

The Breadwinner Study Guide

The Breadwinner by Deborah Ellis

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Plot Summary

Readers get a glimpse into the lifestyle of Afghans in Taliban controlled Kabul in the novel "The Breadwinner" by Deborah Ellis. The novel is aptly named as eleven-year-old Parvana had to be disguised as a boy and sent to earn a living in order to keep her family alive after her father had been unjustly arrested by the Taliban. The novel includes themes which explore the changes in Kabul, the unjust treatment of women by the Taliban, and the acts of kindness and humanity despite the war's ugliness.

Because her father had lost one of his legs in a bombing, eleven-year-old Parvana was allowed to help him walk to his job in the Kabul marketplace as a letter reader and writer. Her mother, sister, and two younger siblings spent each day, all day, cooped up in a one-room apartment. Laws put in place by the Taliban leaders treated women unjustly. Women were not allowed to go to school, have jobs, or go out in the street unless they were wearing a burqa. Even when wearing a burqa the women were supposed to be accompanied by their husband or another man.

One night during dinner, the Taliban burst into the apartment where Parvana and her family lived. They arrested her father. Because she was the one most likely to pass as a boy, Parvana's hair was cut and she was dressed in clothing that had belonged to her older brother, Hossain. Hossain had been killed by a land mine. Disguised as a boy, Parvana took her father's place in the marketplace reading and writing letters. With the help of her classmate, Shauzia, who was also masquerading as a boy to support her family, Parvana even dug up bones in a nearby cemetery for a few weeks to earn extra money so the two could buy trays from which they could sell goods. The girls hoped they would be able to make a better living for their families if they could use these trays to move easily with the crowd.

Working in the streets, Parvana witnessed a good deal of ugliness. She saw the poverty, need, and hurt felt by the people of Kabul. Believing there was going to be a soccer match, she and Shauzia walked into the town's sports stadium only to witness a public show of corporal punishment by the Taliban. In spite of the ugliness on the streets, Parvana also saw some evidence of humanity among the people with whom she worked. She was surprised when she saw a member of the Taliban cry when she read to him a letter that had been written to his deceased wife. A woman who lived in the room above the spot where Parvana worked would periodically drop small gifts on Parvana's blanket or head. As a thank you to her unknown friend, Parvana planted flowers in the spot where she'd worked.

Parvana's older sister, Nooria, received a proposal of marriage prompting the family to go to Mazar for the wedding. Parvana was left behind because her mother was afraid it would be too difficult and too dangerous to explain Parvana's short hair. While staying at the apartment with Mrs. Weera, a friend of the family, Parvana found a woman hiding in a bombed out building. She took the woman home. The woman told Parvana and Mrs. Weera she had come from Mazar where the Taliban had just taken control of the city. Meanwhile, Parvana's father had been released from prison and had returned home. At

the conclusion of the novel, Parvana and her father had found transportation to Mazar in an attempt to find their family.



Chapter 1

Summary

The destruction caused by war is seen through the eyes of an eleven-year-old in the novel "The Breadwinner" by Deborah Ellis. Parvana's story includes themes such as the unjust treatment of women by the Taliban, the changes made in Kabul because of the war, and the lack of education in the area. Despite the hostile environment around her, Parvana still noticed act of kindness and humanity among the people.

Although she was a girl, Parvana went to the Kabul market with her father each day to help him walk. The only reason Parvana was allowed outside was because her father's missing leg made it hard for him to walk without help. Taliban orders stated that all women should stay inside. Girls were not allowed to go to school. Parvana's mother had been fired from her job. Her father had lost his leg when the high school at which he taught was bombed.

Her father earned money by reading letters that people had received and by writing responses. Parvana and her family were one of the few Afghan families that could read and write. Both her parents had studied in a university. As Parvana watched the tea boys run around the marketplace and make sales, she voiced the opinion that she could do that as well. Her father told her he'd rather see her in school. Parvana thought about how much she missed school. She had especially enjoyed Afghan history. When the Taliban had originally ordered girls out of the schools, Parvana wasn't upset, as the order kept her from having to take a test and out of trouble for talking in class.

Although they had once lived in a big house, Parvana and her family now lived in a one-room apartment. They had moved from their big house when it was hit by a bomb. They'd kept moving, each time into smaller places. Bombings were a part of Parvana's life. She'd never known a time when there weren't bombs falling

When her father decided he'd done enough work for the day, Parvana helped him gather the things they had set out to sell and his writing utensils. During the walk home, Parvana thought how her father used to have a false leg but had to sell it. They made their way home over broken, bomb ruined sidewalks and pavement. Even the staircase to their apartment was broken, but they made their way up it and went inside.

Analysis

This novel is set in Taliban-controlled Kabul. Several significant themes are introduced right away. One of the first themes addressed by the novel is the unjust treatment of women that was common in Kabul at that time. Since the Taliban had taken charge, women were not allowed to go outside their homes. Parvana, the young heroine of the novel, was allowed outside only because she was needed to help her father, who had lost his leg in a bombing, walk to the place where he worked. Parvana's mother, who



had worked as a writer for a radio station, was fired from her job because she was a woman.

Touching on the themes of injustice and education, girls were forbidden from going to school by the Taliban. Although Parvana had not been particularly upset when the schools were first closed to girls, she later missed the opportunity to attend classes. Getting an education seemed to be an opportunity that was important to Parvana's family. Both her parents had studied at the university level. Her father had taught in a high school. At the time in which the novel was set, he was one of the few Afghans who knew how to read and write. Parvana also had been taught to read and write in both Dari and Pashtu. Her parents could also speak English.

The changes that have taken place in Kabul and in Parvana's family's life as a result of the war that had been raging for nearly 20 years also make up an important theme in the novel. Parvana can't remember much besides bombing and destruction; but, her parents and even her older sister, Nooria, remember when Kabul was a town of lights and activity. Nooria remembered working traffic lights and full stretches of sidewalk. Now, all of the lights have either been knocked down by bombs or missiles, or they do not work.

Parvana was angry at the changes the war had made in her family and their lifestyle. A bomb had taken her father's leg and had also negatively affected his health in other ways. The only job he was able to hold was writing and reading letters. The family had once lived in a large house with servants and luxuries. Even Parvana remembered this house where she and her little sister shared a bedroom. Now the entire family was cramped up in a tiny one-room apartment. Parvana recalled how their big house had been bombed, forcing them to move to a smaller one. The bombs continued to come forcing them to move each time to smaller and smaller homes. The bombs destroyed more of their possessions until they had very little left.

Discussion Question 1

What changes have Parvana and her family seen in Kabul since the Taliban took over the city?

Discussion Question 2

Consider Parvana's fear of the Taliban. Is her fear justified?

Discussion Question 3

Why was Parvana at first not so upset about having to quit school? Why do you think her sister had a different reaction?

Vocabulary

chador, hawked, urn, labyrinth, conquerors, forbade, decreed, burqas



Chapter 2

Summary

As soon as Parvana was in the house, her sister asked her to go get water. Even though she was the only one in the house who could go and get water, Parvana complained as she made her trips. When she returned, her mother and Nooria asked Parvana to help with the cleaning. Her mother had put Parvana's good shalwar kameez in the pile of things to be sold. Parvana was at first upset with her mother, but she lost her anger when she saw her mother put Hossain's clothes back in the cupboard. Hossain was her parent's oldest child. He had been killed by a land mine.

After supper Parvana's father told the family stories from history. He told the story of Malali, a young Afghan girl said to have motivated the troops when they were fighting the British in 1880. The family was laughing when four Taliban soldiers barged into the room. Two of them grabbed Parvana's father. The other two searched the apartment. They hit Parvana's mother on the head with a rifle when she tried to stop them from taking her husband. Parvana wrapped herself around her father's waist. Before she was dragged off him and he was taken away, he called her Malali and asked that she take care of the family. Meanwhile the other two soldiers were still searching the house. Knowing she had to keep them from finding her father's books, Parvana threw herself toward the soldiers, knocking them down. She screamed at them to get out of her house. They beat Parvana with their sticks before leaving.

Analysis

The plot develops in this section of the novel as Parvana's father was arrested by Taliban soldiers. There was no reason given as to why he was arrested, but the soldiers did ask him why he went to school in Europe. They seemed to think he was responsible for spreading unwanted ideas among the Afghans. Shortly before Parvana's father was arrested, he was telling his family the story of Malali. She was a young girl who encouraged the Afghan troops more than 100 years ago when they were fighting the British. Before he was taken from his home, Parvana's father referred to her as his little Malali.

Since the only members of the family that were left after Parvana's father was arrested were women and children, the family was challenged to get money for food and supplies. Earlier in the chapter, Parvana had indicated she was the only one able to fetch water for the family. The older women aren't allowed to go outside without wearing burqas, long robes that completely cover their bodies with only slits for eye holes. It would be impossible for either her mother or Nooria to carry water upstairs wearing a burqa. The other children are too small to be useful in carrying water.



The Afghans have no qualms about hitting Parvana's mother or beating Parvana even though they are both women who pose no threat to the soldiers. Parvana was a young girl, but she showed quite a bit of spunk in her actions. While her older sister curled herself into a ball and tried to hide from the soldiers, Parvana tried to keep her father from being taken. Then, she attempted to distract the soldiers from finding her father's books.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Parvana's father was put in jail?

Discussion Question 2

Why was the story that Parvana's father told of Malali significant?

Discussion Question 3

Why was Parvana the only one in the family who could go and get water?

Vocabulary

looters, intricate, lavatory, parcel, hospitable, illiterate



Chapter 3

Summary

After they recovered from their shock, the women cleaned up the mess the soldiers had made and then tried to sleep. Parvana wondered what prison was like. She watched where she thought the one small window in their apartment was — the one that was unpainted despite the Taliban's order that all windows be painted so people could not see the women inside — until daybreak. That morning, Parvana's mother announced that she and Parvana were going to get their father out of jail. Parvana and her sister were both worried about the trip because the jail was such a long way away and their mother could be arrested for being out without a male escort. Even though her mother doesn't know, Nooria wrote a note telling the Taliban her mother had permission to be out without an escort. She wrote the note as if it were from their father. Parvana tucked it up her sleeve in case she needed it.

