

The Red Pencil Study Guide

The Red Pencil by Andrea Davis Pinkney

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Plot Summary

“The Red Pencil” is a young adult novel by Andrea Davis Pinkney which recounts nearly ten months in the life of a 12-year-old Sudanese girl named Amira, from September 2003 to April 2004, as her village is destroyed in war and as she seeks to rise above hopelessness to attend school. When the novel begins, Amira has just turned 12, and is very hopeful and content. She has loving parents –her father, Dando, and her mother, Muma – and a younger sister, Leila, who serves both as a source of annoyance and a source of love. Amira lives on a farm with her family, raising wheat and mangoes, among other crops. Life for them is simple and good, though Amira dreams of something more. Her best friend, Halima, has moved with her family to Nyala, where Halima attends Gad Primary School. Amira longs to learn to read and write. She can already draw, and draws beautiful pictures in the sandy soil of her home. Amira’s mother is very opposed to this, believing a woman’s place is to marry, have children, and do chores – not waste their time on letters.

As time goes on, Amira notices troubled looks on the faces of her parents, and adults from the nearby village. Amira’s parents explain to her at different points that a war has erupted, in which the Janjaweed Militia are massacring anyone they deem to be inferior to themselves. One day, just after breakfast, the Janjaweed Militia arrive and slaughter hundreds of innocent villagers and farmers, including Amira’s father. Amira is stunned, for her near-perfect world has been shattered by violence and war. Family friend and neighbor Old Anwar decides that all survivors of the attack must flee as refugees to the overcrowded Kalma Displaced People’s Camp near Nyala.

There, Amira falls into such despair that she no longer speaks or draws in the dirt. One day, a pretty, foreign white woman named Miss Sabine visits the camp and distributes yellow pencils and yellow pads to all of the children. Amira feels horrible, for she did not receive anything. Miss Sabine, however, has a red pencil and one more yellow pad that she happily gives to Amira. Amira is thrilled. Slowly, she begins drawing again, depicting the assault on her village and home to get it out of her head. Old Anwar knows that Amira is slowly healing. When Leila and her friend Gamal takes Amira’s pencil and pad, Amira becomes enraged and finally speaks, telling them to return her red pencil and pad. They do so, and are incredibly happy to see Amira speaking once more.

Old Anwar consents, then, to giving Amira lessons in writing, reading, and math. The lessons are done in secret, for Muma still does not approve of girls learning anything beyond housework and farm chores. Eventually, Amira decides what she wants to do with her life: she wants to be able to read and write at will, and to teach others to read and write. She decides to sneak out of the camp and travel to Nyala, and to find a way to get into Gad Primary School. To do so, she must cross a war zone. She remembers the teachings of the Koran, taught to her by Old Anwar, to always follow the brightest path. It is then that Old Anwar arrives, first attempting to get Amira to return to Kalma, and then deciding to protect Amira on her journey to Nyala by accompanying her to the city.



Part 1, Wheat – Part I, Possibilities

Summary

Part 1, Wheat – Amira turns 12 years old in September 2003, and is old enough to wear a toob. Her mother, Muma, wishes her blessings for all of the years still to come. Amira and her family are farmers who primarily grow wheat, which can be used to make flour, bread, and golden cake.

Part 1, Dando's Delight – Amira watches a sparrow fly up from the wheat, and her father, Dando, picks Amira up in his arms as if she was a sparrow, just as he has done since she was a little girl. He tells her that she can fly, and Amira truly believes that she can in his arms, as if there are unlimited possibilities. He tells her she is precious, calls her “Amira Bright”, and tells her she is a sparrow among sparrows, and that she is rising as sparrows rise above the wheat.

Part 1, Lost Tooth – Amira remembers when she and Halima, her best friend, were six years old. Halima's tooth came loose. Amira helped to pull it out, but they lost it among the grains of wheat. Halima said that the experience hurt, and Amira told her that at least she was now free of it, and could now be happy.

Part 1, Dizzy Donkey – Amira remembers playing Dizzy Donkey with Halima. Dizzy Donkey consisted of both girls, holding hands, and spinning around in circles until they are too dizzy and full of laughter to stand.

Part 1, Opportunity – Amira remembers when she and Halima say goodbye. Halima's father decided that he wanted more out of life – opportunity – and that their small village market wasn't providing it. He determined that moving to Nyala, Darfur's biggest town, with a busy market where consumers paid lots of money, was the best option. Halima's father sold salt, sugar, corn, and coffee, and knew they were a viable commodity. Halima's mother was a weaver, and wanted to sell her fabrics to city women and foreign visitors.

Part 1, School – Amira remembers Halima telling her that with the money her parents earned, she could be sent to Gad Primary School on the outskirts of Nyala. Gad is a school that welcomed girls, being very non-traditional in doing so. Most people were full of scorn for the school, but some were full of praise. Amira desperately wanted to go to Gad – and still does. The opinion is no different long after Halima's departure. Most people are as closed-minded as are donkeys, Amira explains – especially her mother. Muma does not like the idea of Gad, and does not like the idea of girls learning to read or write in Arabic and English, and thinks that a girl's place is marriage and farm chores. Amira describes her mother as being locked in hut of tradition with no windows or doors for fresh ideas to come in.



Part 1, Pinched – Amira remembers Halima and her family leaving the village. They loaded up their possessions on an oxen and traveled off. Amira felt very sad at missing her best friend, and being left behind. Amira wished that she was the one leaving to find opportunity. It was a more painful experience for Amira than ripping a tooth out. It made Amira cry.

Part 1, The Wager – Dando and Old Anwar have made a bet to see who can grow the most tomatoes by picking time. Old Anwar says he always grows more tomatoes, while Dando says he always grows better tomatoes. Their friendly bet ultimately turns to insults as Dando calls Old Anwar's tomatoes little green rocks.

Part 1, Fruitless – Amira finds the tomato wager dumb, because Old Anwar has been friends with Dando and the family for Amira's whole life. She thinks the idea of a tomato war is just silly.

Part 1, Contest – Dando tucks Amira in to bed that night. He tells her to dream of good things. She asks why Dando and Old Anwar fight about tomatoes. Dando says it is merely a contest.

Part 1, War – Amira's father explains to her that a contest is not like a war. He says that there is an ongoing war in Darfur, which he says is nonsense. He speaks about things like persecution, rebellion, and genocide, none of which Amira understands. He explains that some people are killing other people over the belief that in Allah's eyes, some people are superior to others. Amira understands that this is nonsense, as all people are supposed to be equal in the eyes of Allah.

Part 1, As I See It – Amira compares the war to the fight between Dando and Old Anwar. Dando says they are not the same thing, and that he and Old Anwar are not at war. Amira believes they are.

Part 1, Chores – One of the bad things about getting older, Amira notes, is having to do more chores. She is nearly a grown-up. Muma says Amira must accept her new chores with grace and obedience, and not to complain. Amira does everything from weeding to husking and milleting corn, hauling grain to the animals, and peeling fruits and vegetables. Least of all she likes doing, Amira has to rake cow plop around the base of crops. She wishes her cows ate less.

Part 1, Birth Story – Amira's father enjoys telling the tale of Amira's birth. Muma went out to gather okra before it was baked by the sun's heat, only for Amira to be born quickly, within moments, even before the sun rose.

Part 1, Heartbeat – Amira's birth story is as close to her as is her heartbeat, her thin legs, her braids, and her skin. Her birth story is who she is.

Part 1, Okra – Amira's mother fondly recalls giving birth to Amira. She had to run back to the hut to give birth, balancing the okra she collected in her boob, and balancing Amira in her belly. She slowed down only to collect fallen okra – a part of the story that



everyone laughs at. Back at the hut, both the okra and Amira came tumbling from Muma.

Part 1, Twig – Dando gives Amira a sturdy twig with a sharp point, for making pictures in the sand as she loves to do. Amira calls it her “turning-twelve twig”. She loves the gift and knows how thoughtful it is.

Part 1, Ditty – Amira’s little sister, four year-old Leila, wishes it was her birthday instead. Muma tells Leila that she, too, will one day be 12, and can wear bright cottons. Leila sings Amira a ditty for her birthday, about twigs and growing up.

Part 1, Waking the Moon – When the moon winks, it is a bad sign. Amira and her family all beat pots, pans, and make loud noises with anything they can in order to scare the moon into being awake. Dando beats two drums, while Muma uses an ox-bell. Leila just shouts.

Part 1, Glowing Sayidda – Sometimes the moon stays out, pure and bright. At other times, the moon will not cooperate - a Sayidda Moon. Like a lady, the moon refuses to reveal herself. Sometimes the moon is a trickster, hiding behind clouds and then peaking out here and there. The family wonders if they must stay out all night to keep sure the moon remains in view.

Part 1, Leila – Leila was born on a night when the moon was in hiding. This is how the family knew that Leila would be different. The birth was easy, but Leila was very thin and scrawny.

Part 1, Our Bent Baby – Leila was nearly stillborn upon birth, but Dando got her to breathe by clearing mucus out of her nose. Upon closer inspection, Leila just wasn’t scrawny, but was bow-legged, one of them being severely misshapen with a tiny foot with toes sewn together at the end. Leila’s arms were also oddly shaped, and her back was crooked. Muma and Dando love her nonetheless, and were happy to have her, as is Amira.

Part 1, Double Joy – The same night Leila is born, Farha, a sheep, gives birth to Nali. Dando said that a girl and a lamb born under the same sky was a double joy. It was at that time that Leila began to wail, making a sound like “Nali”, which is how Nali came to be named.

Part 1, Gamal – Leila has a difficult time growing as her body is so deformed. Nevertheless, she manages to continue to grow well. One day, Leila met Gamal, a boy from the village the same age as Leila.

Part 1, Goal – Gamal and Leila often play together, such as when they play soccer with a tin can. Leila isn’t fast, but she is determined. She even refuses to use crutches that Old Anwar made for her to get around. Instead, she uses them as goal posts.

Part 1, Tradition Hut – Muma and Amira talk about everything under the sun, but Muma will never tolerate talk of school. On the rare occasions they do speak of education,



Muma explains that they simply do not have money for school, and that anything that Amira learns in school will not help her to milk cows, rake, or pick okra and melons. Muma tells Amira she does not need to worry about how to read, for one day she will be married, and her husband will do the reading for her. Amira wonders what will happen if she does not get married. Muma tells Amira not to speak so foolishly, and Amira thinks her mother's beliefs are backward.

Part 1, Chasing the Wind – Amira continues to speak to her mother about Gad Primary School, and why reading is important. For example, books could tell them better ways to grow crops. Amira, secretly however, wants to go to school to learn about things other than crops. Muma continues to insist that reading is waste of time. Amira counters that Halima's family is discovering new things, but Muma says they are merely chasing the wind.

Part 1, Goz – There is much sand, or goz, in the world, sprinkled by Allah everywhere. Amira calls sand "Darfur's great soil blanket". It is in the sand that Amira feels most at home, and draws pictures.

Part 1, Drawing – Amira draws curlicues in the sand, which for Amira, represent a bird, wings wide, soaring from her twig.

