

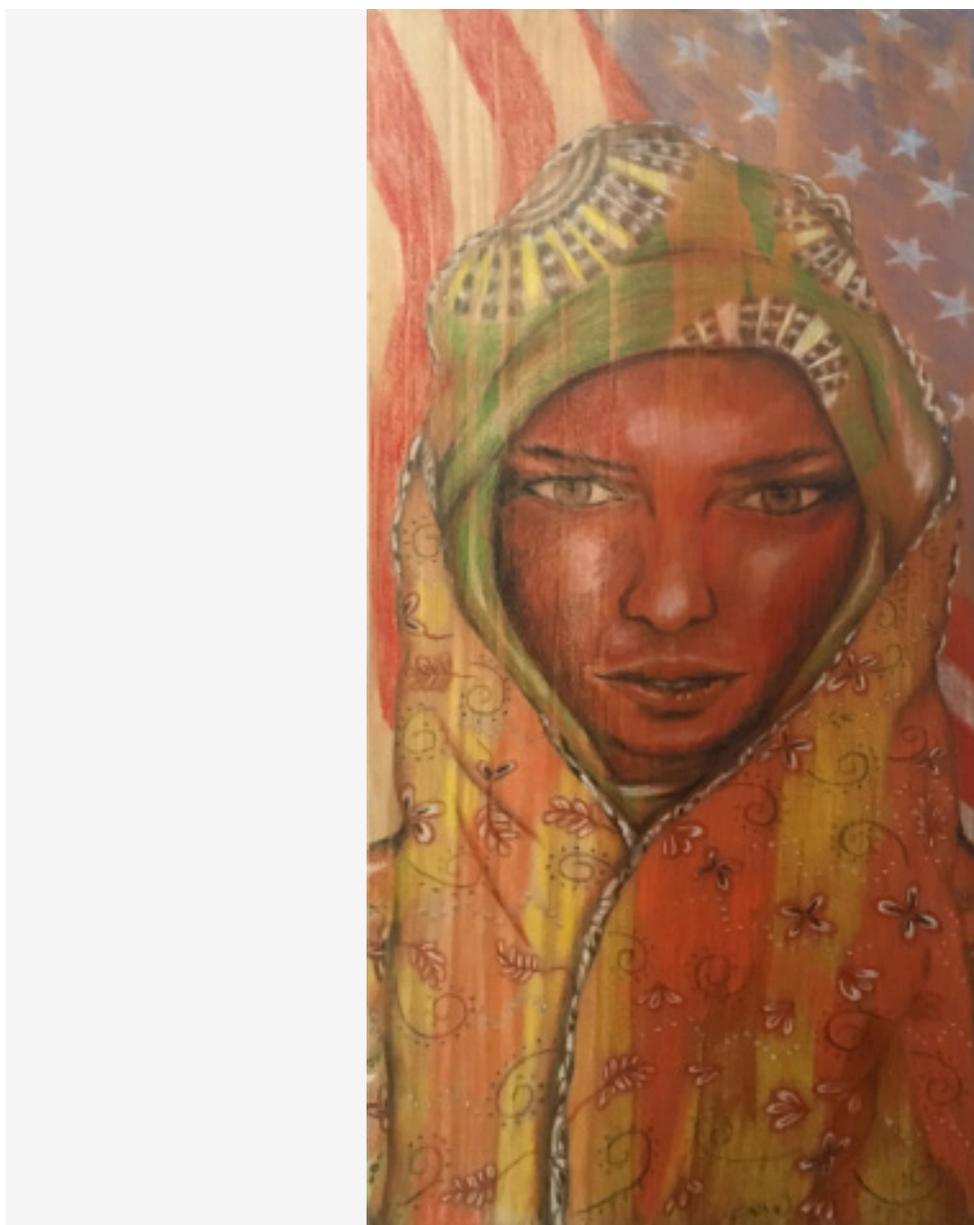
Women in the House of God

by **Jamila Osman**

Illustration by **Jen Swain**

Curriculum developed by **Rosalind Helfand**

Supplementary Curriculum and Copy Editing by **Léna Garcia**



OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ages 15 and up • Grades 10 and up
Genre/s	Nonfiction, memoir, immigrant and refugee experiences, family, Somali American, coming of age
Length	524 words
Content Advisories	The word “shit” is used twice.
One Sentence Summary	A young woman who immigrated to the United States from Somalia muses upon the transition from her old home to her new, and the effect of this transition on her family, community, and herself.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigration • Family-ties • Ancestral roots • Mother/daughter relationships • Identity • Somali refugee experience <p>Themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home • Creating a home in a new land • Connections to your roots • Belonging • Not belong to one place or another • Coming of age
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drought in East Africa and its effects on Somalia • History of Somalia and history of conflict in Somalia • The Somali refugee crisis and its causes
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<p><i>Sunset</i>, by Rainer Maria Rilke (poem) <i>Parable of the Sower</i>, by Octavia Butler</p>

Lesson Planning	
Author and Artists Information	<p>Jamila Osman is a Somali-American writer living in Portland, Oregon.</p> <p>Jen Swain is an artist living in Los Angeles.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10

Author Biography

Jamila Osman is a Somali educator and writer who is committed to honoring the stories and wisdom of her ancestors. She lives in Portland, Oregon, where she is a high school English teacher and fledgling plant-mother. Her work has previously appeared in *The Toast* and *Wasa-firi Literary Magazine*.

