

An Infidel in Paradise

Teacher's Guide

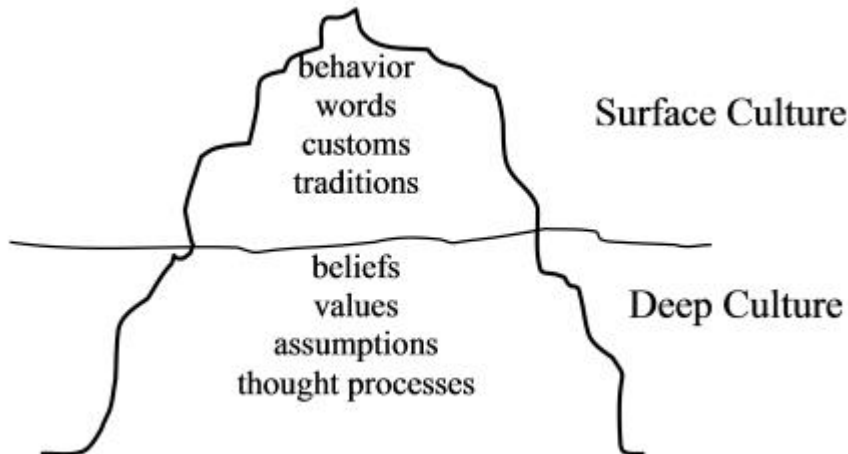
Themes

The interweaving of culture and identity: While Emma is Canadian, she's lived all over the world and doesn't have a strong sense of Canadian identity. Her strongest emotional connection is to the Philippines, possibly because it's the country she most recently lived in.

Coupled with her ambiguous national identity, she feels her personal identity is also fragile. Without the consistency of a homeland or a friendship group, she feels she's constantly recreating herself to fit in to each new school and culture. The loss of her father adds to this feeling of dislocation but even without that complication, she needs to adjust to different values, expectations and behaviours each time she moves. As these are the cornerstones of culture, and for her they can be wildly divergent from one country to the next, Emma's only true identity is that of a global nomad, or Third Culture Kid.

Third Culture Kids are children whose cultural identities are not tied to their "passport countries," or the countries they're living in, but are a melange of the many places they've lived and the people they've encountered. TCKs are not the only ones who experience this blending of cultures. As societies are becoming more multicultural, many children are a blend of different cultural influences and may share Emma's sense of confusion and dislocation.

Culture is often visualized as an iceberg:



On the surface there are the visible behaviours, words, and traditions but underlying these are deeply held beliefs, values, assumptions, and thought processes. There are many examples of this in [An Infidel in Paradise](#). One example is Mustapha's kindness to Emma immediately following her rudeness about Pakistan. Despite being angered by what she said, he checks to make sure she knows where her classroom is. Underlying his behaviour is a strongly held belief in Pakistani culture that visitors should be welcomed and cared for.

Another example is when Mr. Akbar shares tea with Emma when he wants to cement their friendship. Sharing tea has great cultural significance in Pakistan. Greg Mortenson mentions this in his book *Three Cups of Tea*. He quotes a Balti man who is in fact quoting a proverb, "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family." Sharing tea is a ritual that connotes welcome and a desire for friendship.

An example of one of Emma's cultural beliefs was her assumption that she, Leela and Tahira would go to the market in Rawalpindi by themselves. Her shock and indignation that boys, virtually the same age, were needed to accompany them reflected her underlying belief that girls are equal to boys and a 16-year-old girl is old enough to go to a market with her girlfriends alone, which would have been the case in Manila or back in Canada.

A clash of cultures was evidenced in the scene where Emma's friends try to find something for her to wear to the market. Loose clothing, that fully covers the hair and body, is a cultural practice that represents the underlying belief that modesty in dress shows respect for God. It's noteworthy that covering the head is a common practice in many religions in addition to Islam. But to Emma, the practice felt like an implication that her usual style of dress was "slutty," so she felt embarrassed. In this instance, her friends were also being overly cautious because her blonde hair would draw unwanted attention. In Pakistan, it's common for women to wear the *dupatta* around their neck, only pulling it over their heads when they actually go into a mosque.

Culture Shock: Emma is a kid in the throes of culture shock, exacerbated by her anger at being moved and grief at leaving her father behind. These combined feelings impede her willingness to make the best of the move to Pakistan, which she probably would have done in past moves, though she may still have found living in Pakistan an adjustment.