As her mother made her way through the city she would occasionally hold up a photograph of her husband. Parvana was afraid every time she showed the photo because it was illegal and could get them arrested. At the prison, Parvana's mother walked up to the guards and told them she was there for her husband. She continued even though the guards ignored her. At first Parvana tugged her mother's burqa trying to get her to hush; but when she remembered her father calling her his little Malali, she took up her mother's cries saying "I'm here for my father." The soldiers ordered them to leave. When they didn't, the soldiers took the picture and tore it up. Then they began beating the two women. Parvana collected the pieces of her father's picture and told the men to stop. She helped her mother away from the prison.

Analysis

The theme of courage is explored in this chapter as Parvana and her mother go to the prison where Parvana's father is being held. Parvana and her sister are worried when their mother takes Parvana on the long trip to the jail. The sisters are worried because their mother could be arrested for leaving their house without an escort because she is a married woman. Parvana's mother shows courage by holding up her husband's photo as they make their way through the city. Once at the jail, she walks up to the guards and announces that she is there for her husband. The guards ignore her, but she continues repeating that she is there for her husband.

While her mother continues to try to make the guards listen, Parvana remembers when her father called her his little Malaii. Malaii was a young girl who, according to stories told to Parvana by Parvana's father, had rallied the Afghan troops when they were fighting the British in 1880. The memory summoned Parvana's own courage, and she took up her mother's cries saying, "I'm here for my father." Eventually, the soldiers tired of Parvana and her mother. They tore up the photo and started beating the mother and



daughter. After picking up the pieces of her father's picture and yelling for the guards to stop the beating, Parvana led her mother away from the jail. Both her mother and Parvana had demonstrated courage in doing what was strictly forbidden for women in Kabul to do.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the Taliban would make it illegal for people in Kabul to have pictures?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the note that Nooria wrote for her mother would have done any good if the Taliban had chosen to take offense with her being outside? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

In this chapter, it is noted that Parvana's father did not paint over the one window they had in their apartment. Why was it important to the Taliban that windows be painted? What purpose did the painting serve?

Vocabulary

hunched, toshaks, occupation, distinguish, regulation



Chapter 4

Summary

When Parvana and Mother returned home, they were sore and their feet were a mess of broken blisters. Nooria tried to help Mother, but Mother only lay down on a toshak and refused to speak or allow herself to be nursed. She finally cried herself to sleep. Meanwhile, Maryam helped Parvana wash her feet by bringing her a basin of water. Parvana remembered telling Nooria the soldiers would tell them nothing about Father just before she went to sleep. She next remembered waking up in the morning, too sore to move. She and her mother slept most of that day.

The following day, Parvana helped keep the younger children occupied while her mother remained on the toshak. She had moved only to go to the bathroom and drink some tea. Ali had begun behaving strangely because he missed his mother. On the third day, the room began to stink from the smell of dirty diapers. On the fourth day, the family ran out of food. Parvana tried to tell her mother that they had no food left, but she got no response. Nooria told Parvana she had to go and get food, but Parvana refused to do so that day. On the next day, she realized her family was depending on her and agreed to go out.

Analysis

After they returned from the jail, Parvana noticed that her mother's feet were very raw and had blisters. She remembered that her mother had not been out of the house in a year and a half. Parvana thought about how long it had been since her mother had been out of the house. Parvana knew it wasn't because her father forced her mother to stay inside as some men did. Father had actually encouraged his wife to go out, telling her she needed to see what was going on outside so she could tell others about it. Her father's encouragement to tell others introduces the theme of the need to spread the message of what was happening in Kabul to the rest of the world. Father told Mother that because she was a writer she could be a huge worker in bringing about change for the area. Mother, however, seemed content to wait and let others bring about that change. She was determined to stay inside and wait for change to come to her. In a way, she had backed down to the Taliban's demands, even though she had done so passively. It seemed that Mother leaned on her husband a good deal for support as she didn't seem to know what to do with herself or her family since her plan to get her husband out of jail had failed. For three days she had ignored her children even though she had been told they were out of food. Again, it was Parvana who was forced out of her comfort zone to go and buy food for the family.



Discussion Question 1

Why was Nooria unable to go out and get food? Why was it that Parvana had to be the one to go?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Mother seem to forget the needs of her children in her own depression?

Discussion Question 3

What was Father's argument for encouraging his wife to go out in public? Why did she refuse to go?

Vocabulary

publish, decent, preoccupied, concentration, release, depressed



Chapter 5

Summary

Parvana decided to buy bread first because the baker's stall opened onto the street. She was undecided if she should shout her orders in to the other stores, as women were required to do, or if she could go inside because she was a child. At the fruit and vegetable stand, a member of the Taliban asked her why she was dressed as she was out in the street. He hit her with the stick and threatened to punish her father or husband for allowing her to go out dressed as she was. She yelled at the man to stop hitting her. He was so surprised that he stopped long enough for her to run away.

Parvana ran straight into a woman wearing a burqa who seemed to know who Parvana was. The woman demanded to know why Parvana was running and why she was crushing the fresh bread. When Parvana finally recognized Mrs. Weera she began to cry and told the woman how the Taliban soldier had chased her. Mrs. Weera walked Parvana home, telling her she wanted to talk to her mother about a magazine she wanted to start. Parvana tried to tell her that her mother wasn't well but Mrs. Weera insisted on seeing her to take care of her if nothing else.

In the apartment, Nooria scolded Parvana for getting only bread until she saw Mrs. Weera. Mrs. Weera told her the story of Parvana being chased by the Taliban. Mrs. Weera sent Parvana for water once she smelled the pile of dirty diapers and then learned Father had been arrested. When Parvana completed seven trips with water, she was terribly thirsty and tried to drink a cup of water that hadn't been boiled yet. Her sister scolded her for being stupid but Mrs. Weera criticized Nooria for being hateful. Mrs. Weera stayed the night with Parvana and her family. After she described Parvana's encounter with the Taliban, the women decided they'd have to think of some other way to buy food for the family.

Analysis

Furthering the theme of the Taliban's cruelty to women, Parvana faced a no-win situation in this chapter. Her family needed food. She had to be the one to get it. When she had gone out on the streets before, she had worn only a chador instead of a regulation burqa like the Taliban required. She'd also been with her father. Things didn't go so well for her when she tried to go out in the marketplace by herself. She was able only to buy bread before a Taliban soldier asked her why she was dressed as she was. Notice that although Parvana was only eleven, the Taliban believed she might already be married. It is learned that if a woman were caught in public dressed as Parvana was, the woman's husband and/or father could also be punished. Notice also that women are not even allowed to go into stores to shop, even if they are wearing burqas. These women are forced to stand in the street and yell their order in to the store attendant.



The appearance of Mrs. Weera seems to mark a change in the life of Parvana and her family. This strong-willed woman took charge of the scared, depressed family and got them moving again. Notice her usage of sports imagery and language in her motivational talks to the family members. Furthering the theme of giving publicity to what was happening in Kabul, Mrs. Weera had wanted to visit originally to talk to Mother about getting a magazine going for the women in Kabul. Notice Parvana told Mrs. Weera that she doubted her mother would be much help. Although Parvana doubted her mother would be interested, Mrs. Weera's strong will suggested that Mother might surprise her daughter and be convinced to help with the magazine.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think it would have been best for Parvana to do during her trip to shop? Should she have worn the burqa and acted as a woman? Was she right to go out as she was?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think it would have been best for Parvana to do during her trip to shop? Should she have worn the burqa and acted as a woman? Was she right to go out as she was?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Parvana and her sister, Nooria.

Vocabulary

nan, attendant, anxious, sensible, warily, fetched, eternity



Chapter 6

Summary

In this chapter, Parvana learned that her mother and Ms. Weera had decided to disguise Parvana as a boy so she'd be able to buy food for the family and even earn money by working. Nooria seemed to enjoy tormenting Parvana with the scissors when Parvana told them she wouldn't look like a boy because of her long hair. She didn't want her hair cut at first; but, after her mother was finished, Parvana liked the way she was able to see her face. She was told to put on Hossain's clothes. She liked the pockets in her new boy clothes. Maryam didn't recognize Parvana until she heard her voice. Mother called her Hossain.

Dressed as a boy, Parvana went out to buy the supplies she wasn't able to buy the previous day. Parvana was suddenly afraid when she realized those on the street would be able to see her face. She begged her mother not to make her go out, but it was Nooria's comment that she knew her sister would be too scared to go that prompted Parvana out the door. She was surprised when no one on the street even gave her a second look. She successfully bought rice, tea, and onions. Back at the house, Maryam gave her a hug when she returned with supplies, but Mother was lying down again. Nooria explained Parvana had looked so much like Hoosain that it made Mother sad. Mother got up for supper and praised Parvana for her successful shopping trip. Later that night when Ali cried, Parvana heard Mother call him Hoosain.

Analysis

Even though she was only an eleven-year-old child, Parvana showed a great deal of maturity for her age. This idea of Parvana rising above her circumstances and acting like Malali is a major theme in the novel as it was Parvana's bravery that kept the family alive after her father was arrested. Parvana was actually more mature than her older sister who seemed content to make fun of Parvana and belittle her. It was one of Nooria's comments, however, that made Parvana angry enough that she had the courage to go out the door and do the shopping even though she was afraid to do so. Of course, it may be that Nooria intended these comments to be motivating, but she didn't know how to motivate besides being hateful. For instance, her comment to Parvana that she looked better as a boy than as a girl might have been said intentionally not to hurt Parvana as much as to take attention from the fact that Parvana looked so much like Hoosain. Nooria may have also known that Parvana would take her suggestion that Parvana was too scared to go outside as a boy as a challenge, prompting her little sister to action.

