

Homeless Bird Study Guide

Homeless Bird by Gloria Whelan

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Plot Summary

In *Homeless Bird* by Gloria Whelan, Koly is a young teenager growing up in India. Though she is only thirteen, the story opens with Koly's mother pointing out that the time has come to find a husband. Koly's family will struggle to find enough money to provide Koly's dowry. She knows that life will be better for her family once there is one less mouth to feed each day. Her parents, referred to by the Hindi as "Maa" and "Bapp," are good people. Her father is a scribe and often writes letters for people who are not able to pay the full price for his services. Maa is a talented embroiderer and has trained Koly well. As Koly prepares for her wedding, she creates a beautiful quilt for herself, covered with scenes from her home which she will never see again.

Koly is to marry Hari Mehta. Her family has been told he is sixteen. However, when they arrive at the Mehta house, they discover that he is only thirteen. He is very sick. Her parents consider postponing the wedding, but Baap believes brides who do not marry on the day chosen for them by an astrologer will be plagued with misfortune. The day after the wedding, Koly discovers Hari has tuberculosis. The Mehtas had tricked Koly's parents in order to get her dowry to pay for a trip to the holy city of Varanasi. They believe Hari will be divinely cured once he bathes in the Ganges River. The trip is difficult. Even though Hari drinks and bathes in the river, he dies the day after their arrival.

Once the family returns home, Koly's life is a cycle of work and scolding from Mrs. Mehta. Mr. Mehta is kind but ineffectual. He teaches her to read and she greatly enjoys poetry. Koly eventually learns the Mehtas have stolen her monthly widow's pension check and most of the money has gone to fund the dowry of Hari's younger sister, Chandra. Koly holds to the hope of running away but then Mr. Mehta dies. Mrs. Mehta decides to move to Delhi where she has been promised a place in the home of her brother. She and Koly begin the trip but Mrs. Mehta abandons Koly in Vrindavan, a city filled with widows who have been similarly abandoned.

Koly is rescued after living a short time on the street by a young rickshaw driver named Raji. She is taken in by a charitable group that provides her with food, a place to stay, and a job. The benefactress arrives for a visit one day and, upon seeing the quilt Koly made for her dowry, introduces her to a tailor who hires her to be an embroiderer in his shop. Koly is soon making enough money to move from the shelter but discovers that not everyone is straightforward and trustworthy. Her relationship with Raji continues to develop and Raji one day announces that he plans to return to his farm in the country now that he has saved enough money to begin a life there. Koly knows he will marry and that she will never marry because families would not accept a widow as a daughter-in-law. However, Raji is on his own with no family and continues to press Koly to accept him. She hesitates until the day he writes her a letter, explaining that he's built a room especially for her to continue her embroidery. Knowing that Raji is kind and that he realizes how important it is for her to continue her work, Koly accepts and, for the second time, begins a quilt to take into her new life.



Chapter 1

Summary

As the story opens, Koly's mother remarks that Koly is now thirteen and that it's time for her to marry. Koly knows that having her gone will mean there's more food for her parents and brothers. The family is so poor that her mother often takes only a small amount of food for herself so there will be more for the others. Koly's mother, whom she calls Maa, and her father, whom she calls Baap, are also parents to two sons. The boys attend school, but the girls do not. This was the usual custom. Koly often looks at her brothers' school books, wishing she could figure out how to unlock the mystery of the written word. Baap works as a scribe, writing letters for those who do not know how to read and write. He makes little money. Most people who seek out his services are very poor, and he writes the letters for a small fee. Maa often works delicate embroidery around saris, a traditional garment worn by women. She sells her work in the marketplace. Each time she sells a sari, the family has enough food for a few days. Maa has taught Koly to embroider, and her work is excellent. Koly recalls that her mother first put her to work embroidering peacocks and geese. Maa is now working on a red sari that will serve as Koly's wedding attire. Koly has learned how to sew and embroider from her mother, and she is working on a quilt that will be part of her dowry. She embroiders scenes from her life that will remind her of her family and her childhood once she moves into the home of her husband.

A matchmaker begins the process of finding a suitable mate for Koly. Her parents strike a deal with the family of a young man named Hari Mehta. Koly's father asks for a picture of the boy, but his parents never comply. Koly knows only that he is sixteen and that he has a younger sister. His father is a teacher. Koly realizes this means that Hari will have been to school, and she wonders if he will be disappointed that she has no education. She voices the concern aloud, and her mother is displeased. Maa says that Koly has been taught to sew, cook, and care for a home and family. She says there's no time for a woman to spend reading. An astrologer is asked to choose a date for the wedding. Hari's parents ask that the ceremony take place soon.

On the day Koly and her parents set out for the Mehtas' house, she realizes that she is going to miss her brothers. As the bus pulls away from her home town, Koly feels sad about all she's leaving behind. Her mother apparently feels the same sadness, and she holds Koly's hand. Mr. Mehta meets them at their destination, and his first words are to ask if they have brought the dowry. Koly immediately realizes the Mehtas accept her only because of the money she brings with the marriage.

The home of the Mehta family is larger than Koly's home, but it is in disrepair. Koly is introduced to Hari's younger sister Chandra, but Mrs. Mehta says that Hari "has the flu" and is resting in preparation for the following day's ceremony. Koly hears Maa and Baap talking, and Maa says the situation is not a good beginning. She suggests putting the wedding off, but Baap cites a tradition that "some evil is sure to come to the bride" if the



wedding doesn't take place at the appointed time. Koly has realized that her life is bound to be unhappy in this marriage, and she wants to plead with her parents to cancel the ceremony. She doesn't because she knows that such an act would bring dishonor to her parents.

Koly dresses for the wedding. Her father comments that she is dressed like a woman; but, he knows she is still a little girl. At that, Koly begins to cry, but her mother scolds them both. She tells Koly to stop crying before she ruins her makeup. She meets her husband for the first time at the altar and is surprised that he looks even younger than she. He is pale and thin, Koly says, and he looks afraid.

The wedding reception takes place, and Koly is pleased that there is coconut cake. However, the men are served first. By the time she is allowed to get food, the cake is all gone. Koly sees her father in a heated discussion with Mr. Mehta, and the mothers of the young couple

don't speak to each other at all. Before they leave her, Maa and Baap offer words of encouragement to Koly. They say Hari will soon recover from the flu and that his young age is not particularly a bad thing. Baap gives her a piece of the cake. Koly has realized that her new in-laws are greedy. She hides the earrings. When Mrs. Mehta asks her to hand over the earrings, Koly says she lost them. Mrs. Mehta is angry, but she can't do anything about it.

Analysis

Koly notes that she sees regret in the eyes of her mother at the talk of plans for Koly's marriage. Marriage of young girls around the age of thirteen is an accepted practice in Koly's culture. Despite the fact that this is to be Koly's fate and her mother accepts it as such, she still seems to regret the situation.

Each bride of Koly's culture takes a dowry to her marriage. This usually includes money and valuable items that will serve as payment for the groom and his family as they agree to take in another mouth to feed. In Koly's case, there is a pair of silver earrings that belonged to her mother. She also has "two bangles made of glass beads and some plastic toe rings." In order to get the money together for the rest of the dowry, Koly's mother sells some items that were part of her own dowry. Koly hopes that her new family will be pleased to have her as an addition to their household. However, she quickly realizes that they are only interested in the money.

