

The Breadwinner

This is an excerpt from *The Breadwinner*, a novel written by Deborah Ellis and published in 2001.

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Tier 2 terms

folds, forbade, usually, often, disrupted, fled

Web Version: <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/the-breadwinner>

“I can read that letter as well as Father can,” Parvana whispered into the folds of her chador.

“Well, almost.”

She didn't dare say those words out loud. The man sitting beside her father would not want to hear her voice. Nor would anyone else in the Kabul market. Parvana was there only to help her father walk to the market and back home again after work. She sat well back on the blanket, her head and most of her face covered by her chador.

She wasn't really supposed to be outside at all. The Taliban had ordered all the girls and women in Afghanistan to stay inside their homes. They even forbade girls to go to school. Parvana had had to leave her sixth grade class, and her sister Nooria was not allowed to go to her high school. Their mother had been kicked out of her job as a writer for a Kabul radio station. For more than a year now, they had all been stuck inside one room, along with five-year-old Maryam and two-year-old Ali.

Parvana did get out for a few hours most days to help her father walk. She was always glad to go outside, even though it meant sitting for hours on a blanket spread over the hard ground of the marketplace. At least it was something to do. She had even got used to holding her tongue and hiding her face.

She was small for her eleven years. As a small girl, she could usually get away with being outside without being questioned.

“I need this girl to help me walk,” her father would tell any Talib who asked, pointing to his leg. He had lost the lower part of his leg when the high school he was teaching in was bombed. His insides had been hurt somehow, too. He was often tired.

“I have no son at home, except for an infant,” he would explain. Parvana would slump down further on the blanket and try to make herself look smaller. She was afraid to look up at the soldiers. She had seen what they did, especially to women, the way they would whip and beat someone they thought should be punished.

Sitting in the marketplace day after day, she had seen a lot. When the Taliban were around, what she wanted most of all was to be invisible.

Now the customer asked her father to read his letter again. “Read it slowly, so that I can remember it for my family.”

Parvana would have liked to get a letter. Mail delivery had recently started again in Afghanistan, after years of being disrupted by war. Many of her friends had fled the country with their families. She thought they were in Pakistan, but she wasn’t sure, so she couldn’t write to them. Her own family had moved so often because of the bombing that her friends no longer knew where she was. “Afghans cover the earth like stars cover the sky,” her father often said.

Her father finished reading the man’s letter a second time. The customer thanked him and paid. “I will look for you when it is time to write a reply.”

Most people in Afghanistan could not read or write. Parvana was one of the lucky ones. Both of her parents had been to university, and they believed in education for everyone, even girls.

Source

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TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

1. Question

A market is a place where people buy or sell things or services. Why was Parvana the only girl in the market? Why is she allowed to come?

2. Question

Based on the story, who do you think the Taliban are? How do you know?

3. Question

How does Parvana feel about the Taliban?

4. Question

Why does the narrator call Parvana “one of the lucky ones”?

5. Question

What can you infer about what Parvana’s father probably does for a living? What details led you to make that inference? Use evidence from the text in your response.

6. Question

What injustice does this excerpt describe? Use evidence from the text in your description.

7. Question

How was Parvana able to spend time outside, unlike other women or girls?

TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Question

A market is a place where people buy or sell things or services. Why was Parvana the only girl in the market? Why is she allowed to come?

Answer

She was the only girl because all girls and women in Afghanistan were ordered to stay in their homes by the Taliban. She is allowed to come because her father needs help walking, and he doesn't have a son old enough to help him.

2. Question

Based on the story, who do you think the Taliban are? How do you know?

Answer

The Taliban seem to be a group of soldiers. According to the story, they give orders like "No women or girls can be outside." There was a war going on in the country. Parvana says she sees soldiers in the marketplace, and she says she sees them hurt "someone they thought should be punished."

3. Question

How does Parvana feel about the Taliban?

Answer

Parvana doesn't like seeing them "whip and beat" people, so she is afraid of them. She doesn't like having to stay inside one room with the rest of her family or the fact that she cannot go to school. Based on these things, it is likely that she does not like them.

4. Question

Why does the narrator call Parvana "one of the lucky ones"?

Answer

She is lucky because her parents believe in everyone—boys and girls—being educated. As a result, she can read and write.

5. Question

What can you infer about what Parvana's father probably does for a living? What details led you to make that inference? Use evidence from the text in your response.

Answer

Parvana's father appears to make money by reading and writing for people who are illiterate. Most Afghans could not read or write. In the excerpt we learn that he goes to the market every day and then we see him being paid to read another man's letter and the man saying he'll be back to have him write a response on his behalf. In addition to being literate, we learn that Parvana's father also received a university education, was a high school teacher and believes in education.

6. Question

What injustice does this excerpt describe? Use evidence from the text in your description.

Answer

The excerpt describes gender inequality and the oppression experienced by women in Afghanistan who are denied the right to an education. Girls were made to leave school and women lost their jobs.

7. Question

How was Parvana able to spend time outside, unlike other women or girls?

Answer

Parvana escorted her dad to the market each day. He needed her help because he had been disabled in war, and he didn't have any sons old enough to help him. She was only 11 and was small for her age, so the Taliban didn't question her or find her suspicious.