In this section, Mrs. Weera told Parvana that it was Parvana's decision as to whether or not she wanted to dress as a boy and take care of the family. The idea that Parvana was in charge of the decision seemed to make her feel more empowered as she



realized that if she was going to take care of the family, she would have to do it willingly. Mrs. Weera and Mother could hold her down to cut her hair and then put Hoosain's boy clothes on her, but they couldn't make her act like a boy once she was outside.

Discussion Question 1

What steps did Mother and Mrs. Weera take to ensure that Parvana looked like a boy?

Discussion Question 2

Why was it significant that Mother called Ali by Hoosain's name at the end of this chapter?

Discussion Question 3

How might you have felt if you were Parvana, out masquerading as a boy for the first time? Would you have been scared? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

brusquely, confident, fumed, impossible, complimented



Chapter 7

Summary

Parvana was sent out the next day with Father's writing supplies to try to earn money reading and writing letters. She went to the same spot where she and her father had set up the supplies in the past. Her first customer was a Taliban soldier. He handed her a letter written to his late wife. The letter was from the wife's aunt, congratulating her on her wedding and apologizing for not being able to attend the ceremony. Parvana was surprised when she saw a tear fall from the man's eye.

The only other customer before lunch wanted to buy her red shalwar kameez. Parvana was not sure how much to ask; so, she bartered with the man as she had heard her father do. When they were finished, Parvana was so proud of herself for making a sale that she wasn't as sad as she thought she'd be when she saw the outfit fluttering in the man's arms as he walked away. Before she went home, Parvana thought she saw a flicker of movement in the painted over window above her spot in the market.

Analysis

A significant aspect in this chapter is that Parvana saw for the first time that the Taliban did have feelings just like everybody else. This instance where Parvana had the opportunity to read a letter written to the late wife of a member of the Taliban opens the themes of humanity and kindness even in the time of war. Parvana had always associated these men with anger, hurt, and punishment. They had always been the enemy. Seeing this man's tears gave her a new perspective on the Taliban as she realized that these men, while cruel, had the same emotions and feelings as everyone else.

This chapter introduces a painted window above where Parvana sat up her blanket and supplies. The mention of the window foreshadows its greater significance in later chapters. Even though Parvana was angry at first when her mother sent Parvana's shalwar kameez to be sold, Parvana parted with her good outfit with a feeling of pride because she had earned money for her family by selling it. Instead of the necessity to sell the outfit remaining a symbol of poverty, it is changed into a symbol of sacrifice and pride as she was able to give it up to help her family.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the impact that the Taliban soldier's tears had on Parvana.



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the changing symbolism of the red shalwar kameez from the time that Parvana first realized it would be sold until the time she actually earned money for her family from its sale.

Discussion Question 3

How likely do you think it would have been for some one to realize that Parvana was indeed a girl? What might have happened to her if someone had discovered her secret?

Vocabulary

disguise, decree, obedience, embedded, bargain



Chapter 8

Summary

Parvana learned that Mrs. Weera and her granddaughter were moving in with them. Parvana was enlisted to help Mrs. Weera move her things. It was Parvana's mother who told her that Mother and Mrs. Weera would be starting a magazine. As they walked down the street together, Mrs. Weera told Parvana she was quite sure that she could handle any Taliban who tried to mess with her as she'd been reducing teenaged boys to tears for years in her position as a physical education teacher. Parvana tried to tell Mrs. Weera she'd seen a Taliban soldier cry the day before, but her words were lost in street noise. As they were packing her things, Mrs. Weera showed Parvana a medal she'd won in an athletics competition for being the fastest female runner in Afghanistan.

That evening when Parvana went for water, she asked if she could take Maryam with her. Mrs. Weera encouraged Maryam to go, saying the girl would be safe with Parvana dressed as a boy. Maryam's sandals were too small, so Mrs. Weera wrapped her feet in cloth. Maryam was fascinated with the flow of water from the tap but could only handle one trip because she'd had so little exercise. The following day, Parvana bought bigger sandals for her sister.

One day Parvana suggested that they use her disguise as a boy to allow both Nooria and Mother to go outside occasionally. Mrs. Weera thought the idea was a good one. Although Nooria tried to discourage the idea, Mother told her she was needed to take Ali outside because Parvana couldn't manage both the children alone. Each day at lunch, they began going outside for an hour. They would walk, then sit, in the sun. Sometimes, Mother began going with Parvana to shop for the family. Parvana enjoyed those times alone with her mother.

Although she still missed her father, Parvana had begun to get used to her life without him because she was so busy. One day, she saw a man walking in the marketplace that she thought looked like Father. It was not until she got up to him and was hugging him that she realized it was a stranger.

One afternoon, Parvana noticed a piece of gray embroidery on her blanket. She at first believed the piece had been blown onto her blanket by the wind. However, a few days later, she found a beaded bracelet on her blanket. When she looked up, she noticed the window above her was open. She saw a woman's face give her a quick smile before closing the window. A few days later, Parvana got another pleasant surprise when she helped a person who she thought was a tea boy pick up the cups he'd spilled when he tripped near her blanket. The "boy" turned out to be a girl from her class at school.



Analysis

The theme of humanity is explored further in this section of the novel as the man whom Parvana believed was her father was kind to her even though he did not know who she was or her circumstances. He recognized Parvana's longing for her father and told her there was a possibility that her father could be released from prison.

The lady whose window opened over the spot where Parvana spread her blanket and set up for work was also kind to Parvana in this chapter. Although Parvana set up her work in the same place that she and her father used before he went to prison, the woman might not have recognized the things that Parvana, now dressed as a boy, used in her work. Another possibility is that the woman might realize that something had happened to Parvana's father and Parvana had been required to take on the guise of a boy to support her family. Since the woman threw down things to her that only a girl might like, the woman probably knew that Parvana was actually a girl.

Also in this section, the addition of Mrs. Weera to the family along with Parvana's new role as a boy has given the other family members much more freedom than they once enjoyed. Parvana was able to take Maryam to the tap with her to get water, allowing the girl to get exercise and fresh air. It had been so long since Maryam had been outside that her sandals no longer fit her. Even though she balked at the idea Nooria was encouraged by her mother to go outside so that Ali could get fresh air as well. Soon, even Parvana's mother was going with her to do the family's shopping. It appeared Mrs. Weera's decision to move in with the family as well as Parvana's decision to allow herself to be made into a boy were good ideas all around. Not only were Mrs. Weera and her granddaughter getting to live in a larger place, Parvana's family was getting the benefit of more exercise and more socialization.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think the woman who lived above the spot where Parvana put her blanket knew that Parvana was a girl? What makes you think so? Support your answer with examples from the novel.

Discussion Question 2

Consider Parvana's reaction when she believed she saw her father in the market place. With Parvana disguised as a boy, do you think her father would recognize her if he saw her? Discuss the man's reaction to Parvana's mistaking him for her father.

Discussion Question 3

Do you think the tea boy who turned out to be a girl from Parvana's school tripped intentionally to get Parvana to recognize her? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

distinctive, dawdling, karachi, bandits, latrine



Chapter 9

Summary

Parvana's friend, Shauzia, came back later that day. The two talked as they walked to Parvana's house. Parvana was glad to learn there were other girls in Kabul like her who were disguised as boys so they could work. Shauzia gave her some apricots as a gift. Shauzia had been working for nearly six months since her brother went to Iran to find work and her father had died of a bad heart. When Parvana told Shauzia her father had been arrested, Shauzia told her they probably wouldn't hear from him again, but Parvana insisted that he would return.

Shauzia suggested the two girls could find something to do that would earn them more money than their current jobs. She suggested they could sell things off trays but said she never had the extra money to buy a tray or supplies to sell. Parvana encouraged Shauzia to come upstairs and say hello to her family. While Shauzia was there, Mrs. Weera asked her if she'd been keeping up with her studies and then mentioned she was thinking of starting up a secret school.

That evening Mother talked about how she wanted to visit Shauzia's mother to get her story for their magazine. When Parvana asked how the magazine would be published, her mother told her the stories would be smuggled to Pakistan from printing, then back to Kabul. Nooria was excited about the school as she had wanted to go to college to be a teacher. Parvana didn't like the idea of her big sister being her teacher, but she didn't say anything.

Shauzia continued to visit Parvana often. One day, she came just as the woman in the window had dropped a white handkerchief with red embroidery on Parvana's head. Parvana didn't get a chance to smile her thanks to the woman but tucked the handkerchief into her pocket without telling Shauzia what it was. Shauzia told Parvana she had found a way they could make a lot of money. She told Parvana she wouldn't like the idea.

Analysis

Since Parvana had reunited with a girl she knew from school, the two were able to put their heads together to try to find some way to earn more money for their families. Shauzia's home situation was very different from Parvana's as Shauzia lived with her father's parents. Because they lived with them, Shauzia's mother felt they had to follow the rules as set down by her in-laws. Because her in-laws didn't value school for girls, Shauzia was not encouraged to keep up with her studies. Parvana's situation had been different as her father had continued to teach her and her sister until he became too ill to do so. Parvana enjoyed the freedom that being able to get out in public allowed her. She enjoyed not being stuck at home doing housework. Shauzia also enjoyed her



freedom but for a different reason. She liked being able to get away from the constant fighting and arguing that was going on at her home.

Even though Mother's husband was unable to do so, Mrs. Weera seemed to have convinced Mother that she needed to use her skills to help her get a magazine started. Parvana was surprised to learn that the women already had a plan as to how they would get the magazine published and back into Kabul. She was happy to learn that they didn't plan to use her to do their smuggling.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think Shauzia's idea for the two girls to make money involved? Why do you think neither of them would like it?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Shauzia's home situation. How was it different from Parvana's?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think that the idea to start a school was a wise one? What might the Taliban have done if they were to find out about the school?

