

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO *HER* DISCUSSION AND ESSAY QUESTIONS

By Tammy Sakato and Florence Lamoureux

1. How would you describe the main character, Mrs. Hamid? Cite examples from the story to support your ideas. Engage the class in a debate about how they perceive Mrs. Hamid, drawing upon cultural differences.

(a) Dedicated to her family, strong, good mother, intelligent, capable, responsible, unselfish, loyal, devoted woman, traditional. She sacrificed her needs to ensure that her children were taken care of; cared for her health because she did not want her children to live with their father's new wife; maintained harmony in the home without her husband; always got up and met her children at the kitchen door; joined a woman's club; behaved in a mature manner when confronted by an uncomfortable situation with the second Mrs. Hamid.

OR

(b) Weak, irrational, dependent, insecure, overly devoted to her husband. She felt pain but chose to put up a facade; she "swallowed her pride with her rice"; wanted to be an "ideal wife" and did not pursue her own interests; worked hard to keep him happy; had five more children with her husband after he had taken a second wife; was more of a mother than a wife to her husband.

2. How would you describe Mr. Hamid, her husband? Cite examples from the story to support your ideas. Engage the class in a debate about how they perceive Mr. Hamid, drawing upon cultural differences.

(a) Selfish, inconsiderate, immature, cruel, ungrateful, weak. He married another woman without telling his first wife; did not consider her feelings, or those of his children, in the matter; embarrassed his wife and children; constantly spoke about his new wife to his first wife; left his first wife to see his second wife whenever he wished; did not spend much time with his children; had five more children with his first wife.

OR

(b) Strong, self-assured, confident, devoted follower of Islam, successful, financially stable, active, interesting. He had a right to take additional wives so long as he could support his families; he made an effort to return to both wives; he wanted his wife to have outside interests but she refused; he supported his children financially and did not spoil them; he was active and involved with different organizations; he spared his first wife's feelings by refusing to list reasons why he married a new wife; promised to care for his children; called her a "proverbial good woman" as a compliment; he was a well-respected high official.

3. Examine the dialogue on pages 2 and 3 between Mr. and Mrs. Hamid. What reasons does he give her for marrying his new wife? How does she react when she hears the news?

The conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Hamid started off with an indignant question, "So you married her?" Her husband's immediate response, "Yes, why not?" suggested that he felt that he could do what he wanted, when he wanted,

without much consideration for anyone else. The conversation resembled a mother trying to reason with her immature egocentric son. Mrs. Hamid was incredulous. She could not believe that she had not fulfilled her husband's needs. There was a layer of sarcasm from the husband when he stated, "Are you sure of that?" which placed responsibility on his wife rather than himself. He sounded ungrateful and selfish since he was only concerned with his happiness and satisfaction. The "blame" shifted to his wife when he implied that she used to be an "involved and interesting woman." His reasons centered on the fact that their failed marriage was the result of her self-righteousness and lack of outside interest. His dissatisfaction was reason enough to take another wife despite the fact that Mrs. Hamid had been the "proverbial good woman." Her desire to understand why her husband would hurt her and their children motivated her to push the issue. She felt that an injustice had occurred at the hands of her husband, but soon accepted his decision without much of an argument. When he asked, "Do you accept the fact that I go to her?" she immediately responded with a bowed head and the statement, "Do as you please, and I will remain an ideal wife." She basically resigned herself to the fact that she had no choice but to share her husband.

4. How did their children feel about their father taking another wife? How do you think you would feel?

They had five children prior to him taking a second wife, and had five more sons afterward. Johan, their eldest son, was "terribly embarrassed," making up excuses for his absent father. He even lied on a couple of occasions because it was so painful. The sentence, "The children remained by the door," conjured up an image of confusion and sadness when their father left. Their "sober vigil" implied that they longed for their father, and kept watch in hopes that he would soon return.

5. Mrs. Hamid chose not to leave her husband despite his actions. What led her to make this decision?

Mrs. Hamid believed that her husband had the right to practice polygamy, and this was a test of her tolerance for this practice. She stated, "I devoutly believed that as a woman I was destined to accept and to protect. Had I not believed that, and also considered the fate of my children, I would merely have asked for a divorce and left him." She felt that as a woman and mother, she had an obligation to care for both her husband and family. She sacrificed her own interests and suppressed her feelings to "maintain this charade." Islam permeates Indonesian culture and society, and a devout Muslim adheres to its guidelines. Since polygamy is allowed for Muslim males, Mr. Hamid was not breaking any law, and in fact had every right to marry another person without consent or permission from his wife.

6. Discuss the issue of gender equity in this story. Who showed the most responsibility? Who had more influence and power in the relationship?

