

THE RUGMAKER OF MAZAR-E-SHARIF

Study Notes

Robert Hillman



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Wild Dingo Press
ABN 74 141 410 675
GPO Box 1556
Melbourne
Victoria 3001
Australia
Tel 61 3 9523 0922
Fax 61 3 9523 0822
Email: books@wilddingopress.com.au

www.wilddingopress.com.au

Written by the author, Robert Hillman *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* Study Notes provide an extensive and valuable addition to any study of the text. The material is designed to introduce a broad background to the life, culture, religious and social conditions from which Najaf Mazari came, as a member of the Hazari tribe in Afghanistan.

The chapter breakdowns provide a succinct summary of each chapter, and a series of interesting and thought-provoking questions and discussion points for classroom activities.

About the text

The story

Najaf Mazari's life begins in a village at the foothills of the Great Hindu Kush in Afghanistan. He is a shepherd boy when we first meet him, chasing wolves away from his family's flock. The background to his life is the warfare that has raged in Afghanistan for decades and it is this conflict that claims the life of his beloved elder brother, Gorg Ali. When Najaf's family moves from the village to the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, Najaf discovers his passion for rugmaking and is set on a course that will lead to his becoming a master rugmaker. Najaf's love of his craft is his sole consolation when the conflict that claimed his brother's life intensifies and claims a second brother.

In adulthood, now married, Najaf and all the young men of his Hazara clan are menaced by the rise of the Taliban, a force of puritanical warriors that sweeps up from the south and captures Mazar-e-Sharif. Najaf survives being taken prisoner, tortured and threatened with execution by the Taliban, but he knows that his life could be snatched away any day. With the remorseful blessings of his family, he makes his escape from Afghanistan and puts his life in the hands of a people-smuggler. After periods of dread and despair, the final leg of his journey of escape leads him by boat to Ashmore Reef in the Timor Sea. Najaf and his fellow refugees are rescued by the Australian Navy and conveyed to the detention centre for illegal immigrants at Woomera in South Australia. A new ordeal for Najaf begins in Woomera as he awaits the result of his application for asylum. Finally accepted as a genuine refugee, Najaf begins his life in Australia, working long days to establish the rug store of his dreams in Melbourne. Eventually reunited with his wife and daughter at Melbourne Airport, Najaf embraces his family then pauses to reflect on all that he has been through. His happiness, he concludes, is a gift from God, worth all the trials he has endured.

Themes

- The politics of displacement and the relationship between culture and identity are the major themes of *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*.
- What becomes of a person in our world if political developments make it impossible for him to live in his own country?
- Will the habits and customs of one culture flourish in a new and different cultural environment?
- Is 'identity' portable?
- What factors are involved in the successful preservation of identity?
- Why is 'identity' important to people?

In addition to these two major themes, the text yields what we might refer to as 'suggestions', i.e. questions and ideas that emerge as the story unfolds, prompting discussion:

- The significant role played by 'family' in the shaping of identity;
- The lingering impact of violence on individuals and families;
- The sense of a 'home';
- The role of religion and its teachings in the shaping of an individual's life;
- The difficulties and challenges raised by differences between certain cultures;
- The sense of 'justice' that people hold dear.

Characters

Najaf Mazari is the major character in the story. He is thirty years old when the reader first meets him. When the story returns to his earlier years in Afghanistan, Najaf appears as a young boy, a teenager and as a young man. Najaf starts his working life as a shepherd boy, then becomes an apprentice rugmaker, and finally a master rugmaker.

Gorg Ali Mazari is Najaf's eldest brother. He takes over as head of the family when Najaf's father dies. Gorg Ali is a bee-keeper.

Abdul Ali Mazari is Najaf's second-eldest brother. He becomes head of the family when Gorg Ali is shot dead by a sniper. Abdul Ali is a butcher.

Rosal Ali Mazari is Najaf's younger brother. Rosal Ali is killed when the Mazari house in Mazar-e-Sharif is destroyed by a high-explosive rocket.

Najaf's mother comes into the story in the chapters set in Afghanistan.

Robin Bourke is an Australian woman in her sixties who helps Najaf when he first settles in Melbourne and becomes his closest friend in Australia.

Colin Young is a Melbourne rug and antique dealer who became Najaf's friend when Najaf established his rug shop in Prahran.

Abbas is an Afghani and fellow-refugee of Najaf's. Abbas is a musician who plays an Afghani instrument known as a tullah.

Narrative Strategy

The story is told in both present tense and past tense in the voice of Najaf Mazari. Chapters set in Australia are written in the present tense and alternate with chapters set in Afghanistan, which are told in the past tense. The Australian chapters range over a six year period, from 2001 to 2006. The Afghanistan chapters range over a much longer period, from 1977 to 2000. The events of the Afghanistan chapters gradually catch up with the Australian chapters, so that the final Afghanistan chapter brings the reader to the point at which the first Australian chapter commences. This narrative strategy permits the reader to learn about Najaf's past and present at the same time. Each chapter set in the past enlarges the reader's understanding of what is happening in the present.

Historical context

The region of the Middle East that the nation of Afghanistan now occupies has been a site of dispute and armed struggle for some thousands of years. Armies seeking new lands and conquests have crossed Afghanistan since the earliest centuries of recorded history, taking the shortest route from north to south, and south to north. Recognising the geographical and strategic importance of the Afghanistan region, military leaders as remote in history as Genghis Khan have garrisoned the lands that lie either side of the towering mountains of the Hindu Kush. Over a span of centuries, the tribes of Afghanistan developed a fierce warrior credo, not only resisting foreign invaders but also clashing with each other. In the nineteenth century, the British Raj (Colonial rulers of India) fought with limited success to secure Afghanistan as a buffer to any Imperial Russian encroachment on the subcontinent.

After World War I, Afghanistan sought to secure independence from Britain and establish itself as a sovereign nation. The British resisted and it was only after World War II, when Britain acceded to Indian demands for independence, that Afghanistan was able to take its place amongst the community of nations. Afghanistan was ruled by a king who allowed only limited powers to the elected parliament. Relations between king and parliament remained tense until 1973 when a military coup swept the monarchy from power and established one-party rule in Afghanistan.

