

Saffron Dreams

An Instructor's Manual

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Foreword



This Instructor's Manual is a companion guide to *Saffron Dreams* and contains discussion topics and questions for each chapter. Educators can use this manual in their classrooms to stimulate critical thinking, explore key themes of the novel, and brainstorm about decisions and actions of the characters at various points.

Saffron Dreams is a novel about our ever evolving identities and the events and places that shape them. Arissa Illahi, a Muslim artist and writer, discovers in a single moment that no matter how carefully you map your life, it is life itself that chooses your destiny. After her husband's death in the collapse of the World Trade Center, the discovery of his manuscript marks Arissa's reconnection to life. Her unborn son and the unfinished novel fuse in her mind into one life-defining project that becomes, at once, the struggle for her emotional survival and the redemption of her race.

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General Discussion



1. What is the significance of the title *Saffron Dreams* and how does it apply to the various themes in the novel?
2. In what ways are the similarities between Eastern and Western society evident in the novel? For example did any of the characters in the novel particularly those close to Arissa like Ma and Baba surprise you in any way? Discuss how family relationships differ culturally.
3. Some of the novel's most important revelations are reported through dreams and naysayers. How effective was that tool? How did you react to the Firedancer prophecy?
4. Much of the book is a study on what it means to be an immigrant assimilating in the U.S. Discuss your experiences with foreign cultures.
5. At the core of the book is a powerful but simple message of awareness: don't judge a race by the atrocities committed by its people. Do you think the message is powerful enough to bring about a lasting and meaningful change?
6. Did the book change your general views toward Islam or Muslims in any way? Did the book inspire you to learn more about the religion and its followers?
7. What was the effect of reading the storyline through Arissa's eyes? Would you react to the book differently if it was developed in the third person?

8. Arissa was driven by some goals in her life post 9/11. Did you agree with those? Which one do you think was the toughest? What is the boldest goal you have ever envisioned? How far did you go to pursue it?
9. What role does Ma play in Arissa's journey? How did Arissa's early life influence her approach to mothering? What lessons did Arissa learn from having Ma in her life?
10. What was your impression of Faizan and Arissa's relationship? What bond did they share? Despite the hardships it caused, do you think Faizan's sudden death strengthened Arissa in any way?
11. How did the novel's three distinct places—Karachi, New York and Houston—reflect the three distinct parts of Arissa's identity?
12. Was Arissa right in taking on her husband's unfinished manuscript? In your opinion, was Faizan's legacy a burden or a blessing for her?
13. What makes the post 9/11 era an ideal setting for this storyline? How vastly did the details in *Saffron Dreams* differ from your impressions of that time?
14. What factors kept Arissa from getting close to Zaki emotionally?
16. Why is the character of Ann Marie an important one in the novel? Do you agree that Ann Marie performs the role of Arissa's inner voice in the novel?

Chapter-by-Chapter



CHAPTER ONE

1. Discuss Arissa's conflicting emotions at the start of the scene. How would you characterize her state of mind?
2. Why was it important for Arissa to take this journey alone, unseen and unchallenged?
3. What effect did that opening scene have on your reception of the story that follows? There is a telling passage about Arissa's transformation at the start of the book: "The wind tore the veil from my hand, making my task easier. I grasped the cold railing with one hand and swatted at the fleeting piece of my life with the other as the wind picked up speed." What made Arissa particularly ripe for such a change? What significance did the veil have in her life? Has anything similar happened in your own life where you gave up something very dear for someone else?

CHAPTER TWO

1. What can you make of the character's personality by the state of her art studio?
2. By the end of the chapter, what can you decipher about the character's special mission?

3. What is the reason behind the character's obsession with colors, especially the color orange?
4. Can you tell what the two key themes of the rest of the story might be from this chapter?

CHAPTER THREE

1. In your opinion, what was the standard of living of Arissa's family in Karachi?
2. Discuss the complex character of Arissa's mother. What kind of a parent is she to her children?
3. Discuss how Arissa's mother shaped her children's opinion of people outside their home. Would you consider that a form of discrimination? In your opinion, what kind of thinking can develop in children from hearing a general analysis like that?

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Discuss the importance of the Khan party on the rest of the life of the main character.
2. Can you get a sense of the political turmoil from the conversations circulating at the party? Why do you think people are afraid or hesitant to participate in such conversations?
3. Discuss the relationship between Arissa and her father, based on this chapter.
4. Do you think Arissa's mother really hated her children? Discuss the main character's paradox and state of mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. What can you tell about the various class distinction in Arissa's Karachi household?
2. What is your opinion of arranged marriages? In your opinion, how many types of arranged marriages are there? Do you know someone

- who has had an arranged marriage?
3. Discuss the character of the matchmaker. Discuss why parents of prospective brides might not want to irk a matchmaker.