Discussion Question 1

What are the attitudes of Koly's parents about the wedding prior to their arrival at the Mehta house? Why don't they call the wedding off?



Discussion Question 2

What is a dowry? What are some of the items in Koly's dowry?

Discussion Question 3

How is Koly's husband chosen? What is Koly's reaction when she sees him the first time?

Vocabulary

Tremble, scribe, auspicious, ceremonial, impatiently, flaws, tassels.



Chapter 2

Summary

In Chapter 2 on the day after the wedding, Mrs. Mehta goes to town, and Koly steps into Hari's room. They talk briefly, and Hari says he isn't going to recover. Koly doesn't believe him at first. She asks Chandra who says Hari is telling the truth. Koly asks why Mr. and Mrs. Mehta allowed the marriage if Hari's future is so dim. Chandra says her parents want to take Hari to the holy city of Varanasi in the hope that Hari will be cured. Chandra says Koly's dowry will pay for the trip.

The Mehtas are preparing to begin the trip right away. Hari announces that he won't go without Koly. When his mother objects, he becomes furious and throws something of a temper tantrum which causes him to begin coughing uncontrollably. He says Koly's dowry is paying for the trip and refuses to go unless she accompanies him. His mother gives in and tries to calm him. Hari tells his mother he wants to see Koly. His mother points out that he's already been told Koly can go with him on his trip and that he needs to rest now. He throws something and demands to see Koly. Mrs. Mehta arrives at Koly's side and instructs her to "go to your husband." In Hari's room, Koly takes a seat on the floor and complies when Hari demands that she tell him a story about her life prior to their marriage. She tells him about a man who asked Koly's father to write a letter to the government for him regarding a train that had killed his cow.

When the doctor arrives, Koly hears him tell Mr. and Mrs. Mehta that Hari needs rest. The doctor says the trip to the holy city will be a serious drain on Hari. He says Hari might have weeks or even months to live if he remains at home and rests as much as possible. After the doctor leaves, Hari's father says the doctor is intelligent and suggests they listen to his advice. Hari's mother says the doctor knows nothing of the healing power of the Ganges. Later, a healer arrives and chants over Hari in preparation for the trip. They are planning to leave for Varanasi the following morning.

Analysis

Hari is obviously spoiled and accustomed to getting his own way. He tries to boss Koly around, a fact that Koly considers ridiculous because they are about the same age. She knows that Hari is so frail he could not force her to do anything. Some of Hari's attitude may come from the fact that he knows he's dying.

Mrs. Mehta is obviously stingy and greedy. She wants Koly's silver earrings and is furious when Koly hides them from her. When Koly hears Hari coughing, she makes him a concoction of ginger and honey which quiets Hari's cough. When Mrs. Mehta discovers what Koly has done, she is angry again. She can't remain too angry when it's obvious that Hari is coughing less, but she never says a kind word to Koly for her efforts. Koly attempts to cheer Hari by bringing him blossoms from a mango tree. Hari is



pleased by the offering, but Mrs. Mehta is angry again. She says that each of those blossoms might have grown into a fruit and that Koly has deprived the family of that much fruit. While it's easy to fault Mrs. Mehta for her greed and stinginess, it's important to remember that this family has no luxuries and life is difficult for them. In addition, her only son is probably going to die. This can explain, to a degree, why Mrs. Mehta is so unhappy.

There are some references to spirituality and superstition even this early in the book. Hari seems to accept that he is going to die. He says that he hopes he dies while they are visiting the holy city of Varanasi so that his ashes can be scattered over the Ganges and his spirit will be free. He doesn't elaborate on why his spirit will be freed only if his ashes are scattered over the Ganges. The culture is truly a mixture of the old and the new. A doctor arrives to check on Hari and advises against the trip to the Ganges. A healer arrives that evening and chants over Hari as his parents prepare for the trip.

Discussion Question 1

What does Chandra reveal about the Mehta's reason for rushing the wedding?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Mrs. Mehta angry that Koly has given Hari honey and ginger for his cough and blossoms from the mango tree?

Discussion Question 3

What advice does the doctor give? What do Mr. and Mrs. Mehta say about the advice?

Vocabulary

Sulky, fetch, cunning, solemn, journey, impatient.



Chapter 3

Summary

In Chapter 3, everyone rushes to prepare for the trip. Koly is sad to say good-bye to Chandra, who isn't accompanying them to the holy city. Chandra is disappointed that she isn't going on the trip but says she looks forward to sharing Koly's memories when they return. Koly, Hari, and his parents board a train. Any excitement Koly feels is quickly replaced by discomfort. There's very little room. The heat and motion make Koly sick. Koly says she wants to believe that Hari will be healed when he bathes in the Ganges, but she finds it difficult to do so because he's so sick.

Hari and Koly are both amazed by the sights they see. They go to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lai, who are apparently friends of the Mehtas. They seem to believe Koly is Hari's sister, and no one corrects them. Soon after their arrival, Mr. Lal gives Hari a jar of water from the Ganges. Everyone watches as Hari drinks, and Koly says she believes they are all hoping for a miracle at the moment he swallows. But, he begins coughing instead. They soon make their way to the river with Hari being carried by men hired for that job. The path to the Ganges River is crowded, and many are obviously ill or deformed in some way. When Hari enters the water, he is pleased to point out to Koly that he can float. He splashes at her, though his mother tells him to be more proper in the holy place.

After only a short time, Hari is so exhausted that he has to be helped from the water and carried back to the Lal house. The doctor is called. He says Hari will die soon. Later, Koly hears Mrs. Mehta wailing and knows it means Hari has died, leaving her a widow. Mr. Mehta arrives in Koly's room and tells her that her husband has died. He says allowing the marriage wasn't fair to Koly but says they'd hoped he would recover. He ends by saying that Koly will now be "like a daughter to us." Koly knows that Mrs. Mehta will never soften toward her. Hari is cremated the following day.

Analysis

Koly notes that once the family reaches the holy city, there are beggars holding out containers and pleading for money. She says Mr. Mehta stops and puts coins in the cups; but, it seems it isn't out of the kindness of his heart. Koly notes that these donations "bring much

credit with the gods." It's important to remember that the culture is steeped in superstition and tradition. In Christianity, the rule is that gifts are to be given freely. In Koly's culture, the gifts of this kind were often given with the idea that the gods would reward the giver. Mr. Mehta is hoping to garner favor for Hari, hoping to tip the scales so that the gods will heal him.



Koly points out that many of those who are headed to the Ganges to seek the healing of the water are sick and obviously suffering, but that most seem to be at peace. This is probably not because of the miraculous healing of the river water, but it is from the sense of accomplishment and hope experienced by those who are bathing. Koly says that even Hari seems to be at peace as they prepare to enter the water.

After Hari's death, Koly sees a dove flying around a temple. She says the spirit of the dead "hovers about for a time," and she seems to believe this dove might be Hari's spirit. This is only one of many instances in which spiritualism and superstition intermingle in this story. Koly recalls that Hari said he hoped to die in the holy city so that his spirit would be freed.