Muslim society is essentially male-oriented, with distinct rules for males and females. The very concept of "gender equity" in this story contradicts the message conveyed through the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Hamid. One could argue that both parents displayed responsibility for caring for their children, with

Mr. Hamid providing the financial support and Mrs. Hamid taking care of the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Others may perceive Mrs. Hamid as being the most responsible because she maintained the household independently, got up with her children every morning, had home-cooked meals ready, and refused to show her frustrations. She put her needs and feelings aside for the sake of her children. She kept herself healthy because she was concerned about the welfare of her children, and did not want her husband's second wife to care for them. The individual with more influence and power in the relationship, however, was Mr. Hamid. He was able to keep his first wife and his family, and without consulting them, marry a second woman. Although his first wife protested and disapproved, Mr. Hamid made no apologies for his actions, and did not concern himself with how others felt about his decision. He was in control of his actions, yet was able to transfer responsibility of their failed marriage to his wife.

7. Polygamy is legal for Muslim (Moslem) males in Indonesian society, but not for females. Give your opinion on this issue.

Answers will vary. Additional library or Internet research may be helpful in understanding the Islamic religion. However, this question gives students an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding the issue of polygamy, and the fairness of having the practice only be for males. Students may also wish to discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of polygamy for all parties involved—husbands, wives and children.

8. Analyze the meeting between the two wives at the convention. What did the applause mean to the first Mrs. Hamid?

Both wives were active in women's clubs, and both women assumed leadership roles. Their meeting at the convention in the second Mrs. Hamid's city led to an interesting turn of events. When both wives approached the podium to speak as the elected chairperson, there was confusion since no distinction was made as to who would assume the leadership role for this occasion. However, both women were graceful and poised as they returned to their seats. The second Mrs. Hamid's gesture and subtle invitation for the first wife to take the rostrum was significant because it demonstrated that she was willing to give up the power position to her. In handing over control of the meeting to the first Mrs. Hamid, she was perhaps showing the audience that she knew and understood her own place, not only in the professional circuit, but also in the personal arena as well. The applause from the audience was important to the first Mrs. Hamid because it was as if they felt her humiliation and pain, recognized her endurance, and validated her suffering for the sole purpose of saving her family. The fact that it was the second Mrs. Hamid who was kind enough to honor and respect her was powerful. When the first Mrs. Hamid thinks to herself ". . . now I was being vindicated by the very one who had been the cause of my misery," she no longer feels hostility toward "her," the other woman.

9. What were some of the Indonesian cultural values and beliefs expressed in this story?

The value of "saving face" was salient throughout the story. The first Mrs. Hamid persevered in the face of personal humiliation in order to keep her family stable and together.

She did not let her children see her as "weak," and maintained the image of being an "ideal" woman. Mr. Hamid also protected his image by maintaining two wives and his ten children. He was able to appear as a successful, strong Muslim male figure because his devoted and "proverbial" wife accepted the situation and continued to be the "ideal" wife. He had several sons to carry on the family name, another important aspect of Indonesian culture. Even their children attempted to perceive their family as "normal and intact" by making up excuses and lies to avoid the shame and embarrassment they felt. The second Mrs. Hamid helped protect the first Mrs. Hamid's feelings by giving the podium to her. Respect is given to people of authority and prestige in this society. The first Mrs. Hamid was appointed to the office of vice-chairperson not because she was active, but because her husband was a high official, occupying an important position. In Indonesian society it is not uncommon for the differences between men and women in terms of responsibility to be striking. Most Indonesians understand this and accept it. Men have more leeway to do as they please, so long as their financial obligations to their families are met. Women, however, are still the primary caretakers of households and children. In the story, the first Mrs. Hamid believed that a woman was destined to "accept and to protect." She translated this into tolerating her husband's actions, showing a strong commitment to her family.

10. Have two students improvise a dramatic presentation; first as it takes place in the story, and then as they think it might play out in American society.

11. Rewrite the ending of the story in a creative way.

A Related Activity

Check the two Indonesian newspaper Web sites below and report on an article you find that pertains to Islam. Use the newspaper's archival sources if necessary. Consult newspapers from other Muslim countries for articles on Islam as well. For a selection of international newspaper Web sites, go to: <http://www.zafo.com/news/asia.html>.

Indonesian Newspapers, English versions:

1. Kompas at <http://www.kompas.com/9807/07/ENGLISH/>
2. The Jakarta Post at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/headlines.asp>

Suggested Internet sources for educational materials

on Indonesia:

1. University of Hawaii, Center for Southeast Asian Studies: <http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/outreach.html>
2. Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program: <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/SoutheastAsia/outreach/EdResources.html>
3. Classroom Teacher, Avi Black: <http://members.tripod.com/kebyar/indonesia.htm>
4. U.S. State Department, Country Background Notes: http://www.state.gov/www/background_notes/indonesia_0010_bgn.html ■

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