Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALANA VALENTINE

Alana Valentine is an Australian playwright, director, and librettist. She graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney, Australia in 1989. Her first play, *Swimming the Globe*, premiered in 1996, and her second, *The Conjurers*, premiered the following year. Valentine also attended the University of Sydney around this time, graduating in 2000 with a graduate degree in museum studies. She has published 13 plays, produced a handful of radio plays, and has received a number of awards, including the Australian Writers Guild Award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The majority of *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* is set in the years following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. The play directly deals with the aftermath of this monumental event, specifically examining how Western culture demonized Islam by lumping together peaceful, law-abiding Muslims and the al Qaeda terrorists who carried out the attacks. To that end, the term "Islamic extremists" worked its way into the media, which many public figures have since criticized, since the phrase risks vilifying Islam itself instead of the small minority of terrorists who use violence to pursue a radical, militant agenda. President George W. Bush tried in 2002 to dissuade Americans from directing anger and prejudice toward Muslim people, saying that the war waged in the aftermath of the attacks was "not against Islam or against faith practiced by the Muslim people," but against "evil." Arguably, though, political messaging surrounding what the U.S. government called the "War on Terror" had already stoked Islamophobic sentiments in the United States and abroad. Of course, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* takes place in Australia, not the United States, but it examines how the discourse and messaging surrounding the terrorist attacks reverberated throughout the world, causing very real problems for ordinary, peaceful people like Shafana and her aunt.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah is technically a response to the Australian playwright Alex Buzo's 1968 play *Norm and Ahmed*. Buzo's play centers around a single encounter between a white Australian man and a Pakistani man at a bus stop one night, mining the tensions and complexities that many non-white migrants have historically faced in Australian society. In fact, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* was specifically commissioned by the literary estate of Alex Buzo, which funded Alana Valentine to write a contemporary response to *Norm and Ahmed*. In terms of more recent plays that cover similar ideas, it makes sense to consider *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* alongside *Disgraced* by the American playwright Ayad Akhtar. Like *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, *Disgraced* considers how the 9/11 terrorist attacks exacerbated Islamophobia in the West. Given that *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* also features two characters living abroad as refugees, it's also reasonable to compare the play to famous works about refugee life, such as Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* or Viet Thanh Nguyen's story collection *The Refugees*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah
- **When Published:** The play premiered on August 6, 2009.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Australia in the years following September 11, 2001
- **Climax:** Calling her aunt's bluff, Shafana suggests that Aunt Sarrinah should help her put the *hijab* on—after all, Sarrinah refuses to admit that she disapproves of the idea.
- **Antagonist:** Islamophobia

EXTRA CREDIT

On the Air. *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* was adapted for the radio shortly after it premiered onstage.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play opens in a science laboratory, where Shafana—a university student—is practicing a presentation about **deep sea** organisms. She speaks about how shrimp and other sea creatures have to constantly make sure not to incinerate themselves in geothermal vents called "black smokers." And yet, despite this constant threat, they thrive.

As Shafana rehearses, Aunt Sarrinah enters and interrupts to make fun of her niece's wording. Aunt Sarrinah has recently completed a PhD in engineering at the same university. She was a top engineer in Afghanistan, but after fleeing to Australia, it was difficult for her to find work without documentation proving her credentials. So, she got another PhD. Now, both Aunt Sarrinah and Shafana need to renew their university IDs, and Aunt Sarrinah wants them to go together because she's proud of her accomplishment. Sarrinah is disappointed when Shafana refuses and suspects there's a reason she won't go. But

Shafana simply says she'll come to her aunt's for dinner, at which point they can talk further.

When Aunt Sarrinah leaves, Shafana has a flashback to her early years in Australia. She and her immediate family left Afghanistan at the same time as Aunt Sarrinah's family, but they first went to India to wait for the Australian government to let them enter. Because of her professional qualifications, Aunt Sarrinah was the first to go to Australia. Shafana also went ahead of her family, so she and Aunt Sarrinah lived together. In Shafana's flashback, she's embarrassed of Aunt Sarrinah's thick accent and broken English, and she insists that Aunt Sarrinah is too good for her factory job. But Aunt Sarrinah says she's not better than her coworkers just because she's more educated.

In the present, Shafana comes for dinner at Aunt Sarrinah's house. She reveals that she didn't accompany her aunt to get new ID cards because she's thinking about starting to wear a hijab and is still deciding whether she wants to wear one in her ID picture. Aunt Sarrinah is shocked, though she does acknowledge that wearing a *hijab* is a choice all Muslim women can make. Shafana has been considering this since she started contemplating her faith after the 2001 **terrorist attacks** on the World Trade Center.

Aunt Sarrinah refuses to explicitly state that she doesn't want Shafana to wear a *hijab*. And yet, it's obvious that this is how she feels, as evidenced by the many concerns she brings up—like how the decision might impact Shafana's job prospects. She also brings up the general state of the world and the animosity people have toward Muslim women. But Shafana is undeterred—if she decides to wear a *hijab*, it will be because she simply feels spiritually moved to do so.

Shafana then runs out to the grocery store to get a dinner ingredient, and while she's gone, Aunt Sarrinah briefly narrates her departure from Afghanistan. She was forced to leave her prestigious engineering job when a bomb dropped on her daughter's school. She then has a flashback to 2002, in which Shafana shows her a school essay she's written about a "contemporary crisis in religion." Shafana wrote about Islam and, as a result, has been revisiting her own faith by reading the Qur'an. This makes her feel overwhelmingly content, but Aunt Sarrinah is skeptical. Shafana's essay tries to show that violent terrorists do not represent Islam, but Aunt Sarrinah insists that this isn't what she has been assigned to write about—Shafana should write another draft that simply summarizes the "discourse" surrounding the issue.

Back in the present, Shafana returns from the grocery store and reveals that she bought a scarf while she was out—it's evident that Shafana really *has* made up her mind about wearing a *hijab*. Realizing this, Aunt Sarrinah brings up how Shafana's life might change if she starts wearing a *hijab*. Ignorant people might harass her in public and treat her as a representative of the entire Islamic faith.

Nevertheless, Shafana still wants to wear a *hijab*. She tells Aunt Sarrinah about the "soft revolution," a group of young Muslims who reject both liberal and extremist approaches to Islam. They want to use Islam to advocate for human rights and see wearing a *hijab* as empowering. Shafana thinks it's possible to fuse Qur'anic ideas with the current cultural climate. But Aunt Sarrinah says there's a difference between faith and "civil society," even though Islam is a "fundamental" part of who Sarrinah is. But then Shafana says that Islam is *all* of who she is. Again, Aunt Sarrinah disapproves—people must leave room in their lives for "reason." She doesn't think religion is the answer to everything, and she fears Shafana's outlook could lead to extremism and fundamentalism.

Shafana tries to get Aunt Sarrinah to say outright that she shouldn't wear a *hijab*. Because Sarrinah refuses, Shafana suggests that her aunt should help her put the *hijab* on right now. Aunt Sarrinah avoids doing so and tells a story about how traumatic it was for her to escape the Taliban. She had to wear a *chador* (a Muslim religious garment covering the head and upper body) to disguise herself as her family traveled through Pakistan. But it was so hot on the crowded bus that she took it off for a moment, and an armed guard yelled at her and kicked her and her family off the bus. It was a terrifying experience.

Before Shafana leaves for the night, Aunt Sarrinah promises to stop by tomorrow before Shafana goes to get her new ID—she wants to see what her niece has decided. Once she's alone, she has a flashback to September 12th, 2001. In the flashback, Shafana bursts into Aunt Sarrinah's house. They frantically talk about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, noting that newscasters keep using the term "Islamic extremists." The more the newscasters talk about what happened, the less they seem to make a distinction between "Islamic extremists" and Muslims in general. To that end, Aunt Sarrinah has already begun to experience Islamophobia at her workplace. She's going to go back to school and get a PhD, even though she already has one—that way, at least she'll be able to teach. Shafana doesn't think this is necessary, but Aunt Sarrinah tells her that everything is different after the terrorist attacks.

In the present, Aunt Sarrinah goes to visit Shafana, who is putting on a *hijab*. Aunt Sarrinah is upset, trying to tell her niece that she can still change her mind, but it's clear that Shafana has made her decision. Aunt Sarrinah makes it clear that she still loves Shafana, and the tension between them lifts. And yet, Aunt Sarrinah says that now they are on different paths—they are "opponents." They can still be close, but there's no changing the fact that Sarrinah disapproves of Shafana's approach to Islam. She kisses Shafana on the forehead and then leaves, at which point Shafana starts practicing her presentation once again, saying that the deep sea is full of many "impossibilities" that have yet to be discovered.

CHARACTERS

Shafana – Shafana is a young Muslim woman living and studying in Australia. She and her family fled Kabul, Afghanistan in 1989, during the Afghan Civil War. Shafana was 14 at the time, and she quickly gained entrance to Australia even though her immediate family members were kept behind in India. For the time being, then, she stayed with her aunt, Sarrinah, who acted as her mother. During this time, Shafana was somewhat embarrassed by Aunt Sarrinah because she had a harder time assimilating into Australian life than Shafana herself did. Shafana was also embarrassed because she thought her aunt was overqualified for her job in a factory. However, as a young woman finishing her university studies, Shafana's views have changed. She no longer sees total assimilation into Australian culture as a good thing—instead, she wants to embrace her Muslim identity. In the aftermath of **the September 11th attacks** on the World Trade Center, she felt compelled to revisit her Islamic faith, largely because so many people around her vilified Muslim people and Islam as a whole. Reading the Qur'an moved Shafana quite profoundly, and now she is considering the idea of wearing a hijab, but she wants her aunt's opinion. All the dramatic tension in *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* revolves around Shafana's decision to devote herself more thoroughly to Islam and the difficult discussions this sparks between her and Aunt Sarrinah, who sees the decision to wear a *hijab* as too devout and potentially regressive for a freethinker like Shafana. And yet, Shafana insists that wearing a *hijab* is empowering, thus challenging her aunt's assumptions about what it means to tie one's sense of self to religion.

Aunt Sarrinah – Aunt Sarrinah is a Muslim woman living in Australia. Like her niece Shafana, she is originally from Kabul, Afghanistan, which she was forced to flee in 1989 because of the Afghan Civil War. When she arrived in Australia, she didn't have access to documents proving her professional qualifications, so she had difficulty finding work. Still, she lived with Shafana and acted as her mother, since Shafana's family hadn't yet gained entrance to Australia. During this time, she spoke with a heavy accent and worked in a factory, even though she'd been a top engineer in Afghanistan. Eventually, Aunt Sarrinah found work as an engineer, but in the aftermath of **the September 11th attacks** on the World Trade Center, she quit her job because her coworkers became Islamophobic. She went back to school to get yet another PhD, this time studying engineering in English so she would be able to teach in Australia. The play takes place just as Sarrinah has earned her PhD. She has fully assimilated into Australian culture, but she hasn't lost touch with her connection to Islam. At the same time, though, she's weary of any kind of all-encompassing devotion to religion, since her experiences have taught her that such mindsets can lead to extremism. For this reason, she has a hard time accepting Shafana's decision to wear a hijab, telling her that religion shouldn't inform every aspect of her life. In the end, Aunt Sarrinah makes it clear that she will love her niece no matter what. But she also says that Shafana has—by wearing a *hijab*—made them "opponents," since Aunt Sarrinah disagrees with the worldview Shafana has embraced by devoting herself so completely to religion.