Discussion Question 1

What does Mr. Mehta say about Koly's place in the household once Hari is dead? What does she know will actually happen?

Discussion Question 2

What do the people believe will happen to them once they enter the Ganges River? Why might they believe this?

Discussion Question 3

What happens to Hari for a short time when he first gets into the river? How do you explain this?

Vocabulary

Astonished, wondrous, treading, vain, dignified, deformities, purchased, cremation, procession, recite.



Chapter 4

Summary

In Chapter 4, Mrs. Mehta only talks to Koly to scold her for performing a task poorly. She finds fault with almost everything Koly does. Koly rises before anyone else in the house and performs a myriad of chores each day. She says she might have been content with her existence if only Mrs. Mehta would leave her alone, but the woman is constantly harping about the things she believes Koly is doing incorrectly.

Koly begins a quilt. Mrs. Mehta would likely have refused to allow Koly to work on it, but Koly says it will be a memorial to Hari. Mrs. Mehta lets her continue the work. She never compliments Koly on the work but sometimes stops to check the progress. Whenever they have a chance, the girls swing in the mango tree, and they love their afternoons alone in the courtyard for their baths.

Koly notices Hari's school books, and she asks Mr. Mehta if she can have one. When he questions her, she admits that she can't read but hopes she might learn if she only has a book to look at. He decides to teach her to read but warns that she should only come to him when Mrs. Mehta is visiting friends and won't discover the lessons.

Koly wants to leave the Mehta house and considers her options. She knows she can sell the silver earrings but worries that it won't be enough to keep her for long. She can't imagine what she might do for a job to earn more. She briefly considers returning to her parents, but she knows her arrival would displease them because she now belongs with her husband's family. Koly says that Mr. Mehta is kind to her, but she knows he can't really help her with her bigger problem.

Once Koly is reading fairly well, she begins to read from a poetry book by Tagore. The book is signed by the great poet himself. It's Mr. Mehta's prized possession, and Koly soon reads a poem about a flock of birds. Among them is a homeless bird, "always flying on to somewhere else." One day Mrs. Mehta discovers the lessons, and she's furious. However, by then Koly can read on her own, and she says Mrs. Mehta can't take that knowledge from her. Koly knows that some families kill the widowed women. She doesn't believe her mother-in-law will kill her, but she does believe Mrs. Mehta will try to beat down Koly's spirit.

Koly begins ignoring her chores, and she starts making problems for Mrs. Mehta on purpose. She is rebelling, but the stage is short-lived. Time continues in much the same way for two years.

Analysis

One day, Mrs. Mehta takes Koly to town where she tells a government official that Hari has died, leaving behind a widow. Mrs. Mehta asks if there is "something for Koly." The



man gives her papers to fill out, and Mrs. Mehta takes them home for her husband. Each month after that, an envelope arrives for Koly. She's told that it's government business and nothing for her to worry about. In fact, Koly is drawing a widow's pension, and the monthly envelope contains a pension check. Koly is never given any of the money by the Mehtas. It's not until much, much later that she is able to get her hands on the check for herself.

Koly herself adheres to tradition and superstitions of the day and culture. She says she "bows to the household shrine each morning" and she "begs Krishna to find a way to let me escape." She pushes the limits with her mother-in-law but stops short of spilling any salt for fear she will have to spend part of her afterlife sweeping up the salt she'd spilled.

There is an instance of foreshadowing at the end of Chapter 4. Chandra tells Koly the matchmaker has located a husband. The chapter ends immediately after that announcement, and the reader doesn't get the details until Chapter 5.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the traditions and superstitions Koly believes in?

Discussion Question 2

Describe what happens at the government office. Why does Mrs. Mehta refuse to tell Koly the truth about her widow's pension?

Discussion Question 3

What is the typical role of a widow?

Vocabulary

Reassuring, miserable, yank, propelled, scholar, official, burdened, soiled, creep, badgering, modesty, winnowing, impudent.



Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

In Chapter 5, an astrologer sets January second as the “most auspicious day” for Chandra’s wedding. She says her future husband is nineteen, has been to mission school, and has been promised a job working with computers. Mrs. Mehta insists that Koly give Chandra her silver earrings but Koly continues to say that she has lost them and refuses to give them up. While she doesn’t voice her thought to her mother-in-law, Koly knows those earrings may be the only hope she has of being able to escape the Mehta house to live on her own. Koly overhears Mrs. Mehta telling her husband that Koly is selfish and evil. Mr. Mehta responds that Koly’s widow’s pension check has added greatly to Chandra’s dowry. Koly asks Chandra if it’s true. Chandra admits that it is and seems surprised that Koly doesn’t know. Her first concern is that Koly might insist she have the money for herself. Koly works up her courage and tells Mrs. Mehta that she wants the next pension check that arrives. Mrs. Mehta says that Koly would not be entitled to the money at all if “it were not for our son.” Koly knows she can’t win this battle.

Koly tells Chandra she wishes to give her something for a wedding present. Chandra asks Koly to make her a quilt. Koly knows Mrs. Mehta won’t give her the material needed for a quilt, but Chandra asks her mother and the necessary supplies are provided. Koly has to keep up her chores. So, she works on the quilt whenever she has a few minutes to spare. Though Koly is happy for Chandra, she is miserable for herself, knowing that her life will become even more unbearable without Chandra to brighten her days. Koly compares Chandra and her new husband to Hari and herself. She knows that Chandra has a greater chance for happiness.

In Chapter 6, Mrs. Mehta cries, and Mr. Mehta disappears into his room with the book of Tagore’s poems, but he doesn’t read. Koly has no one to talk to and longs for some sign of affection from her mother-in-law. Mrs. Mehta continues to berate Koly, though Koly gets up even earlier and works as hard as she possibly can. One day Koly asks if she might brush and braid Mrs. Mehta’s hair, remembering the times Chandra performed that task. Mrs. Mehta says Koly is “too clumsy” and tells her to scrub some pots if she has nothing else to do.

Koly becomes so desperate for company that she befriends a stray dog. The dog is smart enough to come into the open only when Koly is alone. The dog begins to follow Koly around, and Koly saves scraps of food from her own meager plates. One day Mrs. Mehta sees Koly feeding the dog and is furious. She strikes the dog who turns to run just as a gosling walks by. The dog grabs the goose by the neck and runs away, holding the bird. He never returns. After that, Koly tames a bandicoot and this creature never shows himself except to Koly. Though Koly is glad for the company of the bandicoot, she is sad at the bleak future ahead of her.



One day Koly comes up with an idea, and she rushes to the government office, finally working up the courage to ask the official if she can pick up her widow's pension checks at his office. He says she can't but agrees that he will mail the checks to some other address if Koly moves from her in-laws' home. She doesn't know how she'll manage the move, but the thought that she could gives her hope. Mrs. Mehta becomes stingier with the food, and Koly is sometimes so hungry that she is dizzy. Mrs. Mehta begins screaming one day when she discovers the body of her husband. Mrs. Mehta has died "quietly in his sleep," and his death dramatically changes things for Koly once again.

Analysis

Though Koly is pragmatic about most things, she is obviously still inclined toward the romantic aspects of love and marriage. She asks Chandra how she can be sure she will love her future husband. Chandra assures Koly that she will learn to love him and insists that her husband will be a good husband if she is a good wife for him. Koly isn't at all certain that life will turn out so perfectly for Chandra. She thinks back to how she was disappointed with her situation when she saw Hari for the first time.

