



## HOUSE OF CARAVANS

A Novel

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## Discussion Questions

1. *House of Caravans* tracks the end of the British occupation in India, as well as the long-term consequences of colonialism and the Partition of 1947, whose traumatic effects rippled across generations. Reflect on how the trauma of Partition is experienced by Karan and Ila: “Ila and I were two warring parts of the same town. We’d inherited our town’s discontent. We’d inherited our grandfather and granduncle’s war.” [16]
2. The book opens with a vivid scene of Chhote Nanu attempting to flee India as a refugee, with a golden-haired boy named Henry in tow. Consider the relationship between these two characters, and reflect on how shared trauma may have once brought them together, but ultimately tears them apart.
3. Despite the many different points of view illustrated in *House of Caravans*, many of them share one thing in common: the masking of thoughts, feelings, and tensions through silence. What are some of the silences you have noticed throughout the book? And how do they complicate or obfuscate the interiority of its characters?
4. Among the many other polarizing systems at work in India in the 1900s, religious separatism loomed large between Muslims and Hindus. To further exacerbate these tensions, siblings Ila and Karan learn that they were fathered by two different men, one from each religion. What is the significance of the inter-religious relationships (of romance and friendship) that bloom despite these systematic barriers in the novel? Are their beginnings more significant than their endings?
5. By the mid 1940s, many citizens of India had become resentful of colonial rule, and with growing resentment came increased resistance efforts by rebel groups. Discuss the Indian National Army’s (INA) role in this resistance movement, and consider the general attitudes of others observing the INA from afar. Is the resistance painted as particularly sympathetic or compelling in the novel?
6. While much of this book focuses on the larger collective experiences of those belonging to certain groups—Hindus, Muslims, the INA, etc.—readers are given a glimpse into the isolating individuality of a woman struggling to claim India or Britain as her rightful home. Reflect on Nigar Jaan’s outsider status, and her family’s relationship to place and belonging in India.
7. One of the slower-burning plot lines in *House of Caravans* centers around Bebe’s mysterious romantic history, which is a consistent source of tension for her children. Discuss the similarities, differences, and overall significance of her love stories as they relate to the book’s larger themes of constructions of (female) identity and inter-religious unions.
8. As violence comes to a head in the book, many characters find themselves at a crossroads; “Barre Nanu had a decision to make. Ought he to move to India or stay back?” [236] Discuss Barre Nanu’s decision not to follow his uncle out of Lahore—why does it take him so long to leave? Does blood feel thicker than water—and conflict—in this novel?
9. Readers first encounter Moin Bhai as the estranged childhood friend of Barre Nanu, before the two find themselves enemies over a dispute on pride and professions. But by the end of the novel, their friendship is restored, and Moin Bhai goes as far as to save Barre Nanu’s life by risking his own. Consider the themes of forgiveness and redemption at play throughout the novel.
10. Attiya Rehman finds herself estranged from her family due to the ongoing conflicts in India. After returning home to continue her search, she discovers that Barre Nanu has begun living there, and the two strike up an unlikely friendship—and romance. But only a year into their marriage, Attiya is confiscated from her husband and child, as effortlessly as property. Reflect on the impact of her final scene, ending in helplessness and silence, and on the dynamics of illegitimate children, unrecognized families, and women as political prisoners in wartime India.

