

Climbing the Stairs Study Guide

Climbing the Stairs by T. V. Padma

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Contents

Climbing the Stairs Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
August 1941 - Ganesha Chaturthi.....	4
Madras - Raman.....	10
Deepavali - Malati's Departure.....	14
Pearl Harbor - Alone.....	18
Saidapet - Madras August 14th, 1942.....	21
Characters.....	26
Objects/Places.....	29
Themes.....	31
Style.....	34
Quotes.....	37
Topics for Discussion.....	39



Plot Summary

Fifteen-year-old Vidya is coming of age during a time of political upheaval in the British colony of India. The youngest daughter of a Brahmin family, Vidya and her brother, Kitta, are brought up with a mixture of modern values and Hindu philosophical thought. Caught between the Indian non-violent push for independence and the violence of World War II, Vidya and her family must search for their place in a quickly changing world.

Vidya and her family must move in to her grandfather's home, with their extended family, after her father becomes brain damaged after a beating. There are different hierarchies in the home. Rules for how men and women interact with each other and rules for how women should behave. Vidya, like her father, believes in the nonviolence taught by Indian leaders like Gandhiji (Gandhi), but her brother decides to join the Indian British army and help the British fight the Axis powers.

Vidya is out of place in her grandfather's traditional home. Her relatives are cruel to her and she misses the freedom that she enjoyed when she lived in Bombay with her parents. Vidya wants to go to college and was told by her father she could go, but after her father's injury she is afraid to continue to dream about college. Vidya doesn't want to drop out of school and marry. She is expected to marry. Instead, she tries to fight her feelings for Raman. Raman lives with the family during the school year. Vidya and Raman fall in love over the course of the book.

The war comes to India and Vidya's family is sent away for the summer. Vidya comes to love Raman and they become engaged. Raman leaves for college in America and Vidya's grandfather agrees to send Vidya to college in their home town of Madras. Vidya ends up happy with her new life and is able to reconcile the values with which she was raised and the demands of modern society.



August 1941 - Ganesha Chaturthi.

August 1941 - Ganesha Chaturthi. Summary

August 1941:

Fifteen-year-old Vidya and her eighteen-year-old brother Kitta are helping to collect food and decorate their home for Krishna Jayanthi. They are decorating and awaiting a visit from their father's older brother, their periappa, when their father arrives home. Appa gets out of the car and rushes to the house, there is a dark red stain on his shirt collar. Amma, Vidya and Kitta's mother, knows something is wrong, but the adults act like things are normal in front of the children. Appa reminds them all that his brother is coming for a short visit, then he goes in the house with amma. Vidya is not looking forward to periappa's visit. She, like her family, is part of the Brahmin caste and doesn't think the caste system is part of the Hindu faith. However, periappa very much believes in the caste system. Vidya tells her brother she doesn't like how periappa acts better than others because of his caste. Kitta tells her that many feel the way periappa does. The two then discuss the current world war; Kitta explains to Vidya that Indians dislike their British colonizers and also dislike Hitler, but that doesn't mean they are on Hitler's side. Hitler believes he is superior to other races and that is similar to how the British treat Indians. They discuss Gandhiji and his struggle for Indian freedom. Vidya wants to know why periappa is coming for a short visit and why father had something on his collar. Kitta tries to get out of talking about it and is saved from having to deal with Vidya's questions when their mother comes out and calls them in to change clothes.

Krishna Jayanthi:

Vidya gets ready for dinner and reapplies the pottu in the center of her forehead. She thanks her maid, Ponni, and meets the family for dinner. Vidya notices that her mother looks worried and she assumes it is because her uncle is coming. When her uncle visits her mother must wait on him hand and foot. He won't eat food that isn't fixed by Brahmin hands. The family celebrates Krishna Jayanthi and honors their different gods. Vidya tries to get her father to tell her what is going on with him, she can tell something is happening and is upset her brother is included but she isn't. Appa tells Vidya he is helping the nonviolent freedom fighters in their movement to get India out from under the control of Britain. Vidya is proud of her father and finds it hard to get to sleep that night.

Rifka:

Vidya can't wait to get to school and tell her best friend, Rifka, about her father's activities as a freedom fighter. She tells Rifka that afternoon at lunch. Rifka is excited and swears to keep Vidya's father's activities a secret - even from her parents. The girls return to class, but are unable to talk about her father's adventurous new life as a freedom fighter. Rifka tells Vidya she wants to come over the next week to see her



father again now that she knows he is a hero. School is over and Vidya is picked up by their driver, Suruve, and her brother.

Mahim Beach:

Vidya's father is home when she returns from school. The family takes a walk together in the evening along the Arabian Sea. Appa buys nuts for the kids from a vendor, even though amma worries they will get sick from them. Vidya's family goes for a walk together after dinner, then they clean the dishes and read together. The servants are all on holiday. Amma and appa don't approve of the way periappa treats those of a lower caste, so they give them time off when he is coming to town. Vidya is upset that her brother is reading a book about soldiers and war. She questions appa about their Hindu faith. Appa tells Vidya that he will not censure what her brother reads. He also tells her he is a faithful Hindu, but doesn't always think nonviolence is the answer. Vidya reflects on their faith and her family's belief that there are many paths to God. She finds the words of the Bhagavad Gita soothing, because it allows her to be friends with Rifka even though they are of different faiths.

The Chess Game:

Appa asks Vidya to put her dog, Raja, in the yard as they wait for periappa to visit. Vidya apologizes to the dog for having to punish him just because her uncle is coming. Vidya is trying to enjoy her last few moments of freedom too, knowing she will be stuck in the house once her traditional uncle arrives. She approaches Kitta and asks him to play a game of chess. Kitta is surprised, as Vidya isn't a chess player, but says ok. Vidya uses the game as a chance to ask her brother questions about their father's activities with the freedom fighters. Kitta explains that their father is a doctor to the protesters when they are injured. He explains that the protesters are nonviolent, but the British are not, and they beat the protesters. Vidya is uneasy with the mental picture his words conjure. Kitta worries he told her too much, and tries to reassure her that the doctors are safe.

Periappa:

Periappa arrives and everyone must bow to him and accept his blessing. Vidya hates this custom, and usually doesn't do it well, but this time she is too preoccupied thinking about the protesters to make a big deal over it. Everyone notices Vidya's accommodating behavior and Periappa gives her a backhanded compliment. The family sits to dinner and the brothers begin to argue. Periappa believes they should accept British clothes and titles; appa feels they should hold onto their traditions. Periappa tells his brother that appa is lucky because he has his own medical practice; this allows him the freedom to stick to his morals and values. Periappa points out that he works for the British, and he must do what they want in order to have a job and status. Appa is upset by the ways in which the British have tried to eradicate Indian culture. They give Indian men British titles and have destroyed the Indian's traditional education and crops, forcing them to accept Western ideas and practices. Amma interrupts the men and asks periappa about the arranged marriage he has made for his daughter. Before bed, Vidya



tells amma she doesn't want to marry before finishing school. Amma and appa have given her a year to put off marriage, but Vidya secretly harbors the hope that she will be allowed to attend college.

Black Crow:

Appa invites Vidya to drive periappa to the train station with him. She is excited to go and have alone time with her father. They pass through Breach Candy, a white-only town, on the way. When they arrive at the station, Vidya accidentally brushes against a white girl. The girl hits Vidya with an umbrella and calls her a coolie. Vidya shouts at the girl and her mother, but is quieted by her father. On the way home Vidya tells her father that she is upset he didn't stand up for her. Appa asks her what he might have done, call the woman and child names? When Vidya says "yes" appa tells her to have dignity. Vidya asks appa how he can call himself a freedom fighter if he doesn't fight for the injustices that happen to him. Appa tells her there are many ways to fight. Vidya is angry and threatens to run away and join the fighters. Appa laughs at her and tells her if she joins the fighters she won't be able to go to college. Vidya is shocked and thrilled that her father is going to allow her to go to college. They continue to drive along the shore line when they begin hearing strange noises.