Vocabulary

embraced, shrugged, smuggle, ridiculous, secret



Chapter 10

Summary

The next morning Parvana and Shauzia walked with a group of others to a cemetery where they were going to dig up bones for money. They dug bones from five graves. By that time Parvana had to go to the bathroom. The only place to go in private was just inside a doorway. Parvana went inside, afraid she would be blown up by a land mine. She emerged safely, and the girls cashed in their bones. They received more money than Parvana usually made in three days. They continued through the afternoon. They agreed that when they were rich old ladies they would remember that day. At the end of the day, the girls also agreed not to tell their families what they'd been doing that day and not to give them all of the money they'd earned so they'd have some to buy their trays. At home Parvana washed herself off at the tap as best she could before going upstairs.

Analysis

In this section, Parvana asked Shauzia how she would feel if someone were to dig up her bones after she had died. Shauzia was not able to answer the question. The two did realize, however, that they had dropped to an especially low level as they told themselves they would remember that day and talk about it when they were rich old ladies. Even though the girls were in a situation that was perhaps worse than any one could imagine, they still had hope. They still believed that one day things would get better. Despite the poverty, hunger, and daily deaths, they believed they would grow to be old and have the opportunity to be prosperous.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Parvana's fear that she would be blown up by a land mine if she went inside the abandoned building to go to the bathroom. Why would land mines hold particular fear for Parvana?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the girls' act of digging up bones and selling them for the money was immoral? Do their circumstances play any role in your answer?

Discussion Question 3

If you were Parvana or Shauzia would you have given your family all of your wages or kept some for yourself? Justify your answer.

Vocabulary

haul, objections, intact, trophy, mascot, accommodate



Chapter 11

Summary

Although Parvana tried to keep her promise to Shauzia and not tell her family she'd been digging up bones, she fell into her mother's arms and cried after only a few questions from them about her day. Her mother commented that the Afghans had been reduced to digging up bones in order to feed their families. Mrs. Weera told the family that bones were used for chicken feed, oil, soap, and buttons. When Parvana showed them how much she made during her day's work, all the family members were surprised. Her mother didn't want Parvana to go out bone digging again, but Parvana argued with her as did Nooria. Parvana was surprised to hear her sister taking her side in the issue. Their Mother relented when Mrs. Weera reminded her that the times were extraordinary, requiring normal people to do unusual things, just to get by. Mother asked only that Parvana tell her everything she saw and did during her day in the graveyard, so she could write a story for their magazine. At the end of two weeks, the girls had enough money to buy their trays and supplies to sell from them.

When Parvana returned to her letter reading position, Parvana received a welcome back gift of a single bead from the woman in the window. Parvana also noticed Nooria wasn't treating her as hatefully as she usually did. During one afternoon when the girls were selling their wares, they noticed a crowd going into the sports stadium. Believing that a game was about to be played, the two rushed into the stadium with the crowd to sell their things. Inside the stadium they noticed the crowd didn't seem to be acting like one that had come to watch a soccer match. As the girls watched, prisoners were brought out. One by one, each prisoner had one of his hands chopped off. Some men in the stadium let the girls hide behind them after the girls realized what was happening. The same men helped them pick up their spilled goods and then surrounded them as escorts when they left the stadium. Before she was out of the stadium Parvana saw a very young member of the Taliban holding up a string with the cut off hands, like a prize. The man who helped Parvana and Shauzia out of the stadium told them to go home and remember better things.

Analysis

When Parvana's family learned she had spent a day digging up bones in a nearby cemetery to earn money, they had mixed feelings about allowing her to continue the job. Mother's comment about Afghans being reduced to digging up the bones of their ancestors to feed their families indicated that she did not approve of the grave digging. Mrs. Weera and Nooria, thought differently. Nooria reminded her mother that the money that Parvana made reading letters barely provided food for them. Mrs. Weera made the point that unusual circumstances required people to do unusual things. Although they seemed to be in agreement that what Parvana was doing was not an ideal way of making money, they were at a point that they were becoming desperate. Additionally,



Parvana's goal of buying a tray with which she could walk the streets and sell goods would allow her to make more money; but, she had to be able to make what she needed to buy supplies to start her new business venture. Again, Parvana's spunky side showed through as she refused to do as her mother told her to do. Her disobedience became accepted, however, because it was for the good of the family.

In this chapter, simple acts of human kindness continue to be seen, even in the midst of the cruel war in which the country is embedded. Parvana and Shauzia went into the sports stadium believing they could sell their goods. Instead, they found themselves at a public show of corporal punishment during which members of the Taliban were cutting off the hands of those found stealing. Kind men helped to shelter the girls from the ugliness of what they were seeing. They also helped to gather the items the girls had dropped from their trays in their shock and returned them to the children. When they left the stadium, the men provided a protective shield for the children, keeping the Taliban from spotting them on their way out of the stadium. The cluster of severed hands on display represents the extent of the cruelty for which the Taliban were capable.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss what was happening at the sports stadium where Parvana and Shauzia thought there was about to be a soccer game.

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Nooria was being kinder to Parvana than she had been in the past?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the arguments given by both Mrs. Weera and Parvana's mother about Parvana's work in the graveyard. With which side do you agree? Give reasons to support your answer.

Vocabulary

relented, wander, wares, ducked, booty



Chapter 12

Summary

Parvana stayed home for several days after her experience in the stadium. Her mother and Mrs. Weera learned that there were public showings of corporal punishment there every Friday. When the family ran out of bread, Parvana went back to work. When she saw Shauzia, Shauzia told her she was saving her money so she could go to France. Her only worry was that she would begin developing a female figure before she was able to leave in the spring. Parvana admitted she just wanted to be a kid again and go to school, without having to worry about supporting her family. Parvana shared her secret of the Woman in the Window who gave her gifts. The two wondered if she was a princess and fantasized about saving her.

It was summer in Kabul. Flowers bloomed despite the war. The heat in their apartment made the young children cranky. On the days when she made more money, Parvana was able to bring home treats of fresh fruit for her family. She talked to the men who stopped to buy things from her or have a letter read or written so she would have something to tell her family about that night.

Nooria was the teacher for the secret school started by her mother and Mrs. Weera. She had only five students. They met at a variety of places and times with students divided into two groups in an attempt not to raise suspicion from the Taliban. Parvana continued to get gifts from the woman in the window. One day she heard a man yelling at the woman. She looked up at the window, but a man on the street advised her to mind her own business. She wanted to tell her family about the fight that night. Instead, she was surprised by the news that Nooria was getting married.

Analysis

The theme of courage is demonstrated once again by Parvana. After witnessing the public punishment of thieves, Parvana wanted a break from the ugliness that she saw on the streets each day. She allowed herself to stay home until the family ran out of bread. Then, she went back to work with no prompting. When she returned to her job, Parvana seemed to look at the world around her with new eyes. She no longer saw any humor in anything around her. Instead, she focused on the poverty and cruelty that had taken over the city. Even though Parvana wanted to go back to being just a regular kid, she realized she couldn't. With courage, she faced her responsibility of caring for her family. She even took extra steps to care for them like keeping her eyes and ears open for news from outside she could share. She also used her extra money to buy family members special treats.

The themes of education is explored in this section as the mother of Parvana, Mrs. Weera, and Nooria begin their secret school for girls despite the Taliban's orders that



girls would not go to school. They have to be very careful about where they meet and how often they meet so that they don't raise any suspicions. Nooria served as teacher for the school and was frustrated because she had no books or supplies and could make little progress with the few, sporadic sessions they had.

At the end of this chapter, as well as many other chapters, the author leaves the reader with a surprise statement, much like a cliffhanger to draw the reader into the next chapter. This chapter ends with the statement that Nooria was getting married. The news of her marriage was as much a surprise to the reader as it was to Parvana, who had no idea marriage was even in the realm of possibility for Nooria.

Discussion Question 1

What would Nooria's marriage mean for the family?

Discussion Question 2

What does it say about Parvana that she continued to work and take care of her family despite her desire to just be a kid again?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the situations faced by Parvana and Shauzia. Do you think Shauzia was making the right decision in leaving her family to go look for a better life for herself? What might you have done in her situation?

Vocabulary

nomads, insisting, snuffling, competition, tribal



Chapter 13

Summary

Nooria would be marrying the son of a family who had once lived next door to them. She would move to live with his family in Mazar-e-Shaif, a part of Afghanistan the Taliban did not yet control so she would be able to go to school and finish her education. When she was told the family would be leaving Kabul to attend the wedding, Parvana was upset because she was afraid her father would return from prison and not know where they were. After three days of pouting, Parvana was relieved when her mother told Parvana that she would not be going to Mazar after all. It had been decided it would be too difficult to explain Parvana's appearance. Although she'd wanted to stay, Parvana was unhappy that she wasn't being allowed to go with the family.

Parvana shared her unhappiness with Shauzia who agreed she felt the same way. Even though she thought being able to make more money by selling things from a tray would make her happier, Shauzia had found that her family was still hungry and argumentative. When Parvana wondered aloud what the answer was, Shauzia suggested someone should destroy the country and let them start over again. Parvana reminded her that had already been done and it had only made things worse.

The day before Nooria and the rest of the family were to leave, Parvana bought Nooria a present of a pen in a beaded case for use in her university classes. The rest of Parvana's family would be gone for most of the summer, leaving Parvana alone with Mrs. Weera. Mrs. Weera believed the magazine the women had been working on would be printed and ready to distribute by the time they returned. The next weeks were strange for Parvana with so few people in the house. In her free time, Parvana took her father's books from their hiding place and read them. Mrs. Weera trusted her to be responsible for herself and encouraged her to keep some of the money she earned for herself. One day on her way home Parvana took cover in a bombed building to keep from getting wet in a rainstorm. The rhythm of the rain lulled Parvana into sleep. When she woke, she could hear a woman crying.