International schools, to some extent, provide a refuge from culture shock, as the teachers and students come from many different countries, and most have a "third culture" perspective. Culture shock is likely even more intense for the children of immigrants moving to schools with a dominant culture, as would be the case in Canada and the U.S. These students may feel they're the only ones who are different.

Interestingly, Third Culture Kids often report feeling the greatest culture shock when they return to their "passport countries." They feel as out of sync as they were overseas, but it's worse because they're no longer surrounded by other Third Culture Kids like themselves. They often report that their peers "back home" can't understand why they behave and think quite differently.

Alienation: Emma feels a profound sense of alienation in the beginning of the book. She feels distant from her older brother over their shared shame in not responding to their mother in a time of crisis; she feels inadequate to be the kind of big sister her younger sister wants and needs; she's angry and disappointed with both her parents; she's reluctant to depend on friends who she knows will be transient due to her nomadic existence; and she's resentful of being moved, which impedes her ability to accept and adapt to life in Pakistan.

Identity formation is one of the most critical tasks of adolescence. Teens who have read *An Infidel in Paradise* may identify with Emma's uncertainty about who she is and feel equally alienated from friends and families as they struggle to figure out who they are in the world.

Religious tolerance: Islam, like all religions, is interpreted and practiced in different ways. The characters in the book represent a variety of different viewpoints and practices, from the relative secularism of Mustapha's family to the radical fundamentalists, with many permutations in between. Mr. Akbar is a profoundly religious man but for him religion is about kindness and tolerance. The man who shouts at Emma in the market is an example of the other extreme, as are the men who attack her.

Terrorism and Islamic Fundamentalism: In Chapter 15, Angie suggests that poverty contributes to the Anti-western demonstrations in the city. This sentiment is repeated again when Emma worries that Aisha and Mustapha's visible wealth, coupled with the fact that they're helping her, will further incite the demonstrators. When she actually confronts the demonstrators, they're carrying farm implements, which again suggest they're from economically modest backgrounds.

The vast discrepancy between rich and poor in Pakistan, as in many countries around the world, is undeniably a contributing factor to societal discontent and fundamentalists do exploit this discontent to promote anti-western sentiments. Demonstrations following inflammatory sermons at Friday prayers are a common occurrence as in *An Infidel in Paradise*.

However, while there is research to support the link between poverty and anti-western sentiment, research shows that the radicalization of Islam has many causes and socio-economic factors alone are not the most significant determinant.

Friendship: Friendship is a recurring theme throughout *An Infidel in Paradise*. At the beginning of the novel, Emma thinks she knows pretty much everything there is to know about making friends. In her words, "It's like figuring out your role in an ecosystem. The structure's already in place; all you need to do is keep a low profile until you figure out where you fit in." She's prejudged who is friendship material, initially skeptical of Angie's overtures and slow to recognize the friendship offered by Leela and Tahira. She also gets off to a bad start with Queen Bee Aisha, certainly they have nothing in common beyond the boy they're competing for.

She's also decided it's unwise to invest emotional energy into making friends because they're inevitably transient. She refuses to keep in contact with her Manila friends and feels she should have seen it coming when Angie is suddenly evacuated. She makes the decision when they part not to keep in touch with her either.

However through all her up and downs with friends and family, the old gardener Mr. Akbar provides ballast, a quiet presence who in the end helps her to realize that while landscapes may change, the people she befriends will form the fabric of her life and it will be a richer tapestry for it.

Multiculturalism: Multiculturalism is a pervasive theme throughout the book. Emma falls for a boy from a different culture. The majority of the people she meets and befriends are from different cultures and

her relationship with Mr. Akbar transcends culture, religion, age, wealth and social status to become the strongest and most profound in the book.

Family: *An Infidel in Paradise* is a novel about the importance of family. Family is often the single constant in the lives of rotational kids, as friends change with every move. Unfortunately, divorce is even higher in rotational families than in the general population, so the circumstances Emma finds herself in at the beginning of the book are all too common.

Emma's parents have separated and her mother has moved Emma and her siblings to another country, creating a physical distance from their father that facilitates Emma's determination to maintain an emotional distance as well. Emma's relationship with her older brother Vince is also strained, as they share guilt over their failure to help their mother through the crisis of their father's infidelity. They're further divided by Emma's unwillingness to make the best of the move to Pakistan and forgive her parents for the dissolution of their family. But the most important family relationship in the story is that between Emma and her younger sister Mandy.