The Protest March:

Appa pulls the Austin over to the side of the road as a large wall of protesters appears in the street. They are marching arm-in-arm, waving the Indian flag and singing the national song. This is a song banned by the British. Vidya is moved by the protest and gets out of the car, running into the thick crowd. Appa is terrified and runs after her, trying to pull her out of the crowd. Vidya struggles against him, taken in by the protest. The British come into the crowd riding horses. When the marchers refuse to disperse, they begin beating them with lathi, long silver tipped sticks. Vidya watches, horrified, as they beat a woman and rip open her blouse. Appa grabs the woman and covers her protectively while the soldiers rain blows on his shoulders and skull. Vidya describes hearing his head crack like a coconut.

The Idiot:

Vidya watches helplessly as her father and the woman crumple to the ground in a twisted mess. The police arrive and herd the peaceful protesters into vans and off to jail. A Muslim man drags appa to a makeshift hospital run out of someone's home. He is alive, but in bad shape. In a daze, Vidya is taken home. She and her brother are left with the neighbors for a few days while her mother goes to be with her father. When appa returns, he is brain damaged. He will remain this way until the day he dies.

Ganesha Chaturthi:

Vidya's brother allows her some distance from the family, but her mother is worried about her and wants her to talk to someone. Rifka calls to find out why Vidya has been missing school. Vidya tells her that her father was hurt, but can't say anymore. Rifka wants to help, but is trying to give Vidya her space. Amma's brother, Bala maama,



comes to stay for a few weeks. He helps amma get their finances in order and tries to help her though her emotionally trying time. He tells her to wear earrings still and encourages her to participate in the worship time of the god Ganesha. Amma and Bala maama decide that they need to use the money the family has to put Kitta through college and pay a marriage dowry for Vidya. Vidya is too upset to do anything more than agree. Kitta wants to disagree, but knows they are right. Indian custom requires amma to live with her husband's family if she can't take care of them.

August 1941 - Ganesha Chathurthi. Analysis

August 1941:

Chapter one introduces many of the book's main characters and sets up the tensions which will become an intricate part of the storyline. The chapter is also used to explain India's role in WWI, something which may not be common knowledge for readers. The author takes time to familiarize the reader with the caste system and where Vidya and her brother are in that system. They are part of the educated, scholar class. They are Brahmin. Vidya's family has servants and her father has a driver to drive him in the family car. However, appa and amma are progressives. Appa believes caste is a social construct and not a true tenet of the Hindu faith. Vidya shares her father's beliefs. Kitta seems to be more pragmatic and thoughtful about things than his sister. However, it is clear he believes the same way his family does.

Krishna Jayanthi:

Vidya is still too young to understand the ramifications of her father becoming involved with the freedom fighters movement. However, the anxiety she sees in her mother is most certainly a result of the issues they are dealing with now that her father is involved in the movement. Vidya's family is Brahmin, and wealthy, and have a lot to lose if her father is caught. Vidya's confusion about her uncle's visit suggests some foreshadowing about what is to come, both in terms of her relationship and life at her uncle's house and in his reason for visiting them.

Rifka:

Rifka is Jewish. There is some foreboding in this chapter that Rifka could be in danger because of the war. Vidya recounts her summers in Madras at her periappa's home. Periappa's home is very traditional. Vidya's grandfather lives with him and they separate the men from the women. Married couples take turn using the one bedroom set aside for couples. Vidya and her family spend their entire summer at periappa's home. Usually she sees very little of her father and brother, as the men live upstairs and the women live downstairs. Vidya thinks how happy she is that her parents moved to Bombay. She also thinks about how different her parents are from others in the family.

Mahim Beach:



Vidya's family seems to be very egalitarian. After buying nuts on the boardwalk, her father gives Vidya one before her brother. The entire family clears the table together and does the dishes; they also read together and spend family time together. This chapter offers the reader a clear picture of just how progressive Vidya's parents are. Not only do they share chores and family time, they also openly question and debate their faith. Their words and behaviors set them apart from many in their society and in their extended family.

The Chess Game:

Vidya struggles with wanting to be treated like an adult, but also with not truly being able to handle the realities of what she is being told. She is uneasy with the thought of the peaceful protesters being beaten and is worried for her father. She is also struggling to understand the Hindu concept of ahimsa, nonviolence. She doesn't like the picture of nonviolence being met with violence. The chess game played between Vidya and Kitta is symbolic of the conflict of values going on within the family and in their society.

Periappa:

Periappa and appa represent a clash of cultures and values, modern versus the traditional.

Vidya feels trapped by the idea of having to give up her education to get married, and she has been raised in such a way that she feels her ideas and thoughts matter and are important to her family. The family listens to the radio together and hears about the German blitzkrieg of London. Periappa and appa both agree that the British have a lot of nerve asking Indians to fight for them when they are paid less and treated with less respect than white soldiers.

Black Crow:

It is clear that appa is upset about what happens to Vidya at the station, but it is also clear he is committed to maintaining their dignity and to the concept of nonviolence. However, his frustration at the racism in India is apparent. Appa's way to provide Vidya with equality and fairness is to offer her a chance to go to college, something nearly unheard of for an Indian girl. The mood changes in the last paragraph of the chapter. It becomes clear that something big is about to happen.

The Protest March:

Vidya finds out first hand how people get hurt in a peaceful protest. She notes that her father could have easily fought off his attacker, but he didn't. He sacrificed his life for his values and beliefs. The British soldier hesitates before hitting the Indian woman, but is egged on by other soldiers.

The Idiot:



Inside the makeshift hospital, Vidya is told her father can't be taken to a real hospital or he will be put in jail without trial. Vidya can't believe she is able to function through her haze of shock and grief. She tells her saviors who she is and where she lives. They take her home and bring her mother back to her father. Vidya and Kitta stay with the upstairs neighbors until their mother returns. Her father comes home a week later, a shell of his former self.

Ganesha Chaturthi:

Vidya has yet to tell her family exactly what happened the day appa was hurt. She is embarrassed for Rifka to see her father as an idiot instead of a hero. She also blames herself for what has happened. Vidya is emotionally closed off and refuses to feel much for fear that she will come undone. She agrees to live with her uncle and grandfather, doesn't protest the idea of marriage and doesn't tell her family that appa told her she could attend college. Like Kitta, Bala maama is supportive of his sister, amma.



Madras - Raman.

Madras - Raman. Summary

Madras:

Vidya and her family board the train and make the journey to Madras. They are welcomed by her thatha, her grandfather, at the door. No one met them at the train station and they walked to thatha's home alone. Vidya is surprised thatha has come down from upstairs. He usually is too busy to greet them. He seems surprised that no one met them at the station. Vidya's brother escorts his father to their living quarters upstairs with the other men. Vidya and her mother will live in a communal bedroom with the other women. Periappa's wife, periamma, and the other two aunts Chinni chithi and Sarasa chithi. There is an obvious hierarchy inside the home. Thantha is the patriarch. Periamma is in charge of the women and she is not pleased to have more people under her roof. Chinni chithi is a skinny, unattractive girl. Sarasa chithi ingratiates herself for periamma and is not given a lot of chores as a result. Vidya has a hard time adjusting at dinner. The men are served first by the women. Kitta isn't given enough to eat because periamma is showing her power over their lives. Vidya challenges her and gets her brother more food, however, she is given less as a result. When the women eat, Vidya is taunted by her beautiful cousin, Malati, who brags about her upcoming wedding.

School:

Vidya wakes early so she can bathe privately in the communal bath. She does her chores and tries to read the paper before school. Periamma tells Vidya she isn't allowed to read the paper. Malati tells Vidya there are no sports for girls at her school. The girls walk to the bus and Malati tries to blackmail Vidya into carrying her bag and braiding her hair. She tells Vidya that she will tell everyone about her father if Vidya doesn't do what she wants. Vidya refuses to become her cousin's slave. Vidya is introduced to the class and asked to stand up and talk about herself. She tries to smile, but no one smiles back. The teacher, Mrs. Rao, asks Vidya what her father is. Vidya tells the class her father died as a freedom fighter. Mrs. Rao punishes Vidya for impertinence and tells her that her father deserved to die. The next day Malati tells Mrs. Rao that Vidya lied. The teacher tells the class to stay away from Vidya because she is a liar. She tells them her father is an idiot and that they should be more like Malati. Then she canes Vidya's writing hand and makes her do her work.