Analysis

Parvana's situation changed drastically in this chapter. Instead of having to earn a living for seven people, she was in charge of only three people. Mrs. Weera encouraged her to keep some money for herself. Parvana was able to treat her friend, Shauzia, to lunch sometimes.

Another of the notable things that happened in this chapter was Mother's decision to leave Parvana behind in Kabul while the rest of the family went to Mazar for Nooria's wedding. Considering that her husband was in jail and one of her children had been killed by a land mine, it must have been a difficult decision for a mother to make. She



reasoned that if it were discovered in Mazar that Parvana had been disguised as a boy to make money for the family and word got back to Kabul, the family could get into much trouble with the Taliban.

There are changes in the relationship between Parvana and Nooria in this chapter. Although Parvana could barely stand her older sister and Nooria was openly hateful to Parvana when the novel opened, the two seem to have developed a mutual respect for each other. Although she would be getting married to a man she has not seen for years, Nooria seemed to have high hopes that her marriage and move would mean good things for her. She planned to finish school and attend a university, an option not available to her in Taliban controlled Kabul.

Discussion Question 1

Consider Mother's decision to leave Parvana in Kabul while the remainder of the family went to Mazar. Since she had already lost one child to a land mine, this decision must have been very difficult for her. Would you have split up your family or kept them together?

Discussion Question 2

How had life changed for Parvana since the majority of her family had left for Mazar?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Mrs. Weera was justified in allowing Parvana to take care of herself? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

discussion, merely, informed, glowered, sulking, distribute



Chapter 14

Summary

Parvana located the crying woman in the abandoned building. She tried to get her to talk by telling her that she was a girl disguised as a boy so she could take care of her family, but the woman would do nothing but cry. Parvana was worried she would miss curfew as she tried to convince the woman to go with her. She lit a match and realized the woman was not wearing a burqa. Parvana tried to go home to borrow Mrs. Weera's burqa for the woman to wear, but the woman wouldn't let her leave. Parvana decided they should wait until dark to leave and then try to sneak back to Parvana's house without getting caught.

As they walked toward Parvana's home, Parvana heard the woman's footsteps echoing along the empty streets. She considered telling the woman to walk more softly. She decided not to bother telling her because she knew if they were caught, the noise made while walking would not be the worst problem they faced. They finally reached Parvana's home safely. Mrs. Weera was so relieved she hugged them both. She started to scold them because the woman had not worn a burqa, but Parvana stopped Mrs. Weera by telling her she thought the woman was in trouble. Mrs. Weera got the woman cleaned up, and the woman was able to eat some supper before she fell asleep.

The next morning, the woman was still sleeping when Parvana went to work. It was not until that evening that she was rested enough to talk. She told them her name was Homa and that she had fled Mazar because it had been captured by the Taliban. She told them both her parents had been shot as well as her brother. She'd escaped only because she'd hidden in a closet. The Taliban told the people to stay inside and would not allow them to tend to the dead bodies or even cover them up. As Homa ran from the city she said that wild dogs were beginning to eat the bodies. Homa had gotten into a running truck and hidden in the back. The truck took her to Kabul where Parvana found her hiding in the abandoned building.

Parvana imagined her family dead in the streets of Mazar as well. In her despair, Parvana lay down on the toshak just as she had seen her mother do. Mrs. Weera gently encouraged Parvana to get up for the next two days. But, it was not until Shauzia came to visit and asked Parvana to come back to work that Parvana decided she couldn't refuse any longer. Parvana carried on as before because she didn't know what else to do. One day when she returned from work, she saw her father being helped up the stairs to their apartment.

Analysis

Homa, the woman whom Parvana brought home from the abandoned building, told them terrible news about Mazar. Her story was bad enough in its own right, but it was



also terrible for Parvana to hear because her family was in Mazar. Homa grieved because she had seen her family killed in the street. Parvana grieved because she did not know what might have happened to her family. She imagined her family had been killed in the streets, just like Homa's. Parvana had lain down on the toshak just like her mother had done after her father had been jailed. She even told Mrs. Weera that was what women in her family did when they were sad.

Consider Parvana's thoughts as she and Homa walked back to the apartment in the dark. In addition to the requirement that women wear burqas and have escorts while in the street, they were also required by the Taliban to walk softly and not make noise as they walked. Parvana and Homa were breaking so many of the Taliban's rules that Parvana did not even want to think about what might happen if they were caught.

There was some good news as Parvana's father was finally released from jail. For a girl who was missing her family, one of the best things for her to see was one of the lost members of her family. She had some relief because she at least knew her father was safe.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the things that Homa said she saw done by the Taliban in Mazar. Was there anything different she could have done other than run away?

Discussion Question 2

Consider Parvana's act of lying down and refusing to get up like her mother did when Parvana's father was imprisoned. What finally motivated Parvana to go back to her life?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think that Parvana's father came to be released from jail? What did it mean for her that he was back home?

Vocabulary

flared, curfew, browse, imagine, heroine, companion, resolved



Chapter 15

Summary

The men who brought Parvana's father home told Parvana and Mrs. Weera they had found him lying outside the prison. He was so weak and tired it took Mrs. Weera several days of nursing before she got him strong enough to talk. When he did begin talking, Parvana was surprised to come home from work one day to find her father speaking in English with Homa. He asked Parvana if she'd brought home another educated woman, but Parvana had only brought home onions. Parvana worked to buy medicine to make her father better.

Meanwhile, Shauzia's grandfather had begun looking for a husband for the girl. He believed the money they would be paid as a bride price for her would support the family. Shauzia, however, did not want to get married. She planned to leave her family as soon as possible.

Parvana's father told her they'd learned that many people who had fled Mazar were living in refugee camps. He and Parvana planned to go and search the camps for their family members as soon as they could find a way to go. Mrs. Weera and Homa, meanwhile, would go to Pakistan. Parvana suggested they take Shauzia with them. When Mrs. Weera questioned the idea, Parvana did not say anything else about it.

During one of her last days working in the marketplace, the Window Woman dropped a tiny camel made of beads onto Parvana's head. Parvana was happy to know she was okay. She wanted to find some way to thank her for her kindness. She decided to plant some flowers in the spot where she'd always put her blanket. The men and boys watched her, some making fun of her for trying to plant flowers in that spot. One man, however, encouraged her efforts and even helped her dig a hole and plant the flowers. Parvana waited there until no one was watching and waved up at the woman's window. She thought she saw the movement of someone waving back.

Just before Parvana and her father were to leave, Mrs. Weera showed them copies of the magazine that she had just received. She told them to pass along the news to Parvana's mother that the magazines were being distributed and they needed her back to help with the next issue. Shauzia arrived to tell Parvana goodbye and to tell her that she was leaving soon with some nomads who had agreed to take her to Pakistan. They promised each other in twenty years they would meet each other at the Eiffel Tower in Paris. As the truck drove away, Parvana wondered what would happen in those twenty years. She felt she was ready for whatever might happen.

Analysis

The loose ends in the story are tied up as Parvana and her father left for a journey to Mazar to find their family. The magazine had been printed and was being distributed.



Mrs. Weera was moving with Homa to a refugee camp in Pakistan where she hoped she would be able to start a school. Shauzia had made arrangements to leave Kabul with some Nomads.

Despite the fact that Parvana had no idea where the other members of her family were or if they were even still alive, the novel ends on a very optimistic note. Parvana felt as if she were ready for anything that might come her way in the future. In fact, she and Shauzia have arranged to meet one another on the top of the Eiffel Tower in twenty years. Again, this arranged meeting showed the faith these children had that life would get better, even though there seemed to be no hope for improvement at that time.

In this last chapter, Parvana took the opportunity to return the kindness that the Window Woman had shown her through the years. She planted some flowers that she believed were the kind that would grow year after year for the woman to enjoy. Though some mock her for doing so, one old man encouraged Parvana's attempt to bring some beauty to the marketplace and even helped her with the planting.

Discussion Question 1

Compare Shauzia and Nooria's opinions of marriage. Why did Nooria look forward to marriage? Why did Shauzia dread it so much?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss what you think might be different for Shauzia, Parvana, and the country of Afghanistan when they meet again in twenty years.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Parvana and the Window Woman. Why were the flowers a fitting farewell gift?

Vocabulary

tattered, poultice, hesitated, refugee, transport, nutrients, trampled, derision



Characters

Parvana

Parvana is the main character and heroine of this novel. She lived in the Taliban-controlled city of Kabul in Afghanistan. Eleven-year-old Parvana was unable to go to school because the Taliban had ordered that girls could not get an education. However, she did accompany her father, who lost his leg in a bombing, to a spot in the marketplace where he read and wrote letters, and sold household items to support his family. After the Taliban took her father and put him in jail, Parvana allowed herself to be disguised as a boy so she could work and earn money to support her family.

During the time that she filled her father's spot reading and writing letters Parvana was surprised to see a member of the Taliban cry when she read to him a letter that had been written to his late wife. She also made two friends; the Window Woman, who lived above the spot where Parvana worked and would drop small gifts onto Parvana's head while Parvana was waiting for work and Shauzia, a girl who had been in Parvana's class in school. In order to make more money, Parvana and Shauzia worked two weeks digging up bones in a cemetery. From the money she had earned in this venture Parvana was able to buy a tray that she could mingle with the crowd in the marketplace and sell items like gum, cigarettes and small bags of dried fruit. She was devastated when she and Shauzia went into the sports stadium thinking they could sell their wares at a game but instead discovered the men there were being forced to watch public corporal punishment with people believed to be thieves having their hands cut off.