The move to Pakistan marks the start of a newly reconfigured family without the support of their father, who was their primary caregiver. Both Vince and Emma realize they must take on more responsibility to help their younger sister Mandy adjust, but both fall short in different ways. Vince does his best, when he's at home, but he spends a good deal of his time with his new girlfriend, leaving Emma to take on the brunt of the responsibility. It's clear that Mandy also wants Emma, more than their brother, to guide her. And despite her resistance to take on the role, and belief that she's unworthy, it's Emma time and again who comes through, though she gets little credit for it.

Emma plans ahead for Mandy's first day of school, packing her lunch box with homemade cookies that she can dole out to potential friends to win them over. She also slips an encouraging note in Mandy's bag. Emma seeks Mandy out to reassure her during the first evacuation to the theatre; she backs Mandy up, taking on their mother, when Mandy boycotts the party she wasn't invited to; and she helps Mandy build a Secret City to entice the other kids to play with her. At the same time Emma resists doing anything reminiscent of their father and makes a dangerously selfish decision when she leaves Mandy alone to pursue her relationship with Mustapha.

Questions on Chapters 1 – 10

Choose a simile in Chapter One and rewrite the sentence using your own simile.

In Chapter 2 Emma says something extremely rude about Pakistan. What emotions and events contributed to her outburst?

Find an example of symbolism in Chapter Two. Explain its meaning.

Emma has spent most of her childhood overseas, moving from country to country. In Chapter 4, when Mr. Akbar suggests her "home" is in North America, she disagrees and says she's from the Philippines. Why do you think Emma thinks of the Philippines as home?

Give an example of foreshadowing in Chapter One. What later event in the story does it foreshadow?

In Chapter 7, when Angie talks about Tahira's relationship with her brothers, Emma muses that she's "not the only one with problems." What does she mean by this? Do you think Tahira would agree with her? Explain your answer.

In Chapter 8 Angie retells the story of Little Red Riding Hood as an allegory. What is the meaning of the story? Why does she leave it unfinished?

There are several examples of how relationships between Emma and her siblings have shifted with the break-up of her parents and the move to Pakistan. Give three examples of these changes.

In Chapter 9, Emma swears at her mother. How does she feel about her behaviour the next day? Have you ever said something in anger that you later regretted? Did you resolve the situation with the person you spoke to harshly? Explain.

Questions on Chapters 11 – 20

How do Emma and Angie's relationships with their siblings differ? Which family dynamic do you think is more common? Explain your answer.

What simile does Emma use in Chapter 13 to describe grief? Do you agree with her observation on grief? Explain.

In Chapter 15 Aisha tries to explain to Mandy what causes the frequent anti-western demonstrations. Do you agree with her explanation? If not, provide an alternative explanation. Defend your answer.

In Chapter 19, Mustapha's mother makes a case for arranged marriage. Do you find her reasons convincing? Explain your answer.

In Chapter 19, Emma folds a napkin into a bull. It gradually becomes apparent that the bull symbolizes something. What or who does it symbolize? Explain your answer.

How do you think the expectations of family differ in Mustapha's family and Emma's? Does either character have closer family ties? Give examples to support your answer.

Questions on Chapters 21 – 30

An Infidel in Paradise is a work of fiction but many of the events in the story are based on real events, including the evacuation in Chapter 23, precipitated by bombings in Africa. Find out which bombings are being referred to. When and where did they occur?

In Chapter 25, Mr. Akbar gives Emma a plant. Why does Mr. Akbar give her the plant at this point in the story?

In Chapter 28, Emma sees a side of Aisha she hadn't seen at school. How does this change her opinion of Aisha? Do you think they will become friends? Justify your answer.

Emma and Angie have very different teaching styles. What underlying beliefs do these different teaching styles reflect? Explain your answer.

Emma has contradictory feelings about many of the people in her life, e.g. she loves her father but is angry at him; she misses her Manila friends but chooses not to stay in touch with them; she cares about Mandy but is often annoyed and is sometimes mean to her. Give an example from your own life of a time when you had contradictory feelings about someone or something. Were you able to resolve those feelings eventually? Explain.

Throughout much of the novel, Emma seems to resent Mandy, yet there are moments when her love for her sister shines through. Give three examples prior to the conclusion when Emma shows concern for her sister.

After Reading the Book

When Emma, Mustapha and Aisha are fleeing the Islamicists, Emma worries that the Islamicists will target them for two reasons. What are they?

Why did the author choose a gardener to be Emma's constant friend throughout the book? What is the symbolism of his profession?

Emma and Mr. Akbar have significantly different social statuses. Do you think the author did this deliberately? Explain.