Upstairs:

Periamma finds Vidya doing her school work and gives her a list of chores to do. She tells Vidya she is to take music lessons with Malati, that thatha wanted it. Vidya thinks she would have enjoyed the lessons if they were for her pleasure, and not to make her more appealing to a husband. Vidya babysits Chinni chithi's infant daughter, Mangalam. She enjoys the baby, but becomes bored when the baby falls asleep. Vidya remembers



appa always enjoyed the library. She was unable to bring books to their new home, so she decides to climb the stairs to the men's area and read. She settles in with the baby and reads in the men's library until dark.

Chinni Chithi:

Periamma and Sarasa chithi get together to be cruel to Chinni chithi. Chinni is pregnant with a third child, even though she already has a son and an infant daughter. The two older women make fun of Chinni and tell her she might miscarry because she named her daughter such an awful name. They tell her she is wrong to only want two children, and they look at amma accusingly. Sarasa chithi tells them it is their duty to have children. Periamma tells Vidya she will be in charge of washing the baby's clothes now because Chinni will have to stay with her parents during her pregnancy. Vidya wishes Chinni would stand up for herself, but she doesn't. That evening, Vidya hears the men talking about the war. Kitta says he thinks the war is becoming like the first World War, periappa disagrees.

Hans Brinker:

Vidya has no friends at school, she does well in her studies but her teacher still hates her. Her only good times are spent in the library and in the hallway where she can hear pieces of news floating from the men's radio. She reads Hans Brinker over a few days and decides to help her father become well again so they can return to Bombay.

A Walk:

Vidya meets her brother and father at the bottom of the stairs when they leave for their evening walk. She isn't supposed to go outside, but she goes for a walk with them. Vidya tells Kitta of the story she read and tries talking to appa. Kitta wants Vidya to accept reality. They talk about their schooling for a while. Kitta takes care of appa when he returns home each day, the women take care of appa during the day. Vidya asks Kitta how he can stand the mean things the aunts and uncles say about appa. Kitta tells her there are more important people in the world saying more important things. Vidya asks Kitta if the family is trying to marry her off and asks if she can stay unmarried until she graduates. Kitta says he will try his best, as the head of their house they must get his approval to marry her off. They return home to find amma upset. She tells Kitta never to allow Vidya out again, they aren't alone and people will talk. Vidya is upset and goes to her room.

Saraswathi Poojai:

The festival of Saraswathi poojai has begun and the women in the family decorate and pray. The goddess is a goddess of learning, so in celebration, Vidya brings Hans Brinker down from the library and puts it with her stack of books. Periamma finds the book and questions Vidya. Vidya admits to going into the library and is told it is not allowed by periamma. Vidya gathers her courage and asks thatha if she can study in the library. Everyone in the household holds their breath. A handsome young man, whom Vidya assumes is part of her paternal aunt's family, agrees with Kitta that Vidya should be



allowed to learn and read in the library. Thatha agrees. Periappa is horrified. Chinni and amma are proud of Vidya for her courage.

Raman:

It isn't until early October that Vidya is able to talk to the boy. His name is Raman and he is her paternal aunt's brother-in-law from Coimbatore. He is living with the family in Madras while he attends school. Raman tells Vidya she hasn't seen him because he had typhoid and was quarantined in the upstairs. He tells her he noticed her a while ago. The two talk about faith, books and Bombay. Raman seems to know what Vidya is thinking before she says it. Vidya is sad when their conversation is over. She enters the house smiling and writes a letter to Rifka. She decides to get off the bus early on the way to school and use her bus fare to pay for a postage stamp to send her letter.

Madras - Raman. Analysis

Madras:

Thantha's home is a huge adjustment for Vidya and her family. Vidya and Kitta are used to being outspoken. They are also used to equality in their family. Periappa and Periamma refer to Appa as an "idiot" and this enrages Vidya. Unlike, Amma and Kitta, Vidya has a hard time not speaking her mind. She doesn't let insults roll off of her, even for the sake of harmony inside the household. It is clear that periamma will do her best to make their lives uncomfortable. She wields power within the house. Kitta is told that he will resume college in Madras. Vidya's mother tells her she will go to school here also.

School:

Vidya's world has been turned upside down. She is isolated at school and has been humiliated, but still she has spirit. After being caned, she finishes her work. Taking pleasure in the small victory that she finished her writing assignment and didn't get anything on it wrong. Malati has shown herself to be Vidya's enemy. The hierarchy of women in the house is oppressive and stifling for Vidya. She notes that her grandfather is wealthy, but they live modestly. She also tries to make sense of their Brahmin ideals, as her father hated the caste system and felt the British encouraged it as a way to turn the Indian people against each other.

Upstairs:

Vidya is playing a dangerous game by going into the men's library. Women are not allowed upstairs and she is living in a home where the education of women is not considered to be important. She is uncertain what periamma will do if she is discovered.

Chinni Chithi:



It is unclear exactly how Chinni made her wishes known that she didn't want to have more than two children. However, it is clear that periamma and Sarasa consider themselves superior to Chinni because of her desire to have a limited number of children. Chinni feels badly that Vidya has more work because of her, but Vidya likes Chinnie and goes out of her way to put the woman at ease.

Hans Brinker:

The story of Hans Brinker resonates with Vidya because it is similar to her own story. The story gives her hope. She is also able to conceive of a way to undo the damage done to her father, which she blames herself for. Hans Brinker is the story of a brother and sister whose father becomes brain damaged. The siblings try to win a pair of silver skates, and in the process find a doctor to help cure their father.

A Walk:

Vidya's immediate family, who were once so close, are now isolated from each other both mentally and emotionally. Kitta is bound by the rules of the home just as much as his mother and sister, but he acknowledges that Vidya has it worse. Kitta knows his sister is breaking rules, but he doesn't warn her against it. It is only amma who is fearful for her daughter. She seems to feel that Vidya's reputation could be ruined.

Saraswathi Poojai:

Vidya risks a lot when she asks permission to go into the library. She has never spoken directly to her grandfather and isn't certain what will happen if she does. She is surprised to find that her uncle and grandfather are willing to listen to the young man sitting at the table, but she is elated when she is given permission to study.

Raman:

Raman is an attractive young man a few years older than Kitta. He is almost finished with schooling and is staying with Vidya's family. The family treats him with deference, as he is brother to Vidya's aunt's husband. Vidya thinks of him as chivalrous and there is a certain chemistry between the two. Raman respects Vidya's opinions and seems to enjoy her company.



Deepavali - Malati's Departure.

Deepavali - Malati's Departure. Summary

Deepavali:

Vidya and her family are allowed to participate in the fireworks that accompany the festival of Deepavali, celebrating Lord Krishna. Vidya tells her mother she looks beautiful and remembers how her parents used to look at each other with adoring eyes. Vidya reaches into a box for some sparklers and her hand brushes against Raman's. The two back away from each other nervously, touching is frowned upon in their culture. That night Vidya dreams of Raman.

Raman's Gift:

It is the second day of Deepavali and all of the women in the house are given new saris by their husbands/fathers. Because appa is "gone" Vidya and amma are not given new saris. The other women go to bless their garments and Vidya tells amma it is ok, she has enough saris anyway. Thatha appears and hands Vidya boxes from a famous silk store, inside are beautiful saris for both Vidya and her mother. The old man leaves before Vidya can thank him. Vidya puts on the pink and gold sari and sneaks into the library to look at herself in the full length mirror, knowing if she is caught admiring herself she will be banned from the library. Raman finds her there and gives her a blank journal as a gift. He tells her it might help how she feels. Vidya sits in the library and writes how she feels, she writes about her life in Madras and about the library.