TERMS

Hijab – A *hijab* is a head covering that many Muslim women wear in public settings.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RELIGIOUS FAITH AND DEVOTION

Shafana & Aunt Sarrinah is a play about the different ways people conceive of their own religious faith. Both Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah are Muslim women, but they have very different ideas about what this identity means. For Aunt Sarrinah, Islam is a "fundamental" part of who she is, but it doesn't inform every aspect of her life. Shafana, on the other hand, embraces a more all-encompassing form of religious devotion, as evidenced by the fact that she tells her aunt that Islam is "all of who" she is. This comment hints at a certain one-upmanship, as if it's important to Shafana that her aunt understand the extent of her religious commitment. To that end, the play dramatizes the tension between Shafana and her aunt by highlighting Aunt Sarrinah's struggle to accept her niece's decision to wear a hijab. What's especially difficult for Aunt Sarrinah about this situation is that she genuinely respects the impulse to wear a *hijab*—after all, she's Muslim, too. It's just that religion for her is "private and cultural," and she sees it as a belief system that she can apply to the rest of her life as she sees fit. Because she approaches religion in this rather pragmatic, utilitarian way, it's hard for her to accept that Shafana wants to make religion the central, defining aspect of her life.

The nature of Shafana and Sarrinah's disagreement is complex and multifaceted, but it essentially boils down to Aunt Sarrinah's worry that complete religious devotion can be dangerous. She thinks this because she still has visceral memories of fleeing Afghani extremists who set forth a violent and fundamentalist approach to Islam during the Afghan Civil War. For her, the idea of total religious devotion is scary, since her experience has taught her that such devout religious beliefs

can convince people to carry out or tacitly condone terrible behavior. And yet, Shafana tries to show her aunt that this is all beside the point; she only wants to wear a *hijab* because she has been spiritually moved to do so. She implies that her aunt is turning the matter into something else by projecting outside considerations onto a really quite simple matter—that is, a matter of personal faith. Of course, the play doesn't side with Shafana or Aunt Sarrinah, instead exploring their contrasting views to illustrate the idea that religious faith and devotion mean different things for everyone.

IDENTITY AND SELF-PRESENTATION

One of the central issues at stake in *Shafana & Aunt Sarrinah* is the relationship between identity and self-presentation. Aunt Sarrinah worries about Shafana's decision to wear a hijab because of the message she fears it will send to other people. Aunt Sarrinah is afraid that ignorant people who are prejudiced against Muslims will see her niece not as an individual human being, but as a representative of the entire Islamic faith—which unfortunately includes the small minority of terrorists who use violence to set forth an extremist, fundamentalist approach to Islam. But such things won't stop Shafana from wearing a *hijab*, since she feels that doing so would be deeply meaningful— the *hijab* would represent something central to her newly developing identity as a religious woman. For her, wearing a *hijab* feels like a very genuine expression of who she is (or, more specifically, who she has become since reconnecting with her Islamic faith). The *hijab* itself is therefore not just a garment, but an embodiment of her identity. "It is for me, not for anyone else," she says, explaining that she wants to wear a *hijab* because it aligns with and reaffirms her sense of self on a very deep level. In other words, the way she presents herself to the world is closely linked to her identity. And though it might disconcert Aunt Sarrinah to see Shafana present herself as a devout Muslim, the fact of the matter is that this is how Shafana sees herself. To not wear a *hijab*, then, would be to deny what she feels is her true identity.

Although Aunt Sarrinah doesn't want Shafana to wear a *hijab*, she doesn't actually stand in the way of her niece's decision. It seems that she understands—on some level, at least—that certain forms of self-presentation are highly personal because they're directly tied to essential elements of a person's identity. In this way, the play shows that while appearances are often superficial and don't accurately represent who people are, certain kinds of self-presentation are especially meaningful because they really can embody and reaffirm central aspects of a person's identity.

MIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

Shafana & Aunt Sarrinah investigates what it's like to migrate to a new country, spotlighting the many complexities of assimilating into a new culture. Both Aunt Sarrinah and Shafana fled Afghanistan during the Afghan Civil War, but they've had different experiences assimilating into Australian culture. Shafana was young at the time, so she quickly learned English and fit in rather easily. Aunt Sarrinah, on the other hand, had a thick accent, struggled to learn English, and was forced to work a low-paying job in a factory (even though she'd been a leading engineer in Afghanistan). Shafana showed very little empathy for her aunt's situation, perhaps because she herself had a comparatively easy time assimilating into Australian life. She even seemed *embarrassed* of Aunt Sarrinah, telling her aunt that she was above factory work. Shafana's unkind and elitist comment suggests that she wanted her family to simply pick up where they left off in Afghanistan, thus hinting at a certain naivety about the specific challenges of her aunt's refugee experience.

However, when Shafana gets older and considers wearing a hijab, she actually disapproves of how much Aunt Sarrinah has managed to assimilate into Australian culture. Shafana's views on assimilation, it seems, have drastically changed, as she now criticizes Aunt Sarrinah for her hesitancy to fully embrace a Muslim identity in a predominantly white society. "Assimilate," Shafana says, mocking Sarrinah's worldview. "Disappear into the masses. Never speak up, never stand up." Shafana wants to express her identity however she sees fit, which—at this point in her life—means wearing a *hijab* despite what other people might think about such a decision. And yet, although her views on assimilation have reversed, it's arguable that her disapproval of Aunt Sarrinah comes from the same place as her earlier frustration regarding Sarrinah's slow assimilation process. In both cases, Shafana fails to recognize the many hardships her aunt has undergone. In the same way that she originally overlooked how difficult it must have been for Sarrinah to leave her country after decades and find success in a new place, she now overlooks how counterintuitive it would be for Aunt Sarrinah to do anything that might threaten the hard work she has put into establishing herself in Australia. Simply put, Shafana has a much different perspective on the experience of assimilation—one that doesn't necessarily account for the fact that such experiences are different for everyone. In this way, the play suggests that forced migration can impact people in many different ways, even when those people share a number of experiences and are otherwise quite close.

JUDGMENT AND PREJUDICE

Shafana & Aunt Sarrinah acknowledges the prejudices many Muslims face in Western societies. More specifically, the play looks at what it's like for Muslim women to move through the world with the constant awareness that everyone around them is somehow judging or assessing them. Aunt Sarrinah has dealt with this ever since migrating to Australia, where she has always felt it necessary to

keep relatively quiet about her religious beliefs. In fact, in the wake of the **terrorist attacks** on the World Trade Center in 2001, she quit her engineering job because her coworkers (mostly white Australian men) kept referring to the terrorists as "your lot." These comments indicate that they had grouped Sarrinah in with the terrorists simply because she's Muslim—an obviously ignorant and bigoted way of thinking. Stories like this underscore the dispiriting challenges that Muslims face in predominantly white and Christian societies, especially when such societies are quick to categorize and villainize them.

Moreover, though, the play suggests that Aunt Sarrinah has internalized some of the prejudices she herself has faced, as evidenced by the difficulty she has accepting Shafana's decision to wear a hijab. On an intellectual level, Aunt Sarrinah knows that wearing a *hijab* is simply an embodiment of a person's religious devotion, but she still has trouble separating the idea of her niece wearing a *hijab* with the kind of religious fanaticism that can lead to violence and terrorism—that is, the kind of fanaticism that many Australians have ignorantly assumed she herself condones simply because she's Muslim. Of course, Sarrinah isn't actually prejudiced against Muslims who wear *hijabs*, but in her efforts to protect her niece from bigotry, she ends up strangely perpetuating the unfair assumptions she herself has had to deal with since moving to Australia. In turn, the play emphasizes how unfortunately easy it is to internalize and unwittingly perpetuate unfounded judgments and prejudices. But the play also implies that Aunt Sarrinah is depressingly correct about the bleak reality of the situation: Shafana will undoubtedly encounter more prejudice and bigotry once she starts wearing a *hijab*.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE 9/11 TERRORIST ATTACKS

Throughout the play, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City—and the aftermath of these events—symbolize people's tendency to form unfounded prejudices in the wake of tragic events. More specifically, the play looks at how non-Muslim and Western cultures vilified Islam as a whole, simply because the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks were affiliated with the religion.

Immediately after the attack, Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah bemoan the fact that newscasters talking about the events make an implicit connection between extremist violence and the entire Islamic faith, such that ordinary Muslims end up having to answer for the heinous actions of a small violent minority. As Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah discuss Shafana's decision to wear a hijab, they frequently reference the Islamophobic attitudes that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11, mentioning the attacks as a representation of just how ignorant many people are when it comes to their ideas about the Islamic faith. In turn, the attacks themselves come to symbolize how dangerous it can be for Muslims to simply go about their everyday lives in societies that discriminate against them.

THE DEEP-SEA ECOSYSTEM

As Shafana practices the school presentation she's going to give about mysterious ecosystems in certain parts of the deep ocean, the ecosystems themselves come to symbolize her optimism about thriving as a Muslim woman in otherwise hostile environments. She talks about certain creatures that live in the immediate vicinity of geothermal vents known as "black smokers," which periodically shoot out extremely hot liquids and gases, thus threatening to incinerate the shrimp and mussels living nearby. And yet, despite this constant threat, mussels and shrimp thrive in this ecosystem. The entire idea of this precarious but ultimately productive ecosystem fascinates Shafana, who clearly sees such circumstances as symbolic of her own life: she knows that Australian society can be hostile toward Muslim women, but she believes that she can wear a hijab and wholeheartedly embrace her Islamic faith in a way that will enable her to survive—and even prosper—in an unlikely environment.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Currency Press edition of *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* published in 2010.

Shafana & Aunt Sarrinah Quotes

❝ You've sussed out most probabilities so you're ahead of the game. Which is canny.

But there always comes a point where you lose it. Where a whole generation lose touch. They start to listen to what looks like the next thing. It sounds like the next thing and it acts like that next thing but it's not the next thing. The truly astonishing thing about what's coming next is that it's nothing like what this generation were like, old or young. It's utterly unfamiliar.