Koly's decision to tame the stray dog and the bandicoot is a desperate cry for friendship. She notes that the dog is covered in sores and is in really poor health. Koly spends time with the animal away from the house and gives it some of her food, though she isn't given enough

to eat. An interesting aspect of this is that she first reaches out to Mrs. Mehta for friendship after Chandra's marriage. Koly has been badly mistreated even prior to this point of the story. Mrs. Mehta has shown virtually no kindness at all. It wouldn't be unreasonable to think that Koly would hate Mrs. Mehta by now, but she still tries to find a meeting point in the hope that they will become allies rather than adversaries. It doesn't work. Koly later predicts that Mrs. Mehta is an unhappy person who won't be able to find happiness anywhere and that she won't be welcomed by other family members because she is so unhappy.

Discussion Question 1

How does Koly discover that a widow's pension check arrives for her each month? What does Mrs. Mehta say when Koly demands the next check be turned over to her?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Koly tame the dog and the bandicoot?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the emotional state of Koly and Mr. and Mrs. Mehta after Hari's death.



Vocabulary

Elegance, difficult, scandalized, clenching, determined, triumphant, defeated, gawky, moaning, scrawnier, resume, pariah, morsel.



Chapter 7

Summary

In Chapter 7, Chandra arrives home, and Koly notices that she no longer looks like a child. She has a good life with her husband who is kind to her. She says she's missed Koly terribly and promises they'll talk after the funeral. Mr. Mehta is taken for cremation in a field. There is no money for a funeral, and each of the mourners scatters seven pebbles on the way back home after the ceremony. Koly says the pebbles confuse the spirit of Mr. Mehta so that he would not follow them home. Koly explains that spirits are poor counters but love to count, and Mr. Mehta's spirit would be so busy trying to count the pebbles that the family would have time to return home without him.

Chandra tells Koly about her new life. She says she's free to run the house as she pleases. She says her husband is brilliant with the computers and that she now wishes she had learned to read. The family has a television and electricity, and Chandra tells Koly about some of the "improper" shows she's seen. Chandra remains three days and is treated like a guest the entire time.

Koly confides her plan to run away, but Chandra objects, saying Koly couldn't possibly take care of herself. After Chandra leaves, Mrs. Mehta withdraws. Koly wishes the two widows living alone together could comfort each other, but Mrs. Mehta won't allow a friendship to build. Often she asks Koly where the silver earrings are hidden, but Koly continues to insist she lost them. One day Mrs. Mehta heads to the village with Mr. Mehta's prized book of poetry, saying she intends to sell it. Koly trades her silver earrings for the book.

Mrs. Mehta seems to look at Koly strangely as if considering some plan. One day she announces that her brother in Delhi has invited them to come live with him. She sells the house and her cow to prepare for the trip. As the departure date approaches, Koly notices that Mrs. Mehta often has a "sly smile." She never allows Koly to see any of the correspondence from her brother. Koly packs her belongings in a basket, wrapping up some of the items in the quilt she had made as part of her dowry. Though she has never felt welcome in the Mehta home, she now dreads leaving it because it is at least familiar.

They board a crowded train and finally arrive for a stop over at Vrindavan. Koly asks where they will spend the night and Mrs. Mehta says she'll take care of that later but wants to visit a temple first. They hire a rickshaw and the young driver - a boy named Raji - haggles over the price of the fare. Koly notes there are many widows, and Mrs. Mehta explains that widows often settle in Vrindavan because they are "taken care of here."

When Raji leaves them at a temple, Mrs. Mehta says she'll wait inside where it's cool while Koly buys food from one of the many street vendors. She gives Koly money and



tells her to shop for a good deal. Koly gets the food and returns to the temple but can't find Mrs. Mehta. She waits for hours, eventually eating the food she'd purchased for her mother-in-law. She tries to decide what to do. Koly eventually returns to the train station and sees Raji there. He says Mrs. Mehta had returned to the station hours earlier and that she had boarded a train.

Analysis

Chandra's toenails are painted, and that's one of the first things Koly notices when Chandra arrives home for her father's funeral. While this seems a minor thing, the painted nails are a symbol of Chandra's new life which is apparently much more prosperous and enjoyable than Koly's life has become.

There's an interesting statement in Chapter 7 as Koly describes the cremation ceremony held for Mr. Mehta. She says that his thumbs are bound together as a sign that he could no longer work. His toes were bound together so that his ghost could not return. Then Koly says that the men of the town build fires in an open spot in a nearby field and chant during the ceremony. The final part of the actual ceremony includes a holy man's declaration that Mr. Mehta is dead. This aspect of the ritual is not explained. It may be that people in deep sleeps or coma states were sometimes mistaken for dead. It may also be a mere formality or a symbol of his passage to another world. The reader is left to decide.

The days leading up to the beginning of the trip to Delhi are filled with clues that Mrs. Mehta plans to abandon Koly all along. Koly notes that she is constantly giving her "sly looks." Mrs. Mehta won't let Koly see any of the letters from her brother in Delhi, meaning Koly has no way of finding Mrs. Mehta in that huge city, even if she were to follow her there. Mrs. Mehta also keeps Koly at a distance while she purchases the train tickets. She obviously didn't buy Koly a ticket for the entire trip to Delhi. Finally, Mrs. Mehta gave Koly a rather large amount of money to purchase their food. This is obviously Mrs. Mehta's way of easing her conscience over abandoning Koly. While it's easy for the reader to see that Mrs. Mehta had planned it all along, there's no reason for Koly to expect this. She has apparently never even heard of Vrindavan until they arrive in the city.

Discussion Question 1

What is Chandra's life like? How does that compare to Koly's life?

Discussion Question 2

How does Koly discover she has been abandoned in Vrindavan?



Discussion Question 3

What were some of clues that Mrs. Mehta planned to leave Koly? Why doesn't Koly realize what's in store for her?

Vocabulary

Intimidated, shrewd, impudent, vendor, grudgingly, perspiration, pitying, parcel, chanting, misheard.



Chapter 8

Summary

In Chapter 8, Koly puts together all the clues from previous days and realizes she should have known Mrs. Mehta's plan. She begins to cry, and Raji says she can join the widows who chant in the temple. The monks feed them. Raji leaves, and Koly is faced with the realization that she will have to sleep outdoors among strangers. As Koly walks, trying to decide what to do, an elderly woman motions for Koly to share her space. She is asleep on a doorstep. She says that the residents hand out a little food each morning. Koly and the old woman talk. She says that her brother-in-law dropped her off in the city, claiming that widows are bad luck. She says they actually had no use for her because she is too old for hard work. She says the monks give her food, and she has the widow's pension check. She usually finds a small room to rent.

As everyone goes to sleep, Koly considers her options. She doesn't believe she can return to her parents' home. She decides that she will somehow have to make a life for herself in Vrindavan. Over the next few days, Koly returns often to the train station. She doesn't believe Mrs. Mehta will return, but it has become familiar to her. She is drawn back. One day the older widow doesn't return to the doorstep, and Koly realizes the woman has probably found a room. When the residents hand out a little food, Koly eats it all but is later ashamed because a hungry child stood nearby.