The Library:

Vidya is in the library with baby Mangalam when Raman comes in to find a book. The next day he comes in to study. On the following day, Raman is already in the library when Vidya arrives. The two fall into companionable silence as Vidya writes and reads and Raman studies. Thatha enters the library for the first time since Vidya has been using it. He and Raman discuss a familiar book while Vidya sits nervously. After thatha leaves, Raman asks Vidya why she is so nervous. She tells him she thinks thatha was checking on them because they are unchaperoned, the idea makes her uncomfortable as appa always trusted her. Raman points out it is thatha's job to protect her because she is unmarried. Vidya asks if he is worried about their reputations, he tells her he cares about his friends. But what he really meant to say was that he cared about her. Vidya leaves the library and can't meet Raman's eyes as she serves dinner. That night she thinks about him before falling asleep.

The Outhouse:

Vidya's period begins and she is banished to the outhouse as is the custom. The outhouse is solitary confinement. Menstruating women are not allowed to leave the shed until they are finished. They can't bathe and are considered unclean. No one



interacts with them, going so far as to leave their food in a bowl outside the door. Vidya is not allowed to be seen even to get the food. She is burning with humiliation when she returns to school and the house three days later. Raman confronts her in the library and demands to know where she has been. He finally gets the picture and tells her he wishes he could have three days off. His casual words send Vidya into a righteous rage. She expresses her anger for tradition and for the idea that a woman's body is not private. She tells Raman she wishes she lived in a world with only women. Raman cracks a joke by asking if she was sure she wanted to only be with Malati and they both begin to laugh. The tension is broken. Raman agrees with Vidya that some of their traditions are nonsense.

Karthigai:

Vidya returns home from school and is confronted by periamma. A letter came from Rifka; periamma and Malati opened it and read it. Vidya is upset over their invasion of privacy. Periamma questions her about where she got the money for a stamp. Vidya tells her that her brother posted the letter. Malati has dropped out of school in preparation for her wedding, so does not know Vidya has been getting off of the bus early and saving her money. In her letter, Rifka tells Vidya she misses her and invites her to come for a visit. Amma, Vidya and Chinni decorate with oil lamps for the second festival of light, Karthigai, and they are joined by thatha and Raman. Kitta is busy listening to the radio about the war and doesn't join them. Vidya hasn't spoken with him in weeks. Chinni tells Vidya she is leaving the next day to stay with her family for the rest of her pregnancy. The older women go inside, leaving Vidya and Raman to enjoy each other's company.

Malati's Wedding:

It is December first and the day of Malati's wedding has finally arrived. The wedding celebration is a week long affair and the groom's family has brought nearly 80 guests to the celebration. Periappa rented a house for the groom's family three blocks away. Vidya, Sarasa and Sarasa's husband, followed by a band, spend the morning going back and forth to the guests' house with food. Kitta, Raman and Vidya greet the guests as they arrive for the wedding. They are left to themselves while everyone enjoys the festivities. Vidya remarks that Malati looks "ravishing" in her wedding finery. Raman tells Vidya she looks ravishing too. Kitta mocks the two of them, batting his eyelashes and pretending to be a flirty girl. Raman and Vidya hold his arms and pretend to hit him for teasing them. Vidya is surprised to find how equal the marriage vows are, especially the seventh vow that has the couple promising to look after each other and be each other's best friends. Raman remarks that he never thought much about the equality of Indian marriages or the vows before, at least not until he met Vidya. Kitta loves this and teases the pair again.

Malati's Departure:

The wedding is over and it is time for Malati to leave the house to live with her husband's family. Vidya has been waiting for this day, now she will hardly ever see her



cousin again. Vidya remarks to Kitta about how beautiful Malati looks as she readies to leave. Kitta tells Vidya he thinks Malati looks sad. Vidya looks at her cousin again and sees what she didn't want to see before. Even though Malati wants to get married, all of the changes have been hard on her. Leaving her family and the home in which she was raised is hard for her. Vidya tells Malati she wishes her the best and hopes she is happy in her marriage. Malati is surprised and tells Vidya she is sorry she didn't welcome her into the home. The two of them have made a peace of sorts. Periamma and periappa return from dropping Malati off. As Vidya watches, they both break down in tears and comfort each other. It is a side of the couple she has never seen before.

Deepavali - Malati's Departure. Analysis

Deepavali:

Vidya's reaction to Raman's touch shows that she is falling for the boy. It seems that Raman returns her affections. However, Vidya is ashamed that she has had an improper dream about Raman. In the dream they held hands.

Raman's Gift:

Thatha's gifts surprise both Vidya and Amma. They also make Malati extremely jealous. As thoughtful as thatha's gift is, Raman's gift is even more thoughtful. By giving Vidya a journal, Raman shows that he knows what she is interested in. He also shows that he understands she is having a hard time and wants to help her through her troubles. Raman is not bold in his interactions with Vidya. He is shy around her and seems embarrassed when he is caught watching her in the library.

The Library:

It is becoming obvious that thatha has a fondness for both Raman and Vidya. His interactions with Raman show that he respects the young man's mind. Even though he has not direct interactions with Vidya, his tolerance of her desire to be in the library speaks volumes toward his fondness for her.

The Outhouse:

Vidya reads a famous Hindu philosopher and wonders why Hindus don't follow their own teachings, why they allow traditions like the outhouse to continue. She hates being treated unequal and is having a hard time with the traditions in thatha's home. Raman proves himself to be both a progressive young man and a true friend. He tells Vidya he respects her and shows her his respect by listening to her opinions and allowing them to change his mind.

Karthigai:

Thatha gives Vidya permission to return to the library even though she will no longer be babysitting Mangalam. Vidya will miss Chinni and her baby while she is away staying



with her parents. Vidya is thankful that Rifka didn't reveal too much in her letter and knows that her friend must have understood that her mail would be read openly by her family.

Malati's Wedding:

The entire family is run ragged putting on a week long wedding celebration for Malati's husband's family. The wedding is festive and seems to be a success. Vidya is impressed by the wedding vows. Both she and Raman begin to think about Indian marriage and vows in a different way. Raman thinks of them for the first time and agrees with Vidya that they are equal and that a wife doesn't need to promise to obey. Vidya seems encouraged by the equality in the vows. She is also excited to see Kitta, whom she hasn't talked to in a month.

Malati's Departure:

Malati's marriage and departure heals something in her relationship with Vidya. Vidya begins to see that she isn't all that different from the others in her home. The love each other and are just as human and emotional as she is. Vidya is allowed a rare glimpse into the private, and vulnerable, natures of her extended family. This realization allows her to grow and mature.



Pearl Harbor - Alone.

Pearl Harbor - Alone. Summary

Pearl Harbor:

Vidya is in the library reading when Kitta bursts in. He has just heard the news about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The Americans have joined allied forces and Kitta thinks they might actually help win the war against the Germans. Raman and Vidya listen as Kitta talks about his excitement. Raman reveals he may be leaving for America in the fall. He has applied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, and is excited about getting his Master's Degree in America. Vidya is devastated. She can't imagine not seeing Raman for two years while he is gone in America. For once, she doesn't feel like listening when Raman talks.

Pongal:

The family gathers outside to decorate the milkman's cow and celebrate the harvest with the festival of Pongal. It is mid-January. Kitta and Vidya finally have a chance to talk privately. Vidya wants to know what Raman is really like. Kitta wants to know what Vidya thinks of the war. Kitta tells her that he thinks the violence of the war is justified and that the British are not as bad as the Germans. He wants to know if she agrees that killing one person is ok if it will save others. Vidya becomes upset. She tells him killing is never ok. She also can't believe that he feels the British aren't so bad. She asks him if he cares what the soldiers did to their father. Kitta becomes angry and tells her he is the one who cares for appa every day, where is Vidya and her caring then? Vidya tears the skirt of her sari into strips in anger. Raman tries to comfort her, but she refuses to tell him what happened the day her father was beaten. She just tells him that it is her fault that their father is gone. Raman tells her that appa isn't dead, he is just different. Amma brings Vidya inside to finish fixing food for the day.