The Prime Minister and President, Mohammad Daoud Khan, was in turn overthrown in a second coup in 1978, led by Marxist leader Nur Mohammad Taraki. Daoud was killed in the fighting that followed the coup. In 1979, Taraki was ousted as President by Hafizullah Amin, also a Marxist. Late in 1979, Amin was killed in yet another coup that resulted in Babrak Karmal seizing the presidency. Karmal was supported by Soviet (Russian) troops, said to have been ‘invited’ into Afghanistan to secure peace by Karmal’s Marxist party. The Russians remained in Afghanistan for nine years, supporting the Afghani armed forces of Babrak Karmal against the furious opposition of many anti-Marxist militias known collectively as Mujahedin. Over this eight year period, the Russians suffered severe losses and finally withdrew in 1988. This period of civil war was followed by a second civil war, which pitted Mujahedin forces that had defeated the Russians and thrown out the Marxist government against each other.

In 1994, a new force entered the conflict. This force took the name ‘Taliban’, meaning ‘pious scholars’, and was made up largely of young men who had at one time studied the Koran with the aim of becoming what we would call priests. The Taliban fighters had been greatly inspired by the triumph of Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution in Iran, more than a decade earlier. Between 1994 and 1998, the Taliban, brilliant guerrilla fighters, succeeded in taking control of the whole of Afghanistan. The Talib leader, Mohammad Omar, declared Afghanistan an Islamic Republic and prosecuted an exceptionally stern regime that enforced many of the most extreme provisions of Islamic religious law, known as Sharia Law. These laws were particularly severe when it came to the rights of women in Afghanistan, essentially restricting women to the home, denying them education and establishing harsh laws, including the death penalty, for any failure to observe the dress code.

The Taliban regime gave sanctuary to the al-Qaeda movement of Osama Bin Laden in the years leading up to the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City and other sites in the United States on September 11th, 2001. In the weeks following those attacks, the United States issued a demand that the Taliban regime hand over Osama Bin Laden to justice officers of the United States government. The Taliban regime refused to do so, and in retaliation, an international force led by the armed forces of the United States invaded Afghanistan in October, 2001, succeeding in driving Taliban forces and the Taliban government from Afghanistan. An interim government headed by Hamid Karzai was installed in the Afghan capital of Kabul in December, 2001. Almost three years later, in October 2004, Hamid Karzai was elected president of Afghanistan under a new, democratic constitution.

Since 2004, regrouped Taliban guerrilla forces have fought fiercely to retake Afghanistan. The Taliban forces maintain secure bases in north-western regions of Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan. The Afghan government, under Hamid Karzai, relies on military support from a number of countries, including Australia, in combating the resurgent Taliban.

Notes on the Taliban

The Taliban is a uniquely Afghani movement of radical Islamists who adhere to an extremely strict (and some would say narrow) interpretation of the Prophet Mohammad’s Divine Message recorded in the Holy Book of Islam, the Koran. The term ‘Taliban’ is a collective noun, designating students (‘Talibs’) of the Koran and of other Islamic sacred texts. The Taliban movement has its roots in the teaching of the radical Islamist Deobandi religious schools, which emerged in India in the twentieth century when India was still under British rule. When India was partitioned in 1948, with Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan sharing common borders, the Deobandi schools in Pakistan trained young Muslims (children, teenagers and adults, male only) from impoverished backgrounds in a strict version of Islam. It has been argued by some Muslim and non-Muslim scholars that the ‘fundamentalist’ interpretation of the Koran is, in fact, a political interpretation, with the complex and poetic words of the Prophet Mohammad reconfigured as political slogans. However, fundamentalist scholars maintain that the Prophet Mohammad’s Divine Message

can only be interpreted in the one, radical way and that all other interpretations are either compromised or corrupt.

Notes on Islam

‘Islam’ is an Arabic word meaning, literally, ‘I submit’ but which may be more accurately rendered in English as, ‘I accept’. Islam is the faith; Muslims are the followers of that faith. Approximately 1.5 billion people follow the Islamic faith. In Afghanistan, Najaf’s homeland, 99% of the population is Muslim.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is a monotheistic religion, meaning that it honours only one God. ‘Allah’ is the name given to God by Muslims. Of the world’s major religions (in terms of followers) Islam is the newest, having been founded by the Prophet Muhammad who lived from the year 570 to 632. However, Muslims do not think of Islam as having commenced in Muhammad’s lifetime, but rather that Muhammad was the last Prophet of God and that He rectified errors made by Jewish and Christian prophets in understanding the word of God. We may think of Islam, Judaism and Christianity as very closely related.

Within a century of the Prophet Muhammad’s death, Islam divided into two distinct streams, Sunni and Shi’a. The dispute between the two denominations concerns acceptance of Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law Ali as the Prophet’s successor. Shi’a Muslims hold that Ali was Muhammad’s rightful successor, while Sunnis maintain that Abu Bakr was the Prophet’s true successor. Approximately 85% of Muslims belong to the Sunni denomination; the remaining 15% is Shi’a. Najaf and almost all of his ethnic group, the Hazara, are Shi’a, but the great majority of Afghanis are Sunnis.

In common with other major religions, Islam supports highly divergent views as to how the faith should be interpreted. Fundamentalists, who may belong to either of the Muslim denominations, apply a very strict interpretation of the Prophet’s message, which is taken to be the directly expressed will of God. The fundamentalist beliefs of radical Islamists may be likened to those of certain puritanical Christian and Jewish codes of belief, enforcing uncompromising rules regarding dress, diet, educational practices, manner of worship and the distinct roles of men and women in the community. It would be true to say that fundamentalist Muslims, like fundamentalist Christians and Jews, form a small minority in the broader community of believers.

Facts About Afghanistan

Population and Ethnic Groupings

Afghanistan’s population numbers approximately 32 million. A number of ethnic groupings with distinct cultures and heritage make up the total, reflecting the historical movement of people from lands outside Afghanistan into the region. The largest ethnic group is Pashtun, comprising 42% of the total population, followed by Tajiks (27%), Hazara (9%), Uzbeks (9%), with Aimaks, Turkmen, Baloch and other small groups making up 13%. The total population figure does not include approximately 2,734,000 nomads, who travel between national borders, and 3,500,000 refugees, who live mostly in the north-western provinces of Pakistan.

The larger ethnic groups tend to dominate certain regions of Afghanistan, and they defend their historical domains fiercely. Najaf is a Hazara, an ethnic group descended from the armies of Genghis Khan that conquered the entire region of Afghanistan in the thirteenth century.

Geography

Afghanistan is a landlocked nation, sharing borders with Iran, Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It is a land of mountains and deserts, with the Great Hindu Kush range (the second highest in the world) dividing the country from east to west.

The south-western plateau region of Afghanistan, including the Rigestan desert, is almost uninhabited. Only 3% of Afghanistan is capable of supporting crops, roughly comparable to the fertile regions of Australia. The areas of Afghanistan that receive good rainfall include valleys, meadows and plateaux of great beauty and are celebrated in Afghani folk songs.