Part 1, Hand, Twig, Sparrow – When Amira draws, it is not her doing the drawing, she explains, but her hand, her twig, and her sparrow. Amira takes great delight in drawing beautiful things. She never knows what her sparrow will create, but knows there is a sparrow inside of her as well – one that means flight.

Part 1, The Janjaweed – Amira's mother tells her about the Janjaweed militia, who are very bad people. "Janjaweed" means "devils on horseback". As with Dando's talk about war, Amira does not understand the words her mother uses, either – including armed, militia, bandits, and renegades.

Part 1, Fright – Amira listens respectfully to her mother talk about the Janjaweed, for it fills Muma's face with fright. She says that the Janjaweed attack without warning, and if they ever come, Amira is to run.

Part 1, Possibilities – Amira and her father play a game called "What Else is Possible?" because it is their favorite game. Each time a question is asked, the answer can only be good. For example, if Amira wakes up and her sandals are gone, what is she to do? The answer: not worry, for worrying is a waste of time. If a week passes and still the sandals are gone, it could be that a pair of generous hands has stitched a new pair of sandals for Amira.

Analysis

Andrea Davis Pinkney's novel "The Red Pencil" is a story about a young girl who aspires to learn to read and write against the backdrop of the unfolding genocide in Darfur, Sudan. When the novel begins, Amira seems to have nearly everything she



could possibly want: she has a loving, loyal family, a stable home and farm which provides good food, a nearby river which provides water, and plenty of sand in which to draw. Yet, like all young people, Amira dreams of something else in addition to the idea of home and family. She aspires to do something other than farm work, and aspires to learn to read and write. Amira's parents, though unconditionally loyal to her, and loving of her, emblematic of the theme of family, disagree on the idea of education.

The reader should also note that in literature, it is usually the father who tends to be more orthodox and traditional in ideas and thinking, but in "The Red Pencil", it is actually Muma who is very orthodox and very traditional in her ideas and thinking. She believes that Amira's desire to learn will amount to nothing more than wasted time, for she believes that Amira's future rests with marriage, children, and chores, and that to want anything more is nonsense. Muma is not cruel or even unkind in the stating of her beliefs, but is certainly unflinching and unrelenting. Amira's father, Dando, however, can see there is a brightness in Amira –he has called her Amira Bright since she was an infant – and compares his daughter to a little sparrow who can fly and follow her dreams. While Dando heads up his household, he defers to Muma on matters relating to Amira, because Amira is a girl, not a boy, and because he loves and trusts his wife's judgment. As such, though Dando can write and read, he has not endeavored to teach Amira.

One of the ways in which Amira is able to demonstrate and practice her freedom is to draw in the sand. It is something she loves to do, delighting in the purely creative act of making something beautiful, from simple lines to pictures of those whom she loves. Indeed, drawing is such a freeing act to Amira that she does not consider herself to be an artist, but believes that there are near-spiritual forces at work in the twig, in the sand, in the world, that compel her to create the things that she does. This allows the reader to see just how passionate Amira is about drawing – and also underscores her passion for the desire to learn to read and write. This can also be seen symbolically by the goalpost crutches set up by Leila and Gamal. The crutches are used as a goalpost in their soccer game, and serve as a goal for Leila to get past – which is having to use the crutches to get around. Amira is likewise determined to get past her current circumstances to achieve her dream.

The reader should also pay close attention to movement beneath the surface of events. Amira's life seems to be very much in order. Apart from wanting to learn to read and write, Amira does not do without, either from the love of her parents or to lacking anything in terms of food, shelter, water, and clothing. But the security and stability of this simple, yet beautiful way of life, is slowly being eroded from beneath. The Janjaweed Militia make their first appearance only by way of mention. The only conflicts in the novel until then have been very mild and very peaceful: Dando and Muma disagree on Amira's education, and Dando and Old Anwar are in a tomato growing contest. But the Janjaweed Militia are outright violent, and have caused a war that is slowly spreading across the Darfur region. This war, day by day, grows closer to Amira's home and the nearby village. It cannot stay away forever.



Discussion Question 1

Why does a sharpened stick become such a wonderful gift to Amira? Why does she love it so much?

Discussion Question 2

To what bird does Amira compare herself? Why does Amira compare herself to a bird?

Discussion Question 3

What is the Janjaweed? Why is Amira supposed to run when they come?

Vocabulary

hearty, abundance, bustling, opportunity, paltry, grace, obedience, ample, ditty, summoned, generous



Part 1, Lines – Part 1, Nowhere

Summary

Part 1, Lines – Amira never knows where the lines she draws will go. Each day there is something new she sees when she is done, and she loves to create.

Part 1, Agreeing – While Dando and Old Anwar are in a tomato contest, they both agree on Amira. She overhears them discussing how special Amira is. Old Anwar tells Dando that Amira gets her glimmer and brightness from Dando, who was much like Amira when he was younger. He learned to read when he was Amira's age, being taught by Old Anwar.

Part 1, Seeing the Same Man – Old Anwar believes that Amira also gets farm sense from Dando. Dando believes so too, but also believes that Amira could have a gift for learning letters as well as farm chores. Old Anwar urges Dando to teach Amira to read – and Amira is stunned. Dando would love to do so, but his wife cannot be convinced. Old Anwar says that Amira could glow even brighter by learning how to read.

Part 1, Broken-Bottle Dolly – Leila makes a baby dolly out of a broken plastic bottle. She names the dirt-filled dolly “Salma”.

Part 1, Toy Battles – Leila and Gamal both fight over the bottle, and who found it first. Gamal says it is not a baby doll, but a jeep.

Part 1, Eyes – Ever since Mama told Amira about the Janjaweed, she has noticed, in the eyes of her parents and in the eyes of others, a strangeness, like a shadow. They are clearly concerned and worried, but do their best to keep their fears to themselves. It is as if something bad is coming, but they choose not to speak about it. But Amira cannot figure out what worries them, or why.

Part 1, Dots – Amira makes dots in the sand, and finds the wind wiping them away easily. Amira is amazed by the dots she draws, for they can be stars, bird footprints, eyes, and spilled beans. Amira wishes she had learned about the dots sooner.

Part 1, Walking, Walking, Water – Amira and Muma rise up early before the sun to go and fetch water from the river, toting heaving plastic jugs. It is rough work, and Amira feels the ache in her arms, legs, and back.

Part 1, Family Pictures – Amira describes her parents in pictures. Her mother has a strong, square, beautiful face, and is very proud. A toob covers all of her body, except for her feet, hands, and eyes. Dando is very square, has a stubbly chin, and eyes of wisdom that see that many things are possible for Amira. Leila has a misshapen body, but a gentle, kind face that is open. Amira herself has eyes like her father's, and always looks to the sun, for new possibilities.



Part 1, Eternity – Muma shows Amira her wedding toob a gift from her own mother. The wedding tomb will someday be Amira's.

Part 1, Melon Belly – Amira feeds Nali. She and Muma see that Nali has a large belly, as if she has consumed too much millet. Amira believes Nali is becoming too fat, but Muma has Nali rub the belly of Nali, and Amira discovers that Nali is actually pregnant.

Part 1, The Haboob – Amira sees an approaching sandstorm, a haboob. She can hear it before she can see it. Amira knows that sandstorms are dangerous, but they are also a wonder to her.

Part 1, Demon! – Dando and Muma rush to prepare for the sandstorm. Dando boards up the family's hut with tin sheets, while Muma begins to lay tarps over washbasins, sleeping pallets, and other important things. But Amira cannot find Nali, and worries. Dando orders Amira back to the house, so he can board up the door. Dando says that the sandstorm has the lash of a demon.

Part 1, Worry – Amira will not go back to the hut, for she is worried about Nali. Dando tells her there is no time to look for Nali. Amira struggles against her father, pulling her to the house. Amira will not come. The storm bears down upon them, and then suddenly lifts up.

Part 1, Bleat, Relief! – The sandstorm clears up. Sand is everywhere. The crops are flattened, the animals are matted, and everything is still. Amira coughs up dust. Muma arrives to tell Amira that she had previously brought Nali into the hut. Amira is so happy that Nali is safe.

Part 1, Afterward – Amira and her family spend the rest of the day cleaning and clearing away sand. It is gritty work. Amira cannot sleep that night, thinking of the haboob's beauty.

Part 1, Dando's Confession – Dando tells Amira that she frightened him. He was afraid he might have lost Amira, he explains. Amira is worried she might have lost Nali. Dando is angry that Amira has disobeyed him, and that haboobs destroy things, and are not games. As Amira falls asleep, Dando asks her where she gets such self-determination from. Amira asks where Dando gets it from, in response.

Part 1, Lizard – Leila sings a ditty about the haboob. She compares it to a lizard, slippery and silly, enjoying a party while Muma and Dando worry for Amira. Amira realizes how selfish she has been by listening to the song.

Part 1, Apology – Amira goes to find Dando the next day, and apologizes for disobeying him during the haboob. Amira and Dando hug, and make up.

Part 1, Nali's Gift – Nali the sheep gives birth early in the morning. Her lamb is gentle and very tiny, with eyes full of wonder. Amira calls to her family to see the new baby.



Part 1, Flitter – Amira decides to name the little lamb “Flitter” after the lamb’s fluttering tail.

Part 1, Sand Sheep – Amira draws sheep in the sand. She draws Nali, with short legs, and she draws Flitter, with triangle ears and a fluttering tail.

Part 1, Peek-and-Prance – Flitter happily awaits Amira each morning at the pen. She then pretends to hide, only to come prancing out to meet Amira.

Part 1, Dawn – Amira’s family eats breakfast with a meal of mangoes, the farm’s best fruit. Amira and Leila are especially happy to be eating the mangoes because they are sweet and tangy.

Part 1, Sudden Gust – It is bread day for Amira and Muma. They begin rolling dough for bread. Amira loves spending time with her mother baking bread. On the horizon, quick gusts of wind can be heard. Amira wonders if it is another haboob.

Part 1, Hammering – Amira can hear a hammering-like sound in the distance. Muma’s face takes on a dark expression of worry. But the sounds, like thunder, grow closer and closer, and louder and louder.

Part 1, Happening? – Muma wraps Amira and Leila in their sleeping pallets, and puts them in the corner. She tells them to stay where they are. It is not a sandstorm, but the Janjaweed. Amira finds it all to be unreal as helicopters and horses arrive. Janjaweed militia begin shooting into crowds of people in the village. Dando is killed, shot in the back. The village and many surrounding farms are lit on fire, including Amira’s. Nali burns to death. It is a terrifying, suffocating experience for Amira.

Part 1, Shock – Amira is stunned by what has happened. Her father is dead, and Nali is dead, with their farm burned.

Part 1, Together – Muma gathers supplies and food quickly, along with Old Anwar’s help. He has brought his donkey and Gamal to Amira’s house. Gamal’s is badly burned, and Old Anwar treats his wounds. Old Anwar says the four of them must stay together.

Part 1, Calling – Amira calls to Flitter. She is terrified that Flitter is dead, and hopes that Flitter is merely playing hide-and-prance. But Flitter does not come, no matter how long or how many times Amira calls.

Part 1, Nowhere – Amira still cannot find Flitter the next day. Muma holds Amira and comforts her, telling her that Flitter is gone.

