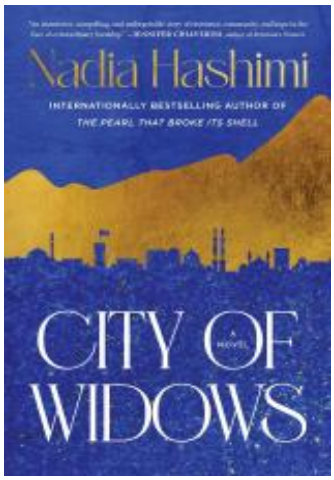
City of Widows

by Nadia Hashimi



About the Book

From bestselling novelist Nadia Hashimi comes a gripping, occasionally terrifying, yet ultimately hopeful novel focusing on the women of Afghanistan in the years since the Taliban regained power.

In February 2020, the US began to withdraw troops from Afghanistan after nearly 20 years of occupation. A whole generation of Afghan women had been born during that time --- women who had grown up in relative peace, gone to school, entered the professions, even served in the army and Parliament. The women of Afghanistan watched as the Taliban filled the streets again. They knew everything was about to change.

In the bustling, cosmopolitan city of Kabul, women are TV newscasters, shop owners, doctors, teachers, lawyers, even soldiers. They include Marjan, who fought with the Afghan army and will risk everything to keep her daughter, Hawa, safe. In her earlier days Marjan was called Rahima and had lived the life of a *bacha posh* --- a girl raised as a boy until she came of age. Forced into an early marriage, Rahima took the name Marjan when she fled her warlord husband. She?s created a whole new life for herself, one she will not give up easily.

So has Soraya, who defiantly wore red lipstick as she led the army?s all-female combat force over the objections of her upper-class family. Soraya is now a wanted woman whose brother may choose not to shelter her from the Taliban. What will become of her? Or Mina, a journalist and broadcaster whose beautiful face is known to everyone in Kabul --- including the new regime?

Fight or flight? Or find a third way? One thing is for certain: none of these women will meekly accept her fate.

An epic saga of fear, resistance, change and reinvention, CITY OF WIDOWS gives voices to the unforgettable Afghan women at a crossroads of history.

Discussion Guide

1. The *bacha posh* tradition, in which a girl is dressed and raised as a son, grants Marjan freedoms unavailable to other girls, including playing soccer with the neighborhood boys. How does the novel weigh the liberation this tradition offers against its underlying message about the value society places on girls? Discuss the observation that "a girl dressed as a boy was still a girl and would inevitably be treated like a girl."

2. ?Without a man to validate her existence, she is a shadow and so is her daughter,? the narrative tells us. How does Marjan's struggle to obtain a tazkera and a passport for Hawa illustrate the concrete, legal dimensions of this invisibility? What does the practice of excluding mothers' names from birth certificates reveal?

3. Marjan reflects that ?half of soldiering is knowing when to fight and when to lie low.? How does this philosophy of strategic patience surface throughout her life, from her forced marriage to her later actions under Taliban rule? Do women have to be soldiers to live this philosophy?

4. The legendary lion Marjan at the Kabul Zoo, having survived a coup, invasion, civil war and the Taliban, becomes a potent symbol in the novel. How does the protagonist's shared name deepen this motif? In what ways does the lion embody both national and personal endurance?

5. The narrative explores the ?thousand lies? Marjan tells to shield Hawa from the truth about her past and her father's identity. How do these protective deceptions both preserve and strain the bond between mother and daughter? Do you believe Marjan was right to conceal the truth for as long as she did?

6. Samia advises Marjan that survival is ?infinitely harder alone? and urges her to ?Find yourself a circle of women.? How does solidarity between women function as a survival mechanism throughout the book, from the women's shelter to the Female Tactical Platoon? Which relationships strike you as the most sustaining?

7. The #IAmMySong campaign, in which young girls post videos of themselves singing to protest government restrictions, frames voice itself as defiance. How does the novel connect artistic expression to political resistance? Why might singing feel especially threatening to those in power?

8. Zanabad, the ?City of Widows,? is a hillside sanctuary founded by a widow known as ?Mother of the Mountain,? where marginalized women build their own homes, teach one another to read and sew, and rebuild each time the authorities tear them down. What does this community reveal about female agency and matriarchy? How does it reframe what a ?city? or a "home" can be? Is it truly the safe space to which the women aspire?

9. The destruction of art and culture is depicted over and over, from ruined instruments to Hawa's grief that ?without music, I feel lost.? How does Nadia Hashimi link cultural destruction to the broader oppression of women? Why might art be one of the first things an extremist regime seeks to silence?

10. The text critiques the international romanticizing of Afghan women's endurance, calling the word ?resilient? a ?dangerous myth? because ?It gave the world permission to turn its back.? Later, Marjan reflects that ?going to battle for oneself was a great love story too.? How do these two ideas speak to each other? What responsibility, if any, does the novel place on the outside world that admires survival from a distance?

11. What do you think happens to Marjan and Hawa in the years after this novel ends? If you could imagine the ideal future for them, what would it be?

Author Bio

Nadia Hashimi is a pediatrician turned international bestselling novelist and daughter of Afghan immigrants. She is the author of five books for adults: THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL, A HOUSE WITHOUT WINDOWS, WHEN THE MOON IS LOW, SPARKS LIKE STARS and CITY OF WIDOWS, as well as the middle grade novels ONE HALF FROM THE EAST and THE SKY AT OUR FEET. She lives with her family in the Washington, DC, suburbs.

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