Related Characters: Shafana (speaker), Aunt Sarrinah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Shafana speaks these words in the first few moments of the play, as she rehearses a presentation she has to give for one of her science classes. However, what she says at the beginning of this presentation doesn't seem to have much to do with science—rather, she talks about how unknowable the future is. More specifically, she focuses on how impossible it is for older generations to prepare for the future, even if they think they've been working toward a certain outcome.

Although it might not make much sense at the beginning of the play, this idea later becomes important because it relates to Shafana's critique of her aunt's hesitancy to completely embrace her Islamic faith. Because of her personal history as a refugee who fled extremist fundamentalists, Aunt Sarrinah doesn't think any good can come from devoting oneself wholeheartedly to religion. Shafana, however, thinks that it's possible to apply the core values of Islam to matters in the 21st century without succumbing to fundamentalism or extremism. In other words, she disagrees with Aunt Sarrinah's pessimistic view about religion, and her thoughts in this passage speak to this difference in perspective, as Shafana believes in a future that seems inconceivable to Aunt Sarrinah.

SHAFANA: Just. Just wait till you get your qualifications…accepted.

SARRINAH: My engineering degree.

SHAFANA: Yes.

SARRINAH: Why?

SHAFANA: Well, what are you going to tell the teacher? That you work in a factory now? [*Pause.*] She says, 'Hello Mrs. Obaidullah and what is it you do?', and you say, 'I work packing hardware supplies'?

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In a flashback to shortly after Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah migrated to Australia, Shafana tells her aunt not to come to a parent-teacher night at her school. Aunt Sarrinah has already said that she'd be happy to come, but it's clear that Shafana is embarrassed of her because she hasn't yet assimilated into Australian culture. Unlike Shafana, who—because she's young—has had an easy time fitting in and picking up the language, Aunt Sarrinah continues to struggle with English.

What mostly bothers Shafana, though, is that Aunt Sarrinah doesn't have a prestigious job anymore. She used to be at the very top of her field as an engineer in Afghanistan, but now she works at a factory. Shafana's request that Sarrinah stay home because she doesn't have an impressive job reveals a certain elitism—or, at the very least, a desire to pick up in Australia where her family left off in Afghanistan. But simply continuing like normal after uprooting and becoming a refugee is extremely difficult, and though Shafana herself has had a relatively easy time doing so, what she fails to recognize is that this is not the case for everyone. By highlighting this dynamic, then, the play underlines the many complexities of forced migration.

SHAFANA: I want to put on the *hijab*.

Pause.

SARRINAH: *Hijab* is an Arabic word. Meaning partition. We are not Arabs. We are Persians.

SHAFANA: What do you think?

SARRINAH: This is an option for all Muslim women. Down the trail.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When Shafana tells Aunt Sarrinah that she wants to start wearing a *hijab*, Aunt Sarrinah is very obviously taken aback. She doesn't respond right away, instead pausing to collect her thoughts. But when she *does* say something, it's not very indicative of what, exactly, she thinks of Shafana's idea. In fact, her response is rather avoidant, as she latches onto the fact that *hijab* is an Arabic word. And yet, while she doesn't actively voice her disapproval, it's evident that she doesn't want her niece to start wearing a *hijab*—after all, why else would she point out that *hijab* is an Arabic word and that she and Shafana are Persian? She doesn't come right out and say it, but she's clearly trying to frame this as a potential reason for Shafana to *not* wear a *hijab*, even though it's quite common for Muslim women from Afghanistan (like Shafana

and Sarrinah) to wear them.

In keeping with Sarrinah's reluctance to actually voice her opinion, she avoids the question when Shafana goes out of her way to ask what she thinks. Instead of saying what she thinks, she simply says that wearing a *hijab* is "an option for all Muslim women." This is, of course, yet another way of sidestepping the question, but Sarrinah's avoidance is more complex than it might seem. It's true that she doesn't want Shafana to wear a *hijab*, but it's also true that she knows the decision to wear a *hijab* is deeply personal. In turn, her (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to avoid the question is partially an attempt to give Shafana the space she needs to make her own decision. In other words, Aunt Sarrinah respects Shafana's right to choose for herself what she wants to do—even if she dislikes the outcome.

SHAFANA: Mum said that she had been contemplating on it for the past five years but had never taken the step to do it. Dad asked me if I was sure of what I was doing. Had I thought about all the consequences, all the things that are going on around the world, all the employment considerations.

SARRINAH: But if you really feel it in your heart these are not reasons not to do it.

SHAFANA: That's right.

SARRINAH: And is that how you feel?

SHAFANA: I want to make real the change that has happened to me, that God really is there and I believe that.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

As Aunt Sarrinah tries to subtly outline the reasons she thinks Shafana shouldn't start wearing a *hijab*, she asks what Shafana's parents said about the matter. Shafana reveals that her own mother has considered wearing a *hijab* herself, so it's obvious that Aunt Sarrinah won't be able to enlist her to dissuade Shafana. Her father, however, seems somewhat concerned about the prejudice his daughter might face if she starts wearing a *hijab*. Because there's so much Islamophobia in the world (especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks), he's concerned that wearing a *hijab* will attract negative attention to his daughter and place unfair limitations on her prospects in the professional world.

Interestingly enough, though, Aunt Sarrinah doesn't reinforce what Shafana's father said about the potential negative "consequences" of wearing a *hijab*. To the contrary, she says that her father's concerns aren't "reasons not to do it" if she genuinely feels "in [her] heart" that she should wear a *hijab*. This is somewhat unexpected, since it's obvious that Aunt Sarrinah doesn't want Shafana to go through with her idea. However, her response once again illustrates her belief that deciding whether or not to wear a *hijab* is a very meaningful and deeply personal thing. Regardless of what Aunt Sarrinah thinks, she knows that Shafana should base her decision on how she herself feels—a perspective that underscores the respect Sarrinah ultimately has for the process of deciding to wear a *hijab*, even if she herself doesn't want to wear one.

SHAFANA: Yes, but I went to the primary sources.

SARRINAH: You are reading the Qur'an?

SHAFANA: I am reading specific explicit verses of mercies, insight, knowledge and understanding. The scope and the breadth and the depth of Islam is overwhelming, so much connecting to me, and it's like answering one of the most profound questions that I have been asking all this time. Aunt, all at one go it just made me literally ecstatic.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place during a flashback, in which Shafana shows her aunt an essay she has written for school. The assignment is to write about a "contemporary crisis in religion," and Shafana has chosen to look at Islam. Aunt Sarrinah is skeptical of her choice, thinking that her niece doesn't have to cover the Islamic faith just because she herself is Muslim. Shafana, however, explains that the assignment has encouraged her to take a deeper dive into her own religion, inspiring her to go back and read the Qur'an. In doing so, she appears to have experienced something of a religious awakening. Of course, she was religious before this assignment, but reading the Qur'an has reinvigorated and strengthened her religious faith. It's

notable that she latches on to verses that highlight the importance of "understanding," since she later insists that the Islamic faith can be applied to humanitarian causes—in other words, it's clear that she sees the Qur'an as a text that advances universally positive ideals that society would do well to adopt.

SHAFANA: But I do not believe it is a holy war.

SARRINAH: Don't get into that.

SHAFANA: But I don't. This killing people, this one human being doing such things to another.

SARRINAH: Be careful.

SHAFANA: This is not Islam.

SARRINAH: Don't open it up.

[...]

SHAFANA: But I read it myself. Specific verses of mercies, insight, compassion, kindness.

SARRINAH: But that is not what your assignment is asking of you. It is asking you to analyse the crisis, analyse the discourse around it, compare and contrast various points of view, summarise, and provide a lucid overview.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Talking about the essay she has written for school, Shafana brings up the unfortunate fact that many people have come to unfairly associate the Islamic faith with terrorism. She tells her aunt that, though she is increasingly interested in exploring a more devout and serious commitment to Islam, she doesn't believe that the small minority of Muslim terrorists are justified in their violent ways. In fact, she doesn't even think that such violence has anything to do with Islam, which—in her view—celebrates "compassion" and "kindness," not violence and terror.

Although Aunt Sarrinah undoubtedly agrees that Islam (which is *her* religion, too) shouldn't be used as a justification for violence, she tells Shafana to drop the matter completely. Her unwillingness to even discuss such things is a good illustration of how weary she is of the vitriolic debate surrounding the Islamic religion in the post-9/11 world, since so many non-Muslims advance the prejudiced and ignorant idea that there's no distinction between extremist terrorists and everyday Muslims like herself. In keeping with this mindset, she tells Shafana to rewrite her essay in a more neutral tone, most likely fearing that Shafana's passion about Islam could make her vulnerable to discrimination.

SHAFANA: I am not thinking of it for any of those reasons. All you have mentioned is about consequences. I am not motivated by any of that.

SARRINAH: No?

SHAFANA: No. Do you want to hear? Do you want to hear me when I say that I want to put on the scarf because this is who I am and I feel this is what I want to do? It is for me, not for anyone else. One night I was reading the Qur'an and it just occurred to me, I don't even recall what passage or where, and it just occurred to me, 'Why am I not wearing the scarf, what is stopping me?'

Related Characters: Aunt Sarrinah, Shafana (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24-5

Explanation and Analysis

Although Aunt Sarrinah doesn't immediately voice her concerns in a straightforward way, she provides a number of arguments against the idea of Shafana starting to wear a *hijab*. Shafana, however, doesn't care about the potential "consequences" of wearing a *hijab*. Her aunt, she implies, can talk for as long as she wants about the ways in which Shafana's life could become more complicated as a result of wearing a *hijab*, but none of these factors have anything to do with her decision. This is because her decision is primarily rooted in how she conceives of her own identity—she "feel[s] this is what [she] want[s] to do," and there's not much more to it than that. In other words, wearing a *hijab* would help her feel more like herself, since it would reflect her newfound relationship to religion. And since this relationship feels fundamental to who she is as a person, wearing a *hijab* would simply be a way for her to more thoroughly embody the person she feels she has become.

SHAFANA: Have you heard of the soft revolution?

SARRINAH: No. Or… it's… is it?

SHAFANA: It's young Muslims who reject both extremists and liberals. They… fight… for human rights… for change to the Hadith… There is a project. It could be the most intellectually active period for Islam since the height of scholarship in the Middle ages.

SARRINAH: And you want to be part of it?

SHAFANA: I don't know. But for them, for some, the veil is a mask in the power struggle against the dictatorship of men.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

At one point while talking to Aunt Sarrinah about her decision to start wearing a *hijab*, Shafana brings up the "soft revolution"—a term that refers to a group of young Muslims who apply Islamic ideas and the values espoused in the Qur'an to contemporary life without indulging in the kind of extremist fundamentalism that certain factions of Islam have embraced. In other words, the "soft revolution" advances a religious worldview but also sets forth a humanitarian agenda, effectively trying to use the best parts of religion (Islam, in this case) to benefit the world. By outlining this idea to Aunt Sarrinah, Shafana tries to show her aunt that serious devotion to religion doesn't always have to end in violence, extremism, and fundamentalism—which, to be fair, has been Aunt Sarrinah's experience thus far in life. Moreover, Shafana references the "soft revolution" as a way of suggesting that some Muslim women see the *hijab* not as a garment that symbolizes submission (as Sarrinah seems to feel), but as something that can help women subvert misogynistic power dynamics.