The capital city, Kabul, in the north-east, is by far the largest city in Afghanistan with a population of approximately 3 million. Other major cities include Kandahār in the south, with a population of approximately 500,000; Herāt in the west, a city of 560,000; and Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, Najaf's home city, which is home to approximately 1,000,000 people.

Despite the growth of Afghani cities over the past two decades, Afghanistan remains a land of villages. Most Afghanis still live in rural areas, making their living as farmers. Apart from common crops, such as wheat, barley and maize, Afghanistan is also home to regions that supply most of the world's opium. The cultivation of opium in Afghanistan was initiated by the British when they controlled Afghanistan in the nineteenth century and has flourished ever since.

Cultural context

Marriage

In Afghanistan, most marriages are arranged by the parents and other relatives of the prospective bride and groom. But it is only in a minority of cases that the bride and groom have no say in the choice of partner. Usually, a friend or relative of a young man will quietly mention that a young woman in his family or a friend's family is of a marriageable age (sixteen years or older). Before any engagement is announced, the circumstances of the young man and young woman must be considered carefully. The couple will usually come from the same ethnic group and will enjoy approximately the same social and material status; it is uncommon for the young man to come from a very poor family while the young woman comes from a wealthy family, in the same way that such an engagement would be uncommon in Western countries. If either of the parties to the engagement takes a strong exception to the match, the marriage is unlikely to go ahead, but such a refusal is rare and would be considered very ill-mannered. The family member with the greatest say in the match is often the mother of the prospective groom. She will make a judgement regarding the prospective bride based on the young woman's modesty, housemaking skills, piety and personality.

The question the mother of the prospective groom asks herself is not, 'Will my son fall in love with this young woman?' but, 'Will this young woman make a good home for my son?' Romance does not play an important part in betrothals, although it is expected that the bride and groom will grow to love each other. Once the marriage has been agreed to, only a catastrophe can break the contract. In Western countries, an engaged couple may have second thoughts about the marriage and call it off. In Afghanistan, such an eventuality would be thought insulting to everyone involved. The bride's family provides a dowry in the form of gifts to the groom's family, while the groom's family will often offer smaller gifts to the bride's family. The marriage ceremony itself is always extravagant; the groom and his family are expected to make the occasion measure up to other marriage ceremonies and any stinting on expenditure is looked on with great disapproval. Friends and relatives attend from far and wide and it is not unusual for a reasonably well-to-do family to invite a thousand or more guests. Food and beverages are served on trays and trenchers (very large metal dishes) from the commencement of the ceremony until the end. Amongst some ethnic groups, such as the Hazara, music and dancing form a highly applauded part of the ceremony. Guests sleep at the home of the groom, often on mattresses and bedding rolled out under the stars. After two or three days of feasting and entertainment, the guests depart. For months afterwards, the high points of the ceremony will be discussed by the

guests and plaudits awarded for the quality and quantity of food provided, and the brilliance of the dancers and musicians.

Dress

The garments of Afghani women conceal most of the body, as is the custom amongst Muslims. The degree of concealment varies greatly, according to ethnic group and tribal custom. Some Afghani women reveal no part of their body other than their hands in public, clothed in loose-fitting garments from head to foot, face veiled with only a latticed slit provided for vision. Complete concealment of this sort is called Chadri. Others Afghani women fulfil their religious obligations with a simple headscarf and a long tunic over loose-fitting red trousers, leaving the face exposed. Amongst Afghani men, concealment of the body is not an obligation, although it would be considered exceptionally rude for a man to walk about shirtless in public, or to go about in shorts; modesty of attire, amongst Afghani men, is more a matter of good manners than of religious stricture. The most common type of dress for Afghani men is a loose, thigh-length, long-sleeved shirt, loose-fitting white cotton trousers and a sleeveless waistcoat. In cooler weather, Afghani men wear a chupan – a long-sleeved, loose-fitting coat of wool, more like a sleeved cloak than an overcoat. In winter, men wear thick woollen hand-knitted socks with tough leather boots made from yak hide. Headwear ranges from close-fitting Astrakhan hats to knitted woollen caps, sheepskin caps with thick side-flaps, and cotton turbans. As in most cultures, Afghani men and women retain more expensive garments for special occasions. Even women who wear chadri keep a set of concealing garments of finer quality for feasts and weddings, or sometimes just to make a big impression on a trip to the market.

Food and Eating

Lamb, kid, chicken, spinach, chick peas, kidney beans, chillies and yoghurt are the dominating ingredients of Afghani dishes, as is the case in most Middle Eastern countries. Stews are common; small lamb or beef pies often form an entrée to a larger meal. While lamb and kid are enjoyed all over Afghanistan, beef is more a regional ingredient in traditional dishes. Yoghurt is added to almost all stews and casseroles. The dishes Najaf and his family most enjoyed include: Aush (lamb, yoghurt, kidney beans, chick peas and noodles); Boulanee (meatballs wrapped in pastry); Samboosak (flaky pastry meat pies); Korma Sabzee (meat stew with garlic, chilli, spinach and coriander leaves). All meals are served with flat bread cooked on a smooth stone in an open oven. Desserts do not play as important a role in the Afghani diet as they do in the Western diet. Often, a meal will conclude with tea and small biscuits flavoured with pistachios and sweetened with honey, known as Khatai.

In most Afghani households, meals are served picnic-fashion on a large tablecloth spread on an area of the floor on which people avoid walking. The members of the family sit around the tablecloth and serve themselves from large dishes. Meal-times are arranged so that eating does not clash with prayer-times.

Notes on Refugees

Afghani Refugees

Decades of fighting in Afghanistan have created some millions of refugees. In modern warfare, combatants rarely distinguish between civilian and military targets, and so thousands of Afghani villages have been destroyed in the fighting. Pakistan is the destination of the great majority of refugees fleeing battles and bombardments. Refugee camps in the north-western provinces of Pakistan provide shelter of a very basic sort to 3.5 million Afghani refugees. Most of these refugees hope to return to Afghanistan one day, but many have been waiting for ten or fifteen

years. The refugee camps of Pakistan are infiltrated by the Taliban, and are particularly dangerous places for members of the Hazara ethnic group, such as Najaf. The Taliban regard Hazara as enemies. The camps are places of great poverty and despair. Educational and medical facilities are over-stretched and some camps depend entirely on welfare provided by charities.

International treaties governing the rights of refugees

A number of international treaties spell out the rights of refugees and specify the obligations of nations when refugees seek asylum within their borders. The most important of these treaties is the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which is administered by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Most member states of the United Nations (including Australia) have committed themselves to upholding the rights of refugees under the Convention. A refugee is defined by the Convention as any person who, *'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country.'* This definition can cover small groups of people who belong to a victimised minority, or to very large numbers of people who face abuses ranging from forced eviction from their homes and lands to organised massacres in their homeland.