Air-Raid Drills:

The household works to turn the men's radio room into a bomb shelter for the family. As the men are being served dinner on night, the air-raid sirens begin a drill. Thatha instructs the women and children to enter the shelter. Amma signals that she will not leave without appa. The entire family settles into the darkness of the shelter to wait out the drill. Kitta tells Vidya that the Japanese want to take over India. India is the jewel of the British empire, there are natural and human resources that could help the Japanese. If the British lost India, it would cripple the Empire and they would lose the war. Vidya looks to Raman to see if Kitta's words are true. Raman tries to reassure her, but he is unconvinced. Kitta's words are true and make sense. If the Japanese invade from one side and the Germans from another, they will be overcome. Kitta is frustrated that they just wait in a dark room to be invaded, it is clear he feels Indians should be doing



something in their own defense. The sirens stop and the family, shaken, returns to dinner. Raman tries to reassure Vidya that they are safe, but she can tell he is worried.

The Dark Fortnight:

The men leave for an overnight religious festival and the women are left in the home to pray all night. Vidya tries to play a game with Periamma and Sarasa, but they make a joke about marrying her to a awful man and she leaves. Vidya finds her mother deep in prayer. She tells her mother she is scared of marriage. Her mother talks about how wonderful her marriage to appa is and Vidya points out that appa is a different man than others. Amma prays for Vidya to find a man like her father. Vidya loses herself in prayer. The men return home at dawn. Kitta tries to speak with Vidya, but is interrupted when she is ordered by Periamma to get breakfast. Kitta tells everyone in the room that he is going to enlist in the British Indian army and fight the Nazis. The entire room goes crazy. Amma almost collapses and begs him not to leave. Periappa attacks him, asking how he can side with the people who damaged his father. Thatha tells Kitta that he is Brahmin and must be nonviolent. He tells his grandson that if he takes up arms he will be considered dead to the family and never welcome into the home again.

Kitta's Choice:

Vidya is grieving in the library when Kitta finds her. He wants to know how she feels about his joining the war. She calls him a murderer. She rages at him about nonviolence and how he is betraying their father and their beliefs. Kitta tries to win her over with logic. He talks about saving humanity and the Jews. He tells her he will come home from the war and fight for Indian independence. Vidya doesn't want to hear it. She wants to know what she will do without him. He tells her she will learn to be independent. She tells Kitta that she hates him and he tells her that is ok, then she won't mind if he leaves. Vidya turns her back on her brother and he leaves the library and doesn't turn back.

Alone:

Raman finds Vidya in the library and tells her he knew of Kitta's plan for a few months, but didn't tell because Kitta asked him not to. Vidya is outraged and asks Raman how he could let this happen. Raman explains that Kitta is a man and makes his own decisions. He tells Vidya that he, Raman, practices nonviolence and thinks what Kitta is doing is wrong. However, it is not his decision to make. Vidya feels terrible about the way she let Kitta leave. That night she listens to her mother cry and thinks about the many ways Kitta could die in the war.

Pearl Harbor - Alone. Analysis

Pearl Harbor:

Kitta's obsession about the war and excitement over the American's joining the allies is growing. Vidya is scared to lose Raman when he goes to America.



Pongal:

Pongal represents a breaking point for Vidya. She is isolated because she can't tell anyone why she feels appa's beating was her fault. Raman wants to comfort her, but custom forbids him from touching her. Vidya is scared of Raman's leaving and she is worried about Kitta. She doesn't like that Kitta is changing how he feels about the way they were raised. Kitta is giving up on the nonviolent philosophy that their father lived his life by. Kitta is also frustrated because he feels powerless to help his countrymen and his family.

Air-Raid Drills:

The reader can feel Kitta's anger and frustration over the war. The idea of nonviolence does not sit well with him. He watched his father become brain dead because he refused to fight back. Kitta thinks the war is justified and is seething with the desire to protect India and his people. His education has allowed him to talk about war and philosophy with others. Kitta is knowledgeable about the war and the threat of Japanese invasion.

The Dark Fortnight:

Kitta's decision to join the war has been a long time in coming. The reader has had hints in the past few chapters. Even when appa was his old self, Kitta was obsessed with reading about the war. Kitta's decision to fight makes him the symbol of old v. new in the novel. His battle is one of traditional Indian values vs. the realities of a modern, global era. Amma is devastated by his decision and the entire family is upset. They can't believe he would betray the Brahmin way and, surprisingly, they can't believe he would take up with those responsible for his father's condition.

Kitta's Choice:

Vidya and Kitta's opposing viewpoints about how to deal with war are the crux of the book's theme of tradition vs. modernization. Both know the war is threatening India and they both know that what Hitler is doing is wrong. Where they differ is on their idea of heroic action. Should you take up arms or stay passive? Which is the true definition of strength? Vidya tells herself that Kitta would not be doing this if appa were the same as he was, but that is not necessarily true. Kitta was interested in war before appa was beaten, at that time appa made it clear that Kitta was free to choose a life for himself.

Alone:

Raman tries to comfort Vidya, but she is too upset to allow him to help her. She also refuses her mother's kindness. She is worried about her brother and upset over the way they parted.



Saidapet - Madras August 14th, 1942.

Saidapet - Madras August 14th, 1942. Summary

Saidapet:

Vidya wakes before the rest of the house and goes to her hiding place in the library. She has hidden her journal and a bag of money there. It is the money she has saved from her bus fare. Vidya gets a map of the city and eats with the rest of the family. Thatha notices how upset Amma is and gives her the day off from her chores. While the women eat, Sarasa and Periamma talk about how horrible Kitta is and how poorly he was raised. Vidya leaves for school, but gets off the bus early and takes another bus to Saidapet. She notices for the first time how awful the conditions of the city are. She sees sick children and is helped by a gypsy woman. The woman leads Vidya to the police station and wishes her luck.

The Officer:

The first officer Vidya meets tries to throw her out because he assumes she is a beggar. She sees an Austin, the car like her father's, pull up and chases after it. The man inside tells the officer that beggars don't speak English, he invites Vidya in for tea and asks how he can help. She tells him her entire story, even the part about her father. The man admires her courage and helps her find her brother. He is in the Army barracks at St. Thomas Mount. The British man provides a ride for her and wishes her luck.

St. Thomas Mount:

Vidya is treated with respect by the major at the compound. He reminds her of a grandfather figure and she is surprised how kind he is. When Kitta comes to get her, the major tells them to go and talk. Brother and sister discuss their feelings. Kitta asks Vidya to try and understand his beliefs. She tries, and tells him she still doesn't agree. Vidya admits her part in appa's beating, but Kitta isn't surprised. He tells her that something would have happened sooner or later. He tells her that appa sacrificed his family when he joined the movement. Both wish that appa had just died. Vidya and her brother part with laughter and a hug. She leaves the compound and collapses in grief, grieving for her brother and for the family she used to have. She looks up and sees Raman waiting for her.

The Return:

Raman offers her a drink and leads her to the bus that will take them home. He tells her she wasn't hard to find. When she didn't come home from school her mother told him and Thatha she was missing. Raman knew she would go to her brother and left immediately. The pair sit in the men's section of the bus, Vidya leaning on Raman's shoulder. They stop touching when they enter the yard in front of the house. Amma cries



at her return. Even thatha comes down to see her home, then he tells her to rest and says they will talk about things later.