Koly applies for her widow's pension, but she is told she cannot collect until she has an address. She argues that she can't afford a room until she gets her check, but her pleas are ignored. She returns to the station most days and, eventually, approaches Raji again. She says she has nowhere to go and no money, and she begins to cry. He offers to help but says she'll have to wait until he completes work later that day. At the end of his day, he gives Koly a ride to a house and introduces her to Maa Kamala. She is introduced to a young widow named Tanu. Tanu works for a vendor in the market. Each day she and others string garlands of marigolds. Maa Kamala says Tanu's employer is looking for a new girl to work for him and she says Koly can probably get the job. Koly is so happy and relieved that she hugs Maa Kamala.

Analysis

Koly is in a serious situation in Vrindavan. Even though there is a thorough network of people and organizations providing food and shelter for the widows, there are many widows and families living on the streets. Many are barely able to feed themselves, and Koly feels desperate from the first hours on her own. She quickly eats the food handed out by the residents of a house one morning, refusing to offer any to the child who stands silently by, even though that child is obviously hungry. Koly later realizes that she is becoming very much like Mrs. Mehta. She seems to make a conscious decision to fight that greed and desperation though her situation is still bleak. She realizes that Mrs.



Mehta will have “won” if Koly allows herself to fall into that habit of being mean and hateful.

Raji asks why Koly continues to return to the train station. She doesn't really know how to explain that it's the last link she has with her old life and she doesn't know what else to do. Koly doesn't really believe Mrs. Mehta will return for her, but she seems to continue to hold to that hope anyway. It's because she continues to return to the station that she connects with Raji and her life is changed for the better.

The home where Koly stays is funded by a wealthy benefactress. The purpose of the home is to provide a safe place for the widows to live, an address so they can receive their pension checks, and food. They also help them find a job and a place to live once they are on their feet. The first thing they do when Koly arrives is provide new clothes, telling her that there's no need for her to wear the traditional white sari that indicates she is a widow.

Discussion Question 1

How does Koly first get to know Raji? How is her life changed because of him?

Discussion Question 2

Where does Raji take Koly once she explains her situation to him?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Koly feel guilty after eating the handout from the residence?

Vocabulary

Entrusted, pedaled, jumbled, pittance, rubbish, annoyed, despised, bartering, inconspicuous.



Chapter 9

Summary

In Chapter 9, Koly feels secure for the first time since her arrival. Maa Kamala gives Koly money for lunch, provides breakfast for all the girls, and urges them to be on time for work. They arrive at the flower stall where Tanu works, and she introduces Koly to the owner, Mr. Govind. Koly is much slower than the experienced women at first but soon catches on to the method of stringing the marigolds onto the fibers.

Tanu and Koly share a room at the house and are soon good friends. One day a man at a perfume stall asks if they can string beads. They assure him they can, and he provides the supplies, promising them each a bangle if they complete several for him. They work in the evenings after their job at the flower stand. Koly notes that she loves to embroider, which some would call tedious, but that she is soon tired of stringing the beads. Each week, the girls' earnings from work are handed over to Kamala. Half is used to pay their living expenses. Half is put into an account so the girls will have money saved to get a room of their own.

Koly continues to see Raji from time to time. One evening she discovers he can't read. He says he has worked the land since he was five. There was never time for education. She offers to teach him. After that, he often drops by in the evenings for lessons, sometimes bringing Koly a small gift. They work on his reading, but they also talk about their lives and dreams. One evening, Koly slips away from the watchful eyes of Kamala for a walk along a nearby river with Raji. They talk about Raji's dream of returning to the country where he has a home waiting for him. He says he'll want a wife when he leaves the city. Koly has nothing to say, knowing that no family would accept a widow as their daughter-in-law. Then Raji is gone for several weeks, and Koly fears he has left for the country without even saying goodbye.

One day Koly and the others are told their benefactress, Mrs. Devi, will be paying them a visit. Everyone carefully cleans in preparation of the visit. When Mrs. Devi arrives, Koly and Tanu are asked to show her around the house. In the room the girls share, the woman is interested in Koly's dowry quilt, which is hanging on a wall of the room. Mrs. Devi tells Koly she knows a man who makes "fine saris" and that he is always on the lookout for skilled seamstresses and embroiderers. She promises to take Koly to see him the following day.

Analysis

Koly is working at the flower stall when Mr. Govind announces they don't have enough marigolds to complete the day's orders. Tanu's reaction is indifferent. She whispers to Koly that Mr. Govind is always facing some crisis, hinting that she believes he's overreacting. Koly doesn't ignore him but asks if they might make jasmine garlands



instead. He says tradition demands marigolds. She then suggests they might make marigold garlands with jasmine blossoms interspersed so that the marigolds will stretch father. He agrees, and the customers are happy with the result. This is an example of Koly's natural tendency to do her best at every task. She is likely bringing the work ethic handed down to her by her mother.

When Raji has a good day with plenty of tips, he sometimes brings Koly a small gift. It might be spiced almonds or flowers. This seems like only a nice thing to do until the reader considers Raji's situation. Raji is determined to return to his home in the country where his farm is lying fallow. He is working in the city to save enough money for the equipment he needs to return the farm to working condition. He often goes with very little food in order to save more money. He confides in Koly that he hates the city and can't wait to return to the country. With that information, the reader realizes these gifts are actually a huge sacrifice for Raji and an indication of his growing fondness for her.

Discussion Question 1

Describe how the relationship between Koly and Raji is changing. What are some of their obstacles?

Discussion Question 2

What is Raji's dream for his future?

Discussion Question 3

What happens when they run out of marigolds at the flower stall?

Vocabulary

Pacify, bangles, bazaar, garlands, mournful, grateful, artificial, flurries, presentable, respectful, dusky, elsewhere, eagerness, flutter, generous.



Chapter 10

Summary

In Chapter 10, Mrs. Devi arrives and takes Koly to see Mr. Das, the man who owns the sari business. They ride in a car, and Koly is amazed at the air conditioning. Mrs. Devi tells Koly about her father. His father died when Mrs. Devi's father was young. One day he arrived home to discover that his mother was gone. He was told that she had died, but he later discovers that she had been abandoned in Vrindavan. He goes to the city and apprentices himself to an ironworker. One day he is asked to repair a drill bit and offers an idea to make the bit more effective. His design is good, and he is soon wealthy. He never finds his mother. When he dies as a wealthy man, he leaves his money to the widows' home.

Mrs. Devi introduces Koly to Mr. Das and leaves. Mr. Das doesn't seem pleased, and Koly offers to leave. He is happy that she isn't pushy because of her association with Mrs. Devi, and he takes her into the shop. He gives her a scrap and invites her to embroider something for him. She looks around and decides to copy the design of another woman who is hard at work. When she finishes, Mr. Das says she shouldn't copy others. He says he is looking for seamstresses who can create original designs. She starts again and weaves the heron she and Raji had seen along the river. She is engrossed in her work as Mr. Das watches. He is pleased when she finishes. He says that the heron is hers, having "flown right out of your head and, more importantly, out of your heart." He names a wage that amazes Koly and invites her to return the next day.

