

## *Climbing the Stairs* Discussion Questions

*Climbing the Stairs* was chosen as a discussion text for a graduate library sciences class led by Dr. Cheryl McCarthy at the University of Rhode Island. The following questions are based on those the participants came up with and are used with the instructor's permission.

### Text to Self Connections

- Which character in the story can you best identify with? Explain how you relate to that character and list some of the traits you share. Discuss similar situations you and the character have faced and when you displayed some of the traits you described.
- Living during British occupation was not easy for Vidya. When a British girl calls Vidya a "coolie" (page 42) her father doesn't defend her. Vidya is shocked and upset about this and thinks her father should say something instead of ignoring the insult. How do you think Vidya's father should have handled the situation? Vidya's father cites a Tamil proverb (page 44) to explain his point of view. What do you think he is trying to tell her with those words? Do you think ignoring a situation can be effective? Why or why not, or under what circumstances?
- The members of the family have very different reactions to Kitta's choice. Compare their ideas about what is right and what is wrong. What does Kitta say to defend his choice? Whose point of view do you agree with and why? Do you think war is ever justified? Why or why not?
- Describe what the phrase "nonviolent protest" means to you. What are the positives and negatives for protesting nonviolently? In your opinion, can it always work?
- Vidya struggles to preserve hope in the face of oppression. Have you experienced a situation that seemed hopeless? What was your ray of hope during that difficult time?
- Vidya's family celebrates many festivals. Are there similarities between those celebrations and any of the holidays and traditions you observe?
- How do the obstacles that Vidya and Kitta face change them? Have you ever faced or overcome obstacles in your life? Do you think this has shaped the person you are today?
- When Malati leaves to join her new husband's household, Vidya shows kindness to both Malati and periamma even though they have been unkind to her. How did they react? What are some potential risks and benefits when we take the first positive step towards others?
- When Vidya first climbs the stairs to the library she is seeking an escape from both periamma and the limitations of her new life. What does she find beyond escape? In what ways have you benefited from books? Have you ever read a book that influenced your beliefs? Have you ever read a book that changed your plans for the future?

- On page 10, Kitta says, "We don't like Hitler because he says his race is superior. But the British think they're better than us, so we don't like them either." The home in Madras is described as starkly divided between the genders, with Indian men both accepting and enforcing rules of conduct that support the belief that men are superior to women. periamma, Sarasa chithi, and Malati believe themselves superior to anyone of a lower caste. This undercurrent of caste, in its many forms, weaves through all of the sub-plots of the novel. Can you think of other caste-like systems that exist (or have existed) in other societies? Is our society completely egalitarian or is there any caste-like system in the United States? If there is, what determines your place in the system? Is there a caste-like system in your community? If there is, what determines your place?
- On page 28, appa states that "what is right depends on the time, the place, and the circumstance." Vidya comments, on page 29, that "Hinduism did not categorically state what was good and bad; there were no dogmatic rules; instead, the religion gave suggestions on how to act with compassion." Yet, the daily lives of the extended family in Madras are governed by strict rules of conduct, hierarchy, and duty. In what ways does the novel demonstrate the distance between the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of the Hindu religion and some of the banal customs followed by Indian society? Is there any distance between the philosophy of your religion and its observance? How does Vidya seek to explore the inner realities of her faith? What is your personal relationship with your religion or philosophical tradition?
- Vidya dislikes many of the rules that govern the society of her time. What are some of our common rules relating to social interaction and household life? Where do these rules come from? How do the rules affect your life? What rules would you like to change (if any) and why?
- Vidya's Indian culture is different from our American culture in some ways but also is similar in many ways. Discuss some cultural similarities and difference in family dynamics. How are men and women treated differently? Is your relationship with extended family similar to Vidya's? What about the relationship between Vidya and Kitta - is that similar to your relationship to your sibling(s) in any way?
- Why do you think periamma and periappa act the way they do? Is it just their tradition or belief, or is it for their own personal gains? Have you observed people choosing to ignore traditions that do not further their agendas?
- Much can be learned about a person's character from how they treat those without power or position. What do we learn about Appa in this way? Periamma? Chinni Chithi? Do you treat everyone the same way?
- Once Vidya's appa becomes brain damaged, his own family treats him terribly. They call him an idiot. Why is this? Is it ignorance or something more? Have you encountered disability yourself or interacted with disabled people? How has this changed your outlook on life?
- In what ways do Vidya and her family support maintaining the caste system? Appa sends the family servants away when periappa visits instead of showing upfront how he runs his household? Why do you think he does this? What can be gained for hiding his true beliefs? What would you have done? Have you ever suppressed your beliefs in the face of social pressure?