SARRINAH: You think you can synthesise Qur'anic values with the twenty-first century?

SHAFANA: Don't you?

Pause.

SARRINAH: You want to participate in a faith that judges others by the rules it fashions.

SHAFANA: What?

SARRINAH: The rules. The outward cladding of piety.

SHAFANA: No.

SARRINAH: Yes. You want to judge my faith.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

After Shafana tells Aunt Sarrinah about the idea of the "soft revolution," her aunt skeptically asks if she thinks she can "synthesise Qur'anic values with the twenty-first century." In other words, she wants to know if Shafana thinks the contents of the Qur'an can be applied to contemporary life. The mere fact that she asks this question suggests that Aunt Sarrinah herself doesn't think the Qur'an can be used to navigate life in the 21st century. This viewpoint most likely comes from her experience with extremists before fleeing Afghanistan, since the groups that made her home country dangerous to live in were fundamentalists, meaning that they adhered to literal interpretations of the Qur'an—a text that was written more than a thousand years ago.

Of course, Shafana doesn't believe that the Qur'an should be applied *literally* to contemporary issues, but she is perhaps less skeptical about turning to the values it expresses than her aunt is. But because Aunt Sarrinah is a Muslim, too, she has trouble outwardly admitting that she doesn't think the Qur'an can be applied to modern times, which is perhaps why she lashes out at Shafana by suddenly accusing her of judging her faith, since this is a good way of avoiding the question about whether or not she thinks the Qur'an still pertains to issues in the 21st century.

SARRINAH: My faith is between me and God. The Qur'an speaks directly to me, Sarrinah, today.

SHAFANA: Of course.

SARRINAH: It is a fundamental part of who I am.

SHAFANA: It is all of who I am.

SARRINAH: No. There is faith and there is reason. There is religion and there is civil society. There is belief and there is the law.

SHAFANA: But your faith touches every part of your life.

SARRINAH: No. My faith is private and cultural. But it is not the answer to all the freedoms we have struggled for.

SHAFANA: But how can you say that?

SARRINIAH: Because I have seen what your brand of religion can do. I have witnessed what your brand of fanaticism can destroy.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

As Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah continue discuss the idea of wearing a *hijab*, Aunt Sarrinah tries to defend her own commitment to Islam. The fact that she goes out of her way to do this suggests that she feels oddly threatened by her niece's desire to wear a *hijab*, perhaps because she feels as if it highlights her own unwillingness to make this kind of commitment. For her, religious faith isn't something that has to be expressed in an external sense. Instead, she views religion as "private and cultural," but this doesn't necessarily detract from her sense that the Qur'an "speaks directly" to her.

In a way, it's funny that she gets so defensive and goes on at length about how her religious beliefs are highly personal and private—after all, her defensiveness is based on the assumption that Shafana is judging her. And yet, Shafana *also* sees her faith as a deeply personal matter; she wants to wear a *hijab* for her *own* reasons, which have nothing to do with Aunt Sarrinah. As such, she and Aunt Sarrinah are on the same page: religious beliefs are personal. Ironically, though, Aunt Sarrinah fails to grasp that her niece's decision has nothing to do with her, thus overlooking the very point that she herself tries to make about religion being a personal matter.

SHAFANA: Your solution is just to hide? Fade into the background.

SARRINAH: That's not what I'm saying.

SHAFANA: Assimilate. Disappear into the masses. Never speak up, never stand up. Well, maybe if you'd spoken up in Afghanistan the country wouldn't be in the mess it is in now.

Related Characters: Shafana, Aunt Sarrinah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

For the most part, Shafana remains even-tempered and calm in her discussion about *hijabs* with her aunt, even as Aunt Sarrinah tends to become combative. In this moment, though, Shafana challenges Aunt Sarrinah by suggesting that she's too worried about what other people will think about her. Aunt Sarrinah has just suggested that Shafana's life will become much harder—and potentially more dangerous—if she starts wearing a *hijab*, outlining the many scenarios in which her niece might face discrimination in everyday life. Instead of viewing this as a reason to refrain from wearing a *hijab*, though, Shafana criticizes her aunt's fearful attitude, insisting that letting these considerations interfere with an important religious decision is cowardly. She doesn't want to "disappear into the masses," she wants to be herself.

Shafana even suggests that Afghanistan might not have been overtaken by extremists and fundamentalists if people like Aunt Sarrinah had stood up against such things. This, however, fails to take into account the many complexities of the situation in Afghanistan, which included foreign meddling from both the Soviet Union and the United States. Her comment also undermines the difficulty Aunt Sarrinah had migrating to an entirely new country, where she had to work hard to fit in and find success. Now that she has finally found stability in Australia, it feels counterintuitive to do anything that might attract attention to her as an outsider.

In a new country your religion becomes the main focus of how you are being seen, we all go a bit deeper into who we are and where we belong. The society we are living in, we are thinking about how we are going to protect our children, we want it to be in a direction that they are not going to be hurt, not going to be victimised.

Related Characters: Aunt Sarrinah (speaker), Shafana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

When Shafana leaves Aunt Sarrinah's house after dinner, Aunt Sarrinah has a brief monologue in which she talks about the relationship between migration and religion. In particular, she concentrates on what it's like to be a Muslim refugee in a predominantly non-Muslim culture, saying that "religion becomes the main focus" of how people perceive refugees and migrants. With this in mind, she and the other people in her generation are sensitive to how they're "going to protect [their] children" from Islamophobia. This, it seems, is why she has such a hard time accepting Shafana's desire to wear a *hijab*, clearly fearing that any outward representation of Shafana's devotion to Islam will make her a target for Islamophobic bigots. Shafana, for her part, is willing to take this risk, viewing the act of wearing a *hijab* as a personal choice that shouldn't be impacted by outside considerations. But Aunt Sarrinah wants her niece and children to grow "in a direction that they are not going to be hurt" or "victimised," which is why she's weary of anything that might attract negative attention to her niece.

SARRINAH: You'll see me. I'll see you. But we won't be able to… see each other.

SHAFANA: Why are you being so ruthless?

SARRINAH: We can pretend. We can pretend that this is a disagreement about… oh, I don't know… what TV chef we like best. Let's pretend it's just like that. And say… nothing. But, deeply, I am opposed to the path you advocate. Now.

Related Characters: Aunt Sarrinah, Shafana (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

In Aunt Sarrinah and Shafana's final conversation of the play, they reconcile with each other even as Aunt Sarrinah emphasizes the unavoidable tension their relationship will have now that Shafana has decided to wear a *hijab*. She assures her niece that she still loves her and that they'll continue to see each other, but she also suggests that—on a deeper level—there will always be something standing between them. This idea clearly hurts Shafana, but Aunt Sarrinah presses on, insisting that this is just the unfortunate reality of their situation: there's no changing the fact that Aunt Sarrinah disagrees with Shafana's decision to wear a *hijab*, even if she still loves her niece and wants the best for her. By saying this, she highlights how opposing religious views can make even the closest relationships quite complicated, though she also makes it clear that this is not the end of her and Shafana's relationship. Rather, it's simply the beginning of a slightly more complex and potentially volatile chapter of their bond.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SHAFANA & AUNT SARRINAH

Shafana practices a presentation she has to give for one of her final exams. She's in a laboratory filled with various specimen preserved in jars. Rehearsing her presentation, Shafana opens with a somewhat rambling rumination about trying to foresee whatever might come next in life, suggesting that—though it's difficult to prepare for unknown events—it's possible to wisely anticipate new developments. Except, she says, sometimes an entire generation prepares for a certain future, and then that future isn't the one that comes to pass.

It's not yet clear what, exactly, Shafana's presentation is about. Nonetheless, her opening remarks lay the groundwork for her later conversations with her aunt about the possibility of applying ideas from the Qur'an to contemporary issues in the 21st century. Her comment about an entire generation preparing for a future that never comes to pass spotlights the play's interest in generational gaps and the fact that people from very similar backgrounds can end up seeing the world in much different ways.

Making her way to the actual purpose of her class presentation, Shafana continues to rehearse by saying that scientists should know better than to make unfounded assumptions about the future. Scientists should be aware of "the veil of knowing" and, in turn, give themselves over to a state of uncertainty. Like the future, many things about the world remain unknown. Even certain elements of the physical world, for example, are still mysteries. And this brings Shafana to her main topic: the nearly unfathomable ecosystems that exist in the deep ocean. As Shafana begins to talk about "black smokers" (geothermal vents on the ocean's floor), her Aunt Sarrinah enters and tries to interrupt.

Again, it's not yet clear how, exactly, Shafana's presentation connects to the play's broader considerations. However, what she says about the many unknown aspects of the deep ocean symbolically underscores a point that will become quite important in the play: namely, the general idea that there are many possibilities in life, despite the fact that people tend to think they know everything. In the play's broader examination of religious faith, this idea is important because it urges people to embrace a certain open-mindedness.

Aunt Sarrinah lightly heckles Shafana, interjecting to ask why, exactly, she would care about geothermal vents on the ocean's floor. Determined to finish the rehearsal of her presentation, Shafana presses on. She describes in vivid detail how the vents on the ocean's floor spew extremely hot matter into the cold water, creating a very unique environment for a number of creatures to live in. Aunt Sarrinah continues to poke fun at her niece, but Shafana enthusiastically informs her that the many shrimp living in the vicinity of black smokers have to constantly make sure not to burn themselves to death—and yet, they still thrive in this environment.

As Shafana tries to practice her presentation, her aunt's comments suggest that they are quite close—close enough for Aunt Sarrinah to pester Shafana in playful, caring way. On another note, though, what Shafana says about the precarity of the deep-sea ecosystems surrounding "black smokers" is symbolic of the tricky environment many Muslims find themselves in while living in predominantly white societies like Australia—it's possible to thrive, Shafana thinks, but prejudice nonetheless makes everyday life for Muslims in Western cultures complicated and potentially dangerous (ideas the play will later explore in much more detail).

As Aunt Sarrinah interjects to make fun of her niece, Shafana points out that Sarrinah was the one who told her to use vivid details as a way of making her presentation interesting. Aunt Sarrinah, however, doesn't seem to think the details Shafana has chosen are all that interesting, prompting Shafana to note that her aunt thinks like an engineer. This makes sense, Aunt Sarrinah says, since she *is* an engineer. Shafana knows this, but her aunt notes that now she can go ahead and truly *believe* it, too, since she's about to leave to get her new university ID made. Even though she has had a doctorate in engineering since long before she came to Australia, her credentials will finally be recognized in the country.