When refugees reach the borders or territorial waters of a nation observing the UN Convention, that nation is required to accept them. If refugees are detected in international waters (outside the territorial waters of any nation), the nearest observing nation to the refugees (other than the nation from which the refugees are fleeing) is expected to facilitate their safe conduct to within its borders. What this can mean in practice is that if a boatload of people who indicate their status as refugees is detected heading towards an observing nation's territorial waters, the observing nation cannot refuse to accept the refugees; it cannot (for example) force the boat back out to sea. Once within an observing nation's borders, the refugees cannot be deported or forcibly ejected if their status as genuine refugees is found to be valid.

Reception of refugees

Refugees are rarely made welcome, notwithstanding the obligations of observing nations. They are often considered nuisances and sometimes face persecution, very like the persecution they were fleeing. A number of observing nations have established their own conditions for accepting refugees, conditions that may contradict their obligations under the UN Convention.

Australian refugee policy

Over the past four decades, Australia has accepted some thousands of refugees, including many who made their way into Australian territorial waters by boat. In 2001, however, the Australian Government established new legal obstacles designed to diminish the attraction of Australia as a destination for refugees. Small islands and atolls off the Australian coast which had been internationally recognised as part of the Australian Commonwealth were 'excised' from the boundaries of Australian territory. Refugees who washed up on these islands and atolls could no longer claim to have reached Australian territory, and could not claim rights under the UN Convention. Furthermore, refugees who were detained before entering Australian territory or Australian waters were held at camps on Pacific Islands such as Nauru, once again denying these refugees the rights they could claim if they set foot in Australia or entered Australian waters. Processing of the claims for asylum of these refugees was conducted at these Pacific locations. This policy of keeping refugees at locations outside Australia became known as the 'Pacific solution'. It was claimed by the government at that time that these new restrictions on refugee access were necessary to curtail a prospective flood of refugees seeking asylum in Australia, and to frustrate 'people smugglers' who took payment from refugees in return for delivering them to

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Australian waters or to Australian territory. Some of the provisions of the ‘Pacific solution’ have since been rescinded.

People smugglers

A flourishing worldwide industry exploits the large market in refugees willing to pay to be illegally transported inside the borders or into the territorial waters of various affluent states, mostly in the West. These ‘illegal immigrants’ (so-called) are usually people who have little chance of gaining legal entry to their land of destination. Some people-smuggling businesses are sophisticated and expensive, catering to the small number of clients who can afford the high costs, but most businesses rely on poor people who have raised a few thousand dollars by selling everything they own or by borrowing. People-smugglers are notoriously unscrupulous, showing little concern for the safety and welfare of their clients. Each year, thousands of refugees and would-be immigrants perish in transit, dying of malnutrition, suffocation and disease. Some are simply murdered and dumped after paying their money to the smugglers.

Chapter summaries and discussion points

Chapter 1: Singing in the Wilderness

Najaf is behind barbed wire at the Woomera Detention Centre in South Australia. Heartsick and weighed down by anxiety, he wanders the camp with a blanket over his shoulders. He has no idea of his fate and feels powerless to influence those who will decide whether he will be accepted as a refugee or returned to the desperate life he was living in Afghanistan. He finds what he thinks is a solitary place where he can hide his distress from others. He recalls a folk song of his native land and begins to sing it softly. A group of security officers and Department of Immigration officials overhear him and listen admiringly from a nearby balcony.

Discussion points

- Using a scaled world map and the map at the front of the book, estimate the distance travelled by Najaf on his journey from Afghanistan to Australia.
- Build a list of words from the text that describe Najaf’s mood and feelings in this chapter.
- What is the difference between a birth certificate that identifies a baby born in Australia, and the document known as a ‘taskera’ used in Afghanistan? What does this difference suggest about Afghani society compared to Australian society? What differences between Afghani society and Australian society does Najaf himself notice?
- The first month of the Afghani New Year is named, ‘Hamal.’ What does this word mean in English? Why would the month be given that name? In what season would Hamal occur in the Southern Hemisphere?
- When Najaf sings the Afghani folk song, he is overheard by a group of Department of Immigration officers. Why does he stop singing when he realises that the officers are listening? How do the officers respond to Najaf’s song?
- As a class, discuss the symbolism of the flowers mentioned in Najaf’s song. What do the flowers suggest to Najaf?

Chapter 2: Fire in the Night

We return to Afghanistan in the year 1985. Najaf and his family are living in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif, having moved from the small village of Shar Shar after the death of Najaf’s father. During a visit to the city by the President of Afghanistan, Najaf and his family become the innocent victims of a bungled assassination attempt on the dignitary. Two

high-explosive Mujahedin rockets strike the family home, killing Najaf's younger brother and his brother-in-law. Najaf, his mother, and his older brother are seriously wounded.

Discussion points

In this chapter we learn that Afghanistan has been involved in almost continual conflict for most of its history. Google 'current conflict in Afghanistan' and briefly summarise your findings under the following headings:

- What forces are currently fighting in Afghanistan?
- What role is Australia playing in Afghanistan?
- What two claims to fame does Najaf highlight in his discussion of the city of Mazar-e-Sharif?
- What do you think Najaf means when he says, 'We were not a family of political firebrands'? How does Najaf characterise his family? Why did Gorg-Ali distrust 'fiery speeches'?
- When Uncle Ibrahim visits Najaf in hospital, what does his news suggest about the role of religion in the life of an Afghani family?
- Discuss Najaf's response when he hears of the death of his younger brother and of Hassan. What does Najaf's response suggest about his attitude to life, and to the war in Afghanistan? Why is Najaf concerned for his mother, in particular?

Chapter 3: Shoes

For the detainees in Woomera, periods of acute anxiety are interspersed with long stretches of boredom. Najaf and his fellow detainees are not allowed to watch television or listen to the radio. Najaf asks for work to relieve the tedium and is given a job in the camp kitchen.

Discussion points

- Locate Woomera on a map of South Australia. What reasons can you suggest for locating a refugee camp at Woomera?
- Draw up a timetable of a typical day for Najaf in Woomera. What do Najaf's activities in the course of a day suggest about life in Woomera? Why does Najaf refrain from thinking about rugs and what does his explanation suggest about his mood?
- List aspects of Afghani culture that we learn from Najaf's reflection in the course of this day in Woomera. What examples does the chapter provide of differences between Afghani culture and Australian culture?
- Conflict sometimes breaks out amongst refugees within the camp. What causes of conflict does Najaf mention? What is his response to these causes of conflict?
- Najaf speaks of his daydreams in Woomera. Discuss the insights into his character that his daydreams provide.