Koly begins to get to know the other women. Mr. Das is kind. However, one day a fine wedding veil disappears, and he is furious. It is never found. One of the women is a busybody whom Koly refers to as the Shrew. Maia, one of the girls, is nineteen and lives an outgoing life. She is often late to work but refuses to be chastised, threatening to go to work for another shop in the neighborhood. Mala invites Koly to a party but Kamala, who knows of Mala's reputation, refuses to let her go. Tanu agrees to pretend to go to the movies with Koly, allowing her to go on to Mala's party. Koly almost immediately sees the missing wedding veil on a lampshade. She mentions it to Mala who seems unperturbed. Koly is drugged while she's there, and Mala says she will inform Kamala that Koly was voluntarily taking drugs if Koly tells anyone about the stolen veil. A man there helps Koly to the theater where he turns her over to Tanu. Tanu helps her home and tells Kamala that Koly must have eaten something that disagreed with her. It's two days before Koly is well enough to return to work. The next day, Raji returns.

Analysis

It's sheer luck that Mrs. Devi sees Koly's quilt. An interesting aspect of this scene is that Koly impetuously begins telling Mrs. Devi about the scenes on her quilt, describing the clouds that appear in her village just before a rain and other scenes from the quilt. Then



she catches Tanu's eye and realizes that she's talking too much. In fact, she probably isn't, but the girls have been taught about their places in society by their mothers from a young age.

Mala is a true wild child of the era. She is carefree and irresponsible. When Mr. Das complains because she isn't showing up to work on time, she laughs off the reprimands by threatening to go to work for a competitor. Her attitude makes her unlikable and it doesn't seem that Koly would be drawn to her, but it's important to remember that Koly is not yet eighteen and has been through a great deal of hardship. It's only natural that she might be looking for some fun and longing to run a little wild herself. Just because the young women of this time and place are taught what is proper and acceptable doesn't mean they don't long for friendship and fun.

Koly chastises herself for being so naïve as to attend Mala's party when Kamala had warned her that Mala is too wild. When she arrives home with Tanu and the story that she'd eaten something to make her sick, only to have Kamala put her arms around Koly and baby her through the after-effects of the drugs. Kamala's kindness makes Koly feel even more guilty.

Discussion Question 1

How does Koly get the job in the sari shop?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Mala? What kind of person is she? Why is Koly determined to attend Mala's party?

Discussion Question 3

What does Koly learn about the funding for the widow's home?

Vocabulary

Outlandish, hastily, shrew, precious, cinema, sitar, passersby, naïve, devour, sophisticated, objected, anxious, sleek.



Chapter 11

Summary

In Chapter 11, Koly finds Raji waiting for her when she leaves the workshop. He says Tanu told him where to find Koly. She asks when he arrived in the city. He says that he arrived the previous night, but he must return to his farm soon because he has planting to do. Raji asks Koly to go for a walk with him along the river where they had seen the heron. She agrees.

The first thing that comes to Koly's mind is that Raji will be angry with her if he knows she foolishly attended the party at Mala's apartment. He senses her unease and asks what's bothering her. She blurts out the entire story. Raji isn't angry, except at the man who gave Koly the drugs. He says he isn't concerned with the past but wants to focus on the future. He says he wants her to come to his village as his wife. Koly says his family would never accept her, but Raji responds that he has no parents. He goes on to say he wants a wife who will fully share his life and that Koly is that person. Koly still can't believe that it would work. She's silent as she thinks, and Raji takes that for reluctance to accept him. He suggests that she doesn't really care about him after all. She counters, saying she's missed him greatly. She suggests they "wait a bit," and Raji grows angry, saying that Koly has grown to love the city and doesn't want to leave it. Koly convinces him to give her a little time to think it over. She promises that she will eventually agree to his proposal.

Koly and Raji write to each other each week. Koly and Tanu have left the widow's home and share an apartment. The novelty of having a room of her own soon wears off. Tempers at the shop become short as the women work in unbearable heat. One day, one of the women is working on a wedding sari using thread made of real gold. When some of the gold thread comes up missing, Mr. Das is furious, and the Shrew suggests the thread might be found in Mala's purse. It is, and Mr. Das fires her.

Raji announces to Koly that he has built a room especially for her to do her embroidering. He says it is a sunny room, built with the thought of capturing the best light. He says it looks out over the fields where he will be working during the day. Koly says she wants to make a new quilt for herself before leaving the city and promises to marry Raji as soon as the quilt is finished. The scenes on the quilt include a rickshaw, the riverside, and Raji in the fields. She tells Mr. Das about her plans, and he finally agrees to allow Koly to take materials home with her to sew, returning finished products periodically to the shop. Tanu is disappointed, but, she is eventually happy for Koly. She begins looking for a roommate but knows she will have to share the apartment with two girls because Koly - who makes more money at her job than Tanu - pays a bigger share of the rent. As the date for Koly's departure draws near, Mrs. Devi learns of her plan to leave the city. She asks that Koly make a sari for her as her first work in her new home. She suggests that Koly find her inspiration in one of the Tagore poems. Koly's thought goes immediately to the homeless bird.



Analysis

Koly believes Mala is a “clever” girl. While she’s particularly sad when Mala is fired for trying to steal the gold thread, she does feel sorry for Mala. She sees that Mala has wasted her life and has thrown her talent away.

When Raji asks Koly to marry him, she asks what she will do there. She is initially referring to a job, but Raji says she will take care of the house and their children. He seems to want her to be a housewife but quickly realizes that her embroidering is important to her. When he builds the room onto his house, she knows that he will support her need to work. It could be that Koly simply enjoys the work so much that she can’t imagine being without it. It could also be that she fears being without a means of supporting herself now.

Koly thinks about her life in the city. She now has friends and a place to live. She has a good job with steady pay. She doesn’t say that she likes the city, but she does say that she has “found my place in it.” Her one regret is that she isn’t spending time with Raji. It’s important for the reader to remember that early in Chapter 11 Koly didn’t know that Raji intended to marry her. Widows seldom remarry and even more seldom have a real chance at a happy life or a home of their own. Koly has already experienced good fortune, having made a life for herself in Vrindavan. She can hardly believe that her life might get better yet.

Discussion Question 1

What happens to cause Mala to lose her job? What does Koly think about Mala?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Raji’s decision to build a room onto his house change Koly’s mind about marriage?

Discussion Question 3

What might Koly’s life be like after her marriage to Raji?

Vocabulary

Treacherous, corrugated, smirk, skein, confided, muslin, disgusted, satisfied, convinced, sheerest, monsoon, chided, ruffled, fertile, inauspicious, modesty.



Characters

Koly

Koly is thirteen years old as the story opens, and her parents are beginning the search for a husband for her. Koly is worried about her future because she sees herself as having flaws, both in her character and her appearance. She fears she will never be loved because of these flaws. When her parents announce they have found a suitable match, she becomes caught up in the preparations. Koly is shocked when she arrives at the home of her future husband and discovers that his parents are only interested in the money her family gives as a dowry.