It hasn't yet been revealed where Aunt Sarrinah is originally from, but the fact that she hasn't been able to get her professional and academic credentials recognized until now underscores the difficulty of migrating to a new place. From Aunt Sarrinah's triumphant but slightly jaded tone, it's reasonable to conclude that she has had to work extremely hard to get to where she is now, suggesting that she essentially had to start over when she first came to Australia.

Aunt Sarrinah says that until she goes to get her new university ID printed, she will continue to be "Sarrinah Obaidullah, migrant and Afghani nobody." She has been working to finally regain her professional and academic status for the past decade, so this is an important moment for her—getting a new ID card is the last step, since it will reflect the fact that she has a doctorate in engineering. Despite this milestone, though, Shafana doesn't want to accompany her aunt to get the new ID card. She has to focus on her studies, she says, insisting that she must keep working on her presentation. Aunt Sarrinah is clearly disappointed, but Shafana holds her ground.

The play now reveals that Aunt Sarrinah—and, presumably, Shafana—migrated to Australia from Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Sarrinah, this transition took a great toll on her professional life, since she seems to have had trouble getting Australian institutions to recognize her credentials. This situation drove her back to school as a way of working her way back to a professional level she had already attained long ago in Afghanistan. Sarrinah's experiences are a good illustration of just one of the many difficulties related to certain kinds of migration.

Frustrated, Aunt Sarrinah points out that she walked all the way across campus to come get Shafana, which meant trekking through the heat. And she didn't drink any water even though it's so hot, explaining that she's fasting for Ramadan and won't break fast until this evening. Shafana, for her part, says she wants to tell Aunt Sarrinah something, but when Sarrinah asks what, she returns to her initial meditation on the idea that sometimes an entire generation will think things are going to go a certain way when, in reality, they aren't. She then asks if she can come to dinner to talk to her aunt about something.

It's noteworthy that Aunt Sarrinah has been fasting for Ramadan, since this calls attention to the fact that she is religious. That she fasts for Ramadan also suggests that she isn't just culturally Muslim—she genuinely practices the Islamic faith. This will be an important detail as the play continues to unfold, since Aunt Sarrinah's level of religious devotion eventually contrasts Shafana's more all-encompassing commitment to Islam.


As soon as Shafana says she needs to talk to her, Aunt Sarrinah demands to know what's wrong. She interrogates Shafana, asking if she's doing drugs or having sex, but Shafana assures her she isn't. Finally, Shafana gets her aunt to agree to have her over that evening, at which point they'll talk further. But Aunt Sarrinah still can't believe Shafana won't accompany her to get an ID, especially since Shafana needs a new one anyway (though she already called to postpone her appointment until tomorrow). In the end, she disappointedly leaves, accepting that Shafana needs to focus on her studies.

The nature of Aunt Sarrinah and Shafana's close relationship is apparent in this moment, as Aunt Sarrinah treats her niece in a protective, motherly way—she obviously worries about her niece. Her questions about drugs and sex highlight her (and Shafana's) conservative religious values. For Aunt Sarrinah, Shafana doing either of these things would be cause for great alarm, indicating that she and Shafana adhere to Islamic values forbidding premarital sex and drinking alcohol. Once again, then, it's clear that Aunt Sarrinah is quite religious—a detail that will become especially important when Shafana begins to express her more devout religious views later in the play.

When Aunt Sarrinah is gone, Shafana addresses the audience, explaining that she was born in Kabul, Afghanistan but left when she was very young, in 1989. Her family fled the country and went to India, where they lived in New Delhi while waiting to migrate to Australia. Aunt Sarrinah had already been permitted to enter Australia, and then Shafana was the first one in her immediate family to join her. She was 14 at the time.

The play never specifically names the events that caused Shafana and her family to leave Afghanistan. Given that they left in 1989, though, it's reasonable to assume they were fleeing the Afghan Civil War, which began in 1989 after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. During this time, militant factions known as mujahideen *began rebelling against the current Afghani government in an attempt to set forth extremist, fundamentalist Islamic values. This is an important detail, since Aunt Sarrinah's views of religion are very closely tied to her experience fleeing fundamentalism and extremism. She undoubtedly remembers this experience clearly, whereas Shafana was perhaps less aware of the circumstances of her own departure from Afghanistan, since she was still rather young when she migrated to Australia.*

In a flashback, Aunt Sarrinah asks a teenage Shafana if she wants her to "come to school as a pear." Her accent is thick, and the question leads to great confusion between her and Shafana, who is annoyed that her aunt won't say whatever she's trying to say in Dari. But Aunt Sarrinah insists that she has to speak English, especially if she's going to come to school as a "pear." It eventually becomes clear that she's asking if she should attend a parent-teacher night in place of Shafana's parents, since they're still in India. Shafana, however, tells her not to come. She should wait to do such things, Shafana says, until her qualifications as an engineer are "accepted."

In this flashback, it's obvious that Shafana is embarrassed of Aunt Sarrinah for failing to quickly assimilate into Australian culture. Moreover, she seems ashamed of the fact that Aunt Sarrinah's professional qualifications haven't been recognized in Australia, as if this is somehow a negative reflection on her and her family. The fact that she feels this way speaks to the kind of close-minded judgments she must be facing at school. In other words, she seems to have internalized a certain prejudice against migrants (and especially non-white migrants), which is why she now subjects her aunt to such unkindness.

Aunt Sarrinah doesn't understand why Shafana doesn't want her at the parent-teacher night. Eventually, Shafana explains that it's because Sarrinah can't speak English very well and works in a factory. Of course, she actually has an advanced degree in engineering, but Shafana insists that her teachers won't know about that. For all intents and purposes, she insists, her aunt is just like all the other women who work in the factory. When Aunt Sarrinah challenges Shafana about why she has such a negative opinion of the women who work in factories, Shafana speaks disparagingly about how the women are uneducated. Sarrinah, for her part, insists that not everyone has the opportunity to pursue an education, but Shafana argues that this isn't true in Australia. Instead of pressing the point, Sarrinah declares that she will soon get her qualifications recognized in Australia.

Shafana believes that Australia is a land of opportunity, seeing it as a place where anyone can pursue higher education as a way of attaining upward mobility (increased wealth and social status). She uses this viewpoint to justify a rather elitist view of working-class people, whom she seems to think she and her family are better than. Aunt Sarrinah, on the other hand, doesn't judge her fellow coworkers for working in a factory, suggesting that she recognizes how hard it is to attain upward mobility even in societies in which education is widely available. What's most interesting about this moment, though, is that Shafana apparently only wants her aunt to assimilate into certain *social circles. She criticizes Aunt Sarrinah for not seamlessly working her way into Australian culture, but she also expects her to specifically assimilate into an upper- or middle-class social environment.*

Back in the present, Aunt Sarrinah is in her kitchen at home, where she's surrounded by preserved food in jars. As she cooks, she pretends to be the chef Nigella Lawson, waxing poetic about the Afghan dish she's making. When Shafana comes in, she pokes fun at her aunt for pretending to be the "Afghan Nigella Lawson." But Aunt Sarrinah asks her what's so strange about that, and Shafana admits that there's nothing strange about it, though she points out that Sarrinah doesn't really *need* to do such a thing, since she's a "highly qualified mechanical engineer." Aunt Sarrinah responds by saying that she's surprised Shafana knows this about her, since she couldn't take the time to come with her to get an ID that accurately reflects her credentials.

Nigella Lawson is a British chef and television personality. It's interesting that Shafana says that Aunt Sarrinah doesn't need to imitate Nigella Lawson because she is a "highly qualified mechanical engineer," since this suggests that Shafana still has certain elitist ideas about the place her family occupies in Australian society. Now that Aunt Sarrinah has earned Australian credentials that prove her intellectual prowess and professional abilities, Shafana thinks her aunt can simply be herself, as if she thinks Aunt Sarrinah no longer has to prove herself—an indication that she previously thought Sarrinah did *have to prove herself in Australia.*

Shafana asks to see Aunt Sarrinah's new ID card and is surprised when her aunt immediately pulls it off her clothes—she was wearing it while cooking, Shafana realizes, teasing her aunt by asking if she's also going to go to bed with it on. When Aunt Sarrinah humorously evades the question, Shafana says she'll ask her husband if he thinks Sarrinah will wear the ID to bed, but Sarrinah says he's having dinner with Shafana's parents. And her children, Sarrinah says, are with their grandmother, meaning that she and her niece have time to talk.

Aunt Sarrinah makes it clear to Shafana that they will be alone for the evening. The fact that she goes out of her way to stress this detail hints at her eagerness to know what Shafana wants to talk to her about. She can tell, it seems, that there's something on Shafana's mind. Though she herself is in a good mood because her ID card finally reaffirms her sense of self as an accomplished engineer, she can't quite relax until she knows what's bothering Shafana.

Becoming more serious, Shafana tells her aunt that the reason she didn't accompany her to get the ID wasn't just because she needed to work on her presentation. She *did* have more work to do, but there was another reason, too. As Aunt Sarrinah knows, Shafana has been revisiting her relationship with Islam recently. Ever since the **terrorist attack** on the World Trade Center in 2001, she has been more closely investigating the Islamic faith, but it wasn't until she "went back to the source" of her religion that she suddenly felt so connected to it. Aunt Sarrinah becomes apprehensive, though she praises Shafana for reconnecting with her faith. But when Shafana finally says that she's considering starting to wear a hijab, Sarrinah is nearly speechless.

A hijab *is a head covering that some Muslim women wear when they're in public. It has already been made clear that Aunt Sarrinah herself is Muslim, but she doesn't wear a* hijab, *so it makes sense that she would have a strong reaction to Shafana's announcement that she might start wearing one—after all, Aunt Sarrinah herself has surely made a conscious decision* not *to wear a* hijab, *so the idea of her niece (with whom she's quite close) making the opposite decision is somewhat complicated for her.*

After a moment, Aunt Sarrinah points out that hijab is an Arabic word for "partition." But she and Shafana, she says, aren't Arabs—they're Persians. When Shafana pushes her aunt to tell her what she thinks of the idea, though, Aunt Sarrinah merely says that wearing the *hijab* is an "option for all Muslim women." Shafana seems apprehensive, implying to her aunt that she thought she might disapprove of the decision to wear the *hijab*. This prompts Aunt Sarrinah to ask Shafana if she thinks she (Sarrinah) isn't a "good Muslim" because she doesn't wear a *hijab*. Shafana insists that she doesn't think this, but Aunt Sarrinah pushes on by asking if Shafana will think she's a "better" Muslim than her once she starts wearing the *hijab*. Again, Shafana says no.