Chapter 4: Lambs and Wolves

We return to Afghanistan in the year 1979. Najaf is 8 years old. The Soviet Union has invaded Afghanistan in support of the communist government in Kabul, precipitating a civil war. Najaf's father has died, but life in the village of Shar Shar continues as it has for centuries. In tribal tradition, Najaf's oldest brother assumes the position as head of the family and Najaf carries on his task of caring for the family's flock of sheep; attendance at the village school is fitted around this responsibility. Najaf considers schoolwork a waste of time, preferring the days on the mountainside with his dog to the stern discipline of the classroom.

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Discussion points

- Discuss the ways in which the upbringing of an Afghani child differs from the ways in which children in other cultures are usually raised. What reasons for this difference does Najaf suggest?
- Would a child in Australia be given the same employment as Najaf at the same age?
- How does Najaf's earliest employment relate to the differing expectations of children in Afghanistan and some other cultures?
- How does Najaf's schooling differ from the schooling of primary age children in Australia?
- What sorts of authority does an Afghani teacher have that teachers in Australia do not?
- Why has Afghanistan been such a battleground for so long? What role do the major ethnic groups of Afghanistan play in the instability of the country?
- What role does a 'mullah' fulfil in Afghani culture? What differences does Najaf speak of between his attitude to attendance at the regular school and the Koranic school?
- Discuss the final paragraph of this chapter with reference to Najaf's earlier comments on his education in Shar Shar. What point is left unstated, in your opinion? Why has Najaf 'made a great leap through time and distance' to speak of Maria's school?

Chapter 5: The Room of Questions

Even with the assistance of a translator and an advocate from the Afghani community, Najaf finds his third interview in Woomera confusing. He struggles to understand the intent of the questions and wonders why the Department of Immigration officers can't see that he would become a hard-working and responsible member of the Australian community. He becomes distressed when questions about his family revive painful memories of the death of his brother, Gorg Ali.

Discussion points

- Act out an interview of the type that Najaf experiences in this chapter, with one student taking the part of a refugee and another the part of the interviewing case officer. The refugee would first write a personal history detailing place and date of birth, schooling and employment in country of origin, parents' names and employment, names of family members and circumstances that forced the applicant to leave his or her native land. The case officer would ask questions sceptically.
- What reasons does Najaf have for fearing the interview process?
- Najaf says that 'lies are a form of theft'. Earlier he gives an example of 'a lie that helps to tell the bigger truth'. Discuss the apparent contradiction of these two statements. What does the apparent contradiction suggest about Najaf's character?
- Refer to the questions asked by Najaf's case officer. What is the case officer's motive in asking these questions?
- How do cultural differences contribute to the difficulties Najaf experiences in answering some questions?

Chapter 6: Kisses

We return to Afghanistan in the years before the fatal rocket attack. Najaf's family, now headed by his gentle older brother, Gorg Ali, is in the process of building a new house in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Najaf contributes to the building of the new house by preparing mud bricks and delivering them for his older brothers to lay; this labour earns him the right to call the house his home. Now aged 12, Najaf is excited and delighted by the move to the city and the opportunities it offers. He is thrilled to be permitted to attend the wedding of his brother's friend, particularly as a famous dancer is to perform. (Dancers are held in great esteem for their beauty and skill, as the story of Khandi Hazari illustrates). Najaf and three of his friends form a plan to creep up on the dancer as she sleeps in the room provided for the women guests and kiss her. Two of the

boys succeed, but the third wakes her and they flee as women scream and shout. To Najaf, the trouble they get into over the escapade is worth it; the day would have been perfect, however, if only Hashim hadn't woken the dancer.

Discussion points

- In this chapter, some of the customs and conventions spoken of by Najaf parallel customs and conventions widely observed in Australian cultures and elsewhere in the world. Discuss the chapter with reference to customs and conventions that seem uniquely Afghani and those that are more broadly observed.
- What attractions does life in the city suggest to Najaf? Considering Najaf's age at the time of his family's resettlement in Mazar-e-Sharif, what other factors may have come into play to make the city seem so appealing?
- All cultures provide examples of what are known as 'rites of passage', i.e. certain experiences that people in a culture undergo to show that they have passed a milestone. Many of these rites are formal, such as the celebration of a 21st birthday; others are informal, and often amount to showing daring or bravery. What informal 'rites of passage' does Najaf experience in this chapter? What comment of Najaf's suggests that he has completed a rite of passage?
- Make the story of Kandhi Hazara in this chapter a discussion topic. Why does the mujahedin commander feel it is necessary to murder Kandhi Hazara? Why do the soldiers despatched by the commander to kill Kandhi Hazara refuse to carry out his orders? The commander is not angry about being disobeyed. Why is this? In your opinion, why has Najaf told the story of Kandhi Hazara in such detail?

Chapter 7: School

After the initial anxiety of being locked up in the prison-like environment, Najaf recognises that, with their every action and attitude under the scrutiny of prison guards, the internees are partaking in a tacit examination that will determine their refugee status. He graduates to the second-stage camp and is appointed supervisor of the mess where he has to resolve tensions between racial groups over perceived injustices. As their leader, he is relied upon by the Afghanis to try to explain the information they are given about Australian laws and culture and does so with the help of an English-speaking Iranian he befriends.

Discussion points

- Najaf claims that Woomera is a type of school, or college. Discuss the chapter with reference to this claim. What 'tests' do the refugees have to pass? What advantages are there for refugees like Najaf who realise that they are being tested? How fair is the 'grading system'?
- Read the description of Woomera in the third paragraph of this chapter. Why is Woomera made to look so unwelcoming? What feelings does the appearance of Woomera rouse in the refugees as they approach by bus?
- Many of the 'tests' faced by the refugees are more to do with behaviour than with answering questions correctly. What forms of behaviour are rewarded in the camp? Are these forms of behaviour rewarded in your own school?
- What situations cause anxiety amongst the refugees? What reactions does the anxiety produce? How does Najaf attempt to reduce the anxiety?
- Ask your students to write a list of the things that they would personally teach the refugees about Australian culture and society. The list could take in behaviour as well as information about laws and expectations. The students could then read their lists aloud.

Chapter 8: The King's Son and the Canary Bird

His older brothers find Najaf work in a blacksmith's shop as an apprentice welder. The work is physically demanding, noisy, and dirty; Najaf's eyes sting from the welding flashes. It is, however, the lack of the opportunity to create beauty that distresses him most, impelling him to desert the soul-destroying grind of the welding shop and, prepared to face the inevitable wrath of his older brothers, begin to learn the trade of rugmaking.

