Nabil and Khawla's relationship subverts traditional power dynamics in both the 7th-century and in modern times. This hopefully invites debate on consent, gender roles, and the nature of strength and weakness.

The author explored many of these questions while writing the book and reached no fixed opinion on most of them; an author's goal is to write a story that stimulates healthy conversation, not answers.

You, the reader, must do this heavy lifting, and here are some provocative questions to help you explore your takeaways on When Silk & Iron Lie.

On intimacy in relationships:

- The story implies intimacy is a bridge of trust built between two vulnerabilities. Do you think that is generally true or false?
- Can you be intimate without being vulnerable? If not, is one enough—can intimacy exist without two vulnerabilities?
- Trust often underlies choosing to be vulnerable with another person, so to what extent is trust fundamental to intimacy? Or can you be intimate with someone you do not trust?
- Who is more vulnerable: Nabil, who lays his helpless body at the mercy of a lethal predator, or Khawla, who allows a man to get close enough to see the softness she has spent a lifetime turning into stone?

On the topic of consent in relationships:

- When Khawla ravishes Nabil, she becomes a ruthless dominatrix. To what extent does her character arc indirectly explore the complexity and importance of Consensual Non-Consent?
- The novel introduces the word "manrape" to distinguish between a woman ravishing a man and a man raping a woman. Is there really a difference? If so, does the difference occur during the violation or in its aftermath?
- In the 7th-century, women were expected to always submit to men sexually, regardless of whether they wanted to. Consent was a societal expectation, not up to the individual. So, when we reverse the gender roles, is it fair that we should expect a strong 7th-century woman to ask for consent from a weaker man before ravishing him?
- Or should women be held to a higher moral standard than men?

On the gay allegory of the Great Lie:

- Is the lie that Khawla & Nabil perform in public to mask their genuine relationship an allegory for the lie that gay and other gender-suppressed people perform prior to coming out of the closet?

- From a non-straight perspective, is Nabil's participation in perpetuating a lie that Khawla needs more than him harmful or helpful?

On the topic of feminism vs fetish:

- Is this book a feminist rethink of 7th-century power dynamics, a dark historical romantic romp, or merely another fetish novel about a dominatrix emasculating a man? Can it be all of these things?

- Anyone may see another person's passion as a fetish. Most fetishes are not harmful, regardless of how "kinky" they may seem to outsiders who find them foreign. Does feminism expand or restrict the range of "acceptable" sexual fetishes by altering how men should respond to women?

- How many "fetishes" can you find in this book? Hint: the author deliberately hid more than one.

On the setting:

- Pre-Islamic Arabia was the wild, wild east—a harsh environment that rewarded the strong and crushed the weak. (There is a deeper discussion of this in the Author's Commentary). Does this setting make it easier to perceive the pre-modern sexual power dynamic as "foreign"?

- The spread of Islam late in the 7th-century was a massive cultural change for the better; rebalancing the power dynamic between men and women (more on this in the Author's Commentary). Is unbridled toxic masculinity in a society inherently unstable?

- Arguably, the story could have been just as easily set in the North American Wild West of the 1800s, or the European Viking northlands of the 800s BCE. Are these better or worse settings for the emasculation of toxic masculinity described in this novel?

- How might the characters been truly different if the author had set the story in the American Wild West or Viking Northlands?

On the Master/Slave paradigm:

- The historical context chosen for the novel predates many modern CNC safeguards such as pre-negotiation, advance consent, and safe words.

  In the 7th century, power was non-negotiable because it belonged to the strong; individual consent was irrelevant because unconditional surrender by the weak was inevitable; and safe words still to be invented because the very concept was irrelevant when emotional safety was secondary to the pursuit of pleasure by the strong.

  In a modern world, we see CNC as the only healthy way to practice non-consensual relationships, so does that mean that all non-consensual relationships pre-dating CNC were unhealthy? Or are non-consensual relationships inherently unstable, and that other,

primitive mechanisms employing acceptance and closeness (as a substitute for trust and intimacy) existed?

- In the 7th-century context, is it fair to say that "conquest" was the primary mode of interaction between people: in war, politics, trade, and in the personal relationships between men, as well as between men and women?

- Does that mean that the master/slave paradigm of conquest and obedience is the root of all relationship paradigms? If so, is the Master/Slave paradigm essential for understanding the power dynamic in all relationships?

- In what ways was the unbridled domestic violence of that era not merely socially acceptable, but influenced by a need for social governance in the absence of law and stability?

- Is violence in some form a prerequisite for all conquest?

- Is that true in relationships, as well as in wider social interactions?

- The three major religions of the middle east (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) all preach submission to a higher power, they all warn of the wrath of God for those who do not obey, all are based on a covenant for those who willingly submit.

  Is this just a historical metaphor used to explain religion as a better way to live in an era that only understood conquest as a basis for human relationships?

- Is the Master/Slave paradigm also at the root of the relationship between man and god?

- Does consent, or prior consent for non-consent, by the weaker of the two in a relationship merely re-enforce a fundamental master/slave construct, or is it a modern innovation based on equality?

On the topic of trust as a foundation for a relationship:

- Even in the 7th-century, the fundamental CNC requirement of trust was the foundation for a total power exchange in which the woman exchanged her agency in return for protection by her husband. Similarly, her husband extended a commitment to his wife and family in exchange for not being lonely—because being in power can be a very lonely place. Does this mean that trust is essential to all relationships, even unhealthy ones?

- In the story, Khawla emasculates Nabil as the first step in their relationship, flipping the traditional gender narrative upside down to seize power. Does gender inversion make it OK for women to empower themselves by robbing men of their sexual identity? Or is this just a feminist version of rape culture, as the novel implies?

