

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind

by

Suzanne Fisher Staples

Book Information

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When eleven-year-old Shabanu is pledged in marriage to an older man whose money will bring prestige to the family, she must either accept the customary decision or risk the consequences of defying her father's wishes.

Award: ALA Best Book for Young Adults; Horn Book Fanfare; Newbery Honor

Topics: Countries/Regions, Pakistan; Family Life, Marriage; Family Life, Misc./Other; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

Main Characters

Bibi Lal Hamir and Murad's widowed mother

Dalil Abassi (Dadi) Shabanu and Phulan's father, a camel tender, who seeks good marriages for his daughters

Fatima Sharma's unmarried sixteen-year-old daughter

Grandfather Shabanu's grandfather, who fought as a young man for the Nawab of Bahawalpur; he asks to be buried in the nawab fort

Hamir a hot-headed and impulsive young male cousin to whom Phulan is promised in marriage

Kulsum Bibi Lal's widowed daughter-in-law

Mama Shabanu and Phulan's mother, a devout Muslim who upholds the traditions and rituals of the faith and passes them on to her daughters

Murad Hamir's younger brother, to whom Shabanu is promised in marriage and who, after unexpected circumstances arise, Phulan marries

Nawab of Bahawalpur the ruler of the old kingdom of Bahawalpur, which is now part of modern-day Pakistan

Nazir Mohammad the crude and greedy landlord of Mehrabpur, the village in which Bibi Lal and her sons live

Phulan Shabanu's thirteen-year-old sister, whose dowry is being prepared for her upcoming wedding

Rahim Nazir Mohammad's older brother, who promises protection to Phulan and Murad; he pays a bride price to have Shabanu for his fourth wife

Sakina Bibi Lal's daughter

Shabanu the main character of the story, a willful and determined eleven-year-old girl who challenges the traditions of her faith

Shahzada a kind guard at the Derawar fort who aids Dadi and Shabanu

Sharma Mama's female cousin who is an anomaly in the desert society because she left her husband and lives independently; she is respected by Dadi

Sher Dil the Abassis' puppy

Spin Gul an officer in the Desert Rangers

Tipu, Guluband, Mithoo, Xhush Dil camels in the Abassi herd

Wardak a leader of the Afghan rebels who offers to purchase Shabanu's treasured camel

Vocabulary

anemic suffering from a deficiency in the oxygen-carrying component in blood, making an individual appear pale and weak

chadr a long cloth worn by women as a head covering

dowry the money or property given by a bride's family to the groom at marriage

feint a deceptive action intended to throw another off

fez a man's felt hat in the shape of a flat-topped cone

gypsies nomadic people of Northern-Indian origin

Synopsis

The Cholistan Desert in northeastern Pakistan has been experiencing a drought for two years. The Abassi family members are nomadic camel herders and devout Muslims who live on the dunes of this desert. The household is preparing a dowry for their

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oldest daughter, Phulan, who is thirteen and betrothed to her cousin, Hamir. A welcome rain fills the toba, or watering hole, and allows the Abassi family to stay in their desert huts until they journey to the west during Ramadan, the sacred month of fasting, to prepare for Phulan's wedding during the monsoon season. Phulan's younger sister, Shabanu, nearly twelve, is promised to marry Murad, Hamir's brother, the following year when she comes of age. Auntie, who lives with her sons and travels with the Abassis, complains about the dowry preparations and Mama and Dadi's lack of sons to provide and care for them in their old age.

Shabanu loves her desert existence. She is an intelligent and able helper with the camels. When it is time for the Sibi Fair, only Shabanu is allowed to journey with Dadi, as she has not reached puberty and is still considered a child. Their purpose in going is to sell their camels for a good price so that they will have enough money for Phulan and Shabanu's dowries and weddings. Shabanu becomes distraught when Dadi sells the family's beloved camel, Guluband. Although she comes to see the reason for the sale, she is left with an aching heart. On their way home they stop to finish shopping for Phulan's wedding at Rahimyar Khan, where a generous old man gives Shabanu a shawl for Phulan's dowry and a priceless wool shawl for her.

Soon after their return to the desert, the women take a pilgrimage to Channan Pir, where they will pray for sons. There they meet Mama's cousin Sharma, who left her abusive husband and now lives independently with her daughter. She reassures Shabanu that there are good men in the world and not to be afraid of her future marriage.

The family's hopes of staying near the toba disappear after a desert sandstorm completely covers it with sand. Grandfather weathered the storm outside but is dying. He wishes to be buried with his fellow soldiers who fought in the camel corps for the nawab. They journey towards the old nawab fort in Derawar, where Grandfather dies outside the city. They are not allowed to bury him at the fort, so they bury him outside the city's limits.

They stay camped near Derawar, since there is water for their camels. When it is time to prepare for the wedding, they move to Mehrabpur, the home of Hamir.

A sudden twist of events changes all their plans. When the family arrives in Mehrabpur, Dadi orders Shabanu never to be alone, for the greedy and cruel landlord of the area, Nazir Mohammad, is in the village. Shabanu and Phulan become momentarily separated when the landlord and his hunting party threaten to award Phulan to the man who shoots the most quail. Shabanu and Phulan barely escape and all the women flee back into the desert while Dadi tries to warn Hamir's family of the impending threat, since Nazir will not take the indignity lightly.

A skirmish follows, and Hamir is killed. A deal is negotiated with Nazir's older brother, Rahim, a politician who does not want his reputation tarnished, to ensure the safety of Hamir's family and land from future vengeance from Nazir. After Hamir is buried, Bibi Lal, who is Murad and Hamir's mother, and Mama along with other women relatives, meet to decide the fate of their children. It is announced that Phulan will now marry Murad, and Shabanu will marry Rahim, who generously provided protection for them.

