

A Curriculum Guide to

Hidden Girl: The True Story of a Modern-Day Child Slave

By Shyima Hall with Lisa Wysocky

About the Book

Eight-year-old Shyima El-Sayed Hassan is living in a poor neighborhood near Alexandria, Egypt, when her parents sell her into slavery to a wealthy Egyptian family to pay off a “debt” owed to them by her older sister Zahra. Shyima, never having attended school, is forced to work day and night, given little clothing and food, and seldom allowed to go out or bathe. Shyima lives in hope of returning to her family; however, when her captors move to the United States and she has minimum phone contact with her family, her hopes diminish and her anger toward her parents increases. Speaking no English and having no education, Shyima is easily controlled by her captors—she is abused, both verbally and physically, and lives in fear that bad things will happen to her and her family if she does not obey. Living a life of fear, confusion, and betrayal, and unable to communicate with the outside world, her future appears grim until an unidentified person becomes suspicious and US government officials begin an investigation. Shyima’s journey from slave to US citizen is one of hope and perseverance.

Prereading Activity

The activities below align with the following Common Core Standards: (SL.9-10.1) (SL.11-12.1) (W.9-10.10) (W.11-12.10)

1. Read the opening paragraph of the book to students and ask them to free write for ten minutes about how they would feel if they were sold into slavery. Have them discuss their reactions either in small groups or with the class as a whole.
2. Ask students to spend ten minutes brainstorming on paper what they know about modern-day slavery. They can write about slavery in the United States and/or slavery in another country. Have them discuss their understandings and identify points that need further clarification.

Discussion Questions

These discussion questions below align with the following Common Core Standards: (CCRA.R.1, 2, 3, 6) (RI.9-12.1, 2) (RL.9-12.1, 2)

1. Shyima is sold into slavery by her parents when she is eight years old. Explain the circumstances around her being sold. Why do her parents sell her? What is meant by the expression “a debt of honor”? How does Shyima react to having to leave her family?

2. Describe Shyima's childhood and family prior to her being separated from them. Was she a happy child? What responsibilities did she have in her family?
3. What emotions does Shyima have about being sold? How do her emotions change as she grows older?
4. What is Shyima's relationship like with her parents and siblings prior to being sold? How does their relationship change and why?
5. Shyima's father comes across as an unlikeable character and her mother as a weak one. However, one can argue that "we know what we know." How does this argument speak to their personalities?
6. How does Shyima's life as a slave in Egypt contrast with her life as a slave in the United States? What accounts for these differences?
7. Shyima has never attended school and isn't allowed to learn English in the United States. How does her inability to communicate in English hold her "hostage"?
8. Shyima lives several years as a slave in the United States before an unidentified person is suspicious and reports the family. How does Shyima respond at first to questions about her identity and why? How does she begin developing trust?
9. Describe Shyima's transition into school. What is difficult for her and why? How does she overcome these challenges?
10. How do Shyima's religious beliefs change throughout the story and why? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
11. Trust is a theme in Shyima's story. How does Shyima begin developing trust? Who makes her feel safe and why?
12. What happens to Shyima's captors? Is their punishment just? How do the courts attempt to compensate Shyima for her years in bondage? What happens to the money?
13. Describe Shyima's relationship with Mark. How does it develop over time? How is he able to gain her confidence?
14. How would Shyima's story be different if it were written from her father's point of view? From her mother's? From Mark's? From her captors?
15. Who is Daniel and how does he influence Shyima? What does their relationship indicate about Shyima's ability to trust people? Compare and contrast Mark and Daniel. What characteristics do they have that make Shyima feel at ease?

16. Shyima calls her captors “The Mom” and “The Dad.” How does she describe them? How does her perceptions of them change by the end of Shyima’s narrative?

17. How does Shyima prepare for US citizenship? Explain how achieving this goal is a milestone. What does it mean for her? Why does Shyima not return to Egypt to her family?

Activities

These activities align with the following Common Core Standards: (W.9-12.2, 3, 4, 6, 7)

1. Have students read an additional story about slavery such as Patricia McCormick’s *Sold* and compare and contrast the life experiences of the central characters. Students may prepare a class presentation comparing and contrasting the life stories and/or write a comparison and contrast essay.

2. Have students research modern-day slavery in the United States. Using resources found in the library and online, have students prepare a group or class presentation showcasing their findings.

3. Have students research the path to citizenship in the United States. What steps do applicants need to take prior to becoming US citizens? What is the time line? What are common obstacles? If possible, invite someone to speak to the class who has gone through the experience.

4. Shyima is saved because an unidentified person notified authorities. Invite an expert in the area of human trafficking and modern-day slavery from child protective services to visit the class to talk about warning signs and steps they should take should they spot a potential situation.

5. Every year in the United States, missing children surface who have been held for a period of time in captivity. Have students identify a case/news story (e.g., Elizabeth Smart) in the media and compare that individual’s experiences with Shyima’s. What similar emotions might they have experienced and why?

6. Using Microsoft Publisher, or a similar publishing software, have students develop a brochure that includes helpful resources and information about missing children. Identify a place to distribute/display the brochures—for example, libraries or recreational or community centers.

7. Have students conduct an I-Search paper (Ken Macrorie) on any theme/topic in the story for which they would like to learn more. For example, they may wish to research any of the following: modern day slavery in the United States, human trafficking in the United States, the path to US citizenship, foster families, abuse, or adoption.

8. Choose a conversation between Shyima and her mother or Shyima and her father and discuss how and why either parent would interpret the conversation differently. Rewrite the scene from either the father's or mother's point of view.

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