Parvana's compassion showed when she took a crying woman she found in a burned out building home with her. The woman was from Mazar, the place Parvana's mother and other family members had gone for Nooria's wedding. Parvana was again distraught when she learned that the city had been overtaken by the Taliban with civilians taken out of their houses into the streets and shot. Although she followed the example given to her by her mother by lying down for several days, refusing to go out to work, Parvana was visited by Shauzia who encouraged her to get going again. Parvana continued to take care of Mrs. Weera, Mrs. Weera's grandchild and Homa, the woman she had found in the building, until one day her father was returned home. When he recovered somewhat from his time in prison and learned what had happened in Mazar, he and Parvana began a journey to find the rest of their family.

Through her adventures, Parvana thought of herself as Malali, a girl about whom her father told her and her siblings' stories. He had said that Malali had encouraged the Afghan troops when they were fighting the British forces. At several points in the novel, her father referred to her as his Malali.



Fatana

Fatana is Parvana's mother. Before the Taliban had ordered women out of the work force, she had worked as a writer at a radio station. Since the war had begun, Fatana seemed content to sit in the house and wait for peace to return. Her husband encouraged her to go out and witness what was happening in the city so she could write about what was happening but Fatana refused to go out or follow his suggestions. Parvana had heard arguments between her mother and father and knew her mother wanted to leave Afghanistan. When her husband was arrested Fatana took Parvana with her to the prison in an attempt to get him released. When she was unsuccessful, it seemed Fatana had given up on life.

A change was marked in Fatana's life when Parvana met Mrs. Weera in the street and took her home. Mrs. Weera got Fatana up and motivated her to help her with a magazine to let women all over the world know what was happening in Afghanistan. Fatana began going out occasionally after Mrs. Weera joined the family and would even help Parvana with the grocery shopping at times.

Shauzia

Shauzia is a girl who was a member of Parvana's class in school. Shauzia managed to trip and scatter her tea cups on Parvana's blanket one day while Shauzia was working as a tea "boy." Shauzia may have tripped as a way to let Parvana see her face up close and know who she was. Although the girls had not been close in school, they struck up a friendship and soon began to plan ways to earn more money. Shauzia learned they could make a good deal of money by digging up bones in a nearby cemetery. They worked at this job for two weeks until they could earn enough money to buy trays as well as supplies to sell from these trays.

Shauzia's home life was much different from Parvana's. Her father was dead and she, her mother and her younger siblings lived with her father's parents. Shauzia was unhappy at her home and planned to leave as soon as possible because her family members were fighting all the time. When she learned that her grandfather had planned to sell her in an arranged marriage, Shauzia made plans to leave ahead of schedule to keep from being forced to marry a stranger.

Mrs. Weera

Mrs. Weera is a woman who had worked as a physical education teacher in the schools before the Taliban had required that she quit her job. She had won several athletics awards including a medal for being the fastest female runner in Afghanistan. Parvana literally ran into Mrs. Weera in the street when she was running from the Taliban soldier who had threatened her because she was on the street but was wearing no burqa. When Mrs. Weera learned the situation in which Parvana and her family was living, she organized and bolstered the family to get them going again after Father was arrested.



Mrs. Weera and her young granddaughter moved in with Parvana and her family. Together, Mrs. Weera and Parvana's mother began a secret school for girls and put together material for a magazine that would tell others in the world what was taking place in Afghanistan. When Parvana and her father went to Mazar to try to find the rest of their family, Mrs. Weera went to Pakistan to stay with her cousin in one of the refugee camps.

Parvana's Father

Parvana's father is never called by his given name in the novel. He was a highly educated man who had studied in a university in England. He had taught in a high school until that school was bombed. He lost one of his legs in bombing. Since he lost his job, Parvana's father had worked in the Kabul marketplace reading and writing letters. He also secretly taught his children about the history of Afghanistan as well as how to read and write even though the Taliban had declared girls were not to be educated. Near the beginning of the novel, Parvana's father was arrested and jailed by the Taliban. No charges were ever declared. Just as mysteriously as he was jailed, he was later released from prison and brought home by two kind men who saw him lying outside the prison. Although he was still sick, he and Parvana set out anyway to find the other members of their family in Mazar when he learned about the Taliban overtaking that city.

The Window Woman

This woman, whom Parvana knew only as the Window Woman, lived in a house with a window that opened above the portion of the marketplace where Parvana spread her blanket to read letters. The woman would periodically toss down small gifts to Parvana. The woman had apparently seen Parvana with her father before he was arrested and had realized that Parvana was now masquerading as a boy to earn money for her family. It appeared the woman knew Parvana was really a girl because many of the things she tossed down as gifts were feminine items like beaded bracelets and embroidered handkerchiefs. When Parvana and her father made plans to go to Mazar to find the other members of their family, Parvana planted flowers in the spot where she had always sat on her blanket as a way of thanking the woman for her kindness.

Nooria

Nooria is Parvana's seventeen-year-old older sister. She was bossy and hateful to Parvana at the beginning of the novel but seemed to gain some respect for her little sister when Parvana began going out and working, even digging up bones in the cemetery, to take care of her family. Nooria's dream was to attend the university and become a teacher. She taught for a while in the secret school that her mother and Mrs. Weera began in Kabul but was frustrated because she had no books or supplies and could meet with the children only periodically. Nooria was excited to leave Kabul when



she received a proposition of marriage from the son of former friends of the family living in Mazar. Nooria believed that because Mazar was not under Taliban rule, she would be able to finish her education and have a life there.

Homa

Homa is the woman whom Parvana had met in an abandoned building one day after she finished work. She'd gone into the building to avoid a rainstorm and had fallen asleep. When she woke, she heard the woman crying. The woman was so scared she wouldn't talk to Parvana even after Parvana told her she was actually a girl. The woman had come from Mazar and had not brought a burqa or chador, so Parvana believed their best chance to get home safely was to wait until night. Homa told Parvana and Mrs. Weera that the Taliban had taken over Mazar, the town where the remainder of their family had gone for Nooria's wedding. Parvana's father later learned that Homa was educated and could speak English. When Parvana and her father went to Mazar to try to find the rest of their family, Homa went with Mrs. Weera to Pakistan.

Maryam

Maryam is Parvana's five-year-old sister. Parvana remembered even when the family lived in a big house that she had shared a room with Maryam. Maryam seemed to take a special liking to Parvana and cared for her sister as tenderly as a five-year-old could after Parvana and her mother returned with their feet blistered and sore from the Kabul prison where they'd searched for Father. Later, after Parvana took on the disguise of a boy in order to be able to go out and work for the family, Maryam enjoyed going out with her sister to fetch water for the family.

Hossain

Hossain was the oldest child in Parvana's family. He was killed by a land mine when he was fourteen. When Parvana masqueraded as a boy, she wore Hossain's clothes. Seeing Parvana in these clothes made Parvana's mother think of Hossain and sent her into a short span of grief. Parvana overheard her mother call her younger brother, Ali, by Hossain's name one night soon after she began her stint as a boy.

Ali

Ali is Parvana's two-year-old brother. He had lived a year and a half of his life in the same one-room apartment with no opportunities to go outdoors. It was not until Parvana began dressing as a boy that Nooria agreed to go outside and take Ali with her, allowing him to get fresh air and sunshine.



Symbols and Symbolism

Father's Books

Parvana's Father's books were kept in a secret compartment that he had built in the cupboard of their home to keep the Taliban from finding them. Among these books were books written in English about history and literature. They were kept hidden because the Taliban burned books they didn't like. The books represent the education that Parvana's parents found important, but had to keep hidden.

Hossain's Clothes

Although they needed the money, Parvana's mother kept the clothes of her son, Hossain, who was killed by a land mine. Parvana wore these clothes when her mother cut her hair and had her pretend to be a boy so she could earn money for the family and buy food. The clothes represent not only a direct member of the family that had died because of the war but also the secret that allowed the family to provide for itself and stay alive.

A Medal on a Bright Ribbon

Ms. Weera showed this medal that she won in an athletic competition to Parvana. The medal represented an earlier time when women were treated more fairly and allowed to not only move freely about the city streets but also compete in athletics.

Burqa

Whenever they went out in public, women were ordered to wear a burqa by the Taliban. These articles of clothing covered a woman from head to toe showing none of the shape of her body. There was only a slit or screened area for the woman to see out of. These burqas were symbols of the repression of women by the Taliban.

Parvana's Red Shalwar Kameez

Parvana's red shalwar kameez served to symbolize two different facets of her life in Kabul. When it first appeared in the pile of things that Parvana's mother and Nooria had decided could be sold, the outfit symbolized how poor the family had become and how desperate they were for money. When Parvana sold the outfit and earned some money for her family, the outfit became a symbol of her own ability to support those she loved.



A Beaded Bracelet

One of the gifts that the Window Woman dropped onto Parvana's blanket was a beaded bracelet. Although Parvana was dressed as a boy, it appeared that the Window Woman knew that she was the same girl who used to sit with her father. This beaded bracelet, a gift a girl would like, was a symbol that showed she knew Parvana was only pretending to be a boy.

Bones

In order to make more money so they can buy trays to sell items from, Shauzia and Parvana worked for several days digging up bones in a nearby cemetery. The sale of these bones represented how desperate times had become in Kabul.

The Magazine

Mrs. Weera encouraged Fatana to work with her on a magazine that would help others in the world know what was happening in Afghanistan. Their willingness to put together articles and smuggle these articles into Pakistan where they could be published symbolized the women's desire to do what they could to bring about a change in their country.

A Pen In a Beaded Case

Parvana gave her sister, Nooria, a pen in a beaded case as a going away present when she left for Mazar to be married. The pen represented Nooria's hope that her future would include an education and a job.

Flowers

As a farewell gift to the woman who had been dropping small gifts on her blanket periodically during her time working, Parvana dug up some wildflowers and planted them in the spot where she'd always put her blanket. Although some people criticized Parvana for trying to plant the flowers, one man praised her for trying to bring some beauty to the area. The flowers represent Parvana's affection for the woman who gave her gifts, as well as her desire to give the woman something beautiful back.