Analysis

The loyalty and love of family are on clear display in the next several chapters as the novel continues. Muma’s mother, out of love and a sense of duty to her daughter and to her own position as a wife and mother, continues to oppose educating Amira beyond



basic housework and farm work, while Dando, out of love for his daughter, and in support of her dreams, conspires with Old Anwar to teach Amira how to read and write in secret. It is Amira's dream come true, but it is not a dream that will come to fruition through her father. Dark times are coming, foreshadowed by the darkness in the eyes of the adults around Amira.

The events of the haboob – the sandstorm – serve as a harbinger for future events, and for an even greater sandstorm that has yet to come (this storm will be figurative, as in a storm of violence by way of war). Amira refuses to listen to reason, or to her father, during the haboob, wanting instead to seek out Nali and Flitter to make sure that they are alright, and are alive. No matter how much Amira's father begs her to come along to the safety of the house, Amira will not listen. Fortunately, the haboob lets up – and though Amira's father is both angry and relieved, the reader understands just how courageous and determined Amira is once she has her heart set on something. She was willing to risk her own life to see to the safety of a farm animal. Dando, here, is both proud and frustrated. Nevertheless, he is very happy that Amira is alive and well.

The last happy time Amira's family enjoys together is a breakfast of mangoes. This scene should not be lost on the reader's attention. Meals are a truly intimate occurrence, as meals are shared most often with family, friends, and loved ones. Meals are measures of stability and happiness. Meals bring people together, figuratively and literally. The same is quite true for Amira's family. They enjoy the fruits of their labor together – actual fruits – and prepare for what should be just another ordinary day. But this is not to be, as the Janjaweed Militia violate the intimacy and peace of a meal to attack and murder. The final meal Amira and her family have together serves as an ironic occurrence, for it does not serve as a gateway to peace, but a gateway to war.

War becomes a major theme in these chapters, courtesy of the Janjaweed Militia. Their wanton destruction, indiscriminate butchering, and pure hatred destroys hundreds of lives in Amira's farming community alone. Dando is gunned down, shot in the back. Even animals do not escape the cruelty and hatred of the Janjaweed Militia fighters, who use helicopters and guns to kill farm animals – including Flitter and Nali. Almost everything good and decent in Amira's life has been destroyed by the Janjaweed Militia, by war, including her father and her home. Amira's dream of learning to read and write has never seemed so remote as then.

Discussion Question 1

Why is the sandstorm such a dangerous event for Amira's family? Why does Amira's father become so angry with Amira following the sandstorm?

Discussion Question 2

What is so important about the final meal Amira's family has together?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Amira disobey her father during the sandstorm? What does this reveal about her?

Vocabulary

lingering, embroidery, calloused, bleating, enthralled, obstinate, wonderings, coaxes, tawny, frantically



Part 1, Fleeing – Part 2, The Red Pencil

Summary

Part 1, Fleeing – Amira’s family, along with the other survivors of the Janjaweed attack, are now refugees and begin to leave the village, the darkest night they will ever see. They only take what they can carry, but the heaviest burden is the sadness at what has happened.

Part 1, Ashes – The refugees from the village and farms form a single line. Amira knows who many of them are, but doesn’t truly know them individually. Amira asks her mother where they are going. She tells Amira they are going to safety. Everything in their old life has been scorched and burned, including Muma’s wedding toob.

Part 1, Soles – Old Anwar reveals that they will make their journey day by day, never knowing their ultimate destination, but going on each day only as there is peace ahead. Food and water are scarce, and Amira’s feet and legs ache badly. They move only at night, when the Janjaweed militia rest. Muma carries little Leila on her back each night. Amira wishes she was small enough to ride. Gamal clutches at his wounded neck, and tries not to whine.

Part 1, Forward – Old Anwar urges everyone along each night. He tells them that they must keep moving. Despite his age, Old Anwar is fast and moves well. The tomato contest is long forgotten.

Part 1, Footprints – Amira pretends that Dando is walking beside her, and pretends to see his footprints in the sand. She misses him terribly, and knows she will never have him back again.

Part 1, Hungry – There is little food, and Amira is only allowed a handful at a time – from peanuts to clumps of corn. Everyone has the same rations in order to survive. Amira and the others eat their rations bit by bit to make them last, while Gamal wolfs them down. Amira tells him to slow down, but Gamal says he can’t.

Part 1, Stubborn – Muma has grown weary, and can no longer carry Leila. Leila can now ride on Old Anwar’s donkey, who has less and less food to carry for all the others. Leila insists she walk instead, but Muma says no. Leila continues to insist, and finally, Muma relents at Old Anwar’s behest.

Part 1, No Moon – There is no moon, and for once, no one calls her out. Without the moon, there is less light, and it is harder to see. This is good for the refugees, says Old Anwar, for they are in a territory the militia is combing to scrub clean of inferior people. Old Anwar says the war is about greed and arrogance, with Africans and Arabs feeling entitled.



Part 1, Cursed – Amira loses her twig from Dando. Without the moon, there is bad luck. Muma tells Amira she will find another stick, but there cannot be another stick from Dando.

Part 1, Misery – Everyone travels in in silence, in absolute misery, even Old Anwar's donkey. They all want it to be over with.

Part 1, Queasy – Amira is weary and sad. She doesn't know how many nights she has been walking. Her body aches and her stomach is queasy with hunger.

Part 1, Dazed – Amira is tired and her mind is senseless. She prays to Allah to make the misery end soon.

Part 1, Quick-Stream – The only relief to be had is to go to the bathroom behind a bush where no one can see. Amira then must hurry up and catch up to everyone else.

Part 1, Displaced – Amira does not know what day it is. They arrive at Kalma, a Displaced People's Camp. Workers welcome the refugees by bringing them into the cramped camp, full of people from all over. Amira is glad the journey is over, but already knows she does not like Kalma.

Part 2, Scraps – It is now April 2004. Amira's new house is made of the scraps of rice bags. The roof is a patchwork of old, brittle tree roots. Amira cannot believe this is her new home.

Part 2, Disbelief – Amira cannot believe, still, what has happened. She remembers her father being gunned down, and finds reality worse than a nightmare. She reflects on how many families have lost loved ones, and can't believe that she saw what she saw.

Part 2, Vanishing – Amira feels as if something inside her is draining away – her energy, her liveliness, her will to live, her happiness, are all disappearing – including her voice.

Part 2, Mourning – Muma cries at night when her children cannot see. But Amira is fully awake, and can hear her mother crying, and can see her mother wrapped up like a knot in sadness. Muma is no longer very proud, but weak with grief, and does not want anyone to see.

Part 2, Rubber Twigs – The soil at Karlma is dark and smelly. It is worse than cow plop. The twigs at Kalma are not good for drawing, and the soil is not good for being drawn in. Amira can see how sad the camp's dirt is, just like the people. Amira does not feel the will to draw anymore.

Part 2, Silence – Mira is so sad and lifeless she can no longer even speak.

Part 2, Crowded Kalma – The camp in which Mira and the others have come is very overcrowded, and food, water, and sanitation are scarce. All of the people have come from beautiful farms, homes, and villages, all destroyed by the Janjaweed militia. No



matter who the people are, or where they have come from, or how they speak, they all have one thing in common: sad eyes.

Part 2, Echo – Amira can hear the sound of a bird, but does not know if it is from somewhere outside the camp, or somewhere in herself. Wherever the bird is, she knows it is fighting to make sound. She imagines it must be coming from within, after all. The bird wants to be free, but cannot escape its own echo.

Part 2, Locked – Muma tries to get Amira to speak, but Amira will not speak. Muma knows that the only way to get beyond sorrow is time.

Part 2, The Water Giver – Water is a precious commodity at Kalma, and is given out in rations of one plastic jug. Amira and Muma always hope for a little extra, but are never given any extra.

Part 2, The Flicker Box – There is a television at the camp. It is full of happy people speaking in English. Much of what is on television are things that Amira has never seen, including people with hay hair.

Part 2, Stuck – While waiting in the water-giver's line, Amira can hear the other women complaining of heat, mosquitoes, scarce food and water, and more people arriving every day. They never speak of the future, only of the present. They know they cannot go back to life the way it was before, especially with the Janjaweed on the loose. But Amira wonders what else in life is possible.

Part 2, Flowers – Sudanese flowers grow on the gateposts in white, green, red, yellow, and black. The wind sometimes knocks the flowers off, and carries them along on the ground. They bloom no matter the season, and with very little water.

Part 2, Blowing Smoke – Amira sees an older man who smokes cigarettes leading around a girl who is older than Amira, but still a child, and Muma explains the girl is the man's wife. The man spits on the ground and his smoke gets in the girl's face. Amira thinks he is rude.

Part 2, Nonstop – The television in camp goes on day and night, even though there is no volume. Everything is trapped in the flickering box. Amira wonders if the people on the television, with hay hair and pink skin, feel the same way she does: trapped.

Part 2, Moon-Time Mirrors – Leila often has nightmares, and wishes for the dawn to come sooner. Amira can tell that there is still more darkness to come.

Part 2, Unwelcome – Sayidda Moon's fullness is a blessing in Amira's village, but at the camp, lots of different beliefs have become muddled together. The moon is unwelcome that night, for it is bright and makes sleep difficult. Leila can't stand to see the moon, and wishes it would go.



Part 2, Gamal's Grief – Gamal misbehaves much more at Kalma than before. Gamal makes a hula-hoop out of an old tire, and when another child asks to try it, Gamal yanks it around the boy's neck. When the boy calls for his mother, Gamal runs away, crying.

Part 2, Tantrum – Gamal demands that Amira talk. Amira cannot find anything to say. Gamal stamps his foot, demanding Amira speak, but Old Anwar tells Gamal that Amira will speak when she is ready. If Gamal wants to hear words, he and Old Anwar can go to the prayer tent and speak to Allah.

Part 2, Miss Sabine – A woman named Miss Sabine arrives at the camp. She carries a big pouch and has ginger skin with gold-green eyes. Amira compares her eyes to stars. She wears a medal that says "Sudan Relief" on it. She arrives with an intake officer.

Part 2, Want – A crowd of kids gather to see what Miss Sabine is all about, and what she has brought.

Part 2, Knowing – Leila is among the bunch of kids desperate to know what Miss Sabine has brought. They happily welcome her and she thanks them. Her voice is beautiful. She picks Amira out with her gaze, but doesn't try to force Amira to talk. She just lets her be.

Part 2, The Red Pencil – Miss Sabine opens her pouch. Inside are yellow pencils, which are gone in an instant among the children. Amira wants one, but doesn't get there in time. Miss Sabine then pulls out another pencil – a red one – and gives it to Amira personally. She then pulls out a stack of paper pads –yellow, like wheat. Amira is suddenly happy.

Analysis

The war, which has caused so much heartache, sadness, pain, and destruction, becomes background noise once more as Amira, her mother, Leila, Gamal, Old Anwar, and many other survivors of the Janjaweed attack begin a journey toward Kalma's displaced persons camp. The camp is lightly defended, but is in a very safe area. Amira knows immediately that she will not like the camp, for the ground is dry soil and not sand, and the place is overcrowded. If Amira's dreams of an education were remote following the Janjaweed attack, they are even closer to impossible now, for the Kalma camp is a place of despair and hopelessness. This horrible sadness ultimately overwhelms even Amira, and Amira is unable to speak for months. It is a trend which will continue for much of the novel to come.

