



Readers Guide for *The Swallows of Kabul*

Discussion Questions

What is the book about?

1. In what ways is Kabul, as described in the book, a stable society? In what ways is it unstable? What are the destabilizing influences? Are they enough to change or overthrow it?
2. How does the Taliban keep women in check? How is it similar or different from the ways that they keep men in check?
3. Describe the main characters in terms of their gender, class and religiosity.
4. In obvious ways the burqa makes Afghan women invisible. Discuss other instances in the book where women are “disappeared,” disdained and/or discounted.
5. What qualities do Musarrat and Zunaira share? What are the differences between them? To what extent are these differences attributable to their respective ages, social position, education, and religious beliefs?

What do you think?

6. The main characters pass by each other at various times before the end of the story. What do you think the author was trying to convey with this?
7. Khadra depicts the city of Kabul starkly as a desolate, degraded place. In what ways does the physical environment mirror the inner lives of the characters?
8. Do the descriptions of the marketplace [p. 19] and the services at the mosque [pp. 40-42 and pp. 93-97], for example, reinforce the anxiety and sense of claustrophobia that engulfs the city and its population? In what ways?
9. Why does Mohsen experience "an access of unfathomable joy" [p. 14] when his stone strikes the condemned woman? Is he simply swept away by the fervor of the crowd, or does the incident reflect a deeper need of his own?
10. What does Mohsen hope to gain by revealing his participation in the stoning to Zunaira? Why does he "understand that he should not have confided to his wife what he refuses to admit to himself" [p. 38]? From what you know about Mohsen and the dynamics of his marriage, would it have been possible for him to keep his actions a secret? Why does Zunaira remain silent in the face of Mohsen's appalling confession?

11. Zunaira steadfastly refused to leave her home or wear the burqa that "cancels my face and takes away my identity and turns me into an object" [p. 77]. Why does she give in to Mohsen's insistence on taking a walk? Is she persuaded by his arguments, or does her decision come from the desire to heal the breach between them? How does Khadra build a sense of uneasiness and impending disaster in the description of their outing? What aspects of Mohsen's behavior turn Zunaira against him? Why does the experience of waiting for him [p. 98] affect her so profoundly? What does she learn about herself and her ability to survive the intolerance that defines her world? What is the significance of her decision "never again to remove her burqa" [p. 125]? Is it a sign of defeat or defiance?
12. What do you make of Atiq's seemingly businesslike acceptance of his job and complicity in the deaths of innocent people? Do his circumstances -- including his wife's illness, as well as his increasing misgivings about his position as jailer [p. 18] -- explain his behavior?
13. Initially, we see Musarrat through Atiq's eyes [pp. 26-27]. Do the face-to-face interactions between husband and wife [pp. 53-58] change your impressions of her and of the nature of their marriage? At what point in the novel does Musarrat's character come into her own?

What connections can you make?

14. What purpose does scapegoating serve in society?
15. Are the issues confronting the two couples universal? How has the situation in Kabul increased the harm and hurt in their relationships? Have their marriages been strengthened in any way by their dire circumstances?
16. What light does the novel cast on the differences between devout faith and fanaticism?
17. From the stoning of the adulteress at the beginning of the novel to public executions at the end, *The Swallows of Kabul* presents many images of physical violence. What other kinds of violence does Khadra explore? Can the demeaning treatment of women, the suppression of free expression and movement, and the imposition of extreme religious orthodoxy also be defined as violence?
18. If you were in Atiq's position as a jailer in Kabul, how would this affect your own ethical rules?

Questions adapted from readinggroupguides.com