Artist Biography

Jen Swain is a designer and artist. She studied design at Pasadena's ArtCenter College of Design and has done advertising and design for over 20 years. She worked with Acme Corporation and at Warner Bros. She designed three Rose Parade floats for the Tournament of Roses, two of which won awards. She does large chalk murals at festivals; her designs twice won Best Animated Illustration at the Pasadena Chalk Festival. She has created murals for JetBlue, Air + Style, and Cirque du Soleil. She has painted electrical boxes in local cities. She works as an artist, website designer, and illustrator for children's books. She plays dodgeball, loves hiking, and is practicing to skate as an L.A. Derby Doll, an all-women roller derby team.

SYNOPSIS

In this memoir piece, a young woman who immigrated to the U.S. from Somalia feels caught between her identity as an American and as a Somalian. In America, she spends time with her mother in the haven of the masjid with her aunties. But when she and her mother visit Somalia, she is uncertain of her place. Ultimately, she wonders if she will become totally unlike her mother’s generation—or if, perhaps, she’ll share their fate.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic

Hold a class discussion about drought. What have you heard about the California drought? How is it affecting the lives of Angelenos? Now, imagine if the drought were to become worse, making LA unlivable. Where would you and your family go? How would you survive?

Main Ideas

Do you know someone who immigrated to America, or did you immigrate here yourself? Does your family ever share stories about when they or their ancestors came to America?

Write in your journal about any of the social and cultural challenges you or people you know have experienced when settling into their new home (be general, without using real names, if talking about people you know who might not want their experiences shared). What challenges did they experience? What was easy? What was hard? How did things change for better or for worse over time? Was it easier for younger people in the family?

After journaling, hold a class discussion in which students share some of what they wrote.

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from the story *Women in the House of God*:

“All mama ever wanted from America was a house of her own—something to anchor her to this new country. She couldn’t afford one, not until much later, but in the early years of her un-homing it was here, with other women, in the House of God.”

What from this passage can you infer about mama's home in America? What is home to her? What is it to you? Is it more than a place with walls and a roof? Discuss.

Universal Themes

Have you ever heard someone talk about being torn between two worlds or belonging to two worlds? Write in your journal about what it means to belong to more than one place or people at the same time, and both the difficulties and rewards that might bring.

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
appearance	immigrant	masjid (Arab word for mosque)
witness	refugee	third world
attempted	cobble	unincorporated land
plains	convert	liminal
toppled	dictator	born-again
swarm	ravenous	Hargeisa (Second largest city in Somalia)
pack	leering	un-homing
mourn	groping	rosewater
grieve	underage	
pillars	innumerable	
horizon	hustling	
embarrassed	prayed over	
donkey	indulge	
anchor	invasive	
wildly	force feed	
forgiven	dramatic display	
blazing	drought	
ancestors	overly familiar	

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. Osman uses the religious terms “converts” and “born-again” to refer to the women who are immigrants and refugees from Somalia. Look up these terms, then write about what you think they might mean in the context of the story. Follow your writing with a class discussion.
2. Osman uses a number of powerful descriptive terms to describe Somalia after the war. Locate this passage in the story, and identify the descriptive terms that compose the dire images of life after the war. Next, rewrite the passage without these terms, and read it aloud. How has the loss of these descriptors reduced the impact of the paragraph?
3. What does the term “third world” mean? Research this term, and write about what it means in context of the story and as applied to Somalia. As a class, discuss the criticisms of this term and compare it to the term “developing country.”

Extension: Watch the music video for “Weird Al” Yankovic’s satirical song, “First World Problems.” Discuss what he’s talking about and how the subject may or may not apply to students’ lives. What other memes have you seen in relation to the terms: third world, first world, and developing countries? Do you think these are accurate representations? How do you know?

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. What types of expectations do the narrator’s mother and the “masjid aunties” seem to have of her? Share what kinds of expectations your family has of you. How did the narrator respond to these expectations? How do you choose to respond?
2. Why does the narrator’s mother find it difficult to transition to life in America? Why does it seem easier for the narrator?
3. What is the role of dreams and dreaming in this story? Why do you think the narrator refers to dreams several times?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. How do the masjid aunties criticize the author’s appearance? Do you agree with the author when she says that in America “You can’t just tell people what you think about their appearance”? Why or why not?
2. Do the masjid aunties remind you of any of your extended family members? Cite evidence from the text in your response.
3. What does the author mean when she says that the masjid is “. . . unincorporated land: a liminal space . . .”? Before responding, re-read the paragraph where this phrase appears

to discover the context of these words before responding. Then, speak to the definitions of “unincorporated land” and “liminal” in your answer.