All of the beauty in Amira's life has come undone. Everything she once thought secure has been undone by the war. Her father is dead. Her beloved farm animals are dead. Her home is gone. Her village is destroyed. Her crops are ruined. Amira must now live in an overcrowded camp in a rice bag hut with a dirt floor. The reader may argue that Amira is even lucky to be alive, and this is true – but the reader should also keep in mind that Amira has suffered tremendously, and was never ungrateful to begin with. This can be seen by way of the twig that Amira is given by her father on her birthday. It



is a twig, not a fancy car or a video game system or a pass to the spa. Amira considers the twig to be a treasure, both because it will allow her to draw, and especially because it is a gift from her father. To value something so simple for such a sentimental reason is beautiful, and for Amira to be unhappy with her present circumstances, the reader realizes that it must indeed be terrible for even someone like Amira to be unhappy with it.

The more and more time Amira spends in the camp, the more and more trapped she feels. The sparrow, and the dream of an education, are largely forgotten most of the time now by Amira. She doesn't even think of them anymore. But someone is thinking of Amira. A lovely foreign woman, Miss Sabine, comes to the Kalma camp to deliver yellow pencils and yellow pads to the children, to give them hope, and to give them something to do and focus their energies on. The children are delighted to have the yellow pencils and pads, but Amira receives the special gift of a red pencil. For the first time in weeks since Amira's ordeal began, first with the death of her father, and then with her virtual imprisonment at Kalma, Amira is happy. She is genuinely happy with the red pencil and the yellow writing pad. These are things she has never before owned, and she knows that they have potential. The reader should also be aware that the gift has given Amira a new round of potential as well, which will be borne out in coming chapters.

Discussion Question 1

Where do the refugees ultimately end up? What is that place like? How do the refugees feel about being there?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Amira stop speaking? Why do Amira's mother and Old Anwar think she has stopped speaking? Are they correct? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What is so exciting about Miss Sabine's visit to the camp? What does it mean for Amira?

Vocabulary

rations, sustain, territory, muddied, protest, medallion



Part 2, Parting Glance – Part 2, Red Eyed Robber

Summary

Part 2, Parting Glance – Miss Sabine leaves the camp with the intake officer, and Amira waves good bye. Amira is amazed with Miss Sabine's beauty and elegance, and the intake officer is short and fat beside her. Miss Sabine's gaze is friendly and kind, while the intake officer's eyes are obscured by sunglasses.

Part 2, Straight and Shiny – Amira is amazed with her red pencil. It is nothing like her twig. She is amazed that the red pencil is red on the inside, too. Amira has made a half-a-dash on the paper, and comes to find she does not like the red pencil, for it is too hard and too skinny to hold.

Part 2, Blocked – Amira's pencil tries to draw Nali, but cannot. She misses everything about Nali, such as Nali always wanting to play with Amira. She wonders why she cannot draw.

Part 2, Old Anwar's Lament – Old Anwar feels badly for Amira, wanting to wash away her pain. He knows part of her heart is missing, and wishes he could replace it. He knows part of her soul is missing, and wishes he could replace that, too. Amira wishes he could too.

Part 2, Wife – Amira watches the rude man's wife cleaning his messy underpants. Muma tells Amira it is a wife's love. Amira thinks there is nothing to love about a rude man's messy underpants.

Part 2, Inside the Flicker Box – Leila's nightmares and Gamal's unhappiness have made Amira even more unhappy. Amira has nightmares about the television, and dreams the people in it are trying to bite her knuckles. Halima is also in the television, though, and is glad to see Amira. She then tears off the lid of the television, climbs inside, hugs Halima, and plays Dizzy Donkey with her.

Part 2, Stirring a Pot – Old Anwar finds an old wheelbarrow which he loads with firewood. He then makes a cooking pit, out of which comes a meal of greens, salt, rice, lentils, and stale onions. Old Anwar, Amir, Muma, and Gamal pray and eat. The food is good, and Old Anwar announces they are now a family.

Part 2, Needle Noses – Mosquitoes become an even bigger problem at the camp as time goes on. It always gets worse at night. Amira wonders why Allah ever bothered to create mosquitoes.

Part 2, Sesame Oil – Amira's mother lathers her up with sesame oil to keep the mosquitoes away.



Part 2, Questions – Amira still does not speak, but has many things she wants to ask her mother. Those questions include why Muma sweeps the dirt floor of their hut, what she prays for, and if she saw her father fall.

Part 2, New Neighbor – Amira discovers she has a new neighbor. It is a cute little hedgehog. She has never seen one before, and learns the name “hedgehog” from Old Anwar.

Part 2, Withering – As time goes by, Amira discovers her mother is slowly falling apart like a withering flower. She is no longer proud and standing tall.

Part 2, Sad-Quiet – Leila sings a new song about Amira never speaking anymore. She sings about how Amira’s sad-quiet makes her sad-quiet, too.

Part 2, Fences – Amira wonders why there are blue lines, like ugly wire fences, on her yellow paper. The lines seem like a barricade preventing Amira from drawing.

Part 2, No Blue Boundaries – The red pencil encourages Amira to try to break through the boundaries, to ignore the blue lines, and just draw to free the pictures raging through her memory.

Part 2, Awakened – Amira’s sparrow begins fluttering. Amira’s sparrow calls on her to draw a helicopter killing countless people, among them being Dando.

Part 2, Drenched – As the bullets fly, so too does blood. Amira draws numerous dots, representing bullets.

Part 2, Listening – As Amira listens to her inner self, she hears the sparrow singing once more, and then her pencil begins moving. As it does, her sparrow is springing, preparing to speak.

Part 2, Freeing Muma – Amira continues to see her mother struggle through the nights. Sadness is overwhelming at night, like a haboob. Amira goes to her mother, and puts her hands on her back to comfort her, and both mother and daughter recognize the pain in each other.

Part 2, Release – Amira and Muma hold one another together and cry. They soak their cotton tobs. They cry themselves to sleep, in each other’s arms.

Part 2, Healing – Amira shows Old Anwar her drawings. He says the bold color of the pencil is strong, and suits Amira. He looks at Amira’s drawings and knows she is healing.

Part 2, Could it Be? – Amira discovers her pencil and pad are gone from under her pallet. She is stunned. She searches all day, hoping it is merely misplaced. By evening, Amira gives up, believing she is cursed to lose everything she loves.



Part 2, Roar – Amira speaks for the first time in weeks, shouting for her red pencil. She discovers that Leila and Gamal have taken her pencil and tablet. Amira demands the return of her red pencil, and Leila is thrilled Amira has spoken. Gamal is also thrilled, and returns the pencil at once.

Part 2, Erase – Old Anwar shows Amira how to use the eraser on the pencil. Erasers are used to blot out mistakes. To Amira, the mistake is to erase, not the other way around.

Part 2, Sweet Invitation – Amira joins Old Anwar one evening as he is scratching a list of gratitude into the dust. He says that the land is like a tablet, and the land has its own memory and power. He presses into the earth a life that sustains them all. Amira asks Old Anwar to teach her how to write. Old Anwar says that there is talk of a school that will soon come to Kalma, but until then he will gladly teach her. It will be done in secret, by lantern light, without Muma's knowledge. Amira will not be chasing the wind, but stirring it up.

Part 2, To... - For Amira, writing is a treasure, for it can allow her to write in English and read the Koran.

Part 2, My A – Old Anwar teaches Amira how to make the letter "A". Amira is thrilled to be learning. Old Anwar explains that letters are pictures that make words.

Part 2, Mathematics – Old Anwar also begins teaching Amira math, starting out with simple addition, such as 1+1. Amira is not thrilled to be learning math, but longs to draw instead.

Part 2, Funny Bugs – Old Anwar continues to teach Amira how to write and do math. To Amira, each letter of the English alphabet is like a funny looking bug.

Part 2, Favorite – Amira's favorite letter is "O" because it is open, unbroken, and eternal.

Part 2, Population – As Amira waits for water, she tries to make sense of numbers and the people at the camp. She realizes there are thousands, and tries to add up the untold pain among them. Amira realizes there are too many tragedies to count. Amira comes to realize that math is useful, even if it makes her head hurt.

Part 2, Butterflies – Gamal draws a picture of a boy reaching toward clouds shaped like a mother and a father, The boy is drawing butterfly-sized tears. Amira tells him it is a beautiful way to cry.

Part 2, CNN – On the television, a reporter from CNN talks about Gad Primary School. Amira is amazed at all the children in nice clothes in a friendly environment. There are pencils and tablets everywhere. Amira tries to see if Halima is among those children pictured, but cannot find her. But just as soon as the report comes on, it transitions to static.



Part 2, Surprise – Old Anwar brings Amira a roasted yam. She only takes one bite, and stores away the rest for later. Old Anwar then teaches Amira how to read and write the word “sweet”.

Part 2, Bushy Bundle – Amira enjoys watching the hedgehog move along, and wonders where it lives.

Part 2, The Future – Amira decides she wants a future that involves writing, and teaching others to write and read.

Part 2, Mine – Amira continues to eat her yam bit by bit, not sharing with anyone else, even though she thinks she should share with Leila and Gamal.

Part 2, Soup-Can Soccer – Gamal and Leila play soccer with a soup can. Leila wins, and rejoices. Amira can read the ruins of the label on the can, which spell out “icken oodle”.

Part 2, Brushing Dust – Muma is sweeping the dirt floor of the house, and Amira tells Muma she wants to leave Kalma to go to Nyala. Muma tells Amira she is busy.

Part 2, Handlebar Happy! - Gamal cruises around on an old, beat-up bicycle. Each day, he invites kids to ride on the handlebars. It makes him, and the kids, happy.

Part 2, Red-Eyed Robber – A red-eyed rat steals the rest of Amira’s yam. Amira lets the rat go rather than chase it down.

Analysis

In Amira’s darkest moments – when she is no longer even contemplating her dreams of an education – Miss Sabine arrives and turns her world right-side-up once more. Miss Sabine kindles hope in Amira with the gift of a red pencil and a yellow legal pad. Taken together, the pencil and paper may lead to the writing and drawing of anything, and taken together with Amira, give Amira potential once more. Hope is furthered from a very unlikely source: Old Anwar. It was Old Anwar who taught Amira’s father how to read and write many years before, and Old Anwar has decided that he will honor Amira’s father’s memory, and will help Amira achieve her dreams, by teaching her how to read and write. Amira is beyond excited, and while she may not be in an actual school, the fact that she will learn to read and write at all is more than she had ever thought possible at Kalma.

Indeed, Old Anwar’s decision to assist Amira is not just out of that respect for her or her father, but because Old Anwar, Muma, Amira, Leila, and Gamal have become something of a makeshift family on their own. Old Anwar becomes something of an almost grandfatherly figure to Amira, agreeing to teach her how to read and write in secret, because Muma still does not approve of young girls being educated. Amira plunges ahead with her lessons, realizing that the blue lines on the paper are not holding her back from writing or learning to read, but actually provide a springboard for



her to do so. They form a foundation for greater things. As Amira learns to write and read, she also becomes more aware of the world around her for the first time in the camp as well. Her study of math, for example, allows her to understand just how many thousands upon thousands of tragedies have been played out among the people in the camp because of the war.