It's obvious that Aunt Sarrinah disapproves of Shafana's potential decision to wear a hijab, *but she stops short of actually voicing this disapproval. Instead, she makes a few statements that seem neutral but are actually aimed at dissuading Shafana. For instance, she points out that* hijab *is an Arab word, and Shafana is Persian—a remark that tries to undermine Shafana's idea of wearing a* hijab *by implying that it doesn't make sense for her to do so (even though plenty of Persian Muslims wear* hijabs*). When this tactic doesn't work, Aunt Sarrinah speaks a bit more combatively, inadvertently revealing that she sees Shafana's newly enlivened religious devotion as a threat to her own religious identity.*

Shafana claims that she just wanted to discuss the possibility of wearing a hijab, implying that she hasn't fully decided to go through with the decision. But Aunt Sarrinah seems unsure—she thinks her niece simply wants to convince her that it's the right decision. She asks Shafana if she has told her parents yet, and Shafana explains that her mother said that she too has been considering wearing a *hijab* for the last five years, though she has never actually acted on the idea. Her father, on the other hand, wanted to make sure Shafana had thought the matter through carefully, encouraging her to think about global affairs and politics, as well as "employment considerations."

Refraining from outwardly objecting to Shafana's thoughts about wearing a hijab, *Aunt Sarrinah wants to know what Shafana's parents think about the matter, clearly hoping that they—like her—oppose the idea. But this doesn't work, since Shafana's mother has apparently considered wearing a* hijab *herself, suggesting that she wouldn't get in the way of Shafana's decision. And though Shafana's father pointed out the potential hardships of wearing a* hijab *in a world that is hostile toward Muslims, he didn't try to convince her* not *to wear one. Everyone around Shafana, then, stops short of telling her what to do, implying that they see the decision to wear a* hijab *as deeply personal.*

Aunt Sarrinah somberly tells Shafana that none of these considerations—about global affairs or employment opportunities—should stand in her way if she genuinely feels compelled to wear a hijab. But when Shafana agrees with her statement, Aunt Sarrinah quickly turns around and asks if that's *really* how her niece feels. Shafana responds by saying that she wants to "make real the change that has happened" to her. God feels very real and present to her now, and she wants to do something to recognize this shift in her life.

It's apparent that Aunt Sarrinah has conflicting feelings about her niece wearing a hijab. *Because she herself is Muslim, she understands why someone might want to wear one, and she recognizes that the decision to do so is very spiritual. Therefore, she recognizes that nonspiritual or nonreligious arguments* against *wearing a* hijab *are ultimately irrelevant. In keeping with this, Shafana goes on to talk about how her thoughts on the matter came from a place of religious soul-searching.*

Shafana talks about how people tend to misinterpret what it means to wear a hijab. Many people, she says, think women wear the *hijab* because they've been indoctrinated and even suppressed—because they have no choice. But that's not the case for her. To a certain extent, wearing it would be a form of bravery. She knows that some people will only see her *hijab* when they look at her, ultimately failing to see *her*. Playing devil's advocate, Aunt Sarrinah says that maybe wearing the *hijab* will discourage people from making "superficial judgments" about whether or not she's pretty, thus putting more of an emphasis on who she actually is as a person. But when Shafana asks if Sarrinah actually believes this, her aunt only turns the question back on her.

Again, Aunt Sarrinah is clearly torn. She doesn't want Shafana to wear a hijab*, but she also can't bring herself to say this—to the contrary, she recognizes (and even, to a certain extent, believes in) a number of arguments in* favor *of wearing a* hijab*. This makes it all the more complicated for her to listen to Shafana try to work her way to a decision, as she finds herself oddly arguing against the way she actually feels in an attempt to remain impartial.*

Aunt Sarrinah realizes the reason Shafana didn't accompany her to get a new ID card: she's trying to decide whether or not to wear a hijab in her ID picture. She then insists that Shafana has surely already decided that she's going to start wearing a *hijab*. Shafana doesn't deny this, simply pointing out that Aunt Sarrinah hasn't necessarily said anything to dissuade her. When Sarrinah asks why Shafana needs her approval, she says that she cares about Sarrinah's opinion, since she has always looked up to her aunt. Still, Aunt Sarrinah says that her feelings have nothing to do with the matter, prompting Shafana to ask why her aunt is acting this way—she can tell that Aunt Sarrinah doesn't want her to wear a *hijab* but won't say so.

In this case, the decision to wear a hijab *is highly personal, since it's rooted in religious devotion and spiritual self-discovery. (Other cases might be different, since many people start wearing* hijabs *not as a personal choice but as a matter of family or cultural practice.) However, Shafana wants her aunt's emotional support, perhaps because she knows that wearing a* hijab *in a predominantly white society will present a number of difficult challenges—challenges that someone like Aunt Sarrinah might help her through.*

Quickly changing the subject, Aunt Sarrinah says that she has forgotten to get coriander for the dish she's making. Although Sarrinah says they can skip the dish and have something else, Shafana insists on going to the market to get some coriander—partly because she loves the meal Sarrinah was going to make, and partly so she can "make up" for not going with her aunt to get new IDs earlier in the day. Once Shafana leaves, Sarrinah narrates the circumstances of her departure from Kabul, where she was "the chief engineer on all government building projects." She was, in other words, extremely successful. But then a bomb was dropped on her daughter's school, so she and her family left Afghanistan.

What Aunt Sarrinah says about her professional success in Afghanistan emphasizes the fact that leaving her home country as a refugee forced her to start anew. She and her family didn't just randomly decide to move to Australia because they felt like living elsewhere. Rather, the decision to migrate was an undoubtedly difficult one to make, since it meant giving up everything and facing the many challenges of starting fresh in a foreign environment.

Aunt Sarrinah was able to immediately enter Australia because of her impressive qualifications, going ahead of her many relatives, most of whom were quite successful but still had to wait to gain entry. Despite her qualifications, though, Aunt Sarrinah had trouble when she first came to Australia. She only had photocopies of her diplomas and certifications, since the Afghani government kept the originals in an attempt to get her to stay. Although she eventually found a job in Australia, it didn't last long, and she decided to go back to school to earn yet another engineering degree, this time in English. She started the engineering program just as Shafana was entering the same university.

Again, Aunt Sarrinah was forced to start completely anew after coming to Australia as a refugee (professionally, at least). The fact that she couldn't prove her qualifications sheds light on the bureaucratic difficulties many migrants face upon coming to a new country—difficulties that make it that much harder to assimilate and build new lives.

In a flashback to 2002, Shafana asks Aunt Sarrinah what she thought of an essay she wrote for class. The assignment was to focus on a "contemporary crisis in religion," and Shafana has chosen to write about Islam. Aunt Sarrinah isn't sure why her niece chose to write about Islam—just because they're both Muslim doesn't mean they have to "prove" it to anyone. But Shafana insists that she *wanted* to write about the Islamic faith.

Aunt Sarrinah is weary about her niece writing about Islam for her school paper, perhaps because she thinks it might put Shafana in a position in which her (presumably) white professor and peers will judge her and her religion. In a way, then, Aunt Sarrinah's skepticism is really just an expression of her desire to protect Shafana from prejudice.

Shafana explains that she has been reading the Qur'an. The experience has been overwhelming, making her feel like she's finally finding answers to questions she's had for her entire life. She has even felt "ecstatic" as she reads, but Aunt Sarrinah simply says that this is common, adding that the Qur'an reads "like someone who is caught up in a state of emotion rather than reason." Shafana, on the other hand, says that reading the text has been a "faith experience" for her. Before reading the Qur'an, she only ever thought about "enjoyment and happiness." Aunt Sarrinah says that these things are important, but Shafana says that there are other things to consider, too.

Aunt Sarrinah hints at a distinction between "reason" and religious rapture. She doesn't necessarily devalue the meaningfulness of religious experiences, but she does imply that it's important to maintain a certain levelheaded view of the world, even in deeply spiritual moments. Shafana, however, hints that she has embraced a more all-encompassing view of religion—one in which her entire worldview is informed by her religious devotion. This is why she thinks there's more to life than simply finding "enjoyment and happiness."

Aunt Sarrinah says that Shafana is right to reach beyond "enjoyment and happiness," since her essay needs to be grounded in reason, but Shafana tells her to forget about the essay—she's talking about deeper matters. Her research into Islam is no longer just about school. Education has opened the door for her to have a spiritual experience, and now she feels as if her connection to the Islamic faith has reaffirmed everything she's doing in life, including her pursuit of a degree in science. Aunt Sarrinah admits that she has noticed a certain change in her niece, and Shafana says that she has been praying and fasting—both she and Aunt Sarrinah have *always* done these things, but not as often or comprehensively as Shafana now does them.

It's now quite clear that Shafana's approach to religion has diverged from Aunt Sarrinah's. Whereas Aunt Sarrinah seemingly wants to keep her everyday life and her religious devotion separate from each other, Shafana wants her commitment to Islam to influence every aspect of her daily existence. Needless to say, the difference in their religious approaches is at the heart of the play's tension.

The conversation shifts to the events of September 11th, 2001. Shafana says that, although the **attack** on the World Trade Center profoundly altered the world, she doesn't believe that such violent actions are part of a "holy war." Aunt Sarrinah is hesitant to discuss the matter, but Shafana presses on, insisting that the actions of a few violent Muslims don't accurately represent the Islamic faith. The Qur'an, she says, contains passages that specifically advance ideas of "compassion" and "kindness." Aunt Sarrinah, however, says that these considerations aren't what Shafana's assignment is asking her about—rather, Shafana has been asked to "analyse the discourse around [such matters], compare and contrast various points of view, summarise, and provide a lucid overview." She then tells Shafana to write another draft.

Aunt Sarrinah doesn't want Shafana to get too deep into analyzing the Qur'an for her essay, perhaps fearing that doing so will put her in a precarious position—a position in which she'll be dragged into a complicated but potentially prejudiced discussion of the Islamic faith with her white peers and professors. To that end, Aunt Sarrinah doesn't necessarily disagree with Shafana's assertion that the Qur'an extols the virtues of "compassion" and "kindness." But she fears the discourse surrounding Islam in the post-9/11 world will prevent anyone from truly listening to what Shafana has to say, thus making the entire conversation judgmental and potentially harmful.

Back in the present, Shafana returns from the grocery store with some coriander. Aunt Sarrinah notes that she took a long time, but Shafana simply says there was traffic and suggests that perhaps there was an accident on the road. As they talk about the grocery store, Aunt Sarrinah asks if the woman working the checkout was wearing a hijab. Shafana interprets this as a sly comment about her employment prospects if she decides to start wearing a *hijab*.

