

Moth by Melody Razak - discussion questions

Book club Wednesday 5/31/23 at Comstock Township Library

Discussion questions

- 1) What was your overall opinion of *Moth*? Did you like the book?
- 2) Did you know anything about the history of India or Partition before reading this book? Did you learn anything by reading it?
- 3) How is Alma's family unique compared to other Indian families at the time?
- 4) What is the role of honor in Indian culture?
- 5) What is the role of spirituality and religion in Indian culture?
- 6) What is the experience of women at this time? Is there any hope for improvement?
- 7) Is Daadee Maa a bad person? Is she simply a product of her upbringing and society? Is she both?
- 8) Roop demonstrates violent tendencies throughout the book. Is her behavior concerning?
- 9) How would Alma's life have been different if she had married at 14 and gone with her husband to live in England?
- 10) How is Alma's family different after her abduction? How is the book different once her voice is lost?
- 11) What did you think of Alma's decision regarding her baby?
- 12) Do you think it would be possible for Alma to live a happy life after being raped and abducted, then returning home?
- 13) Would you recommend this book to others?

Glossary

- **Azaadi** – also spelled “azadi”, means freedom or liberty in Persian and other languages
- **Brahmin** – also spelled “Brahman” is the highest ranking social class in Hindu India. This was the name for the group of priests in the Vedic period.

“The ritual purity of the Brahmans is maintained through the observance of numerous taboos, many of which relate to diet and contact with lower castes. Most Brahman castes are strictly vegetarian, and their members must abstain from certain occupations. They may not plow or handle any impure material, such as leather or hides, but they may farm and do such agricultural work as does not violate these specific restrictions. They may also accept employment as domestic servants; many well-to-do Hindus have Brahman cooks, who are valued because members of all castes may eat the food that they prepare,” (Britannica).

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/jati-Hindu-caste>

- **Chamars** – A low-ranking caste that were “Untouchables” because their work as leather tanners required them to handle dead animals.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chamar>
- **Daadee Maa** – means “Grandmother” in Hindi.
- **Direct Action Day** riots –

“India suffered the biggest Moslem-Hindu riot in its history. Moslem League Boss Mohamed Ali Jinnah had picked the 18th day of Ramadan for "Direct Action Day" against Britain's plan for Indian independence (which does not satisfy the Moslems' old demand for a separate Pakistan). Though direct, the action was supposed to be peaceful. But before the disastrous day was over, blood soaked the melting asphalt of sweltering Calcutta's streets.

Rioting Moslems went after Hindus with guns, knives and clubs, looted shops, stoned newspaper offices, set fire to Calcutta's British business district. Hindus retaliated by firing Moslem mosques and miles of Moslem slums. Thousands of homeless families roamed the city in search of safety and food (most markets had been pilfered or closed). Police blotters were filled with stories of women raped, mutilated and burned alive. Indian police, backed by British Spitfire scouting planes and armored cars, battled mobs of both factions. Cried Hindu Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (who is trying to form an interim government despite the Moslems' refusal to enter it): "Either direct action knocks the Government over, or the Government knocks direct action over."

By the 21st day of Ramadan, direct action had killed some 3,000 people and wounded thousands more,” (TIME).

<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,933559,00.html>

- **Hindustan** – the northern region of India ; the southern region is called Deccan.

- **Jinnah** – Mohamed Ali Jinnah was a lawyer and the leader of the Muslim League. He advocated for the creation of a Muslim homeland, Pakistan.
- **Kafirs** – a term meaning “non-Muslim” that is now considered outdated and potentially offensive

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/hindus-cant-be-dubbed-kafir-says-jamiat/articleshow/4179187.cms>

- **Mali** – occupational caste that are gardeners
- **Mirza Ghalib** – Celebrated poet who wrote in Urdu and Persian. Born 1797 in Agra, died in New Delhi 1869.
- **Pathan** – Also called “Pashtun”. Ethnolinguistic group that lives in the region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- **Rabindranath Tagore** – 1861-1941. Writer, poet, friend of Ghandi.

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/biographical/>

- **Urdu** – Official language of Pakistan that borrows from Arabic and Persian. Very similar to Hindi but their writing systems differ.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Urdu-language>

Timeline of relevant dates

600-700 CE – Muslim traders bring the religion of Islam

1400-1500 – Sikhism founded

1600 – British East India Company founded

1632-1654 – Taj Mahal built

1650-1656 – Jama Masjid built

1885 – Indian National Congress political party founded

1869-1948 – lifetime of Mohandas Ghandi. He was a lawyer who championed nonviolent protest against British rule. This consisted of actions such as boycotts, fasts, peaceful strikes, and withholding taxes. In the 1920s, he restructured the Indian National congress and penned its constitution. He was assassinated in 1948 by a radical Hindu nationalist.

1876-1948 – lifetime of Mohamed Ali Jinnah

1889-1964 – lifetime of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister.

1947 – Independence from Britain

1971- East Pakistan secedes and becomes Bangladesh.

Additional resources

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<https://www.hinduamerican.org/blog/5-things-to-know-about-vedic-astrology>

BBC. (2019). India profile – Timeline. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12641776>

Dalrymple, William. (2015). The great divide: The violent legacy of Indian Partition. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>

Largehearted Boy. (2022). Melody Razak's playlist for her novel "Moth".

https://largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2022/08/melody_razaks_p.html

PBS. (2008). The story of India. <https://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/timeline/6/>

Shah, Pooja. (2021). My parents' astrologer told me not to marry my fiancé. Here's what I finally decided. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/vedic-astrology-marriage-compatibility-natal-chart_n_6025667fc5b6741597e089ff