Discussion points

- Refer to the story of the king's son told by Najaf's brother, Gorg-Ali. What does this story suggest about Afghani culture? What is the purpose of telling the story? What is its moral?
- Ask your students if they can think of stories told in their own culture that have the same purpose as Gorg-Ali's story. (You might try out certain fables to see if they still have currency amongst your students, such as the story of the hare and the tortoise).
- Refer to page 85. What is Najaf's most important regret about the occupation that has been chosen for him? What does this regret suggest about Najaf's character?
- What do the work practices in the welding shop and the rug factory suggest about industry in Afghanistan?

Chapter 9: Main Camp

Najaf has been transferred to Main Camp where the decision will be made either to grant him a visa or to send him back to Mazar-e-Sharif. The atmosphere is tense as the inmates await rejection or acceptance, but Najaf is able to daydream about the life he may be permitted to have in Australia while accepting with resignation the possibility of disappointment. The horrific self-mutilation of a fellow detainee deeply affects him. As a peaceful rebellion, the locks of a huge wire cage are broken allowing a mass exodus of birds 'imprisoned' by the authorities.

Discussion points

- Discuss the strategies that Najaf employs to maintain his morale in this chapter.
- What do these strategies suggest about Najaf's prospects in Australian society? (Refer particularly to the second paragraph on page 97).
- Moving to 'Main Camp' imposes a new type of trial on the morale of refugees. In what way does Main Camp differ from the other camps that form the Woomera complex?
- How does the Australia Najaf imagines compare to reality? What aspects of 'Najaf's Australia' might invite disappointment?
- Refer to the story of the old camel and the young camel on page 99. Why does Najaf remind himself of this story?
- The refugee whose story has been rejected by the authorities resorts to self-mutilation. What is symbolised by this act? What point may the refugee have been attempting to make?
- Discuss the freeing of the birds at the end of this chapter in the context of its symbolism.

Chapter 10: Gorg Ali and the Watermelons

The story moves back to Afghanistan. It is 1982, and the Russians have been deployed in large numbers to Shar Shar, the family's old village, to fight the mujahedin. Najaf's oldest brother, Gorg Ali, journeys regularly to the surrounding countryside to attend to the family's beehives. A stray bullet from one of the skirmishes kills Gorg Ali, a pacifist who is loved and respected by the whole community. Responsibility for the family now falls to Abdul Ali, the second son, with Najaf also expected to play a greater role in its welfare. Under the threat of escalating political unrest, Najaf continues to develop his rugmaking skills, becoming daily more passionate about the craft; but, at age 12, he feels that the carefree days of his childhood are gone forever.

Discussion points

- Discuss the ‘watermelon school of philosophy’. Compare ‘watermelon philosophy’ with the passages in Chapter 4, pages 33-36 in which Najaf talks about the warrior heritage of Afghans. How typical of Afghani men is Gorg Ali?
- Gorg Ali is described as having special power over snakes, and also the ability to cure various ailments. Najaf believes these gifts ‘come out of the soil and rocks of Afghanistan’ and that Gorg Ali was selected to possess them because of his goodness. Discuss this with reference to Western culture and medical practice, and what Gorg-Ali’s skills suggest about Afghani culture.
- Najaf seems to be making a special point in telling the story of Gorg Ali’s death. Refer to the details that Najaf provides of his brother’s powers and philosophy, then to the account of Gorg Ali’s death. What message is conveyed?
- What changes in Najaf’s household does the death of Gorg Ali bring about?

Chapter 11: Love and Music

At the camp, Najaf has a good friend named Abbas – a fellow Afghani – who is admired by the detainees for his mastery of the tullah (a traditional Afghani musical instrument) and who is very popular because of his cheerfulness. Abbas, having fallen in love with a beautiful woman who regularly attends his recitals, asks Najaf to offer her a proposal of marriage on his behalf.

Discussion points

- Discuss the opening paragraph of this chapter with reference to Afghanistan’s long history of violent conflict. How does Najaf’s observation relate itself to earlier observations about tribal jealousies?
- Discuss the music-making of Abbas and its reception by the refugees in Woomera. How does Abbas’ music affect the refugees? Why is Abbas’ gift so valued by the refugees?
- Abbas’ proposal to the woman in the camp he has fallen in love with is influenced by his Afghani background. In what ways? How is the woman’s response influenced by her own cultural background?

Chapter 12: Two Red Pills

Shrapnel from the rocket attack has left Najaf with a severely damaged left leg. After three months in hospital the wound has still not healed, and Najaf’s leg is sealed in a cast. Najaf is dejected by the lack of improvement despite weekly visits to the hospital and an operation. After a year of eking out a living selling socks on the street, Najaf is persuaded by a taxi driver to seek assistance from a psychiatrist. After taking the two red pills prescribed by the doctor, the pain disappears and the wound begins to heal itself steadily. Overjoyed by his recovery, Najaf returns to rug-making.

Discussion points

- The hospital ward is crowded with civilians wounded in battles. What insight does this chapter give you into the impact of decades of war on the ordinary citizens of Afghanistan?
- ‘I realised that a man is not what he thinks, not what he says, but what he does with his hands and legs and with his heart.’ Discuss this observation of Najaf’s. Why do you think he places a higher value on actions than on thought and speech? How does this observation compare with those made earlier by Najaf’s brother Gorg Ali?
- What incident in the hospital makes Najaf think of himself as an unsophisticated village boy?
- Compare the story of the psychiatrist on pages 138-140 of this chapter to the story of Gorg Ali and the snakes on pages 108-109. Are there similarities between the powers of Gorg Ali and the psychiatrist?

Chapter 13: Apple

- Najaf recognises that Woomera is like a microcosm of the outside world and with similar difficulties encountered. He becomes aware that a young widow is attracted to him. Deeply embarrassed by her advances and troubled by the disappointment his rejection brings her, he offers her an apple. Baffled that this only increases her distress, he then suggests that she should marry her cousin; this attempt at consolation is also bitterly refused.

Discussion points

- The broad claim made by Najaf in the opening chapter is that most refugees simply want a secure land in which to build a new life. Do Najaf's reflections on the world within the camp tend to support or to undermine that claim?
- Public communication between Muslim men and women from certain cultures is often formal and subject to strict rules of behaviour. List some of these restrictions mentioned in this chapter and discuss the way in which relationships develop in spite of them. Ask your students to identify similar signs that people in western cultures use to covertly signal their attraction, or to flirt with each other.
- Why does Leila say to Najaf, 'How strange that it should be you who has come to comfort me'?
- Leila takes little consolation from Najaf's words of advice. Why is that, in your opinion? What was Najaf's mistake in offering an apple to Leila?