The Proposal:

Vidya wakes late and goes to help the women serve breakfast. Periamma and Sarasa discuss her as if she isn't in the room. Periamma calls her a slut and worries how Vidya's journey alone in the city will effect Malati's reputation. Periappa also joins in the discussion and they talk of how she will never find a husband and how she is an idiot like her father. Raman has had enough. He tells the family to quit talking about Vidya. He has asked thatha for permission to marry Vidya and she is to become his wife. Vidya is shocked and runs to the library. Raman finds her and excitedly tells her that he chose America because he thought she would like it. He tells her they will marry in two months and then leave for America. Vidya is not happy. Raman tells her he will allow her to study and she is lucky. Vidya tells him she doesn't want a husband who "allows" her to do anything. She wants equality in a marriage. Raman is humbled and tells her she can help him change. Vidya asks him how she can trust him if he thinks it is ok to ask her grandfather about something as important as her marriage without asking her first. Raman leaves Vidya in the library.

The Diary:

Vidya writes Raman's name over and over again in her diary wondering how she handled the situation so wrong. She had only meant to ask for more time, not to turn his proposal down. Periamma comes in and takes the journal from her, reading the things Vidya has written about. Periamma takes the journal downstairs to where the men are eating and tells them all that Vidya is as ungrateful as her brother because she turned down a marriage proposal that was too good for her. Thatha asks to read the journal and Vidya has no choice but to be gracious and say yes. She tries to speak to Raman, but he ignores her as the men leave the table. Vidya waits with her mother in the kitchen to see what will happen next.

In Thatha's Study:

Vidya is called to thatha's study to talk. He tells her that he is sorry her diary was read by others. He tells her she is a good writer and is a smart girl and asks her what she wants. She tells him she wants to go to college and become a doctor like her father. She also wants to teach other women. Thatha tells her that, no matter what, he will pay for her to go to college. They are pleased with each other. Thatha has a portrait of his dead wife above his desk. She looks just like Vidya, he tells Vidya they have the same passion. Vidya wants to hug him, but knows he would be shocked. She returns to tell Amma and appa about college and feels appa squeeze her hand. Vidya finally tells Amma what happened the day appa was beaten. Amma tells Vidya it would have happened sooner or later, appa would have never allowed an injustice to happen. She reassures her daughter that the beating was not her fault. Vidya goes to bed feeling an emptiness that only Raman can fill.



The Evacuation:

Vidya wakes up determined to speak with Raman, but is told that her school has been closed. The Japanese are moving closer and non-necessary residents have been ordered to leave the city. The women will return to their relatives. Vidya, Amma, and appa will go to Amma's brother's home in Coimbatore. Thatha tells Vidya if the war isn't over in a year he will send her to college in another city. Vidya realizes she may never see Raman again. She waits for him in the library, but when he doesn't show up she goes to find him. She meets him in the hallway. She tells him she just needs time and she will write him while he is away. It is clear that Raman doesn't believe her and feels rejected. Vidya begs him to believe her. She tells him she has lost everything and has only now gained freedom, she needs time to make sense of things. That seems to tell Raman what he needed to know. He can understand she feels lost. Vidya tells him that someday she will marry him and they will have a daughter who will climb trees. Raman's eyes show his joy. He gives her his address in Boston and they talk about writing each other and about America.

Coimbatore:

Thatha and the family come to the verandah to see the family off. He tells Vidya that Raman's family lives in Coimbatore and so he will escort them. He also says Raman will stay in Coimbatore for a while. Vidya can tell that Raman told her grandfather of their plans to write and eventually marry, but this time she is not upset, she is excited. They ride the train to Bala maama's home and he meets them at the station with a smile. Vidya can't believe that both college and a happy marriage are within her grasp.

Madras, August 14th, 1942:

Raman left for America in the morning and Vidya is writing him a letter already. She speaks of their visits over the summer when he would come to see her at Bala maama's home. She talks of how supportive her mother's family was and how well they treated her family. Her uncle even kept her dog, Raja, for her. She is now engaged to Raman and is happy that his family was so excited about their engagement. She tells Raman how she couldn't have made it without his letters and about her return to Madras to live again with thatha. When they arrived in Madras thatha gave them a bundle of letters from Kitta. Vidya writes that thatha saving the letters was a good thing, Amma thinks it means they could reconcile in the future. Vidya is afraid that Kitta's letters reflect his growing disillusionment with war and she worries for his safety. She tells Raman that she has finished the final page in her journal, but she doesn't need it anymore. Now she will spend her time writing to him and Rifka and studying for her last year of school. She talks of her love for America and for her belief that India will rise above British rule. She tells Raman she can't wait to join him in America some day.

Saidapet - Madras August 14th, 1942. Analysis

Saidapet:



Vidya's intentions are to bring her brother home. For the first time in her life she sees the conditions of life in the city and understands how she is protected in the walls of their Brahmin home.

The Officer:

Vidya's Brahmin status and British style education allow to tell her story to the important British man. He provides her with an introduction letter so she will be treated well at St. Thomas Mount.

St. Thomas Mount:

Vidya must finally face the inevitability of appa's injuries and her brother joining the war. Kitta's passion is the same as their father's passion, it is just for a different cause. Vidya grieves for the innocents their family shared before appa's beating.

The Return:

Raman admits he was a little afraid that Vidya had run away and would not return. It is clear the rest of the household worried about this too. Raman looks as if he is upset by the thought of her leaving, much as Vidya looked when he said he would go to America.

The Proposal:

Vidya is devastated by Raman's high handed and traditional manner. He acts as if he will own her once they are married. It is not the type of marriage Vidya wants, nor is Raman showing himself to be the person she thought he was. Raman is confused, but he is willing to do anything to make Vidya happy. He tells her he will change. Vidya is confused, she needs some space to think about things. She considers Raman's decision to ask her grandfather about her marriage before asking her a betrayal. Raman tells Vidya he thought she loved him.

The Diary:

Vidya loves Raman and is heartbroken that things got so out of control between them. She isn't sure what she wants to do about it, but she doesn't want to lose him. She wonders how she could have prayed so hard for a savior, just to refuse him when he came.

In Thatha's Study:

The reader comes to understand that thatha loved his wife and admires how much like her Vidya is. He is not so traditional that he won't allow Vidya to pursue her dream, as long as it is in the Brahmin tradition. He admires her philosophical nature and promises she can go to college no matter what happens. It seems the distance that thatha shows is something which may be partially imposed on him by others. Still, Vidya is not completely happy. She needs to settle her feelings for Raman.



The Evacuation:

Thatha reassures Vidya that he will send her to college, even if it means she must leave the family compound. He is certain the conflict will be over by the following year. However, it will not end until 1945. Vidya and Raman make up and Vidya realizes she loves him and wants to be with him; however, she has some personal growth to do first. Raman acknowledges that he has some growing and maturing to do too, but it seems certain that they will grow stronger as a couple in each other's absence.

Coimbatore:

Vidya cries as she says goodbye to her grandfather, a man who has turned into a different person in front of her eyes. She respects him now and will miss him. The extended family is glad to see Vidya's family go, but not half as glad as Vidya is to leave. The greeting Amma, Appa, Vidya, and Raman get at the train station from Bala maama is the total opposite of the one they received when arriving in Madras. Bala maama is excited to see them and welcomes them. Vidya feels as if she is returning home. It is clear that Bala maama and Amma share a relationship comparable to the one Vidya shares with Kitta.

Madras, August 14th, 1942:

The novel has now come full circle. In the year since the book opened, Vidya has come to know herself and her family better. She has made strides to reconcile her traditional Indian values with the new values which come along with modernity. Vidya and Raman will marry and she will be able to go to college. Kitta was right, the Japanese have invaded Indian soil and the American entry into the war will aid the Allies in winning the war. When the war is over, the Indian people will move toward freedom. Kitta has learned the realities of war the only way he can, by direct participation. Vidya has discovered an admiration for America which is shared by her brother and fiancé, the American desire for self-determination and freedom.



Characters

Vidya.

Vidya is a fifteen year old girl living in Bombay. She dreams of going to college and loves learning. Vidya is a member of the Brahmin caste, but her mother and father raised her to believe that the caste system is wrong. Vidya and her family must live in her grandfather's traditional home after her father is severely beaten and becomes brain damaged. Vidya is a dreamer. She is confident and believes in herself. Vidya has a difficult time reconciling the values she was brought up with and the values of her grandfather's home.