Settings

Pul-i-Charkhi Prison

Pul-i-Charkhi Prison was the prison to which Parvana's father was taken when he was arrested. Parvana and her mother walked to this prison where they demanded that Father be returned to them. They made enough noise that the guards noticed them. However, instead of getting Father back, the women were beaten and forced to leave.

The Sports Stadium

Parvana and Shauzia went to the sports stadium believing there was about to be a soccer game played. Instead of a soccer game, Parvana and Shauzia witnessed the Taliban doling out their form of justice by cutting off the hands of condemned thieves.

Kabul

Kabul was the Afghan city in which Parvana and her family lived most of their lives. During the twenty years that war had raged, the family had seen the city change from a vibrant metropolis where they lived in a large house with a variety of luxuries to a bombed shell of its former self. The family had been forced to move again and again when their homes were destroyed by bombs. Each time they moved they lost more of their possessions until all they had were a few of Parvana's father's books.

The Apartment

The one-room apartment where Parvana lived with her family was a major setting in the novel. This one-room apartment had one tiny window located very high up on one wall. Parvana's father had refused to paint despite Taliban orders. There was also a small washroom with a platform toilet, washstand, water tank, and vent. The apartment building had been damaged in bombings, so the staircase that led to the third floor apartment was damaged. There was no running water in the apartment, and Parvana had to go to an outside tap to get water for drinking and washing. This water was contaminated and had to be boiled before it could be consumed. Parvana's siblings and mother had spent the majority of the one and a half years they had lived in that apartment cooped up in that small space.

The Marketplace

The Marketplace was the place to which Parvana would help her father walk in order to read letters and write responses to earn money for his family. After her father was arrested, Parvana dressed as a boy and continued her reading and writing business in



the marketplace. It was in the marketplace that Parvana met her classmate, Shauzia, who was also masquerading as a boy to help her family. Before she left to travel with her father to find the rest of her family in Mazar, Parvana planted flowers in the spot where she had set up her blanket and supplies as a way to thank the Window Woman, a woman whose window opened above Parvana's spot. The woman had given Parvana various gifts by dropping them from her window onto Parvana's blanket.

The Graveyard

It was in a nearby cemetery that Parvana and Shauzia earned extra money by digging up bones.

Mazar-e-Sharif

Parvana's mother and her other siblings traveled to this city in Afghanistan for Nooria's wedding. During the time they were in Mazar, the Taliban took over the city. Mazar was the city from which Homa escaped when the rest of her family was gunned down by Taliban.



Themes and Motifs

Courage

Courage is a major theme in "The Breadwinner." The theme was demonstrated by both Parvana and her mother as they handled their extreme circumstances in a war torn city. Even though she was only eleven years old, Parvana took on the job of supporting her family after her father was arrested. She drew much of her strength from the example of Malali, a girl about whom her father had told stories. This girl was said to have rallied the Afghan troops when they were fighting the British in 1880.

The first time that Parvana thought of herself as Malali was on the day her father was arrested. She had wrapped herself around her father's waist in an attempt to keep the Taliban from taking him away. As the soldiers had pulled her away from her father, he had called her his Malali. Given courage by her father's words, Parvana went back into her apartment, determined to keep the soldiers from finding and taking her father's books. Parvana again thought of herself as Malali when she accompanied her mother to the prison to try to get her father released. Although Parvana at first tried to keep her mother from making a scene at the prison, she thought of her father's words and joined her mother in trying to get the soldiers' attention.

Parvana also showed courage when she agreed to allow herself to be dressed like a boy so she could support her family. After Parvana's father was arrested, she was the only person in her family who could reasonably trick people into believing she was a boy. Although she didn't want to, she allowed her mother to cut her hair so she'd pass as a male. Parvana was scared the first day she went outside in her boy costume, but she summoned her courage to help her get over the initial fear of being discovered and arrested. In doing so, she found she enjoyed her new freedom.

A courageous Parvana took over her father's spot of letter reading and writing. Although she was able to make enough money to feed her family with this job, Parvana allowed Shauzia to talk her into going to a cemetery to dig up bones to sell. The girls were able to make substantially more money in this way. Although Parvana's family did not like the idea of her selling bones, Parvana argued they needed the money. She also choked down her disgust at what she was doing to provide for the family.

There are many other examples of Parvana's courage throughout the novel. Knowing that her family couldn't go outside, Parvana used her disguise as a boy to allow her to escort the younger members of her family outside their apartment so they could get some exercise and fresh air. Parvana additionally tried to buy treats to bring back to her family whenever she had the opportunity. She also talked to the men she saw in the streets so she would have interesting things to share with her family members who were trapped inside all the time.



Perhaps, Parvana was most courageous when she brought the scared young woman, Homa, home with her late one night. The woman would not talk to Parvana but also would not let the girl leave her to get a burqa so Homa could safely walk back to Parvana's house before curfew. Instead, the two had to wait until it was dark to walk home. Parvana knew they faced certain arrest if they were caught outside so late, but couldn't leave the girl alone in the building. Parvana again compared herself to Malali when she was taking Homa through the dark streets to her apartment.

Parvana's mother also demonstrated courage. After her husband's arrest, she and Parvana traveled many miles to go to the jail where he was being held. Since the Taliban did not allow a married woman to be out of the house without her husband or a male escort, she was in great danger. As she made her way, she held up her husband's picture for all to see. Then, upon arriving at the jail with Parvana, she demanded to see her husband. The guards ignored her; but, that did not quell her courage. She continued to ask. When Parvana joined in the plea, the guards beat both women. Parvana took her mother and returned home. Nevertheless, Parvana's mother had shown great courage when faced with great danger in the streets and at the jail.

Humanity in the Midst of War

Even though Parvana saw poverty and grief on the streets of Kabul during the war, she also noticed various acts of kindness and shows of humanity. For example, probably one of the most significant scenes in the novel took place when Parvana had taken over her father's job as a letter reader. When she first looked up to see a member of the Taliban looking down at her, she assumed her secret had been discovered. Instead, the man had a letter he wanted her to read to him. Parvana had always seen members of the Taliban as being cruel and had never considered they had the same feelings and emotions as other people. Her opinion was changed when she saw this man cry when she read to him a letter that had been sent to his dead wife. She realized that even the Taliban had emotions and missed their dead family members.

Another scene that demonstrates the theme of humanity in the midst of war occurred when Parvana and Shauzia walked into the sports stadium believing that a game was about to be played there. Instead, the people had been rounded up to see a public show of corporal punishment. When the older men saw that Parvana and Shauzia were just children, they shielded them from the violence. The men also helped the girls gather the things they'd dropped from their trays when they had originally been shocked by what they had seen. The men protected the girls and hid them from the view of the Taliban until they were safely out of the stadium.

Two other characters who showed their humanity in the novel included the Window Woman who tossed down gifts to Parvana periodically. Parvana thanked this woman by planting flowers in the spot where Parvana had once put her blanket. Although most of the people in the marketplace mocked Parvana for planting flowers in such an odd place, one old man encouraged her efforts and even helped her dig the hole for the



flowers. It was the old man's contribution to humanity, helping Parvana plant a beautiful sign of hope in the war weary town.

Unjust Treatment of Women

The unjust treatment of women by the Taliban is a major theme in this novel. Under Taliban rule, women were not allowed to go to school, hold a job, or even walk down the street without a male escort. Parvana was able to skirt these rules and support her family only because she was young enough that she had not yet developed a feminine figure and could be disguised as a boy.

Before the Taliban took control of Kabul, Parvana and her sister had attended school. Her mother had a job as a writer at a radio station. Once the city came under Taliban control, however, all that changed. Parvana's mother was fired from her job at the radio station and the girls were sent home from school, not allowed to have an education because they were females.

The Taliban preferred that women stay at home and never leave their houses. If they did leave, the women were required to wear a burqa, a loose fitting garment that covered the women from head to toe. They were allowed only small slits or screened areas for eyeholes. The burqas were not only hot, they were also dangerous for the women wearing them because their vision was obstructed. These women would fall down often because they couldn't see the uneven, bomb destroyed pavement upon which they tried to walk. A woman wearing a burqa could also not do even the simplest tasks, like drawing water and bringing it to her house, because the outfit was so debilitating.

Even when they wore a burqa, women were expected to leave their home only with a male escort. If a woman did not have a male escort, she had to have a note from her husband stating she had his permission to be outside the house. While shopping for food, women were not allowed to walk inside the shops. They had to stand outside the store and call their order in to the shop owner. Women were also not allowed to ride the bus or any other form of public transportation without a male escort.

Another Taliban rule that affected women was the rule that stated all windows should be painted. This painting was done to keep people on the street from being able to see the women inside the houses. Not only did the covered windows keep people from being able to look in and see the women, they also kept the women from being able to see out. The paint also blocked sunshine from the homes, which was unhealthy for the women inside.

Education

Education is a major theme in this novel as both of Parvana's parents were highly educated and wanted their children to be educated as well. Because of Taliban rule, however, both Parvana and her sister Nooria had been kicked out of school. Many Afghans didn't even have the ability to read and write.



Both of Parvana's parents came from prestigious Afghan families and had taken the opportunity to get good educations. Both had studied at the university level. Parvana's father had even gone to Europe for his university studies. Both could speak English. Before the war, Parvana's mother had worked as a writer for a radio station, while her father taught in a high school. Nooria, the couple's oldest daughter, had dreams of going to the university and becoming a teacher.

All the benefits that education had provided the family came to a halt when the Taliban took over Kabul. Because she was a woman, Parvana's mother could no longer work at the radio station. Parvana's father lost his job, part of his leg, and his health when the high school at which he taught was bombed. The two school aged daughters were sent home when the Taliban ordered that girls were not to be educated. Despite this rule, Parvana's father continued to teach the girls at home. After he was arrested, Parvana's mother, her sister, and Mrs. Weera organized a school for girls. They had to be careful with their clandestine school. The small group of students would meet at different times and different places so as not to raise the Taliban's suspicion.