By making an underhanded comment about Shafana's employment prospects, Aunt Sarrinah effectively voices her disapproval of Shafana wearing a hijab *without actually saying so. Her values and knowledge of the Islamic religion prevent her from interfering in what she knows is a highly personal decision, but she can't help but make comments aimed at dissuading her niece from wearing a* hijab.

This discussion leads Aunt Sarrinah to a story about finding a job in Australia after leaving Afghanistan. She had to lie about her abilities, since it had been long enough since she last had an engineering job that the technology had advanced beyond her knowledge. But she secretly taught herself the relevant software, working twice has hard as anyone else. And nobody ever found out. She then talks about how she knows what it's like to desperately want something. Shafana notes that her aunt fiercely yearned for an engineering job when she first came to Australia and worked in a factory, joking that she's a "snob"—a comment that angers Sarrinah, prompting her to say that Shafana is a "stupid, ignorant girl" who has no idea what it's like to make her own way in a foreign country.

The audience may find Shafana's joke about Aunt Sarrinah being a "snob" unfair, considering that Shafana herself was so critical of Aunt Sarrinah when they first migrated to Australia. Indeed, she was embarrassed of her aunt because Sarrinah didn't assimilate into Australian culture as quickly as she did—and, ironically enough, because her aunt worked in a factory instead of at a prestigious engineering job. So although Shafana is making fun of Aunt Sarrinah for being a "snob" now, Shafana herself was the one who claimed she was somehow above her coworkers at the factory. All in all, this disagreement highlights the difference between migrating somewhere as a young person and as a full-grown adult, suggesting that adults often have a much harder time finding their way in their new country because they essentially have to start their entire lives anew.

After apologizing to Aunt Sarrinah for being inconsiderate about how hard she worked to get where she is, Shafana tries to get her aunt to finally admit that she has a problem with the idea of her wearing a hijab. She tells her to yell if she needs to. When Aunt Sarrinah asks what, exactly, she should yell, Shafana says that maybe she should say that she (Shafana) is crazy for considering such a thing. Instead, though, Aunt Sarrinah simply changes the subject by saying that the coriander Shafana bought is good.

Shafana can sense that Aunt Sarrinah doesn't want her to start wearing a hijab, *but she wants to hear her aunt say so. It's possible that she wants Aunt Sarrinah to voice her concerns because Shafana herself has some hesitations about the decision. But because Aunt Sarrinah respects that this is a highly personal decision (even if she doesn't agree with it), she refuses to intervene.*

The conversation continues, as Aunt Sarrinah and Shafana talk about things unrelated to Islam. But then Aunt Sarrinah brings the conversation back around by pointing out that many women who wear hijabs end up buying cars because they get heckled and harassed on public transportation. Shafana is unperturbed—she can drive if necessary. But Aunt Sarrinah says that she might have to always go out in groups, since she might get spat on. Shafana, however, notes that even women who don't wear *hijabs* sometimes get spat on, and her aunt agrees, adding that "fear is not a reason not to do something."

That Aunt Sarrinah is worried about Shafana's safety is a good illustration of how hostile the surrounding culture can be to Muslims, especially in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. And yet, this consideration doesn't deter Shafana because her decision to wear a hijab *is based on one thing only: the fact that she has been spiritually moved to do so. This, it seems, is the only consideration she deems relevant to whether or not she ends up wearing a* hijab.

Aunt Sarrinah goes on to say that sometimes fear can actually *motivate* people to do something—like, for instance, to defiantly take a stand against persecution. But this sentiment enervates Shafana, who throws her napkin down and says that her aunt isn't listening to her. She isn't thinking of wearing the hijab for any reason other than the fact that doing so would be an expression of who she is. She would wear the *hijab* for herself, not for anyone or anything else. Aunt Sarrinah then asks why Shafana took so long to come back from the grocery store, and Shafana reveals that she stopped to buy a headscarf.

Once again, it seems quite evident that Shafana has already made her decision: she is clearly going to start wearing a hijab, *especially considering that she bought one on her way home from the grocery store. And yet, it seems important to her that she discuss the matter with Aunt Sarrinah, most likely because she respects her aunt's opinions and also hopes to take comfort in whatever emotional support Sarrinah might be able to give her. However, Aunt Sarrinah appears somewhat incapable of supporting her in this way.*

Aunt Sarrinah demands to know what has really compelled Shafana to gravitate toward wearing a hijab. When Shafana suggests that it's simply an external representation of her faith, Aunt Sarrinah insists that Shafana isn't normally like this—she's usually more rational. She thinks that her niece is "deceiving" herself in a certain way by ignoring her own misgivings about wearing a *hijab* and letting herself get carried away in a state of "religious ecstasy."

Until this point, Aunt Sarrinah has posed roundabout objections to Shafana's idea of wearing a hijab*—objections that almost make it seem like she's simply playing the devil's advocate, though it has been clear throughout that she doesn't want Shafana to wear a* hijab. *Now, though, she pointedly implies that her niece is being irrational by embracing her religion. This could be read as insensitive to the meaningful changes Shafana has recently undergone, but it's likely that Sarrinah thinks she's simply trying to protect her niece from what she sees as a bad decision.*

Shafana defends her decision to wear a hijab by telling her aunt about something called the "soft revolution." She explains that the "soft revolution" is a group of young Muslims who are neither "liberal" nor "extremist." This group of young Muslims advocate for human rights, using Islamic values to make a case for various progressive causes. For these people, Shafana explains, wearing a *hijab* is liberating and empowering. This prompts Aunt Sarrinah to ask if Shafana thinks it's possible to "synthesize" Qur'anic sentiments and values with the 21st century. When Shafana suggests that she *does* think this, Aunt Sarrinah becomes bitter, saying that Shafana clearly looks down on Sarrinah's relationship to Islam.

For Aunt Sarrinah, there's a very clear separation between religion and everyday life. She sees her religion as a personal belief that she can draw upon in times of need—that is, when it suits her. Shafana, on the other hand, thinks that the values at the core of Islam can be applied to any situation. The idea of the "soft revolution" is to use the Qur'an for humanitarian good, in contrast to the violence that many extremist or fundamentalist practitioners of the religion embrace. At the same time, the "soft revolution" also *rejects the liberal Islamic worldview, which advocates for progressive values and looser interpretations of the Qur'an. If Aunt Sarrinah were to be grouped into either of these two categories, she would most likely identify with Islamic liberalism, so the fact that Shafana is interested in the "soft revolution" suggests that her new outlook stands in contrast to her aunt's.*

Aunt Sarrinah defensively informs Shafana—who insists that she doesn't judge her aunt's faith—that her relationship with Islam is private. She says that her religion is a "fundamental part" of who she is. In response, Shafana says that her relationship with Islam is *all* of who she is. But Aunt Sarrinah disagrees with this sentiment. There's faith, she argues, and then there's "reason." There's a difference, she believes, between religion and "civil society." Shafana, on the other hand, thinks that religious faith works its way into every part of a person's life, but Aunt Sarrinah thinks this is mistaken, insisting that her own faith is "private and cultural."

Aunt Sarrinah has been hinting throughout the play at the compartmentalization of religion in her life. She is devoted to the Islamic faith, but her devotion is only one aspect of her life and doesn't necessarily define who she is. In other words, her faith is "private and cultural," whereas the approach Shafana seems to have taken to religion is more comprehensive, as evidenced by her desire to wear a hijab, *which symbolically announces her total devotion to Islam.*

Aunt Sarrinah goes on to suggest that her religion—which is very important to her—isn't the answer to everything in life. When Shafana argues this point, Sarrinah insists that religious "fanaticism" is a dangerous thing. Shafana is taken aback by her aunt's suggestion that she's embracing a form of fanaticism, but Sarrinah presses on, reiterating that religious faith shouldn't dictate everything in life. Clearly annoyed, Shafana says that all she wants is to cover up her hair, but Aunt Sarrinah claims that doing so is just the first step toward submission. In contrast, Shafana argues that wearing a hijab is the opposite of this kind of obeisance.

It's worth noting that both Aunt Sarrinah and Shafana fled Afghanistan because of extremists who used violence to push for religious fundamentalism. Aunt Sarrinah, however, was much older than Shafana when this happened, so she most likely had a better understanding of what was going on in Afghanistan at the time. As such, it's not all that surprising that she's very sensitive to anything that reminds her of the religious "fanaticism" that led to so much violence and ultimately drove her from her home.

What Aunt Sarrinah struggles with, she admits, is that she'll have to forget about all of the hopes she had for Shafana if she ends up wearing a hijab. Shafana doesn't think this has to be the case, but Sarrinah dejectedly says that she knows what the world is like. She then goes on to say that, because of the state of the economy, she's going to have to ask Shafana's parents to finally pay back the money she has loaned them. Shafana is shocked and says that her parents don't have the money to do this, Aunt Sarrinah says matter-of-factly that Shafana will have to take a leave of absence from school.

Aunt Sarrinah has gotten wrapped up in the heat of the moment and, as a result, threatens to demand repayment for a loan she gave Shafana's parents. The implication here is that she wouldn't do this if Shafana decided not to wear a hijab, *though she never actually says this. When she says that Shafana will have to leave school as a result, it feels as if she's trying to suggest that wearing a* hijab *will place limitations on her niece. In this case, though, the limitation Shafana would face has nothing to do with wearing a* hijab *and everything to do with Sarrinah's inability to accept such a decision.*

Shafana can't believe that her aunt is willing to put her in such a difficult financial position just because she wants to wear a hijab. Aunt Sarrinah unconvincingly says that the two issues are unrelated. But then Shafana says that if that's really the case, then her aunt wouldn't mind helping her put the *hijab* on right now. Aunt Sarrinah tries to avoid this, pointing out that Shafana is indoors and doesn't need to wear it. But Shafana says that since Aunt Sarrinah hasn't explicitly told her that she doesn't think she should wear the *hijab*, it would be nice if she helped her put it on for the first time.

It has been fairly obvious throughout the play that Aunt Sarrinah disapproves of Shafana's inclination to wear a hijab, *but this is the first time that Shafana bluntly challenges her aunt, trying to get her to admit the way she really feels. Aunt Sarrinah's previous comment about the loan she gave Shafana's parents escalated the tension between the two women, so it makes sense that Shafana now tries to goad her aunt into doing something she doesn't want to do.*

Aunt Sarrinah avoids helping Shafana put on the hijab by pointing out that her niece will suddenly have to have an opinion on anything vaguely related to the Islamic faith and Muslim people—including, of course, the many insensitive, racist, and prejudiced things people will say about terrorists and the restrictive extremist practices of a small group of Muslims. She will, Aunt Sarrinah believes, become a symbol of the Islamic faith instead of an individual.