Kitta.

Eighteen year old Kitta is Vidya's older brother. The siblings are very close. Kitta is not sure he believes that nonviolence is the best solution to every problem. He takes care of their father while they live in his grandfather's home. After Kitta finishes school he decides to join the Indian British army and help fight against Hitler. Kitta doesn't believe the British are good people, but he believes they are better than Hitler. Kitta dreams of fighting for Indian independence when he returns from war.

Amma.

Amma is Vidya and Kitta's mother. Amma is her title, but not her name. She is a loving wife and supportive mother. Amma may not agree with her children, but she supports their decisions as best as she can. Amma loves appa and always speaks of him as if he isn't brain damaged. Amma comes from a loving family, but Indian tradition dictates she live with her husband's family instead of her own. Amma accepts her circumstances without complaint. She is a strong woman.

Appa.

Appa is Vidya and Kitta's father. Appa is his title and not his name. Appa is a doctor who has decided to use his medical skills to assist those wounded in the fight for Indian freedom. He is a philosophical man who believes that Hindus do not always follow their teachings. Appa dislikes the caste system and believes in nonviolence and equality. Appa's belief in nonviolence hurts him during a protest movement. He refuses to fight back when attacked by a soldier and is brain damaged as a result.



Periamma.

Periamma is the wife of appa's older brother. Periamma is her title, not her name. She is the woman in charge of Thatha's home. She is an unkind woman who refers to appa as "the idio." Periamma is jealous and demanding. She tries to make life hard for Vidya and her family. Periamma is cruel and bossy. She likes to gossip and goes out of her way to show her power.

Periappa.

Periappa is appa's older brother. Periappa is his title, not his name. Periappa has accepted British ways over Indian ways. He is a wealthy may and uses his caste to treat others badly. Periappa and his family are very traditional. It is clear that periappa does not respect, nor understand, the way appa has chosen to raise his children. Periappa also refers to his brother as "the idiot."

Malati.

Malati is periappa and periamma's only daughter, Vidya's cousin. She is both beautiful and vain. Malati's only goal in life is to get married. Once she becomes engaged, she decides to drop out of school. Malati makes school hard for Vidya and responsible for Vidya becoming an outcast at school. Malati also enjoys making fun of Vidya when they are at home.

Raman.

Raman is the younger brother of appa's sister's husband. He is staying in Thatha's home while he finishes college. Raman is a year or two older than Kitta. Raman is given much respect in the home because his treatment reflects on appa's sister. Raman shares Vidya's belief in nonviolence, but understands why Kitta wants to fight. He is in love with Vidya and plans to attend a Master's program in the United States.

Thatha.

Thatha is Vidya's traditional, Brahmin grandfather. Thatha is the head of the household. He believes in Indian tradition and disowns Kitta when the young man joins the army. Thatha loves his family, even though he never displays affection or emotion. Thatha tells Vidya she may attend college. He also gives his blessing to Raman when he asks to marry Vidya.



Chinni chithi.

Chinni chithi is the wife of appa's youngest brother. She lives with her husband and daughter in Thatha's home. Chinni is not a pretty girl and she isn't liked by periamma or Sarasa chithi. Chinni has made it clear that she only wanted two children and she is unhappy to discover she is pregnant with a third. Chinni becomes a friend to Vidya.

Sarasa chithi.

Sarasa chithi is the wife of appa's second brother. She is a petty, unkind gossip who kisses up to periamma.

Mangalam.

Mangalam is Chinni chithi's youngest child. Vidya is responsible for babysitting the little girl in the evenings. Mangalam sleeps while Vidya reads in the library in the afternoons.

Bala maama.

Bala maama is amma's brother. He is close to his sister and comes to stay with her when appa is hurt. Bala maama welcomes amma and her family into his home when they are forced to evacuate Madras.



Objects/Places

Bombay.

Bombay is the city in India where Vidya and her family live before Aappa is injured. Aappa owns a private medical practice in the city. Bombay has many areas, some are white only and some allow native Indians to live.

Madras.

Madras is the city where Thatha and the extended family live in the family compound. Madras has many areas. It is the place where Vidya attends school and where she will attend college.

Thatha's Home.

Thatha's home is a compound where the extended family lives. The men in the home live upstairs and the women live downstairs. The men and women sleep in separate communal rooms. Women are not allowed upstairs in the men's area, however, Thatha gives Vidya permission to use the library. Thatha's home is run in accordance with traditional Brahmin and Hindu values.

Caste.

The Indian caste system is a way of categorizing people by social status. There are four castes, Brahmin being the highest. There is also a caste of people considered to be untouchable. Aappa feels that the caste system is exploited by the British in order to subjugate the Indian people. Thatha's family believes the caste system is a part of Hindu faith.

Brahmin.

Brahmin is the highest class in the Indian caste system. The Brahmin caste is wealthy and educated. They are studious and considered to be the priestly class.

Colonization.

In 1941 and 1942, India is a British colony. The British use India so that they can have access to natural and human resources. At the outset of WWII, the Indian people are just beginning to fight for freedom from British rule.



Sari.

A sari is a piece of cloth which Indian women wear as a flowing garment, much like a dress. The cloth is twisted and pleated so that it forms a flowing garment.

Krishna, Ganesha, Nataraja, Lakshmi.

These are different gods in the Hindu faith. Each god has a festival and represents a different aspect of the divine. Vidya and her family celebrate the gods with food, decoration, and prayer.

Ahimsa.

Ahimsa is the Hindu tenant of non-violence. Gandhi and other freedom fighters adhere to this nonviolent ideal. Appa is also a believer in ahimsa. He refuses to fight back when he is attacked by a British soldier, thus proving that the principle of ahimsa is one that he considers worth dying for.

The Indian British Army.

The Indian British army is an army made up completely of Indian volunteers. These men helped the Allies fight the Axis powers and win the war. The Indian British Army is the largest volunteer army in the war. Kitta joins this army.



Themes

Equality.

The search for equality is one of the main themes of Vidya's story. Vidya is raised as an equal to her brother, her mother and her father. She is respected and she is encouraged to go to college. Vidya's mother and father teach their children that women and men are equal, and they also teach them that the caste system is unfair because it discourages equality.

Men and Women:

Vidya's parents respect each other and each other's opinions. They move to Bombay so they can live their lives free of the traditional values which rule Thatha's home. Vidya is surprised when Malati is married because she did not expect the wedding vows to address marriage equality. Vidya has a hard time living in thatha's home because of the way women are treated differently than men. Men live above stairs, women below. It is a very literal symbol of their status in thatha's traditional Brahmin home. Vidya is afraid to allow herself to love Raman because she is afraid to lose her equality in marriage. The pair fight because Raman doesn't understand how he has treated her unequally.

Caste:

Vidya and her immediate family believe that the caste system was put into place by the British. They feel it is used to keep Indians from uniting against their oppressors. Vidya enjoys the many privileges given to her as a member of her caste. It isn't until she goes into the city of Madras alone that she begins to understand how sheltered she has been all of her life.

The Axis and the British:

Kitta and Vidya argue over the nature of oppression. Vidya maintains that the British are as bad as the Germans because they harm the Indian people. Kitta's view is that the British are better than the Germans even though what Vidya says is true. Both of them know that, as Indians, they are considered to be unequal to those who are white.

Tradition vs. Modernization.

Vidya's life is one of contradictions. As Vidya and her family confront the realities of the independence movement and the new world war, they must come to terms with modernization.

War:



Ahimsa is an Indian value, but it is a value Kitta is willing to abandon for a greater cause. Kitta doesn't have to become involved in the World War, but the more he learns about the world the more he wants to help. Kitta is exposed to new ideas at college. Those ideas open the door for modernization.

Feminism:

Kitta encourages Vidya to want more than just the petty gossip that go on with the women in the house. Vidya was raised to think of herself as equal to her brother. Both her father and her grandfather agree that she can go to college. This is almost unheard of. Periamma has access to the only kind of power enjoyed by most women of their time. The power of the hierarchy within the home.