Shabanu protests when she learns of this, since Rahim is at least forty years older than she. When Mama's cousin Sharma arrives to help with Phulan's wedding, she reassures Shabanu and promises to teach her things to make her Rahim's favorite over his three other wives. She also tells her she will always have a place with her if she chooses not to accept the path her parents have chosen for her. She tells both Phulan and Shabanu about their value as women and advises them to keep their precious memories in their hearts.

The wedding ceremony proceeds between Phulan and Murad. When Shabanu returns to the desert with her parents, she is continually troubled by her approaching marriage. She tries to hide the fact from her mother that she is now menstruating. Convinced she will become a slave to Rahim's other

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wives, she decides one night to flee to Sharma. Disguised as a boy, she steals away from her home, but Mithoo, the camel she saved at birth, follows her and breaks his leg in a foxhole. Faced with a difficult choice, she resigns herself to stay with Mithoo, even though Dadi will track her down and beat her. Dadi does catch up with her and beats her for her disobedience, though he cries while he does so. Shabanu knows now she will marry Rahim, but will follow Sharma's advice and keep her secrets locked in her heart.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Shabanu wonder if her parents are happy and if they regret not having any sons?

Since Muslim girls are raised knowing they will leave their childhood homes and make their homes with their husbands, Shabanu realizes that her parents will be alone in their old age. Sons are expected to provide for their parents, and Shabanu wonders if they feel short-changed because they have two daughters. Girls are also very expensive, requiring an expensive wedding as well as a dowry. If Mama and Dadi feel that way, they do not share it with the girls; instead they seem happy with their lot and are proud of their daughters.

Literary Analysis

The names of some characters carry special meaning. How do the characters reflect their names?

Phulan, meaning flower, is described by Shabanu as graceful and beautiful. Shabanu means princess, and Shabanu has the strength and will to act like and be treated like a princess. She carries herself so that people take notice, such as the old man who gives her the shatoosh and Rahim, who offers to marry her and give her the lifestyle of a princess. Shahzada's name reflects his mother's wish that he had been born a king. He acts with authority in his role as guard of the Nawab's estate. Rahim means merciful, and he is good and generous towards Bibi Lal, Murad, Phulan, Shabanu, Dadi, and Mama after Nazir threatened them. Mithoo is as sweet as his name implies, following Shabanu around like a loyal son. Xhush Dil displays his happy heart when he dances as soon as he hears singing. Sher Dil shows his lion heart as he rounds up the camels when ordered.

Inferential Comprehension

Dadi is a complex character. What are some contrasting aspects of his personality?

He is a fierce competitor, angry when disobeyed or questioned, and a shrewd businessman. These behaviors have to do with his male role as provider and protector. He appears to have his family's best interests at heart. He is shrewd with others when he needs to be, which is evident in his interactions with Wardak. He is angered when Shabanu disobeys him, but he knows it is his job to raise an obedient daughter. He tries to reason in tense situations, avoiding violence if possible, such as with Hamir, Nazir Mohammad, and Rahim. Dadi also has a tender side that shows as he tries to provide well for his family. He is generous and gives gifts to Mama and his daughters when he has money. He tries to be patient with Shabanu and her questions and looks out for his daughters' futures.

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Constructing Meaning

What persuades Dadi to agree to a marriage between Rahim and Shabanu?

Most likely it is a combination of factors. He worries over Phulan's future safety, his and Mama's economic future in their old age, and their ability to find another eligible and good husband for Shabanu within a short period of time, as she will soon be ripe for marriage. When Rahim expresses an interest in Shabanu, he probably sees an answer for all his concerns. He knows Phulan will not have to worry about Nazir Mohammad if Shabanu marries his brother. Rahim is willing to pay a bride price for Shabanu, so Dadi and Mama will have fewer concerns about their future. Finally, in Dadi's eyes, Shabanu will have a husband who will love and provide well for her.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Grandfather served in the Nawab of Bahawalpur's forces, and his dying wish is to be buried in the fort with his comrades at Derawar. This region is near the border between Pakistan and India and has a rich but sometimes violent history. Encourage the students to research the history of India and Pakistan and create a time-line of various skirmishes, foreign rule and withdrawals, and religious disagreements. They can then look at the modern-day problems to see if and how they relate to the area's past.

Comparing and Contrasting Phulan and Shabanu grow up quickly. They assume adult responsibilities as soon as they reach puberty. In contrast, many Westernized nations typically allow the five-to-ten years between puberty and adulthood to be a time of relative freedom in which adult responsibilities are not fully assumed. Have the students compare and contrast Shabanu's or Phulan's life with the life of an eleven to thirteen-year-old girl growing up in a Western nation. The students may develop a chart that shows the similarities and differences in various aspects of their lives.

Making Predictions *Shabanu* does not have a "happily ever after" ending. Consider what Shabanu's life will be like in the future. Ask the students to write a sequel to the story, describing the next year of Shabanu's life. They can include the reception from Mama and Auntie that Shabanu receives when Dadi brings her home, preparations for Shabanu's dowry and wedding, Sharma's advice, Shabanu's first months of marriage, and their speculations as to the type of husband Rahim is.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Although many people consider the desert as merely a vast dry area of endless sand, Shabanu sees its beauty and many subtleties. Have the students go back through the book and look for descriptive words and phrases Shabanu uses to describe her surroundings. They can then choose four different examples to illustrate the shifting beauty of the desert environment.