Koly quickly realizes that her husband Hari is sickly and it's likely that he will die. Though her mother-in-law refuses to allow Koly to care for Hari, Koly sneaks into his room while the adults are away. Hari tries to boss her, commanding her to entertain him. Koly complies, but she knows that he is too frail to actually force her. When Koly is allowed to accompany Hari and his parents to healing waters of the Ganges River, she finds herself trying to make Hari more comfortable. This is evidence of Koly's naturally caring nature. The bond between Koly and Hari is cut short because Hari dies the day after their arrival in Varanasi. For the next few years, Koly lives with her in-laws. They steal her widow's pension and use some of the money for a dowry for their daughter Chandra. Koly is angry that she's been deceived, but she doesn't make a fuss because she cares deeply for Chandra.

Koly is horrified when her mother-in-law takes her to Vrindavan and leaves her. She is stricken with panic at being left alone in the strange city. For the first time, she wishes that she were back with her mother-in-law, enduring the woman's constant, petty scolding. A stroke of fate lands Koly in the path of a young rickshaw driver named Raji, and he helps her find a home with a group of widows struggling to make a new life for themselves. Her training at her mother's hands is soon rewarded, and she lands a job as an embroiderer where she is well-paid and happy. When Raji asks her to marry him, Koly is shocked. Widows are traditionally destined to spend their lives alone, and Koly initially worries about taking the step. However, she realizes the level of Raji's devotion to her when she learns he has built a small room onto his house to serve as her workroom where she will be able to continue her embroidering.

Raji

Raji is a young boy who drives a rickshaw in the city where Koly is abandoned. He owns land and is fervently trying to save enough money for seeds and irrigation so that he can leave the city. Raji takes Koly and her mother-in-law to a temple and argues with Mrs. Mehta over the price. When Mrs. Mehta gives in and pays the additional money Raji demands, he winks at Koly. This wink is evidence of Raji's fun-loving and friendly nature though it's out of place in this culture. When Koly later returns to the train station



in search of Mrs. Mehta, Raji informs her that she's been left by Mrs. Mehta. It's Raji who helps Koly find a home with Maa Kamala. Raji works very hard in the city and is unhappy, though he's obviously willing to work. He hates the bustle and the noise of the city and longs for the solitude of his farm in the rural area of his childhood. When Raji has a few moments alone with Koly, he takes her to a nearby river that Koly loves as much as he does. This becomes their special place, and it's here that Raji proposes marriage. Raji's devotion to Koly is evident in the fact that he builds a room that is designed to catch the best light for Koly's embroidery. Raji realizes this work is important to Koly, and the room is a symbol of his willingness to let her continue with this work.

Maa Kamala

Maa Kamala is a woman who helps young widows with no family and no home. She takes the young women into a home provided by a rich woman named Mrs. Devi so they may collect the widows' pensions. She helps them find jobs as well. She is the first to tell Koly that she is not just a widow. She is a young woman with a future ahead of her.

Hari Mehta

Hari Mehta is the boy Koly marries. She is told he is sixteen; but, when she sees him for the first time on their wedding day, she knows he is much younger. He is sickly from the beginning and dies only a short time after the marriage.

Mr. Mehta

Mr. Mehta, a school teacher, is Hari's father. His first word of greeting to Baap on the day before Hari and Koly marry is to ask if Baap brought the dowry payment. He is a kind man at heart. When Koly expresses an interest in reading, he secretly teaches her. He dies quietly in his sleep.

Mr. Das

Mr. Das hires Koly to embroider in his shop. When Koly announces her plan to marry Raji, Mr. Das is sad. But, after he has time to think about it, he realizes that Koly is entitled to happiness.

Mrs. Mehta

Mrs. Mehta is Hari's mother. She constantly berates Koly. She takes Koly's widow's pension checks. When her own husband dies, she abandons Koly in a strange city with only a little money and no way to survive.



Chandra

Chandra is Hari's sister, and she is the first person who shows kindness to Koly after Koly and Hari are married. Chandra marries well, and it's partly because the money from Koly's widow's pension is used to fund Chandra's dowry.

Baap

Baap is Koly's father. He is a scribe in the marketplace. He is kindhearted and often writes letters for a small fee when his customers can't afford to pay the normal price. He is upset when he learns that the Mehtas have lied about their son's age and health. His kindness is shown by his worry for Koly and by the fact that he brings her a coconut cake on her wedding day.

Maa

Maa is Koly's mother. She cares deeply for her family and often eats only a fraction of her meal so that her children can have a larger portion. She is known for her embroidery and often spends weeks working on a single sari. When she sells one of her creations in the marketplace, the family has enough money for necessities for a few days.

Tanu

Tanu is a young woman who lives with Maa Kamala. She ran away after overhearing her husband and in-laws plotting her murder. Tanu works in the bazaar, and Koly gets a job with her.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Silver Earrings

Koly wears the silver earrings for her wedding. They were also part of her mother's wedding attire. Shortly after the wedding, Mrs. Mehta asks for the earrings, but Koly refuses to give them up. She hides them in the wall instead.

Dowry

A dowry consists of the money and goods given by the bride's parents to the groom and his family prior to the wedding. Koly's dowry is used by the Mehtas to take Hari to a holy city where they hope he will be healed of his disease.

A quilt

A quilt is what Koly makes for herself when she's about to marry Hari. She makes it for Chandra when she's about to be married. It's the sight of her quilt hanging on her bedroom wall that lands her a job as an embroiderer.

The Widow's Pension

The widow's pension is the money provided to Koly by the government after Hari's death. The check is kept by Mr. and Mrs. Mehta. Some of that money is used as a dowry for Chandra. The check becomes a symbol of hope for Koly who holds to the idea that she might be able to escape her dreary life with the Mehtas if she has that money for her own use each month.

A heron

A heron is the bird Koly and Raji see at the river.

Peacocks and Ducks

Peacocks and ducks are the shapes that Maa gives Koly to embroider as Koly begins to hone her craft.

School Teacher

Mr. Mehta is a school teacher.



Mango Blossoms

Mango blossoms are the kind of flower Koly takes to Hari in an effort to cheer him up. Mrs. Mehta is furious, saying those are blossoms that will now bear no fruit.

A Scribe

Koly's father is a scribe. He writes letters for people unable to write for themselves. Since his customers are poor, he often charges very little.

A Room for Sewing

Raji builds Koly a sewing room. This is a testament of his devotion to her and of his understanding that she wants to continue to work after they are married.



Settings

Varanasi

Varanasi is a holy city. Hari's parents believe he might be cured if he bathes in the waters of the Ganges River which is located there. Koly goes along with them, but Hari dies the day after their arrival.

Vrindavan

Vrindavan is where Mrs. Mehta abandons Koly. Many widows live there.

The River

The River is where Koly and Raji go to find a few minutes alone and to escape the city. This is also where Raji proposes. The river represents tranquility away from the noise and bustle of the city, which neither of them cares for.

The Farm

The Farm is the property owned by Raji. He works in the city pulling a rickshaw to save enough money to return to the farm. Koly doesn't see the farm prior to agreeing to marry Raji, but he describes it in great detail in the letters he writes to Koly.

Delhi

Delhi is where Mrs. Mehta's brother lives and where she is bound when she abandons Koly.