## Text to World Connections

- Religion plays a large role in this book. Not only does it influence the characters' decisions but their religion has helped develop who they are. Name some things you learned about the Hindu religion.
- We have had examples of non-violent leaders in the United States. If you lived in the era of the civil rights movement, how would you have felt about the nonviolent protest given how African-Americans were treated during those times? What about now? If someone were to treat you differently because of the color of your skin, your gender, your religious beliefs, or cultural beliefs, how would you react?
- Does Vidya understand Kitta's point of view? Does she respect it? Given the amount of protest surrounding the war in Iraq, how would you resolve conflict within your own family concerning the war?
- The British are an important presence in Vidya's world as both oppressors of the Indian people and as fighters against the Nazis. How are the British characterized at the beginning of the novel? Does this change by the end? Consider Vidya's personal encounters with the British; in what ways do these encounters contribute to this characterization?
- In appa's family's household in Madras, whose privacy is guarded and whose is invaded? Who decides this? How does this affect Vidya in particular? How does the issue of privacy relate to some of the main themes of the novel?
- Objects and symbols can often mean different things to different people. Too many of us, the swastika symbolizes something evil by its association with the Nazis, but as Vidya points out (page 10), the swastika was a religious symbol in India before it was adopted by Hitler. Can you think of any other objects or ideas that act as symbols in the novel? Do they symbolize something different to different characters? Apply those same questions to today's world; identify symbols in your life (religious, national, personal, etc.) and consider what they might mean to different people.
- Vidya and her family live in British-occupied India during World War II and are colonial subjects of the crown with limited rights and freedoms in their own land. Provide some examples of how the British exerted their will over the people of India and discriminated against them. What other instances throughout history can you think of where people were discriminated against? How are these situations similar/different to the instances of discrimination in the novel?
- Kitta states, "I care about the world, Vidya. The whole world needs our help in this war." How do you think Kitta arrived at this belief? What does it mean to care about the world in the context of this novel?
- Vidya does not wish to marry because she wants to go to college first and she fears that her family will marry her off to a less than desirable husband. Today, in our culture, it is acceptable for women to marry at a much older age than would have been the norm for Vidya. Additionally, arranged marriages, though not very common to us, are still practiced in many cultures. How does the prospect of marriage affect Vidya's outlook on life? How would your life be different if you had to marry before you turned seventeen? Are there any benefits to an arranged marriage? If so, what are they? If not, why?

- How does *Climbing the Stairs* provide counter examples to a one-sided view of the British and White racism? Can you name those examples from within the novel? Where does World War II era Japan fit into this discussion of racism?
- How does the novel depict the United States of America? If the events took place in a later time period, such as today, in what ways do you think the United States would be depicted differently?
- Vidya stops reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* before finishing the book (page 130). Comment on the irony of Vidya's decision, in light of later developments in the story. How do the parallels found in the two novels help to bridge the gap between two cultures? How do they reflect universal concerns about marriage, the female experience and class that transcend geographic boundaries? How does the idea of universal experiences challenge the foundations of British racism and Colonial rule?

## General Questions

- In what ways are the men in this story different from each other? Discuss the ways in which Kitta and Raman are different from appa and periappa.
- Vidya and her cousin Malati are both female (and from the same family) but their lives are very different. Why do you think this is the case? What factors (people, events, places, etc.) in their lives contribute to the different paths their lives take?
- We meet Vidya when she is 15 years old. She is allowed with minor disapproval to climb trees and other activities typically done by boys. What do you think her childhood was like? How is her childhood important in her development to become the adolescent we meet at the opening of the novel? At the end of the novel? How do all of Vidya's experiences living in Madras help her to become the woman she is at the conclusion of the novel?
- Malati and periamma are very cruel to Vidya. In spite of this, Vidya wishes Malati well when she gets married and comforts a very distraught periamma after Malati leaves. Why do you think Vidya reaches out compassionately to those who treat her harshly?
- Appa said that nonviolence is not always the answer, and Kitta leaves to join the military as World War II is breaking out. Today we live in a similar climate with atrocities going on around the world. Kitta says, "Nonviolence doesn't work quickly, we can't afford to wait any longer" (page 182). Do you think nonviolent protest can work to stop the evil in today's world?
- The extended family insists on maintaining strong separations between castes. How does this practice conflict with their stated belief in nonviolence?
- What does the title of the novel, *Climbing the Stairs*, mean to you? We eventually learn that Vidya literally climbs the stairs to access a library, in secret at first, until she gains permission from her grandfather. What other kinds of "stairs" does Vidya climb? What are some other abstract meanings the title acquires that do not involve Vidya directly? List some of the themes in the novel. How does this metaphor work to fit these themes?

- What aspects of Indian culture did you learn about by reading this novel? What are you interested to learn more about?
- Vidya feels her life has been stifled from all the rules and customs that take place in her grandfather's home, but when she travels outside the garden gates she sees chaos, extreme poverty and disease. In which ways is the house in Madras a prison and in which ways is it a sanctuary? Why are Vidya's encounters with the gypsy woman and the kind British officer important? What are some ways to overcome stereotypes and prejudices?
- Throughout Vidya's life she grows to hate her summer visits to her uncle's house. Why is Vidya's life in Bombay so different from the life of her father's family in Madras?
- Before her father's beating, Vidya's last perfect day with her family was at Mahim Beach. At the end of the day, when amma comes in her room to say goodnight, she quotes from the Bhagavad Gita: "In whatever way people approach me, even so do I bless and love them. For many are the paths of worship, and all end in me" (page 29). Do you think Vidya acted in accordance with this quote throughout the novel? Explain your answer and give some examples.
- Why do you think the author chose to leave the novel open-ended? If you had the chance to write a sequel to the story how would you have it continue? What would happen to Vidya? Raman? Kitta?
- Why did the author choose to have appa disabled mentally, rather than have him die? What purpose does his silent presence, and his extended family's treatment of him, have in the story of Vidya? How would the story have been different if he had died?
- At what point does Vidya begin to have a deeper relationship with her mother? Give some examples and explain what these small acts represent.