4. Why do you think the narrator concludes her memoir by speculating that she might become like her masjid aunties?
5. What is a rhetorical question? Where in the story does the narrator ask rhetorical questions? What makes them rhetorical? Why do you think the narrator chose to ask them?
6. Why did the artist choose to create a portrait for this story? What evidence can you find in the text about the author’s feelings concerning her subject, and how are these feelings present or not present in the portrait?

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Write a memoir story about a time in your life when you felt caught between the world of your family and your life outside of your family. How did you choose or not choose to define yourself? How did your family feel about your choices?

Descriptive

When the narrator visited Somalia with her mother, she observed that her mother was embarrassed about the state of the country she came from. Locate and re-read the passage about what she finds embarrassing. Then consider the following question: Are there aspects of your neighborhood that you wish appeared nicer? Describe those aspects in such a way that your reader can both see them through your eyes and experience how you feel about them.

Analysis

Research the history of Somalia and the Somali Civil War. What events of the war does the story refer to? How has the war changed Somalia?

Write an essay discussing the war and its impact on Somalia through the lens of the story. Include discussion of how the war has led Somalis to leave the country as immigrants and refugees.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Writing Exercise

Read the poem *Sunset* by Rainer Maria Rilke. What are the common themes in this poem and *Women in the House of God*? Discuss how the poem and story are similar—do you think the author of *Women in the House of God* would identify with *Sunset*? Why or why not?

Sunset

by Rainer Maria Rilke

Slowly the west reaches for clothes of new colors
which it passes to a row of ancient trees.
You look, and soon these two worlds both leave you
one part climbs toward heaven, one sinks to earth.

leaving you, not really belonging to either,
not so hopelessly dark as that house that is silent,
not so unswervingly given to the eternal as that thing
that turns to a star each night and climbs-

leaving you (it is impossible to untangle the threads)
your own life, timid and standing high and growing,
so that, sometimes blocked in, sometimes reaching out,
one moment your life is a stone in you, and the next, a star.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

Create a diorama of the place in your life that feels the most like home. Your challenge is to visually convey to the people who will view your diorama not only the structure of your home but also what makes it feel the most like home to you.

When the class has completed their dioramas, ask each student to present their creation, talk about why they chose this place, and point out the details that convey what makes it feel like home.

Classroom Activity Two

What anchors you to your home and the life you lead?

Ask the class to create paintings of anchors, then attach images of all of the people, places, things, etc., that they feel most deeply anchor them.

Home Activity One

What makes your home *home*? Create a detailed observation of your home. Make a list of all of the objects, emotions, and people that you believe make your home feel like home to you.

Prioritize your list. What are your Top Five?

Write a short essay discussing the Top Five on your list and how and why they, more than anything else, make your home feel like home.

Home Activity Two

Listen to the song *ABC's* by the Somali-Canadian musician, K'naan. Then read the lyrics to the song and research K'naan's life. Write a short essay interpreting the song in relation to what you've learned about Somalia, K'naan's life, and the story *Women in the House of God*.

Guest Speaker

1. Invite the author, Jamila Osman, to speak to the class.
2. Invite the artist, Jennifer Swain, to speak to the class.
3. Invite an expert on the impact of drought on East Africans, and particularly Somalia, to discuss the full extent of the problem, and what people are trying to do to help.

Field Trip

Make a class visit to a local mosque or Islamic learning center. Consider the Masjid Bilal Islamic Center in South LA or, if possible, the Women's Mosque of American in Downtown LA. Ask the heads of the mosque to discuss its daily routines, the community it serve, and what services and other activities are held there.

After the visit, ask the students to discuss then write about the similarities and differences between what they expected prior to the field trip and what they actually experienced. Instruct them to describe what they saw in vivid detail.

SUPPLEMENTARY CURRICULUM FOR TEST PREPARATION

Stories

Women in the House of God, by Jamila Osman; *Adebowale on the Yangtze River*, by Kosiso Ugwueze

Timed Writing Exercise

“This is America, I want to tell them. You can’t just tell people what you think about their appearance,” the speaker of Jamila Osman’s *Women in the House of God* says of the masjid aunties.

“He has had strangers touch his hair, caress his dark skin on the underground,” says the speaker of Kosiso Ugwueze’s *Adebowale on the Yangtze River*.

Select one speaker from whose perspective you will write. You have 30 minutes to write a one-minute scene in which you respectfully confront the masjid aunties or the strangers about their responses to your appearance.

Online Component

Within the 30-minute deadline, ask students to post their scene on the class website or turn in the assignment on Turnitin.com.

If handwriting your scene, please use the box below:

Pre-Editing Activity

Students exchange digital or hard-copy dialogues.

Editing Activity

At your peer tutoring job, a student asks you for feedback on this scene. Focus on the student's diction, syntax, and sensory language. Is the scene logical, chronological, and purpose driven? Write a brief email to the student discussing areas in which the piece needs revision. Be sure to address the scene's overall strengths, as well as one area in which the student could improve.

Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 9-10 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.6: Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.A: Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.