Amira's dream coming true – of learning to read and write – also gives way to another dream that is forming. She decides that not only does she want to continue to learn to read and write, but that she wants to be able to teach others to read and write, and make sure they have a good future and plenty of potential with even a basic education. However, Amira knows she will need to further her education, and a report on CNN on the Gad School foments a new dream in Amira – before teaching, Amira wants to attend Gad Primary School. This should be taken by the reader in conjunction with Muma's sweeping of the dirt floor in the hut. While Amira never asks Muma why she sweeps a dirt floor, the reasons why are pretty clear to the reader. Muma is seeking normalcy in tragedy, doing something she has always done in order to feel comfortable. Muma is also seeking to tend to a house, such as it is, in order to be able to care for her children by doing something she has always done before. Finally, Muma is keeping alive her own dreams of family by performing a simple task, just to perform it, just to keep herself moving, and just to keep reminding herself that she has a family and must ensure that her children still have something worth calling home. It is a beautiful and sweet thing, but also demonstrates to Amira everything she does not want out of life. Amira does not mind caring for family, but wants to do more than just sweep floors. At the same time, the reader should not miss Old Anwar's declaration that Amira, her mother, Leila, and Gamal are all now a family – and that this is done over a meal. A meal has brought everyone together once more, just as it served an ironic purpose earlier in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Old Anwar agree to teach Amira how to write and read? Why is this done in secret?

Discussion Question 2

How does Gamal cry in the novel? How does Amira respond to this?

Discussion Question 3

What does Amira decide she wants to do with her life? Why?

Vocabulary

encouragement, elegance, lament, secret, instruct, vexing



Part 2, New Family Pictures – Part 2, Flight

Summary

Part 2, New Family Pictures – Amira draws pictures of her new family members. Old Anwar has high cheekbones, a light mustache, heavy shoulders, and bunion-plagued feet. Gamal has wide-open eyes, is smiling, and is always up to mischief.

Part 2, Love – Old Anwar procures a bottle of Orange Fanta for Amira, but Amira does not ask where it comes from. Unlike the yam, Amira leaves half for Leila and Gamal. Amira calls it a dream liquid, and declares her love for Fanta soda.

Part 2, Guzzling – Surprisingly, Leila and Gamal do not fight over the Fanta. They leave one final guzzle for Amira.

Part 2, Fanta Flute – Amira turns the Fanta bottle into a musical instrument by blowing across the rim. It makes her happy.

Part 2, Halima, Profile – Amira draws a pictures of Halima in profile, with a rounded, proud forehead and beautiful eyelashes. Amira imagines Halima’s lips tell her to come to school.

Part 2, I Wish – While Amira is grateful for Old Anwar’s lessons, and the school that is now in the process of being built at Kalma, Amira wants to go to a real school with other girls, especially with Halima. But because Old Anwar has done so much for Amira, she tells him none of it.

Part 2, Leap – Old Anwar can tell something is on Amira’s mind. Amira knows she can trust him, and tells him about her desire to go to Gad Primary School in Nyala. Old Anwar looks pleased but troubled. Amira thinks she will now be reprimanded.

Part 2, Anthill – Old Anwar explains he is the one to be in trouble for not having seen sooner Amira’s desires. She is like a bright star that needs a bigger sky. He explains the sad truth, that real school costs money, and the family does not have the means. Even with the money, Nyala is several miles away, and would be dangerous to travel to during wartime. Amira watches ants build a mound. Amira knows how the ants feel: small, but desiring to climb a hill.

Part 2, Envy – Amira follows the hedgehog to see where he goes. The hedgehog heads for the front gate, near where the intake officer is munching peanuts and drinking Fanta. Amira watches jealously as the hedgehog leaves the camp.

Part 2, Tug of War – Muma and Old Anwar argue about Amira’s lessons. Muma believes that Amira is having her time wasted. Old Anwar contends that Amira’s talents are being



wasted without education, that Muma's close-mindedness is pushing away Amira's brilliance. Despite Muma's anger, Amira can tell Muma is curious about the words and pictures on Amira's writing pad.

Part 2, Opinions – Muma tells Amira and Old Anwar they are both fools. As she leaves, Old Anwar produces Amira's pencil from his robes, worried that Muma may have done something drastic with it.

Part 2, Muma Blooming – Muma and Amira sit near the fire, cooking food. No words pass between them. Muma asks about the drawings Amira makes in the dirt while waiting on the food to cook. Amira says they are pictures of Muma and herself. Muma uses a stick to draw in the dirt. It is as if it is dawn for her. Muma makes the picture of herself and Amira smile.

Part 2, Talking to Sayidda Moon – The moon is full. Amira prays to the moon, saying that she knows her mother loves her, but she wants to go to school.

Part 2, Possibilities – Amira contemplates running away to go to school. She knows many dangers may await, but she wonders what else is possible beyond the camp's walls.

Part 2, Directions – Old Anwar teaches Amira about Allah's light. Amira asks how Allah's light is found. Old Anwar replies that she should take the path that shines the brightest.

Part 2, Sudanese Flowers, Reborn – Amira draws Sudanese flowers on the blue-line fences on her notepad.

Part 2, Bursting - Amira remembers tomatoes – Dando's tomatoes – being red, like her pencil. T is the new letter she learns, and tomato is the new word she learns to spell. She finds the memory of tomatoes is a good one.

Part 2, I Am – Amira comes to discover that with writing and drawing comes freedom, like a sparrow. Amira has become the red pencil.

Part 2, Up, Up, Me – Amira declares she is the red pencil.

Part 2, Thirst Returns – Amira sees that the rude man's child wife is now pregnant. Amira wonders if the baby will make the girl happy, or drain her. Soon, the girl will be required to fetch water for her new family. It makes Amira very thirsty.

Part 2, Fly or Die – Amira's Fanta flute now has multiple flies living inside, but they do not see the escape route at the top. Amira knows the flies must leave the bottle, or will die.

Part 2, Nightmare – Amira dreams of a thunder storm and rain of Sudanese flowers coming down over Kalma.



Part 2, Dumb Donkey – As Amira heads to help her mother with evening chores, the rude man calls to Amira for her help carrying supplies. Amira chooses not to help him, pretending to be as dumb as a donkey.

Part 2, Looming – Amira believes she will spend her life in the Kalma camp, and become a Sudanese flower, stuck to fences.

Part 2, CNN Daydream – Amira daydreams of joining Halima at a CNN party where both girls wear Gad School uniforms.

Part 2, Promises – Amira tells Leila she will be leaving, and not to tell anyone else. She gives Leila her birthday toob, bright blue and pretty. It is too big for Leila, but Amira tells her it fits perfectly.

Part 2, Sister-to-Sister – Amira tells Leila she'll return one day with more pencils and notebooks, to teach everyone else to read, write, and learn. Most importantly, everyone will have a chance for a new path. Amira kisses Leila's cheek goodbye.

Part 2, Good-bye Gifts – Amira leaves many things behind for her loved ones. She leaves her Fanta flute for Gamal, her drawn tomato memory for Old Anwar, her red pencil and tablet for Muma, with letter Os all over it.

Part 2, Now – Amira hears a birdcall inside, and knows it is time. She gathers dried beans, and a small tin of sesame oil, and Amira slips away while everyone is at the central prayer tent.

Part 2, Itchy Doubt – Amira second-guesses what she is doing, but continues on anyways.

Part 2, Dando Bright! – Amira believes she sees her father's shadow up ahead of her, and it guides her on. She moves faster.

Part 2, Pray, Wait – Amira knows she must slip past the guards at the gate. She waits and watches for her chance to flee, and prays.

Part 2, Hedgehog Escape – The guards end up fighting over a bottle of Fanta. Amira then slips through the intake gate like a hedgehog.

Part 2, Quickened – Outside on her own, Amira doesn't know which way to go. Her heart beats quickly. She does her best to listen to the Koran's teachings, taught to her by Old Anwar, to take the brightest path. Suddenly, a bright light appears behind Amira, and two hands grab Amira as she tries to run.

Part 2, The Truth – Old Anwar has caught up with Amira, and asks her if she has lost her mind. He tells her it is not safe for a girl to be outside the camp after dark. Amira insists she wants to attend Gad School. Amira cannot go alone, Old Anwar insists, and Amira begins to cry, believing she will now be brought back to the camp.



Part 2, We – Old Anwar has his wheelbarrow with him. He tells Amira to get in. Old Anwar uses the sesame oil on the squeaky wheelbarrow hinges, and then uses the oil on Amira and himself. Old Anwar then tells Amira to hold on, and begins to push her.

Part 2, Flight – Amira feels free in the morning, like a sparrow, having left Kalma behind. She feels anything is possible, including her.

Analysis

When Muma learns of Amira's secret lessons, she is outraged. Her traditional views clash with the new ways that have come into the region. While Old Anwar and Amira consider Muma to simply be close-minded, the reader can sympathize with Muma to some degree. Everything Muma loves and has known has been upended at best, and at worst, in the case of her husband and her home, destroyed. Muma still holds onto the past in her beliefs, but they are beliefs which slowly give way to a new world and a new way. This can be seen in the very momentous act of drawing in the dirt with Amira, and further underscores the theme of family. In many ways, though Muma is not happy about Amira's dreams of education, Muma has at least come to a place of relative acceptance. So much has been out of her hands in the past several months, from the war to the loss of her former life, and so too must Amira one day make her own decisions and her own life –which will be beyond Muma's control.

Indeed, Amira's bold plans for her own life can best be reflected through the color of the pencil she uses. Earlier in the novel, Old Anwar comments that red is a bold color, and suits Amira. The reader will recall that there was only one red pencil given out by Miss Sabine, just as Miss Sabine noticed Amira among all the other children. These instances set Amira apart from the other girls in the camp, and even from among all the other people. Amira is the only one with a red pencil. So far as the reader knows, Amira is the only one learning to read and write with her pencil, which also sets her apart from all others in the camp. What also sets Amira apart from all others in the camp is her ability to still be able to dream big dreams, to think beyond the prison-like fences of the camp, and to think ahead to the future. Amira is like a sparrow that is rising above a field of wheat to see other things and do better things.

Amira subsequently decides that leaving the camp is her only option. She promises Leila that she'll return to teach her, and all the others, how to read and write. As such, Amira's dream is a very unselfish one, though it will take great courage and sacrifice on her part. To get to Gad School, she will have to cross miles of ground that are a war zone. It is highly unsafe to cross. But true to form, Old Anwar, who had previously declared that he, Amira, Muma, Leila, and Gamal were all a family now, refuses to let Amira travel to Gad School alone. He recognizes that Amira has dreams that will transcend her current situation in life, and to achieve those dreams, she needs a secure foundation. He becomes that secure foundation, agreeing to travel with her to Nyala, to see about Gad Primary School. Indeed, Amira's ride in the wheelbarrow at the end of the novel is not just a ride, but is representative of Old Anwar completing the theme of family by assuming the burden of caring for, protecting, and guiding along Amira. Her



dreams have never been so close than as at the end of the novel, though whether or not Amira achieves her dreams is not answered. The reader can imagine, however, that nothing will stop Amira.