CHAPTER SIX

1. Discuss the meeting between Arissa and the stranger at the library? Why is Arissa so taken by him?
2. Why does Arissa think New York holds so much promise? How does her life in New York compare to the one in Karachi?
3. Why does Arissa decide to be kind to the homeless woman she encounters at the park? Discuss what might have prompted the woman to make unkind remarks to Arissa?

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Discuss why Arissa and Faizan were seated at separate corners before their nuptials. Why does Arissa describe herself as a rare, exotic bird?
2. Research the significance of applying henna on the hands and feet of a Pakistani bride. Why is the custom practiced and why is it essential for brides to achieve a certain shade of henna?
3. Discuss the omen of the cawing of crows in various cultures. Do you believe in any similar superstitions?
4. What significance do you think the prophecy of Firedancer has on the story?

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. This is a pivotal movement in the story when all that Arissa has ever held dear will come crumbling down. Discuss her quiet morning compared to the chaos that follows.
2. Discuss your thoughts, emotions, and fear about the tragedy of 9/11? How does it affect your perception of Muslims in general?
3. Do you recall when Abramovitz's Satan was first mentioned in the

story? Can you recall the details of the artwork that captured Arissa's attention at the Khan's library?

4. In following Arissa's journey to Ground Zero, what were your emotions? Did you feel fearful for her safety or of what she might discover?
5. Why does Arissa feel that she is not sheltered any more? As a Muslim and a potential widow, what were her fears apart from having lost her husband?

CHAPTER NINE

1. Discuss why Arissa was singled out at the subway station. Do you think her perpetrators would have behaved differently had they known she was carrying a child?
2. Why do you think a total stranger on the subway came to Arissa's aid in a post 9/11 world? Would you come to the rescue of a someone being attacked?
3. Do you have Muslim friends or acquaintance who altered their way of living following the 9/11 attacks such as changing their names, removing their beards and veils, preferring not to talk in their native language, etc.?
4. Discuss the emotional and religious reasons behind Arissa's desire to keep her baby despite the severe health problems it faced.
5. "I would not have resented death had it come only once." Why did this verse come to Arissa's mind? What does it mean?
6. At this moment in the story, what did you think when you read this line: "if I had listened when Faizan had tried to talk to me about his premonition of disaster, could we have averted it?"
7. In this chapter, Arissa declares, "The safety of your loved ones is what breeds fear in your heart... Unraveled from them, you are fearless. You can dangle by a thread, hang from the rooftop, bungee jump, skydive,

walk a pole, hold your hand over the flame of a candle. Burnt, scalded, crashed, lost, dead, the only loss would be to your own self.” When does fear finally return to Arissa’s heart?

CHAPTER TEN

1. Discuss why puffballs are being compared to unattainable dreams in this chapter.
2. Does Ma’s help make it hard for Arissa to move on in life?
3. Discuss the significance of sacrifice for others in Pakistani culture. What prompted Faizan’s parents to put their lives on hold to care for their daughter-in-law with no timetable in mind? Discuss the support a widow might receive in other cultures from her in-laws.
4. How does Arissa’s relationship with her own mother compare to Ma’s? What kind of mother do you foresee Arissa to be?
5. Why did Arissa choose not to warn the couple on the streets about the dangers of life? Why did she think it was not her right to say anything to them?
6. What makes Arissa a tough daughter to be around?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1. Discuss what an absentee funeral is in Islam. Research when the practice first started.
2. Why was the funeral not a closure for Arissa? How attached is she to her grief?
3. Discuss how Arissa’s faith has been compromised, based on this comment: “Exalted You are, but You couldn’t prevent this from happening either. What kind of a God does that make You?”
4. Why do you think Arissa chose to lie when she was confronted by a discriminatory act?