On the topic of innocence:

- Khawla didn't take control of Nabil's manhood to diminish him; nor did she do so out of malice. She took it because she was raised within a patriarchy that suppressed her truth as a strong woman, and she had never met a man strong enough to share a woman's power without trying to own it. Does her innocence excuse her behavior when seen through a 7th-century lens?
- Would it excuse her behavior today?

On the topic of aftercare as a foundation for intimacy:

- Aftercare, another modern CNC concept, existed in the 7th century as closeness and co-dependency arising after sexual relations. In the story, Khawla moves from "taking" to "sharing" in her sexual pleasure, and Nabil meets her there by moving from simply "yielding" to actively taking part in her pleasure. Is that shared rendezvous a sufficient condition for intimacy?
- Or does it merely set a foundation for ultimately developing intimacy?

On coercive power dynamics:

- The story suggests that a zero-sum game in relationship dynamics (i.e. a winner and a loser) is inferior to a game in which the participants seek a win-win outcome. This sets the stage for Khawla's relationship with Nabil to evolve from exploitation to coercion. Do the participants have to be equal for a win-win outcome to be fair to both without falling into a coercive outcome?
- Can equality really exist when the participants are as unequal as Khawla and Nabil? Or is equality unnecessary to give both participants a fair advantage to "win?" if both allow themselves to be vulnerable?
- Nabil, accepting the "futility" of his position, sets up the transition from win-lose to win-win by seeing losing as winning. Is that the only path to liberation?
- Khawla uses physical intimidation to dominate Nabil during her exploitative phase. At what point does the reminder of her "protection" cross the line into domestic coercion?
- Is Khawla coercive if she is merely living her truth honestly as a naturally dominant woman who fears being vulnerable?

On The House of Hope as Feminism in Action:

- Is Khawla’s charity for orphans and the marginalized a radical feminist restructuring of 7th-century society, or merely the natural feminine response to others in need?
- Or is it merely a masterstroke to seize power?
- Is it morally possible for it to be both?
- Is Khawla justified in using child labor to make money?

On subverting the Male Gaze:

- Does the recurring description of Khawla's muscles empower female physicality, or does it simply replace one fetish with another?
- Khawla enjoys Nabil's lustful gaze because it is a sign that she controls his sexuality. Does her control over him make her less of a sex object?

Here are some more questions that even the author is unsure about:

- The "Stockholm" Question: Does Nabil truly love Khawla, or is his "devotion" a survival mechanism (Stockholm Syndrome) triggered by his physical helplessness and her overwhelming power?
- The Nature of Submission: Is Nabil's choice to serve Khawla an act of weakness, or is it a sophisticated form of control—the "Silk" that directs the "Iron"?
- The Role of Worship: Is Nabil's "devout" service (washing her feet, massaging her muscles) a sexual orientation, a spiritual practice, or a political strategy?
- Defining the "Wimp": Does the novel successfully redefine being a "wimp" as a hidden form of strength, or does it reinforce the idea that Nabil is a lesser man because his wife can fight better than him?
- The Universal Woman: Khawla is a "Divine Anomaly", an uber-woman in every aspect, except vulnerability. In what ways does her struggle to balance her family's expectations with her personal identity mirror the experience of all women?
- Motherhood vs. Muscle: How does Khawla reconcile her "predatory" warrior instincts with her maternal feelings within the Al-Malik empire?
- The Price of Autonomy: Khawla only finds freedom by leaving her tribe. Does the novel suggest that women can only achieve true power by abandoning their traditional roots?
- The "Tamed Lion" Myth: Even though she had just beaten them up, why do the highland brothers find it easier to believe Nabil "tamed" Khawla than to believe she chose him? What does this say about masculine insecurity?
- The New Masculinity: Does Nabil provide a viable alternative model for modern masculinity feeling emasculated by 21st century feminism, or is his role too specific to this specific "Power Couple" dynamic to be more generally applicable?
- Desire for Domination: For men curious about being dominated by a woman, what is the core appeal of Khawla's physique? Is it the relief of relinquishing responsibility to a more dominant Alpha, the reverse rape fantasy, or the awe of a goddess constructed with "Iron"?

- The "Shadow" Power: Many men throughout history have ruled as a benefit of guidance from their wives. How does Nabil's "Silk" differ from the traditional "power behind the throne when the gender role is reversed?

- Male Vulnerability: Does Nabil's physical weakness make him more relatable to the modern man who no longer requires muscle to thrive? Or is he merely a "fantasy" character emblematic of the meme of a wimp?

- Class vs. Muscle: Does Nabil's wealth and learning make him "stronger" than Khawla, despite her physical superiority?

- The 21st Century Alpha: Does an alpha woman still face the same social "Lioness" stigma today that she did in the 7th century?

- Mechanical Necessity: Nabil makes himself "fiscally necessary" to the Governor. Is this still the best way for marginalized groups to gain power today?

- The "Iron Under the Silk": Is the concept of hiding one's true strength beneath a soft exterior still a necessary survival strategy for women in corporate or political spaces?

- The Ideal Balance: Is the "Al-Malik" partnership (The Mind + The Shield) the ultimate relationship goal, or is it an unhealthy codependency?

- Book Genre: The novel relentlessly subverts the genres of historical romance and dark romance by presenting a female character who is in all ways stronger than her male partner. Is this a new feminist-driven genre, or a gender subversion of the hero trope, or just a weird concept for a novel?

- The Final Subversion: In the first half of the story, Khawla was both physically and emotionally dominant, but in the second half, Khawla was physically dominate while Nabil was emotionally dominant. Who is truly in charge in their relationship? Or is the ambiguity the point of the story because it doesn't matter who leads? Must all relationships have a leader?