Discussion Question 1

How does Muma react to Amira's secret lessons? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Amira decide to leave the camp at Kalma? If you were Amira, what would you have done? Would you have stayed at Kalma, and waited for the school? Or would you have fled to Nyala? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What does Old Anwar do upon discovering Amira has fled the camp? Why? Would you have done the same thing? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

delight, reprimand, scolding, admonished, wheedles, envious, impractical, stunted, grimacing, sensibilities



Characters

Amira

Amira is the main character, principal protagonist, and narrator of Andrea Davis Pinkney's novel "The Red Pencil". At twelve years old, Amira is a beautiful girl with big dreams, living in the Darfur region of Sudan. She is compared to a sparrow rising above the wheat by her father, and she relates to the sparrows, wanting to rise above mere farm work. Amira lives a happy and contented life with her mother, Muma, her father, Dando, and her younger sister, Leila. As Amira gets older, her portion of the farm chores increases, which she is not too happy about. However, she does them dutifully and out of love for her family. Amira escapes the drudgery of day to day life by drawing pictures in the sand. She treasures the gift of a twig from her father, and uses it to continue to draw pictures in the sand. Amira desires above all else to learn to read and write, and even to attend Gad Primary School the way her best friend, Halima, does. Muma, however, considers education to be a waste of time, and believes that Amira's future is one of marriage, childbearing, and farming. Amira is not deterred, and is thrilled when she overhears her father speaking to Old Anwar about teaching Amira to read and write.

When the Janjaweed Militia attack Amira's village and farm, and kill Dando and hundreds of others, Amira, Old Anwar, Muma, Leila, and Gamal travel to the displaced person's camp at Kalma. There, Amira is so overwhelmed by grief and sadness that she does not speak for months, and loses the desire to draw anything at all. Things change completely when Miss Sabine visits the camp, noticing Amira above all other children, and hands out pencils and pads to them. Amira is given a red pencil and a yellow pad by Miss Sabine, and Amira feels genuinely happy for the first time in months. She begins to speak again, yelling at Leila and Gamal for taking her pencil and pad. She then convinces Old Anwar to teach her to write and read, which he does.

When Amira sees a CNN report on television about Gad Primary School in nearby Nyala, Amira knows she must leave the prison-like camp, for it is holding her back. She dreams now of being a teacher, and coming back to the camp to teach others to read and write. Amira watches a hedgehog leave the camp, and it inspires her to do the same. She sneaks out at last one night, determined to head to Nyala, but unsure of which way to go. She is joined by Old Anwar, who becomes her protector, and will bring her to Gad.

Muma

Muma is the mother of Amira and Leila, and wife of Dando. She is strong and proud, and very orthodox and traditional in her worldviews. She believes that education is a waste of time, and that the only things women should do involve marriage, childbirth, and chores. She is absolutely devastated when her farm is burned down by the Janjaweed, and when Dando is gunned down. Muma does not have time to grieve, for



she knows she must keep her family safe. She travels with Old Anwar and the other survivors of the attack to the Kalma displaced persons camp. There, she does the best she can with what she has, turning a rice sack house into something resembling a home. At last, she cries her grief out at night, hoping not to be seen or heard. Muma does her best to keep her own dreams alive in the camp, by performing ritual tasks such as sweeping the dirt floor of the ramshackle hut. Muma is still dead-set against Amira's learning to read and write, and is infuriated when she learns about Amira's secret lessons from Anwar. Later on, Amira and Muma come to an understanding, when Muma adds smiles to the drawings Amira makes of both her, and her mother.

Dando

Dando is the father of Amira and Leila, and the husband of Muma. Dando is a friendly, kind, and bighearted man who is quite open-minded and lovingly cares for his family. A farmer, Dando understands that Amira has dreams that are bigger than the farm, and compares her to a sparrow rising above the wheat. While Dando is the head of his house, he defers to his wife on matters relating to women and Amira's upbringing.

Dando, who has been taught to read and write by Old Anwar, decides ultimately that he will teach Amira how to read and write, even though he wishes his wife would agree to it. Dando's plans are, unfortunately, cut short when the Janjaweed Militia attacks the farm and the village, during which time Dando is gunned down by being shot in the back.

Leila

Leila is the younger sister of Amira, and the youngest daughter and child of Muma and Dando. Leila is only about five years old during the events of the novel, and is born with severe physical deformities which include sewn-together toes and misshapen limbs. Nevertheless, she is able to walk and get by, and is able to do many of the things normal kids do. For example, she befriends a boy from the village, Gamal, and is able to play soccer with him.

Leila, like Amira, is horrified during the Janjaweed attack, and is saddened that Amira will not talk for months. When Leila and Gamal take off with Amira's pencil and pad, Amira begins speaking again by demanding her possessions be returned. This thrills Leila. When Amira leaves for Gad, she only tells Leila where she is going, and promises to return to teach Leila, and all others, how to read and write.

Old Anwar

Old Anwar is the older neighbor and family friend of Amira and her family. Old Anwar is a kind, friendly man who originally taught Dando to read and write. Old Anwar does not have a family of his own. He begins a neighborly contest with Dando at the beginning of the novel to see who can grow the most tomatoes by the end of the season.



When then Janjaweed attack, it is Old Anwar who leads the survivors to Kalma. He becomes a surrogate, grandfatherly figure to Amira and her family, and indeed, along with Gamal, forms a new family with them. Old Anwar teaches Amira how to read and write in secret, and later determines to help Amira travel to Gad School.

Gamal

Gamal is a boy of about five years old from the village near Amira's farm, who becomes best friends with Leila. He is not bothered by Leila's deformities, but finds an avid friend in her. The horror of the Janjaweed attack causes Gamal to become unruly and unkind, which later gives way to the realization on Amira's part that he is suffering on the inside. Gamal draws a picture of butterfly-sized tears, which reveal his deepest pains, and cause him to begin to heal.

Miss Sabine

Miss Sabine is a beautiful young woman with ginger skin and freckles, and gold-green eyes. She is a foreigner who comes to Kalma to bring even the smallest bit of hope and relief to the people living there. She brings pencils and paper pads for the children, and notices Amira right away. She gifts Amira not only with a pad, but with a red pencil. In so doing, her gift gives Amira not only hope, but a new destiny.

The Intake Officer

The Intake Officer is responsible for admitting people to the Kalma Displaced People's Camp. He wears sunglasses all the time, and wears clothes that are too tight. He is lazy and slovenly, and always eats peanuts and drinks Fanta soda. When he gets into a fight with another guard over a bottle of Fanta, Amira is able to make her escape from Kalma.

The Hedgehog

A hedgehog is discovered by Amira moving between the walls of huts. Amira makes friends with the hedgehog, and follows it to the edge of the camp, where it leaves under the fence. This inspires Amira to want to do the same.

Janjaweed Militiamen

Janjaweed Militiamen are the enemy in the novel "The Red Pencil" by Andrea Davis Pinkney. They are hateful, violent men who act as terrorists, determined to murder all people they deem to be inferior to themselves. They launch the attack on Mira's farm and village, killing her father and animals, and causing the survivors to flee to Kalma.

The militiamen have caused a widespread war with their actions, which is ongoing at the end of the novel.



Symbols and Symbolism

Red Pencil

A red pencil and legal pad are given to Amira by Miss Sabine. The red pencil not only becomes the eponymous title of the novel, but also becomes representative of Amira herself. Old Anwar says the color of the pencil, red, suits Amira, for it is bold, and so is Amira. Amira's pencil is red, unlike the other pencils given out by Miss Sabine, which are all yellow. Amira's pencil becomes her most prized possession, for she uses it to draw, and uses it while Old Anwar teaches her to read and write.

The pencil also changes Amira's destiny. Prior to the pencil, Amira dreamt of learning to read and write, but these dreams were dashed by the Janjaweed attack. She becomes sad, quiet, and believes life will never get any better until the pencil comes into her life. With the red pencil, and with the desire to dream once more awakened in her, Amira decides to become a teacher, and will teach others how to read and write. Her destiny has been changed by a simple red pencil, and a simple act of generous kindness.

Legal pads

Legal pads are given to the children of Kalma camp, along with pencils, by Miss Sabine. Amira receives a red pencil and a legal pad as well. Amira finds it difficult to draw on the pad at first, believing the blue lines are like prison fences, only later coming to discover they provide a foundation from which to spring, just as Kalma proves a foundation from which Amira springs for school. When the pencil and legal pad are taken by Leila and Gamal, Amira speaks again, telling them she wants her things back. Amira learns to read and write through Anwar by practicing on her legal pad.

Twig

A twig with a sharpened end is given to Amira by Dando for her twelfth birthday. Dando knows Amira loves to draw in the sand, and so he gives her a specially sharpened twig to do so. Amira treasures the twig, not only because it allows her to draw, but because it is a gift from her father. When Amira is forced to leave home after the Janjaweed attack, the only personal possession she brings along is the twig. When she later loses it on the walk to Kalma, she is heartbroken, knowing the twig can never be replaced.

Crutches

Crutches are whittled by Old Anwar and given to deformed Leila to help her get around. Leila refuses to use them to get around, and instead uses them as a soccer goalpost. This is heavily symbolic, for in soccer, just as players must get past the goalie to score



and win, Leila must get past using crutches if she is to win at life. She cannot rely on them, but uses them as a goal to get past.

Wind

Wind forms an important symbol in the novel, and appears frequently throughout the novel. It is seen as symbolic of the greater course of life. At various points, Amira feels as if she is being blown around by the wind, powerless against it, such as during the Janjaweed attack and the haboob. Muma's mother tells Amira not to chase the wind – to chase after life fantasies – by learning to read and write. Chasing the wind is impossible, because it can never be caught.

When Old Anwar teaches Amira to write and read, he tells her that she is no longer being blown around by the wind, making her own by stirring things up. Here, Amira is in control of her own destiny, and the winds become symbolic of winds of change, of all the change that Amira will bring to the world through her work.

Darkness

Darkness is a symbolic motif of omen early on in the novel. Darkness comes across the eyes of many adults, including Muma and Dando, and precedes, as an omen, the war that ultimately comes. Amira knows something is troubling the adults before war comes by the darkness in their eyes, but she can never place it until afterwards.

Guns

Guns are carried and wielded by the Janjaweed Militia to fight and to murder innocent civilians. Guns are used to kill Dando, by militiamen shooting him in the back. Guns make a thunder-like sound that Amira first thinks is a coming sandstorm, and then later sees are instruments of death and destruction.

Meals

Meals are an important symbolic gesture in two places in the novel. Meals bring people together, and are considered a highly personal, peaceful, and communicative act. On the last normal day of the novel, Amira's family is drawn together to commune by way of eating food – homegrown mangoes for breakfast. Here, the meal is ironic, because it brings the family together one last time as the Janjaweed move in to attack. They will never be together again. When Old Anwar declares that Amira, Muma, Gamal, Leila, and he are all a new family, it is done over a meal, signifying a return to normalcy, closeness, and familial togetherness. Though things are changed, the love and loyalty of family prevail as demonstrated by the coming together at mealtime.