It was because of the education that Parvana's father had that he was able to still earn money after the high school at which he'd taught was destroyed. He worked reading letters and writing responses to these letters. He had success in his job because many of the Afghans could not read or write. Parvana was lucky because her father had taught her to read and write as well. When he was in jail, she was able to disguise herself as a boy and take over her father's position.

Effects of War

One of the minor themes explored in "The Breadwinner" is the effect of war on a city. The Kabul which Parvana experienced was quite different from the Kabul which her parents talked about. All she could remember were bombings; but, her parents had told her that Kabul was once a thriving metropolis.

Despite the destruction they saw on a daily basis, Parvana's parents remembered a time when they could walk down the street at midnight, eating ice cream after having seen a late movie. Even Parvana's sister, Nooria, remembered full stretches of sidewalk with no damage and working streetlights. Thy city had once been full of light and life.

In the time period in which the novel is set, Kabul is a war-ruined city. Bombings had knocked out power lines and streetlights. Even if there had still been lights, it wouldn't have mattered, as there was a curfew in effect in the city forcing citizens off the streets after dark. The streets and sidewalks were broken and destroyed by bombs. Most of the buildings were shells with the insides bombed out. Bombs had hit even the apartment building in which Parvana and her family lived. Half of the building was destroyed. The staircase up to the family's third-floor apartment was broken, and the handrail was missing in many places.



The war brought changes to Parvana's everyday life. Even though Parvana did not remember what Kabul was like before the bombs destroyed it, she did remember that her family had once lived in a larger house with luxuries like servants, a television, and a car. Parvana had to share a room with her little sister Maryam in that house, but Nooria had a room of her own. She also remembered the beautiful Afghan carpets they'd once had. The big house they'd once lived in had been bombed, forcing them to take what belongings they could salvage and move to a smaller house. More bombings forced them into smaller and smaller homes until they finally lived in a one-room apartment. Almost all of their possessions were gone. Her father had even sold his false leg because a man offered him so much money for it that he could not refuse. The war brought destruction to Kabul and a very different kind of life to Parvana's family.



Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from the third person point of view. The narrator knows all of Parvana's thoughts and emotions, but it only records the actions and words of the other characters. This point of view seems appropriate for the novel as it keeps the reader focused on Parvana and her story. Since she was the only one who was allowed to leave the house by order of the Taliban, no other character would have been able to describe the things going on outside the house.

The novel is told in the past tense in a fairly linear fashion. There are no flashbacks. Any past information needed by the reader is given in the form of Parvana thinking about the way things had been in the past, or describing why something is the way it is. For instance, Parvana was able to go to the marketplace with her father because he only had one leg. A short sentence explained how he'd lost his leg.

Language and Meaning

Two of the most significant aspects of this novel include the occasional use of Indian terms as well as Mrs. Weera's frequent use of sports metaphors in her speech. Although both Parvana's mother and father could speak English, that was not the language spoken by the people who were characters in this novel. At one point it was indicated that Parvana was able to speak and write both Dari and Pashtu.

There are several instances in which words from the Dari language are used instead of an English translation. It can be assumed these foreign words are used because there is no real English equivalent for them. One of these words is "burqa." The burqa was a full-length covering that women were required to wear when out in public. They had only slits or small, screened areas so the women could see out. These burqas were free flowing and gave no hint of what the woman wearing them looked like. The "chador" is another foreign term used in the novel. The chador was a scarf that a woman could wrap around her head and face, leaving her eyes exposed. Because Parvana was so young, she was allowed out wearing only a chador. "Nan" is another word seen often in the book. It was one of the things that Parvana and her family ate often. Nan is a type of bread baked in Afghan markets.

Another interesting use of language in the novel is Mrs. Weera's use of sports metaphors. She had been an athlete and spent much of her life teaching physical education. It was humorous when Mrs. Weera would refer to Parvana's family as "the team" and encourage them to pull together and keep the team spirit going.



Structure

This short novel is comprised of 15 chapters. Each chapter is titled with a simple chapter number. The chapters are about the same length, ranging from the shortest at 9 pages to the longest at about 15 pages. The story is told in a linear fashion. A good deal of the story is told in exposition but there is also dialogue scattered throughout the story.

The story's main plot is that of Parvana allowing herself to be disguised as a boy and working to support her family after her father was arrested by Taliban and sent to jail. Sub-plots include Parvana's relationship with Shauzia, Nooria's marriage, and Mrs. Weera and Fatana's plan to start a school and print a magazine.

One interesting aspect of the style of this novel is that the author will often end chapters in a sort of cliffhanger, a technique used to draw the reader into the next chapter. An example of this technique can be found at the end of Chapter 9 when Shauzia told Parvana she'd found something they could do that would earn them a good deal of extra money but that she was afraid that Parvana would not like it. It is not until the beginning of Chapter 10 that the reader learns the girls will be digging up bones to sell.



Quotes

She wasn't really supposed to be outside at all. The Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes. They even forbade girls to go to school.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 3)

Importance: Parvana lived in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The Taliban would not allow women to be outside the house unless they were escorted by a man. The only reason Parvana was allowed to be outside was because her father needed her to help him walk to and from work.

Most people in Afghanistan could not read or write. Parvana was one of the lucky ones. Both of her parents had been to university, and they believed in education for everyone, even girls.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 12)

Importance: Although education was not encouraged in Afghanistan, Parvana's family was highly educated. Both her mother and father had attended universities. It was because Parvana's father could read and write that he was able to earn money by reading letters and writing responses.

That house had been destroyed by a bomb. The family had moved several times since then. Each time, they moved to a smaller place. Every time their house was bombed, they lost more of their things. With each bomb, they got poorer. Now they lived together in one small room.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 24)

Importance: The war in Kabul had taken its toll not only on the city but also on its residents. This quote describes how Parvana and her family went from being almost wealthy to living in a one-room apartment and being forced to sell their belongings to survive.

The word Taliban meant religious scholars, but Parvana's father told her that religion was about teaching people how to be better human beings, how to be kinder.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 32)

Importance: Parvana's father took each chance he had to teach his children about the world around them. Instead of teaching his children to blindly obey the Taliban he was sure to make them understand that the Taliban were not the religious scholars they made themselves seem to be. He had told Parvana the Taliban had nothing to do with promoting peace or teaching people to be kind, as religious leaders should.

Hossain had been the oldest child. He had been killed by a land mine when he was fourteen years old.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 40)



Importance: Every family in Afghanistan had lost members in the war. Parvana's family was no exception. The oldest child in the family, a son named Hossain, had been killed when a land mine exploded.

Women were not allowed to go into the shops. Men were supposed to do all the shopping, but if women did it, they had to stand outside and call in for what they needed. Parvana had seen shopkeepers beaten for serving women inside their shops.
-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: As Parvana tried to go out shopping for the first time, she wondered if she should act like a woman and call into the stores for her order or if she would be allowed to go in the store because she was a child.

They were going to turn her into a boy.
-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 1)

Importance: Her mother and Mrs. Weera cut Parvana's hair and dressed her as a boy in order for it to be easier for her to work and buy food for the family.

Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings?
-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph 38)

Importance: A member of the Taliban hired Parvana to read a letter for him and cried when he heard what it said. He told Parvana it was a letter that had been written to his late wife. Seeing this man shed tears was the first time that Parvana had considered that these Taliban had feelings just like she did.

The tea boy was a girl from her class."
-- Narrator (Chapter 8 paragraph 76)

Importance: Although she had been masquerading as a boy for several weeks in order to earn money for her family, Parvana was still surprised when she came face to face with one of the tea boys and realized "he" was a girl from her school.

We have to remember this,' Parvana said. 'When things get better and we grow up, we have to remember that there was a day when we were kids when we stood in a graveyard and dug up bones to sell so that our families could eat.'
-- Parvana (Chapter 10 paragraph 58)

Importance: As Parvana and Shauzia dug up bones from the cemetery to support their families, they realized they were going to unusual means to support their families. Parvana told Shauzia they'd have to remember that they were once so desperate for food they resorted to grave robbing to feed their families. Notice in the quote the girls' belief that things would get better one day.



And there was no end to it. This wasn't a summer vacation that would end and then life would get back to normal. This was normal, and Parvana was tired of it."

-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph 51)

Importance: This quote refers back to a comment made by Parvana when girls were thrown out of school by the Taliban. She'd told her sister she thought the vacation from school would be nice. After being out of school for some time, she realized how much she missed her old life and how the break from school had been nothing like a summer vacation.

There's no future for me here. At least in Mazar I can go to school, walk the streets without having to wear a burqa, and get a job when I've completed school. Maybe in Mazar I can have some kind of life. Yes, I want to do this."

-- Nooria (Chapter 13 paragraph 7)

Importance: These are Nooria's words to Parvana when Parvana asked her sister if she really wanted to marry a man whom she'd never met. Nooria believed the only way for her to be able to live again at all was to take the chance she would be marrying a kind man. She seemed to be choosing the freedom she believed she'd have in Mazar over the oppression she faced in Kabul.

Then, late one afternoon, Parvana came home from work to find two men gently helping her father up the steps to the apartment. He was alive. At least part of the nightmare was over.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 62)

Importance: Parvana was overjoyed when her father returned home after being imprisoned. His safe return was particularly joyful for Parvana because the rest of her family was in Mazar for Nooria's wedding. Since she'd learned Mazar had been overtaken by the Taliban, she was afraid her family was in danger, if not dead.

Tell your mother that copies are being sent out to women all over the world. She has helped to let the world know what is happening in Afghanistan.

-- Mrs. Weera (Chapter 15 paragraph 67)

Importance: Before Parvana and her father set out to find their family members who had gone to Mazar for Nooria's wedding, Mrs. Weera told Parvana to give her mother the message that copies of their magazine were being sent out worldwide, that her mother had helped to educate those in other parts of the world about what was happening in Afghanistan.