Ultimately, Mustapha had to choose between Aisha and Emma. What factors do you think contributed to his decision? Do you think he made the right choice? Defend your answer.

The Canadian government made the decision not to evacuate Canadian personnel at a time when other foreigners, diplomatic and otherwise, were evacuated. What factors do you think governments consider when determining whether their personnel are at risk?

Both Mustapha and Emma experience situations when their personal desires are in conflict with their parents. Have you ever been in a situation when your personal desires were in conflict with your parents' expectations? How did you resolve this conflict?

The last chapter of the book is a scene between Emma and Mr. Akbar. Why do you think the author chose to end the book with these two characters alone? What role does Mr. Akbar play in the story?

The complicated tea-making ritual reoccurs throughout the story. What is the symbolism of this activity?

Authors often weave personal experiences into their writing. Research the author, S. J. Laidlaw. In what ways do you think she has drawn on her own life experience to write the book?

Throughout the book servants are often present in the background. Choose one scene in the story and retell it from the servant's point of view. Be creative. The more you think about the servant's backstory, the more you'll bring his character to life.

Often when we read a story we identify with one character, or even a single thing that a character does. Choose one character in the story that you can relate to in some way and discuss.

What happens when the people who share and reflect our culture and sense of self are constantly changing? Why did Mustapha choose Aisha over Emma?

Imagine your family has just been posted to another country on the other side of the world. How would you feel about moving? What or who would you find most difficult to leave behind? Would you prefer to move to a country with a similar culture to your "home" country or would you prefer to move somewhere more exotic? Explain.

What are some of the differences Emma found most difficult to adjust to in Pakistan? How do you think the absence of her father affected her struggle to adjust?

Throughout the story Emma is troubled by her inability to give the "correct" answer to how she feels about Pakistan. Why does Emma struggle with this question in the beginning and what changes within her so that she's finally able to answer it?

Multicultural Connections:

Emma is what is known as a Third Culture Kid. Third Culture Kids are children whose cultural identity is a mix of the many cultures they've lived in, rather than being tied to the culture of their home country, or the country they happen to be living in. Third Culture Kids are not the only ones who grow up with the influences of many cultures. Think of your own life. What other cultures have you been exposed to, perhaps through your own family, or friends, or countries you've travelled in. What are some differences you've noticed between your own culture and that of others you've encountered? Give specific examples.

Look the word "culture" up in the dictionary. What does it mean? Give 3 – 5 examples of things you value, or believe, that are evidence of your own culture. It's often helpful when defining one's own culture to pose the question: Is this belief or behaviour common in every country around the world?

Throughout the book, Laidlaw returns to the theme of "home," how our sense of "home" develops and its significance in our lives. Why does Emma struggle to feel at home in the countries she lives in? What are some rituals or traditions that she and her family have to help them transition to new countries? If your family moved to another country, what are some important traditions that you would take with you to make you feel at home?

Extension Activities

Working with a partner, choose one character in the book to interview. Ask them questions that cannot be answered by events in the story but try keep your answers true to the character. Be creative. Perform your interview for the class.

Think about beliefs which you hold to be fundamentally true, but know are not universal in every country around the world, e.g. men and women should have equal rights; child labour should be against the law; parents should not be allowed to hit their children; everyone should have the right to choose their own marriage partner; animal habitats should be protected, regardless of the needs of impoverished, indigenous people, etc. In small groups, brainstorm as many examples as you can. Choose one of these beliefs and prepare a debate to present to the class, reflecting both sides of the issue.

Create a movie poster for the book. Create a tag line to advertise the movie and put it on your poster.

Think about how images are chosen to represent a book's theme. Why is the cobra chosen to represent this book? Did it grab your attention? Did it give you a sense of what the book might be about? Did you have an emotional reaction to the cover? With these ideas in mind, design an alternate cover for the book. Remember your goal is to entice potential readers.

Emma goes to international schools, which are typically very multicultural. How does this compare to your own school? Survey your class to find out which countries your classmates, or their parents, have come from. Compile some interesting facts about each country represented in your class. Make a visual representation of what you've learned, e.g. a collage, a world map highlighting the countries you're from, or a pictograph representing each country represented with one picture for each student.

Pretend you have a new student in your class who's come from a different culture. Prepare a welcome kit for him / her. What important facts should they know about your country / culture?

Emma and her theatre group prepare a play about a culture clash. Write and present your own play about a culture clash.

Emma becomes very involved in helping the poor trash-picking children. Research and choose an organization that helps poor children and organize a fundraiser to support it.