Wheelbarrow

A wheelbarrow is used by Old Anwar to collect firewood and carry supplies around the Kalma camp. When Old Anwar discovers Amira is fleeing to Nyala, and agrees to accompany, he gives her a ride in the wheelbarrow. Here, the wheelbarrow becomes symbolic of Old Anwar's surrogate, grandfatherly nature, as Amira's dreams becomes his burden. He is literally carrying along Amira's dreams in his wheelbarrow through the person of Amira.

Television

Television is watched by the refugees at Kalma. It gives the people a glimpse into a better, outside world. A CNN report on television about Gad Primary School reignites the desire in Amira to go to school and learn to be a teacher. At the same time, the television also allows Amira to wonder if other people in the world feel as trapped as she does, and this ability to empathize with even those whom she has not yet met is telling of her gentle character.

Sparrows

Sparrows are small, pretty birds that live among the farms of Darfur. Amira loves to see sparrows take off from the wheat fields, and is compared to a sparrow by Dando. Indeed, Amira comes to believe that she has a soul-like sparrow inside of her, that helps to guide her in life, and longs to be free with her. The symbolism of the flight of birds from the wheat field, an act of freedom through flight, should not be missed on the reader. The wheat field comes to represent the circumstances of life for Amira – whether war or death or Kalma – and the act of leaving the wheat field, of flying from it like a sparrow, lead to rising above and doing better things. Amira's escape from Kalma for Nyala is the flight of the sparrow from the wheat.



Settings

Darfur

Darfur is a region in Sudan in Africa in which an ongoing war has been waged by the Janjaweed Militiamen against people they deem to be inferior. Darfur thus serves as not only the home of Amira and her family, but as the main setting of the novel. It is across the war-torn region of Darfur that Amira and her family must travel in order to reach the safety of Kalma. and is is later across Darfur that Amira and Old Anwar travel to reach the Gad School in Nyala.

The Wheat Fields

The wheat fields are crop fields of wheat at Amira's farm. The wheat is harvested and used for things like bread and cake. Sparrows like to play and live among the wheat, and often take off in flight from the wheat. The wheat fields come to symbolize the circumstances of life, which sparrows, representing Amira, rise above.

Kalma

Kalma is a Displaced People's Camp several miles away from the city of Nyala in Darfur. Kalma is a very dry, very barren region, in which little grows other than Sudanese flowers. It is at the camp in Kalma that Amira and her new family come to live following the attack on her old village. Much of the novel takes place at Kalma, which Amira hates because it is so depressing and overcrowded. Food is scarce there, as is water and compassion. Yet, it is at Kalma where Amira rediscovers her dreams by way of the gift of the red pencil from Miss Sabine.

Gad Primary School

Gad Primary School is an elementary school located on the outskirts of Nyala, Darfur. It is attended by boys and girls, and is very nontraditional in that it teaches girls to read and write. Amira learns about it by way of Halima, and sees pictures of the school on CNN. Amira desperately wants to go to Gad, and it becomes a dream of hers by the end of the novel. When the novel ends, she and Old Anwar are leaving Kalma to journey to Gad Primary School.

Nyala

Nayala is a city in Darfur that Halima and her family move to, and where Amira desires to go. Nyala is several miles away from Kalma, and is home to Gad Primary School, which Halima attends.



Themes and Motifs

Dreams

Dreams are a major and important theme in the novel “The Red Pencil” by Andrea Davis Pinkney. Dreams are that which people aspire to do, to be, or to achieve in life, and may vary from places they want to go to, things they want to do or become, or what they ultimately want out of life. In the novel, the theme of dreams revolves around main character, Amira, and her struggles to achieve them.

When the novel begins, Amira has nearly everything she wants, from a loving family and stable home, to enough to eat and drink. Yet she dreams of learning to read and write. She knows how to draw well, but also wants to be able to read and write. Muma thinks that Amira’s dreams are a waste of time, that reading and writing will do nothing for her in life. Amira disagrees, believing reading and writing will allow her to learn about things other than farming or childbearing. Muma’s own dreams, which consisted of a family and farm work, have come true, and she believes that her daughter’s dreams of learning to read and write are fantasies, and that Amira should dream of endeavoring to be married and bear children.

When the Janjaweed Militia attack Amira’s village and farm, Amira is heartbroken and overwhelmed by sadness. What may have been possible before – like convincing her mother, or by her father teaching her to read and write – is impossible, now. Things become all the more bleak when Amira goes to live at Kalma. If her dreams seemed impossible before, Amira cannot even bear to think of her dreams now. All of that changes when Miss Sabine arrives in camp to hand out pencils and pads, including a red pencil and yellow legal pad to Amira. Amira is genuinely happy to receive the gifts, and it causes hope to be born in her once again.

Old Anwar consents to teaching Amira how to read and write, and Amira uses the red pencil and the legal pad not only to draw, but to learn these things and practice them. She comes to dream once again, as she had before the attack. Her dream of reading and writing has come true, but has given rise to two new dreams. Amira wants to further her education at Gad Primary School, and Amira wants to become a teacher, writing and reading and teaching others how to write and read. Indeed, the gift of the red pencil changes Amira’s dreams from merely wanting to learn, to wanting to teach. When the novel ends, Amira is in pursuit of both dreams, with Old Anwar’s help.

Freedom

Freedom is an important theme in the novel “The Red Pencil” by Andrea Davis Pinkney. Freedom, thematically, involves the ability for one to determine one’s own future and actions. In the novel, freedom appears as something used, symbolic, and denied,



focusing around Amira, primarily, but also around other characters as well. Indeed, when it comes to Amira, freedom is absolutely essential.

When the novel begins, Amira seems to have some freedom, but not much in her life. She has just turned twelve, and is required to take on extra chores with her new age. Her mother assures her that it is part of a woman's lot in life, and that Amira's greatest aspirations and freedoms will be in homemaking, childbearing, and marriage. Amira is not so sure, dreaming of something other than tending to crops and birthing children. She wants to learn to read and write, but it is something she is not free to do, either by way of her mother, or by way of the cultural norms in which only men in Darfur are educated, and women rarely so. Indeed, most people in Amira's village frown on women having the freedom to read and write.

If Muma and sociocultural norms make it difficult for women to get to learn to read and write, the Janjaweed make it impossible. They are the absolute abrogation of freedom by indiscriminately killing innocent people, and denying them even the most fundamental freedom of living. They destroy homes and villages, farms and livestock, and deprive people of the freedom of living their lives as they see fit. The freedom to live afforded by safety and peace are also destroyed by the Janjaweed. The Kalma camp, meant to protect people, also denies them much freedom, for there is nothing at the camp with which to make a permanent life. Indeed, the camp seems more a prison to Amira, for it is overcrowded and people are hemmed in by fences that are like prison walls. Indeed, the very mention of prison means a lack of freedom, and here the camp isn't just symbolic of prison, but becomes a prison in many ways. For example, Amira is not free to leave and come back as she pleases. Once she is in the camp, she must stay in the camp.

Amira, however, manages to find freedom in camp by drawing. She feels liberated and feels wonderful when she draws, and later, writes and reads, all made possible by Miss Sabine's gift of a red pencil and yellow legal pad. This encourages Amira to dream once more, not only of being a teacher, but of freedom beyond the walls of Kalma. Amira yearns to be free, in order to attend Gad Primary School, and then to become a teacher so that she may offer the same opportunities to other boys and girls. Freedom is a beautiful thing, but often comes with risks. When Amira embraces her own freedom by leaving the camp for Nyala, she will have to cross miles of war-torn land to do so. She will be risking her life in the process – but it is something that she does freely. Amira has often been compared to a sparrow rising above the wheat. Birds often symbolize flight, and flight symbolizes freedom. The wheat above which the sparrows rise symbolize life's circumstances, such as war, death, and a lack of freedom, and the sparrow rising above it – Amira – symbolizes the gaining and use of freedom itself. Amira's leaving Kalma is the flight of the sparrow above the wheat field.

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel "The Red Pencil" by Andrea Davis Pinkney. Family, thematically, involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional



and even physical support between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who behave in the fashion of the traditional family. In the novel, both blood-related family, and non-blood-related family are on clear display, especially through familial relationships with Amira.

When the novel begins, Amira is part of a normal, loving, warm, and gentle family. Her parents are farmers (her mother primarily being the homemaker), and her younger sister, Leila, both annoys and looks up to Amira. The family does everything together, from working on the farm and caring for their crops and livestock to eating meals together, and celebrating things like Amira's birthday together. They are a very close, tight-knit family. For example, they do not dwell on Leila's deformities, but love her unconditionally, doing everything they can to make sure that her childhood is as normal as humanly possible. Life is a gift, and this is certainly true of the love that Leila's family has for her.

When it comes to Amira, the love of family is no less on clear display. Amira's parents love her and encourage her to pursue her dreams, even though her parents have different ideas about what Amira's dreams should be. However, the reader must bear in mind that the parental approach to Amira's desire to read and write is one borne of love and consideration of her future well-being, and nothing else. Amira's mother is very orthodox and traditional, believing girls are good for three things primarily: marriage, childbearing, and chores. She believes that Amira should aspire to be a wife, mother, and homemaker, and to dream of success at doing these things, and that anything else, given the prevailing sociocultural normalcy, is a waste of time. Amira's father believes that Amira should have the chance to learn to read and write, and he frequently encourages her to embrace freedom and rise like a sparrow above the wheat. In other words, he encourages her to follow her dreams despite the situation she may find herself in. The tender love Amira's parents have for her is quite clear.

Following the Janjaweed terrorist attack, Amira, Muma, Leila, Old Anwar, and Gamal form a new family, announced by Old Anwar as such over a meal. Muma continues to be a homemaker, while Leila and Gamal love and annoy their older sister, Amira. Old Anwar becomes the provider, bringing food and treats for the family and the children. Indeed, Old Anwar becomes the paternal head of house, and decides to teach Amira how to read and write no matter what Muma says. His familial and grandfatherly love and encouragement of Amira are clear. When the novel ends, and Amira departs Kalma for Nyala, it is Old Anwar who decides to make the journey with her. He pushes Amira along in his wheelbarrow, not merely giving her a ride, but symbolically taking on her dreams as his own burden, and truly becoming a more father-like figure to Amira than grandfather-like figure to Amira.

Changing Times

Changing times are an important, underlying theme in the novel "The Red Pencil" by Andrea Davis Pinkney. Changing times, thematically, has to do with the clash of new and old ideas, and the people who believe in those things. Changing times also has to



do with how either the new or old ideas win out, or how both the new and old may work together. In the novel, the clash of new and old helps to drive the plot.

In Sudanese culture, sociocultural tradition holds that men rule from the home to the nation, and occupy a dominant place in society. Men are allowed to learn to read and write, while women are not. Indeed, women have three primary purposes in life: to marry, have children, and do chores. This traditional way of thinking is considered old and stifling by Amira, but very much logical and normal by Muma. Indeed, Muma holds true to the old ways, believing that Amira's dreams should be of marrying and giving birth to children while doing chores on the farm and in the home, and that to read or write is nonsense, because they will not help her with her work as a wife, mother, or farmer. To Muma, education has no practical purpose, and is not in keeping with custom. Most of the village disapproves of girls learning to read and write, in addition to Muma.