CHAPTER TWELVE

1. Why does Ma want Arissa to complete Faizan's work? Discuss this line: "It was as if for days Ma had been losing herself piece by piece and had just realized how to put herself back together again."
2. What is the significance of Faizan's childhood knitted booties and how does it affect the debate between Arissa and Ma?
3. Discuss why sex before marriage is not acceptable in Pakistani culture.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1. Why was Arissa's first task tougher than the rest and why did the character feel compelled to tell Ma about it?
2. While Arissa feels condemned in the post 9/11 world, Ma refuses to hold a grudge against anyone for her son's untimely death. Compare and contrast the sentiments of the two characters.
4. Have you ever encountered a discriminatory act? How did it affect you and shape your thinking?
5. Why was Arissa resistant to the idea of moving back to Pakistan?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1. How did losing the veil change Arissa?
2. How does healing differ from society to society? How do people normally heal?
3. What were Arissa's "mini-wars?"
4. Discuss the surroundings where Arissa and Faizan lived. What does it say about their characters?
5. Research and discuss the controversy that Jack Straw's comments raised regarding women wearing a veil.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

1. Would you have reacted differently from Arissa to the badgering of the media if faced with a similar situation?
2. Discuss the character of Ann Marie. How does her life resemble that of Arissa?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

1. Discuss why Arissa feels two conflicting emotions when she is with her birth mother: wanting her affection and yet wanting to distance herself from her?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

1. Discuss the character of Faizan further. What was the relationship of Arissa and Faizan like?
2. What was so significant about Faizan's dream? Was it a premonition? Discuss the various points so far where the characters were warned of possible danger.
3. Why does Arissa not like the idea of Faizan waiting tables?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

1. Why is driving such a big challenge for Arissa? What are the other big adjustments in her life following the death of her husband?
2. In your opinion, is Arissa stalling on finishing the manuscript or is she too caught up with getting her own life in order?
3. Arissa muses about the perception of Islam in the post 9/11 world: "We struggled to know ourselves only to lose ourselves in the interpretation of others, in the hyphenation of our worlds... I witnessed the lynching of a religion and race again and again." What role did the media play in shaping our perception of the events of 9/11 and Muslims in general? Discuss the pros and cons of media reporting during the time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

1. Discuss how Arissa envisions God should run the world.
2. Discuss the symbolism behind the meanings of Zarek and Raian.
3. Research and discuss the postpartum practices of various cultures.
4. Do you agree that all special needs children have kind parents? Does Arissa consider herself kind?
5. Discuss this statement: “I might also tell him that when you leave a land behind, you don’t shift loyalties—you just expand your heart and fit two lands in. You love them equally.” What does this tell us about the character?

CHAPTER TWENTY & TWENTY-ONE

1. Discuss the character of Zaki. What is your impression of him as a potential suitor for Arissa?
2. Discuss the event at the restaurant. Have you or someone you know ever singled out anyone based on their race, disability or religion?
3. Why is the world of Arissa and Raian topsy-turvy? And why does Arissa consider herself and her son to be “oddballs?”
4. Why does Arissa choose to meet Zaki over and over again despite her hesitation?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

1. Why does Arissa refuse to take the next step with Zaki despite enjoying his company? What finally makes her concede?
2. In your opinion, is there any connection between Arissa having her very first sexual encounter outside marriage and losing her veil?
3. Compare and contrast Arissa’s two lovers. How is the intimacy and closeness different in each relationship?

4. Why does Arissa believe that her experiences are a way for nature to teach her to do short term planning? Discuss the pros and cons of long- and short-term planning in one's life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

1. Why did Arissa's in-laws decide to leave? What connection did that move have with Zaki's presence in Arissa's life?
2. Do you know anyone who grieves like Arissa's mother-in-law?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

1. Do you think Arissa is a bad parent for letting Raian hurt himself during his moments of distress? Do you think Zaki is fair in judging her?
2. In this chapter, there are three symbolic endings: one positive and two negative. Discuss what each means for the character.
4. Discuss Arissa's dream. How is it significant and what do you think is the message behind it? What are the "fillers" in Arissa's life?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1. Why does Arissa identify herself with the veiled woman in the park?
2. How is Raian an answer to Arissa's prayers? In what way does having a special needs child help Arissa?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shaila Abdullah is an award-winning Pakistani-American author whose work focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of Pakistani women and their often unconventional choices in life. Her work also deals with the Asian experience in America, the conflict between the two worlds and the culture of her adopted country.

Abdullah received a Hobson Foundation grant for *Saffron Dreams*. Her debut book, *Beyond the Cayenne Wall*, is a collection of stories about Pakistani women struggling to find their individualities despite the barriers imposed by society. The collection won the Norumbega Jury Prize for Outstanding Fiction and the DIY Festival Award, among other accolades.

Abdullah was born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1971. She has published several short stories, articles, and essays for various publications, including *Women's Own*, *She*, *Fashion Collection*, *Sulekha*, and *Dallas Child*. She is a seasoned print, web, and multimedia designer as well. Abdullah lives with her family in Austin, Texas and is a member of the Texas Writers' League.

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