Faith and Pragmatism:

Many of the characters in the book are confronted with a choice: that of adhering to their traditional faith-based values or of making a choice that satisfies the demands of the current problems.

Change.

Climbing the Stairs is a novel about change. Change within a girl, change within a family, change within a country, and change within the world. The story is set during one of the most turbulent times in recent history. The characters in the story must confront change at a rapid rate, something many modern cultures are still striving to do.

Vidya must come to terms with the changes in her father and in her home life. She also changes her views on war and marriage.

Kitta changes into a modern young man. He wants to go to college, to fight in the war, and to eventually fight for Indian freedom.

Thatha must face the fact that times are changing and his family must change with it.

Periamma and periappa see change in their immediate family. Their only daughter is married and moves away according to tradition.

Raman is a symbol of the internal struggle of many Indian youth, whereas Vidya and Kitta represent the extremes. Raman is willing to admit he is unsure of his beliefs and he is willing to allow knowledge to challenge and change his mind.

India itself is in the midst of change. The nonviolent protest has begun the push toward Indian independence. Those who fought for equality in Europe will come back to their native India and demand the same respect and equality for themselves.

The lines of the entire Western world are changing. Alliances are being formed and others broken. Entire groups of people are being exterminated. After the war, colonies all over the world will push for independence and equality.



Style

Point of View

Climbing the Stairs is recounted in the first-person point of view by Vidya, a fifteen-year-old Indian girl. Vidya's beliefs are formed by the world around her and her limited exposure to the world outside the walls of her home. Vidya is close to members of her immediate family, but doesn't know what they are thinking and feeling unless they tell her. The reader is allowed glimpses into the minds of other characters through their body language and facial expressions.

Setting

The larger setting of Climbing the Stairs is Bombay and Madras, India. However, the majority of the book takes place within the walls of Thatha's family compound. Thatha is a wealthy man. His home has two floors. Men live upstairs and women live downstairs. The men and women live separate lives. Men eat together while the women serve them. When they are finished the women eat. No one in the home will touch anything which has been touched by a lower caste. Women sleep in a communal room and use a communal bath. The same is true for the men. Women cook and clean while the men study all day. There is a room for married couples which is used on a rotated basis. Vidya's refuge is a well stocked library upstairs. She spends a lot of time in the library reading and escaping the realities of her new life.

Language and Meaning

Climbing the Stairs is peppered with Hindi words and descriptions of Hindu text and beliefs. The objects and places described in Hindi add to the feeling and tone of the book. The reader is able to immerse themselves in the world in which Vidya and her family live. Vidya's life is lived in both Hindi and English. She also understands other language of the area. Vidya's life is described in vibrant detail. The author uses sensory language to pull the reader into India.

Structure

There are 40 chapters in Climbing the Stairs. Each chapter is named, not numbered. The title of each chapter describes the main event of the chapter. For example, the chapter entitled "The Library" is about Vidya and Raman beginning to sit in the library together.

The chapters are as follows:

1. August 1941



2. Krishna Jayanthi
3. Rifka
4. Mahim Beach
5. The Chess Game
6. Periappa
7. Black Crow
8. The Protest March
9. The idiot
10. Ganesha Chaturthi
11. Madras
12. School
13. Upstairs
14. Chinni Chithi
15. Hans Brinker
16. A Walk
17. Saraswathi Poojai
18. Raman
19. Deepavali
20. Raman's Gift
21. The Library
22. The Outhouse
23. Karthigai
24. Malati's Wedding
25. Malati's Departure
26. Pearl Harbor



27. Pongal
28. Air-Raid Drills
29. The Dark Fortnight
30. Kitta's Choice
31. Alone
32. Saidapet
33. The Officer
34. St. Thomas Mount
35. The Return
36. The Proposal.
37. The Diary
38. In Thatha's Study
39. Coimbatore
40. Madras, August 14, 1942



Quotes

"According to appa, caste was a social evil, not a Hindu belief" (August 1941, p. 7).

"I didn't get more than a glimpse of Kitta or appa in the summers because the men lived upstairs and the women lived downstairs in that house" (Rifka, p. 20).

"In my mind's eye, my chess pieces had grown into lines of dark-skinned men marching forward, being beaten by a white army and crumpling one by one into my father's waiting arms, bloodstains blossoming across their shoulders" (The Chess Game, p. 32).

"Rifka said there were signs at the Breach Candy club and swimming pool that said "Indians and dogs not allowed" (Black Crow, p. 41).

"Appa sat silently in the dining room with us as he always did these days - like a shell cast up on the beach after the crab within had died" (Ganesha Chathurthi, p. 60).

"If I had any doubts as to whether periamma was pleased about our arrival, Sarasa chithi's behavior set them to rest" (Madras, p. 70).

"I wanted to tell him I might even have liked his lesson if we were taught to please ourselves rather than to entertain and enhance the quality of men's lives when we became wives" (Upstairs, p. 89).

"In northern India, people said the festival celebrated the return of the just King Rama to his lands after fourteen years of exile; in southern India, we said it celebrated the victory of Lord Krishna over the demon Narakasura, but appa had explained to me that the true meaning of the festival was far deeper - it was a celebration of the spiritual light, which glowed within every human being" (Raman, p. 114).

"If someone had asked me then what human invention I valued most, I would have told them without hesitation that it was the written word" (Raman's Gift, p. 128).

"I told her about Raman and how confused he made me feel: sometimes he was my best friend, and other times he scared me because there was so much he didn't question" (The Dark Fortnight, p. 176).

"It was then that I realized I truly loved him, even if it would be years before I could bring myself to say those words that he wanted to hear" (The Evacuation, p. 234).

"And even in the midst of all the uncertainty and change that lay ahead, of the reality of the evacuation and the Axis creeping closer to Indian soil, and of Kitta fighting on some faraway battlefield, I felt nothing but pure joy for a few moments: joy that I would soon be leaving the house, joy that I would go to college and that someday Raman and I would be more than friends" (Coimbatore, p. 237).



Topics for Discussion

How is the chess game between Kitta and Vidya in *The Chess Game* symbolic of their differences about the war and nonviolence? Who is teaching who during the game? Who teaches who during the war?

Explain appa's beliefs about caste.

- 1) What are his beliefs?
- 2) Why does he feel this way?
- 3) How does appa treat their servants?
- 4) What does appa think about being Brahmin?
- 5) How has being Brahmin helped appa?
- 6) How has being Brahmin hurt him?

Compare and contrast appa's faith to periappa's faith. What is similar in their spiritual beliefs? What is different about their spiritual beliefs? How do they show these similarities and differences?

How are Jews, like Rifka, treated in India? What Hindu beliefs may contribute to this treatment? How are Jews begin treated in the rest of the world during this time?

Compare and contrast the treatment of Jews and Indians. How are the two groups treated similarly by the British? How are they treated differently by the British? Why do you think this is so?

Explain why both appa and periappa are angry that Indian men are being asked to enlist in the British army. Why does periappa feel the way he does? Why does appa feel the way he does? Why do the men agree on this point?

There is a hierarchy within Thatha's home.

- 1) Who is at the top of the hierarchy? How can you tell?
- 2) Who is at the bottom of the hierarchy? How can you tell?
- 3) Why does periamma have so much power over the other women in the household?
- 4) How does periamma use her power?



Think about Vidya being sent to the outhouse during her menstruation and Chinni being sent to her family's home during pregnancy. What do these actions tell you about cultural attitudes toward women and childbearing in the Brahmin household? Use examples from the text to support your answer.

Vidya and Malati spend much of the story hating each other, yet their relationship seems to change on the day Malati leaves home.

- 1) How does their relationship change?
- 2) Why does Vidya begin to see Malati in a different way?
- 3) Why does Malati begin to see Vidya in a different way?
- 4) What fears might Malati have in leaving home?

Why is Raman treated with such great respect in Thatha's home? What is his status in the household? Why does periappa treat him with deference?