Ironically, it is Dando – the ruling patriarch – who wants Amira to learn to read and write. However, quite unconventionally, rather than rule by fiat in his own household, Dando allows his wife to have her way with Amira for the time being, because Amira is a girl, and raising children is a woman's business that Dando does not want to interfere with. Here, the new and old ways compromise. Yet it is Old Anwar who convinces Dando to teach Amira to read and write, which Dando decides to do – though he never gets the chance. Ultimately, Old Anwar teaches Amira to read and write in secret, breaking with the old ways in favor of the new. Though Muma is still set against Amira's learning, she comes to an understanding with Amira, drawing smiles on Amira's portraits of herself and Amira. While Muma disapproves, she is now interested in the prospect of Amira learning to write and read. Indeed, Amira's new path in life comes by way of the introduction of the new ways by Miss Sabine, who is a stranger in person to the land of Sudan, but not a stranger in matters of kindness from the human heart. She serves as a model of the new ways for Amira, for she gives out pencils and paper, and makes Amira want to be a teacher.

The one place where the old ways win out – at least for the time being – comes by way of the Janjaweed Militia. A violent group of bigoted, tyrannical terrorists, the Janjaweed believe in the racial superiority of their own people, and do not like the changing times or people. As such, they have instituted genocide in order to purge the land of people they consider to be inferior, and to rule the country in the way they see fit. They commit murder, gunning down innocent men, women, and children, burn houses and villages to the ground, kill livestock, and torch crops. There is no stopping them, and all people can do is flee before them or in their wake, as is the case of Amira and the survivors of her village. Amira decides, however, to rise above the old ways of death, by endeavoring to get to Nyala, to attend Gad School, even in the face of such destruction, and at the risk of her own life. Whether or not she will be successful is not seen in the novel, but one can only imagine that she is.



War

War is an important theme in the novel “The Red Pencil” by Andrea Davis Pinkney. War, which involves open combat between two or more opposing sides, forms a looming background in the novel that ultimately takes center stage at the end of Part I, and then rescinds to the background in Part 2. The war in the novel is the Darfur War, being waged by violent Janjaweed Militia terrorists, and their actions affect people far and wide in a very negative way.

When the novel begins, war has not yet come to Amira’s family, and isn’t even a concern on their mind. All is happiness and light as Amira turns twelve, and all seems normal as she carries on her day at the farm. But as the weeks pass, Amira begins to notice a darkness in the eyes of her parents, and in the eyes of other adults, though they do their best to hide their concerns. They know war is coming for them, urged on by the Janjaweed Militia. As Amira’s parents learn about the Janjaweed, they take different opportunities to explain to Amira just how evil they are, and how much they should be avoided.

At the end of Part 1, war comes at last, unexpected by the people of Amira’s village, or by her parents. The Janjaweed arrive in full force, using everything from soldiers with guns riding camels and horses to armed helicopters to kill people. Hundreds are brutally and mercilessly slaughtered by the Janjaweed, including Dando. Houses are burned, crops are torched, livestock is butchered, and lives are ended, all by the Janjaweed. War proves to be a very terrible and evil thing indeed, for it not only destroys the homes of the people living near Amira, but forces them to flee the land as well in order to find safety.

The war forces thousands of people into displacement camps, like the one at Kalma. Not only does it destroy the lives of people, and literally ends the lives of others, but it causes sadness, heartbreak, and depression, and makes food and water scarce. War goes on to beat people into hopelessness and despair, and takes away the freedom and dreams of nearly all people, excepting Amira. Indeed, the threat of war will mar Amira’s journey to Nyala, and to the Gad School.



Styles

Point of View

Andrea Davis Pinkney tells her novel “The Red Pencil” in the first-person limited-omniscient narrative mode from the point of view of her main character and principal protagonist, Amira. Amira serves as the narrator for the novel due to the fact that the story therein is her own, and there is no one better to tell her own story than Amira herself. Because the novel deals with such important things, like writing and reading, and touches upon horrors like war, the first-person perspective allows the reader an intimate glance into the thoughts of Amira’s mind and heart. This is especially important given that, for much of the novel, Amira doesn’t speak out loud to anyone, for the horrors of war have temporarily silenced her. This is also appropriate given that Amira speaks relatively little, even when she does speak. She is very thoughtful and discerning, and most of what she sees, feels, or understands, is all internal. The first-person narrative mode allows the reader access to this process. Additionally, the limited-omniscient aspect does two primary things: First, it allows the reader to know only as much as Amira does, and when Amira learns it. For example, Amira does not know that war is practically on her doorstep with any degree of certainty until war is actually on her doorstep. Second, it allows for reality: no one knows everything going on at once, especially a twelve year-old refugee girl. The limited-omniscient perspective thus lends a degree of believability to Amira’s character.

Language and Meaning

Andrea Davis Pinkney tells her novel “The Red Pencil” in language that is simple, straightforward, and poetic. The language is simple and straightforward for two primary reasons. First, her target audience is young adults and youth. The language must be fitting and appropriate to that age group to understand. Second, Pinkney’s main character, Amira, is herself only twelve years old, and has never before been educated to any real degree, so the simple and straightforward language convincingly reflects Amira’s characterization. However, Amira is a deeply introspective girl who loves to draw, and can see the beauty in the world around her. This is reflected in the poetic nature of the writing. Even in the bleakest of moments, Amira is able to see the beauty in certain things, such as the Sudanese flowers at the displacement camp. This reflectiveness also leads to rich symbolism, such as freedom represented by sparrows and goals to overcome represented by a soccer goalpost made from crutches.

Structure

Andrea Davis Pinkney divides her novel “The Red Pencil” into two primary parts, and further subdivided into 181 unnumbered but titled chapters. Part 1 deals with Amira’s life leading up to, during, and immediately after the Janjaweed attack. Part 2 deals with

Amira's life at Kalma, and her decision to leave. Each chapter of the novel deals with a specific situation, memory, or event in the novel. For example, Part 1, School, deals with Amira's discovery of the Gad School by way of Halima, whereas Part 2, The Future, deals with Amira's new dream of becoming a teacher. Each chapter in the novel, further, is no more than a few pages at the longest, and usually only a page or two regularly. Indeed, some chapters feature only a handful of words. The structure of the writing itself takes the form of free verse, evocative of the poetic nature of the style of writing, and reflective of the writing's simple and straightforward language as well: a simple format for a simple way of speaking.



Quotes

Blessings for all the years to come, Amira.
-- Muma (Part 1, Wheat paragraph 3)

Importance: When the novel begins, Amira is celebrating her twelfth birthday. Muma wishes Amira blessings for the future, and at first glance, this seems like a normal and gentle birthday wish. But here, the blessing serves to be ironic, for in the coming weeks, everything for Amira will change, and nothing will ever be the same. Indeed, what comes will hardly be considered by Amira to be a blessing at all.

Amira Bright –yaaaa! Girl child, rising!
-- Dando (Part 1, Dando's Delight paragraph 12)

Importance: Dando delights in his daughter, Amira. He has long compared her to a sparrow rising above the wheat, taking flight. Amira is the sparrow, taking flight from her circumstances. This is a touching moment between father and daughter, illustrative of the deep and abiding devotion and encouragement Dando has for his daughter, and serves to be a harbinger of Amira's future at Kalma, where she leaves the camp the way a sparrow rises above the wheat. In many ways, this is also reflective of Amira's growing up, passing from a girl child into young womanhood.

Gad is a school that welcomes girls. Gad pushes past tradition. I want to go to Gad.
-- Amira (Part 1, School paragraph 4)

Importance: Amira first learns of the Gad School when Halima moves away to Nyala. From this moment on, Amira will dream not only of reading and writing, but will consider what it would be like to go to Gad. Indeed, going to Gad will become a major dream for Amira soon enough. A huge part of this is that Amira does not want to be bound to marriage, children, and farming, as tradition – and Muma – expect of her. She wants to go to Gad to break with tradition and do something new.

Amira, we are living in a time of war.
-- Dando (Part 1, War paragraph 1)

Importance: Not everything is happy and peaceful in Darfur. Though the farm and village are quiet and peaceful, a war is underway elsewhere, that grows closer every day. Here, Amira's father explains that there is an ongoing war, and this will come to define Amira's life for the next several months.

A good wife lets her husband do the reading.
-- Muma (Part 1, Tradition Hut paragraph 49)

Importance: Amira's appeals to Muma fall on deaf ears. Muma is very conventional, and very traditional, and will not allow Amira to learn to read or write while she has a say in it. Indeed, Muma goes so far as to say that a good wife allows her husband to do the



reading, meaning that total surrender to a husband in all things is the mark of goodness in marriage.

Goz is my place to be. I'm at home in so much sand.
-- Amira (Part 1, Goz paragraph 10)

Importance: Amira's consideration that she is at home among so much sand is not merely literal, but is symbolic as well. Yes, she lives in a sandy region, but the fact that she is able to be truly free when she draws in the sand, means she is most at home there in the sand.

My Bright, tuned black. Stricken!
-- Amira (Part 1, Shock paragraph 5)

Importance: Following the wholesale slaughter and destruction by the Janjaweed, everything beautiful in Amira's world seems to be dead and gone. There is no more light in life, only darkness. Amira, called "Bright" by her father, knows her inner light is gone as well. She is a totally changed person from who she was when the novel began.

My hand's dance is gone. My sparrow has lost its wings.
-- Amira (Part 2, Rubber Twigs paragraph 14)

Importance: At Kalma, Amira attempts to return to drawing with twigs on the ground, but the soil and the twigs are different. Amira can no longer draw or find freedom in the drawing. Her inner sparrow is no more, and has lost its wings without the freedom to lose herself in drawing.

To me, that is the mistake – to erase.
-- Amira (Part 2, Erase paragraph 13)

Importance: Old Anwar explains how an eraser works, saying it can get rid of past mistakes. To Amira, erase mistakes is the mistake. On the surface, this seems to be a benign conversation, but on a deeper level, the mistakes Amira refers to are not written mistakes, but the mistakes of life. One cannot erase tragedy like war, but one can grow from it. Because the past forms who Amira is, she does not want to erase the past, but overcome it instead. To ignore the past, or to pretend it never happened, is the true mistake.

I now know what I want to be.
-- Amira (Part 2, The Future paragraph 1)

Importance: Amira comes to discover that her new dream, following the gift of the red pencil from Miss Sabine, and the gift of writing and reading from Old Anwar, is to be a teacher. Amira wants to write and read for the pleasure of it, but also to teach others how to read and write. Just as Miss Sabine affected the lives of dozens of children in a few moments, Amira, too, can affect thousands of lives in the long run.



The red pencil is me.

-- Amira (Part 2, Up, Up, Me paragraph 3)

Importance: Amira comes to understand that she and her red pencil are one in the same. The pencil has given Amira dreams and desires born anew, which all lead to her new purpose in life. The red pencil itself has fulfilled its own purpose by being used as a writing instrument, and by giving life to dreams. In the freedom of using the red pencil, Amira feels as if she is not the one using the pencil, but the pencil is using her, and that she is the pencil itself, free and doing beautiful things.

What else is possible? I am.

-- Amira (Part 2, Flight paragraph 9)

Importance: Amira has left the camp at Kalma and is now free. Her future is entirely her own. Anything at all is possible from here on out. Amira fully understands this as she says that even she is possible, now.