Chapter 14: Land of Armies

Back in Afghanistan, it is now 1983 and thirteen-year-old Najaf is happily advancing his skill as a rug-maker. However, civil strife persists between the mujahedin and the ruling communist party, and he and the other young males in the village spend much of their time avoiding recruitment officers as both armies vie to expand their forces. Conscripted into either army would mean almost certain death. Najaf can see no prospect of an end to the feuding. Though he quickly dismisses the notion, Najaf begins to wonder if there could be a life for him outside Afghanistan.

Discussion points

- A boy of thirteen in Afghanistan is considered old enough to behave as a man. Identify some of the attributes that Najaf has developed and the responsibilities required of him that illustrate this. Invite class members to talk about expectations of teenagers within their own culture, or cultures. How do these expectations compare with those found in Afghanistan? At what age do boys become men in Australia?
- Najaf has to spend half his life avoiding the recruitment officers yet the thought of leaving distresses him. Why do you think this is?
- In this chapter as in others, Najaf sees the will of God at work in the unfolding of his life. What role does Najaf believe God has played in his return to rugmaking?
- Why do you think the mujahedin and the communists both found it necessary to conscript boys of Najaf's age into their armed forces? What does this conscription policy suggest about the toll of warfare in Afghanistan?
- According to Najaf, what was Afghanistan's main industry when he was a teenager?

Chapter 15: The Other Side of the Fence

Najaf is overjoyed when a security officer wakes him one night to be told that visas have been granted to him and his friend. The jubilation turns to desolation soon after, when the guard returns to apologetically tell him that a mistake had been made. Desperately disappointed but refusing to allow the bad news to overwhelm him, Najaf accepts the decision as part of God's plan and forces himself to continue his daily routine as cheerfully as he is able. He is wary when he is told some weeks later that his visa actually has arrived.

Discussion points

- Why does Najaf say that the middle of the night is not a good time for him? What other night-time experiences might he be thinking of?
- What does the exultation that Najaf and Nemat feel when told that their visas have arrived suggest about their experience of Woomera?
- How does Najaf deal with his disappointment? How does the story of the old camel and the young camel help to console him?
- Why does Najaf ask the security officer the time when he is told once again that his visa has arrived?
- Discuss this chapter in the context of Najaf's beliefs about life. Does the eventual arrival of his visa confirm his beliefs or contradict them?

Chapter 16: Strawberries

By age sixteen, Najaf has settled into adulthood and impresses his family with his acceptance of life and his attitude to hard work. His employment at the rug factory continues to delight him as he masters new techniques. He now begins to imagine the woman he will marry, someone whom he will love and be loved by but, more importantly in Afghani culture, someone capable of joining him as a life partner and raising their children.

Discussion points

- 'War had always been the background to my life and it surely helped to form the way I thought about things.' Discuss this statement of Najaf's with reference to his outlook on life revealed in this chapter and in earlier chapters. Has the conflict he has known all his life made him pessimistic? How does Najaf's craft of rugmaking influence him in his day-to-day life?
- Discuss Najaf's description of 'strawberry love'. What is he suggesting when he compares love in the West to the love of strawberries? What source of nourishment does Najaf commend as superior to strawberries? What does his criticism of Western love and his endorsement of love in his own culture reveal about Afghani culture?
- Discuss Najaf's metaphor of weaving on page 167. Why does this metaphor suit the story told by Najaf in this book?
- Why does Najaf's mother reject Najaf's first choice of wife? Do her reasons seem sensible?
- Discuss Najaf's important account of the rise of the Taliban. How did the Taliban originate? What role did the corruption of the mujahedin forces play in the rise of the Taliban? What role did poverty and displacement play in the Taliban's success?
- Why do you think the Taliban outlawed so many things that would be considered mere entertainment? What is Najaf's essential criticism of the Taliban?
- In the scene on pages 178-180 of this chapter, Najaf reveals the courtship customs of Afghanis. Discuss the courtship of Hakima, comparing Afghani customs to the courtship customs in other cultures.

Chapter 17: The Miracle of the Wire Brush

After obtaining his visa, Najaf is released from Woomera and settles into a house in Dandenong, an outer-eastern industrial suburb of Melbourne, and begins to search for work. Despite the anxiety he feels in an alien culture, he believes he will be happy in Australia. A woman he meets on a bus directs him to High Street, Prahran, informing him of the many middle-eastern rug shops to be found in the area. His first two employers exploit him, offering low wages and demanding long hours, but he soon finds a secure position in a carpet factory.

Discussion points

- What does Najaf's plan to work as a shepherd in Tasmania reveal about his knowledge of Australia? Why do you think the authorities sent Najaf to Dandenong rather than to Tasmania?
- Discuss the differences that Najaf notices between Dandenong and Mazar-e-Sharif. What do these differences reveal about Australian culture compared to Afghani culture?
- How would you describe Najaf's mood during his early days in Dandenong?
- Najaf thinks, 'God gave us burdens, but God also gave us trolleys.' Is this statement consistent with other observations Najaf makes in earlier chapters about God?
- Discuss Najaf's observation about human kindness on page 189. Does this observation build on earlier comments by Najaf, or contradict them?

Chapter 18: Massacre

The Taliban return to Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 determined to kill all Hazara males of fighting age. Najaf flees to the home of a friend who had constructed a secret room within his house. After 15 days cramped in this tiny space, he learns of the slaying of an uncle and cousin and, desperately concerned about the safety of his mother, wife and baby daughter, returns home. Soon after he is captured during a raid on his house and confined with 40 other Hazara men in a small room at the Taliban command post. Daily beatings extract 'confessions' of fighting against the Taliban from many of the prisoners but, despite the torture, Najaf refuses to concede defeat. He is released, still expecting to be shot in the back until he is far from the gate and on his way home.

Discussion points

- Why do you think Najaf has started this chapter with the story of the wolves that bounded down from the hills, 'maddened by the smell of the flesh they craved'?
- The Taliban hunt young Hazara men, such as Najaf, and kill them. Why do you think the Taliban singles out young men to kill, rather than all Hazara?
- Najaf's friend Ashraf has a secret room in his house. What have we learned in earlier chapters of the situation of the Hazara that would explain the existence of this secret room?
- Discuss the character of the Taliban in this chapter by comparing it with Najaf's description of the rise of the Taliban in Chapter 16. What claims about the Taliban in Chapter 16 seem confirmed by what unfolds in Chapter 18?
- The Taliban commander allows Najaf to live, after severe torture. Although no specific motive is given, what reasons might the commander have had for sparing Najaf, in your opinion?