Aunt Sarrinah now voices her concerns in a much more direct manner, effectively trying to scare Shafana out of her decision to wear a hijab. *She worries that her niece will have to bear the brunt of western culture's Islamophobia. What she fails to take into account, though, is that Shafana has surely already considered these things and has still decided to move forward with her decision—a decision that, because of its spiritual and personal nature, transcends such concerns, even if it's also true that Shafana will most likely face more prejudice and ignorance once she starts wearing a* hijab.

Shafana says that she will simply answer people's questions and will tolerate the occasional insensitivity. None of this, she believes, is a good reason to keep her from wearing a hijab. She criticizes her aunt for downplaying her faith as a way of fitting into Australian society, but Aunt Sarrinah takes issue with this characterization, reminding her niece that she knows exactly what it's like to live in a society run by religious zealots. In Afghanistan, she says, zealots destroyed supposedly blasphemous art in the museums with hammers. They shot and killed civilians and then refused to give them proper burials. "You do not reason with fanatics," she says. "You do not argue with zealots."

In many ways, Aunt Sarrinah's inability to accept Shafana's decision to wear a hijab *is a failure to recognize how important her niece feels it is to express her religious identity. At the same time, though, Aunt Sarrinah's viewpoint is understandably influenced by her personal history—she has witnessed so much pain and destruction as the result of religious zealotry, so the idea of such a complete devotion to religion puts her on high alert. And yet, Shafana's desire to wear a* hijab *is obviously very far removed from the violent fanaticism of the fundamentalists who drove Sarrinah out of her country.*

Aunt Sarrinah tells a story about escaping Afghanistan through Pakistan. She had to wear a *chador* as a way of hiding herself, since they were traveling on a bus intended for Pakistani people. It was dreadfully hot on the cramped bus—so hot that Sarrinah could barely breathe. At one point, she was sure she was going to suffocate, so she pulled the *chador* off her face. Immediately, a Pakistani guard yelled at her, telling her to get off the bus right away. She and her family were put in a Pakistani jail and then taken back to Afghanistan. Fortunately for them, the people they had paid to get them out of Afghanistan found them at the border and took them back to the bus, allowing them to finally reach India.

When Aunt Sarrinah tells this story about wearing a chador *(which is a religious head and upper body covering worn by many Muslim women), she provides some insight into the nature of her aversion toward wearing religious garments. It's clear that she associates the* chador *with this traumatic experience of fleeing Afghanistan, especially since the* chador *itself felt as if it was suffocating her on the bus. There's some symbolic resonance to this memory, too, as Sarrinah now seems to associate head coverings with suffocation, restriction, and an overall lack of freedom.*

Shafana asks why Aunt Sarrinah never talks about the hellish experience of leaving Afghanistan. Aunt Sarrinah says that it's painful to bring up—plus, she doesn't *need* to talk about it. The pain of this experience is always with her, and speaking dramatically about it as if she's on the Oprah Show won't help. Nonetheless, Shafana thanks her for opening up. As Shafana goes to leave, Aunt Sarrinah says she will come see her tomorrow before Shafana goes to get her new ID—to see, Sarrinah says, what Shafana has decided about wearing a hijab.

Because Aunt Sarrinah's story about wearing a chador *provides some context for her aversion to head coverings, Shafana is better able to understand her aunt's strong reaction. In this way, the play subtly suggests that having open dialogues about difficult issues often makes it easier for people to better understand each other, even if Aunt Sarrinah herself mockingly disparages the idea of speaking openly about her trauma.*

Once Shafana leaves, Aunt Sarrinah directly addresses the audience, saying that moving to a new country places new emphasis on a person's religion, since the surrounding society projects its ideas about an immigrant's religion—ultimately allowing these ideas to inform how society sees and thinks of that person.

The play has already highlighted the many difficulties of migrating to a new country (especially as refugees), but Aunt Sarrinah now explicitly spells out how religion—and the perceptions surrounding it—can influence how people view migrants and refugees. Her general point, it seems, is that Australians already *make ill-formed assumptions about Muslims, which is why she's worried that wearing a* hijab *will make Shafana more vulnerable to prejudice and ignorance, since it'll call even more attention to her religious identity.*

In a flashback to September 12th, 2001, Shafana rushes into Aunt Sarrinah's house. They're both flustered and talk about what they've heard on the news about the **attack** on the World Trade Center in New York City. Listening to the news is unnerving, since the newscasters keep talking about "Islamic extremists." Shafana has watched them go on at length about what has happened, and as they continue to speak about the attack, their words get "jumbled" and they seem to forget about the distinction between "Islamic extremists" and ordinary Muslims.

The play implies that the phrase "Islamic extremists" is problematic because it risks equating the religion itself with the violence carried out by a very small minority of Muslims. Nonetheless, Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah are horrified to hear newscasters implicitly draw parallels between terrorism and the Islamic faith, thus exacerbating Islamophobic sentiments already circulating in the wake of the attacks.

Aunt Sarrinah tells Shafana to be careful. She says that she has already started experiencing some discrimination at work as an engineer. Because of this, she has decided to resign, despite the fact that it has taken her so long to get the Australian government to recognize her credentials. Nonetheless, she's going to quit her job and go back to school to earn a PhD. Of course, she already *has* a PhD, but getting an engineering degree here in Australia will enable her to teach. Shafana can't believe her ears—she thinks her aunt is overreacting and that she won't actually experience much discrimination in the wake of the **terrorist attacks**. But Sarrinah disagrees, insisting that everything is different now.

Aunt Sarrinah's experience at work sheds light on the ignorance many non-Muslim people showed in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Needless to say, Aunt Sarrinah had absolutely nothing to do with the terrorist attacks, nor do her religious beliefs align with the terrorists' use of violence. And yet, she still finds it impossible to escape ignorance and bigotry in her workplace. Her experience is a good illustration of how quickly non-Muslim cultures vilified the entire Islamic faith after 9/11, instead of recognizing that there are violent extremists in every *religion.*

Back in the present, it's the day after Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah had dinner together. Shafana is in her laboratory, singing a song in Dari while putting on her hijab. Aunt Sarrinah enters and starts crying. She gives Shafana a jar full of shriveled shrimp and explains—through tears—that she bought them for Shafana's presentation, though she couldn't find long tube worms. Shafana tries to get her aunt to stop crying, but this only prompts Sarrinah to plead that her niece reconsider wearing the *hijab*. She can, she says, just take it off. But Shafana doesn't want to do this.

This is perhaps the most pointed objection Aunt Sarrinah makes in the entire play, as she begs Shafana to change her mind about wearing a hijab. *She's no longer pretending to be neutral while offering up underhanded reasons not to wear a* hijab*—instead, she actively wants Shafana to change her mind. What she fails to grasp, however, is that the decision is Shafana's to make, and it's clear that her niece has already decided that wearing a* hijab *is something that's important to her developing religious identity.*

Although she's sad that Shafana has decided to wear a hijab, Aunt Sarrinah starts joking around with her a little bit, much to Shafana's surprise (and delight). As they make up, though, Aunt Sarrinah admits that she's going to miss Shafana. When Shafana says that she's still here, Sarrinah says she'll miss her *hair*. She then asks if Shafana said anything to her parents about the loans. Shafana says that she hasn't and asks if Sarrinah still needs her money back—but Sarrinah is ashamed. She never truly intended to force Shafana's parents to pay her.

Aunt Sarrinah now acknowledges that she overreacted by threatening to collect the loan she gave Shafana's parents. Even though she doesn't want Shafana to wear a hijab, *she still cares deeply for her niece and doesn't want to do anything to make her life harder. In this moment, she makes an effort to show Shafana that she still loves her, regardless of what she has decided.*

Aunt Sarrinah apologizes for threatening to collect the loan, and Shafana forgives her, saying that she's glad her aunt was able to practice how she responds to such news. After all, she says, Aunt Sarrinah's daughter recently told Shafana that she's considering wearing a hijab. Aunt Sarrinah is shocked. Her daughter, she says, is far too young to make such a decision—a sentiment Shafana agrees with, which is why she told her cousin that she has to wait until she's at least 18 to start thinking about such things. Aunt Sarrinah agrees, but then Shafana adds that at the same time, she can't truly bring herself to dissuade her cousin from wearing a *hijab*. Hearing this, Aunt Sarrinah forbids Shafana from seeing her daughter.

Given that Aunt Sarrinah reacted so intensely to Shafana's decision to wear a hijab, *it's unsurprising that she's shocked and troubled by the idea of her own daughter making the same decision. And though Shafana agrees that Sarrinah's daughter should wait to decide, she also says that she can't in good conscience stop her cousin from following the same religious path that she herself has followed. Her attitude emphasizes the idea that everyone is on their own religious and spiritual journey—an idea that Aunt Sarrinah has trouble accepting.*

Shafana asks her aunt why she's acting so hostile, and though Aunt Sarrinah says she doesn't want to be this way, she also says that—starting today—she and Shafana are now "opponents." Shafana doesn't *want* to be Aunt Sarrinah's "opponent," but this doesn't matter. By deciding to wear a hijab, Aunt Sarrinah says, Shafana has highlighted a fundamental difference in the way they each see the world. They can pretend to still be close and aligned, but the fact of the matter is that Aunt Sarrinah strongly disapproves of the worldview Shafana has now embraced. Having said this, she kisses her niece on the forehead and leaves.

This is the play's final exchange between Aunt Sarrinah and Shafana, and it's both emotionally tender and rather heavy. It's clear that Aunt Sarrinah cares very deeply for Shafana, but she also can't change the fact that she and her niece now stand in opposition to each other in terms of their religious worldviews (or, for that matter, their worldviews in general*). Of course, this doesn't necessarily have to mean that they're "opponents," but Sarrinah uses this word to highlight what she sees as a very noticeable difference between them—a difference that is at once spiritual, personal, and cultural, since Aunt Sarrinah strongly believes that religion should only be* one *part of a person's life. Shafana, on the other hand, has now embraced a worldview that places religion at the very center of her life. And though Aunt Sarrinah doesn't intend to hold this against Shafana, she can't help but acknowledge the difference that has now come between them.*

Alone, Shafana returns to the monologue she has prepared for her presentation. She talks about mussels that "live in total darkness" and "cling to the edges of pools that would kill them in an instant." She admires their "precarious determination" and their ability to prosper even while undergoing a constant "balancing act." In the deep sea, Shafana says, impressive creatures like these mussels exist in multitudes, and this astonishing hidden ecosystem is full of unfathomable "impossibilities" that are just waiting to be discovered.

The play ends on a rather symbolic note, as Shafana's interest in the precarious environment of the deep sea represents her determination to thrive and be herself in a world that is hostile toward Muslims. But just because wearing a hijab *might make her everyday life a little more complicated, she thinks, doesn't mean she shouldn't embrace her new religious identity. After all, although it might seem inconceivable to somebody like Aunt Sarrinah, Shafana believes in a future in which society doesn't villainize people simply because of their religion.*

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