



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE WIDOWS OF MALABAR HILL BY SUJATA MASSEY

1. Perveen Mistry is in a historically groundbreaking role: she is representing the rights of female clients, some of whom have never before had any access to legal protection because of religious law, limited education, or patriarchal restrictions that greatly disadvantage them. Perveen is the perfect female lawyer to represent women's rights, since she herself has had terrible legal problems and has seen how frustrating it is to have no power under the law. How much more difficult is Perveen's job than a contemporary female lawyer's? Did any of her encounters particularly frustrate or anger you as a reader? Did she face problems that you couldn't imagine a lawyer today facing? On the other hand, have things not changed as much as we think?
2. What do you make of Perveen's last meeting with Cyrus? How would you have felt in her position?
3. The difference between "modern" and "orthodox" religiosity is an important one in this book. Perveen's parents, the Mistrys, are depicted as modern Parsis who educate their daughter and hope she will have a career. The Sodawallas, meanwhile are orthodox Parsis who still obey ancient purity laws that are now thought to be unhealthy and who expect their new daughter-in-law to leave her education behind and be a traditional housewife. The gap in the two families' beliefs becomes violent and heartbreaking. How has this conversation about religious orthodoxy changed since the 1920s? How does it still relate to our 21st-century societies?
4. Why do you think Behnoush Sodawalla is so insistent that Perveen isolate herself? What do you think are the real reasons behind her strict Parsi traditionalism?
5. Meanwhile, in the Farid house in Bombay, the Muslim widows live in purdah, another form of religious orthodoxy. How do the Muslim and Parsi restrictions on women differ? How do they overlap? From each of the Farid widows' points of view, what would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of living in purdah? Were you surprised by their decision to leave purdah at the end of the book?



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6. What role does class play in the novel? How different would Perveen's choices have been if she had not been from such a wealthy family? Do you think she would have been more or less likely to marry Cyrus, or more or less likely to leave him? What other choices of hers would have been impossible if she had come from a poor or middle-class family?

7. Meanwhile, Perveen is very accepting of her best friend's homosexuality, but Alice's parents are clearly not. How do you think Alice's situation might have been different if she had not been as wealthy? How much advantage does she have as an expatriate? How do you think the flowering women's rights movement will affect her? Do you think she'll end up finding more freedom and happiness in India, as she hopes, or do you think she will eventually find gender roles and sexuality there to be just as stifling?

Questions issued by the publisher.



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