Chapter 19: Shop

Najaf has leased a shop in High Street Prahran but has no stock. He is living on the premises repairing rugs to pay the rent and save enough money to buy some rugs when an Afghani rug-seller comes into the shop and suggests a partnership. Although cheered by the success of his business, he longs for the security of a permanent visa and dreams of the time he can be reunited with his wife and daughter. Australian life is often a puzzle to him – the mysterious requirements

of potential housemates, the intricacies of the taxation systems, EFTPOS – but his outgoing personality attracts friends who help him negotiate its unfamiliar territory.

Discussion points

- Najaf finds a shop to lease and after some set-backs, is able to fill it with rugs. Yet he remains anxious. What is the essential cause of Najaf's anxiety?
- Discuss Najaf's penchant for buying birds and fish, then releasing them. What is Najaf's motive in freeing these creatures? How does the release of the creatures relate to Najaf's earlier complaint about anxiety? Bring the scene in which the Woomera refugees free the birds in the big cage into the discussion (page 103). How do the release of the birds in Woomera and Najaf's own liberation of birds and fishes relate to his feelings about liberty? Discuss, also, the metaphor Najaf employs on page 207 concerning the dangers that liberty encounters. Why does this metaphor suit the story?
- Discuss the confusion Najaf faces in this chapter as he tries to cope with a new culture. Are the things that confuse him to do with being an Afghani in Australia, or to do with his personality? Are all the cultural differences important or significant? When Najaf says, 'Can I ever feel the truth about myself in Australia?' what is being suggested about different cultures? Bring business culture into the discussion. What do the problems that Najaf encounters dealing with business culture suggest about Afghani business culture? (See pages 212 - 214).

Chapter 20: Exile

Desperate to avoid the Taliban, Najaf decides to keep on the move, cycling into regions where his enemies are sparser. He is shocked when he arrives in his home village of Shar Shar to witness the extent of the restrictions the Taliban has imposed. While there, he receives news that his family has devised a plan to smuggle him out of the country.

Discussion points

- Why is it necessary for Najaf to keep on the move in the months after his release by the Taliban? What does he believe the long-term strategy of the Taliban to be?
- Discuss Najaf's reaction when he returns to his village of Shar Shar. What differences does he notice in his village? What do the differences suggest about the policies of the Taliban? What examples are to be found in this chapter of differences between Hazara beliefs and Taliban beliefs?
- Why is Najaf chosen by the family to escape from Afghanistan and search for a new life in a new country? What expectation does his family have of him once he starts a new life?
- Discuss Najaf's account of tribal society in Afghanistan (pages 220, 221). Ask your students how Afghani tribal culture compares with other cultures they are familiar with.
- 'To leave your native land is a terrible thing,' says Najaf. How does this comment relate itself to Najaf's earlier comment in Chapter 19: 'Can I ever feel the truth about myself in Australia?'

Chapter 21: Home

Najaf's Temporary Residence Visa is finally replaced with Permanent Residency Status, meaning that he is free to remain in Australia for as long as he wishes. His joy at having reached the end of his long, anxious wait is tempered by his grief at the death of a beloved friend and fellow Afghani, Ali Sarwari. Najaf's business is flourishing, meanwhile, and he takes delight in learning to use a computer and in the support of his Australian friends.

Discussion points

- Discuss Najaf's reaction to being granted Permanent Residency Status. Compare Najaf's emotional state as outlined on pages 223 and 224 with his observation in Chapter 1 (page 6): 'I know that life is work. I know that a man rolls up his sleeves and labours. I know

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that he must preserve his dreams.’ Can we say that Najaf’s experiences in Australia confirm his earlier observation?

- Compare Najaf’s observation regarding the ‘Canberra Australians’ in this chapter with what he has to say on the same subject in Chapter 1. Has Najaf’s opinion undergone any changes? What consistencies, if any, stand out?

Chapter 22: Journey

Relying on a people-smuggling organisation, Najaf begins his journey of escape from Afghanistan and the Taliban. Ironically, he is told by the people-smugglers to dress in the manner of the Taliban in order to clear the various checkpoints along the way. Once in the Pakistani city of Karachi, Najaf and a number of other Muslims from various countries are flown to Jakarta, in Indonesia. After a week’s wait, the people-smugglers crowd Najaf and his fellow refugees on board an old fishing boat and the boat puts to sea. All of the passengers are horrified at the derelict state of the boat and fear for their lives. But the boat eventually reaches Ashmore Reef in the Timor Sea, to the north of the Australian mainland. An Australian naval vessel picks up the refugees just as their boat is on the point of sinking.

Discussion points

Najaf is suspicious of the Pashtun who has arranged his escape from Afghanistan. What is the basis of the distrust that exists between Pashtuns and Hazara?

- Discuss Najaf’s experience of Indonesian culture (pages 230, 231). What does Najaf realise about the broader world he has entered?
- When Najaf refers to himself and the other refugees as members of a ‘tribe’, what does his comment reveal about the conditions that lead to people bonding together? What common experiences allow the refugees to feel that they belong to one tribe?
- The sight of the fishing boat tied up at the jetty (page 232) fills all the refugees who are meant to climb on board with fear. Discuss the conditions on board the fishing boat. What does the derelict state of the boat suggest about the economic status of the refugees?
- Despite the dangers he faces, Najaf’s experiences on board the fishing boat are not all fearful. What experiences stand in contrast to his anxiety and distress? What do these experiences tell us about Najaf’s personality?

Chapter 23: Impossible Things

Now a Permanent Resident of Australia, Najaf awaits the arrival of his wife and daughter on an aeroplane from Karachi. He reflects on the long journey that has brought him to this day. He thinks of the success of his business, and of the help and support he found in Australia. He is driven out to Melbourne Airport by his friend Colin to meet Hakima and Maria. The joy of the reunion is complete when he embraces his family.

Discussion points

- Discuss Najaf’s reflections on his life in Australia. What has he accomplished in the years since he arrived? What experiences please him most?
- What do Najaf’s reflections of his journey of escape and resettlement reveal about his philosophy of life? How successful has he been in fulfilling his hopes expressed in earlier chapters?

On page 247, Najaf has this to say when talking of the refugee camps in Pakistan: ‘Young men with hearts full of rage walk the refugee camps, hungry to find a cause to kill for and to die for.’ Discuss this observation with reference to the conditions that create refugees. What role does poverty and displacement play in the creation of refugees? Referring to all that has been suggested in this chapter and earlier chapters, discuss the violence in the refugee camps and the possible origins of that violence.