Themes and Motifs

A Lack of Control

Koly has little control over many aspects of her life, but she isn't alone in this. The culture, prejudices, and chance play an important role in this story. From the moment she becomes a teenager, Koly's life is in the hands of others. Her parents agree to an arranged marriage. When it's obvious the groom's parents lied to them, her parents go through with the wedding anyway. Koly is handed over with no say in the matter. She quickly learns that her husband is very ill. Even bedridden, he orders her to perform specific tasks, including to entertain him with stories. Koly knows he can't physically force her, but she complies. After her husband dies, Koly briefly considers going home; but, she knows that it is likely that she will not be welcomed. She searches for a way to run away from her miserable life with her in-laws. However, she knows she can't make a living for herself. When she's abandoned in a city filled with young widows, Koly hears stories of women who were threatened and abandoned simply because their husbands died. Many of the women are reduced to begging, and Koly accepts handouts herself. An interesting aspect of this theme is seen when Koly discovers she can earn money through her needlework. She has contentedly settled into a new life with a job and friends when Raji asks her to marry him. She initially hesitates, indicating that she hates to give up her job. Raji comes to understand that working is important to Koly on several levels and builds a room especially for her sewing. Her insistence on keeping this aspect of her new life is likely because she has begun to gain some level of control and doesn't want to completely give it up.

Superstitions and Traditions

It's tradition that girls marry at a very young age, that their parents pay a dowry to the family of the groom for accepting responsibility for the girl, and that girls never return to their families. All these traditions play an important role in the life of Koly who is widowed only a few days after her wedding. Koly is miserable in her new life and is constantly berated and scolded by her mother-in-law. She's forced to work long hours, and she is never thanked for her diligence. These traditions make it difficult for a young girl in Koly's situation to support herself, and Koly is actually very fortunate that the group of women help her find a job in Vrindavan. Another important tradition is that widows are seldom happy after the death of their husbands. Sometimes, a widow is killed, and most are seen as bad luck. The possibility that Koly might marry again after Hari's death is unheard of in this culture. When Raj mentions his desire to find a wife, Koly is sad because she knows he wouldn't be interested in her. There are other traditions and superstitions throughout the story, including Koly's belief that the dove flying around shortly after Hari's death is Hari's spirit. When Koly's father-in-law dies, his thumbs are tied together to indicate that he can no longer work. There is true concern after his funeral that he might try to follow the family back home.



Making a Life for Oneself

Koly is thrown into situations beyond her control; but, when she is given a chance, she creates a life for herself and is happy with it. She has no control over the fact that she is married to a boy she's never met or that he dies just days after the wedding. She also has no control over Mrs. Mehta's decision to abandon her in Vrindavan with very little money to her name. It is entirely by chance that Koly meets Raji, who introduces her to Maa Kamala at the widows' home. However, as soon as she is given an opportunity to work in order to begin making a living for herself, she takes over more control. It is also by chance that the right person sees her quilt but that would never have happened if Koly hadn't taken the initiative to make the quilt in the first place. Though she is only thirteen when she makes the quilt, her work is so good that she impresses the owner of a fine shop, earning herself a place on his staff and more money than most of her counterparts. Raji is another example of this theme. He is working in the city only as a means to return to his family farm and a life he loves. Koly notes that he is often so hungry that he is grouchy because he is saving almost everything he earns in order to achieve that dream. Raji is also willing to go against tradition to marry Koly, a widow. Koly hesitates, but she eventually realizes she has another chance at a happy marriage and agrees to marry Raji.



Styles

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the limited perspective of Koly. Koly seems brutally honest. For example, she admits when she is being uncooperative on purpose just to anger her mother-in-law, Mrs. Mehta. This makes the perspective more reliable than it would have been if Koly seemed to always put herself in the best light. The fact that the story is written from a limited perspective means the reader is unable to tell what's happening in the lives and minds of others. For example, Koly notes that Mrs. Mehta has a "sly" look when they are preparing for their trip to Delhi. In fact, the older woman has already made plans to abandon Koly in Vrindavan. The reader gets the benefit of the foreshadowing through Koly's observation that Mrs. Mehta seems to be plotting something, but the reader doesn't learn of her plan until Koly makes that discovery. The reader also gets the hint that there is a widow's pension being sent to Koly and that Mrs. Mehta is keeping the money for Chandra's dowry. Again, the reader doesn't know this for a fact until Koly knows. The use of the first person is appropriate to the story because the reader is likely more interested in the inner thoughts of Koly than any other character. The fact that the perspective is limited is acceptable for this story.

Language and Meaning

Koly's native language is Hindi, and there are words and phrases scattered throughout the book from that language. There are several references to the "sari" which is an important article of traditional clothing. Koly refers to her mother-in-law as "sass," which literally means "mother-in-law." She refers to Mr. Mehta as "sassur" which means "father-in-law." There are other Hindi words used, such as "charpoy" which is a bed made of ropes; "ghee" which is a kind of butter; "kohl" which is a dark powder used for makeup; and "poori" which is a specific kind of fried bread. The author includes a list of the Hindi words and phrases at the end of the book. For the most part, the reader can figure out the general meaning of each word from the context. The specific meanings of the words are sometimes more difficult to discern. For example, it's easy to figure out that "poori" is something to eat, but the reader who doesn't have the advantage of the glossary at the end of the book may not figure out that it's a fried bread, usually "stuffed with vegetables and spices." The specific definitions are not necessary to the overall understanding of the story. The story is presented in a fairly straight-forward style that most readers will be able to follow without difficulty. There are few words and phrases that will be above the ability of a reader with an average vocabulary.

Structure

The story is divided into eleven chapters. The chapters are titled by number only meaning there is no clue about the contents. Koly, Hari, and their immediate families are

introduced in the first chapter. The reader is also given a glimpse of the traditions that force young girls into marriage at a very early age and the use of the dowry as payment for the groom's family's willingness to accept responsibility for the new bride. In Chapter 2, Koly is married and begins to bond with her sister-in-law Chandra while discovering that Hari is very near death. In Chapter 3, Hari, Koly, and Hari's parents travel to a holy city in the hope that Hari will recover, but he dies. In Chapter 5, Koly's life settles into dull monotony with no hope of improvement. By Chapter 8, Mrs. Mehta is widowed. She abandons Koly in Vrindavan. In Chapter 9 and Chapter 10, Koly's situation becomes dire because she has no money and no friends; but, she meets Raji who helps her connect with a wealthy woman who provides shelter and food for young widows. Koly soon lands a job as an embroiderer and falls in love with Raji. She wavers near the end of the book, wondering if she should marry him. She gives in when she learns that Raji has built a room especially for her to continue her work as an embroiderer. The book comes to an end as Koly is about to start the next phase of her life.



Quotes

You have brought the dowry, sir?' Until that moment I had believed it was me the Mehta family wanted; now it seemed that what they care for most was the dowry.

-- Mr. Mehta; Koly (Chapter 1 paragraph 28)

Importance: This is the first time Koly meets Mr. Mehta, and it sets the stage for the remainder of the story. The Mehtas are only interested in the money, and they have actually tricked Koly's family by not telling them that Hari is near death. They use the dowry money to take Hari to a holy city, hoping he'll be cured there.

I thought I might be able to endure one day in my new home and perhaps two, but I did not see how I could live there for the rest of my life.

-- Koly (Chapter 1 paragraph 71)

Importance: Koly is laying the groundwork for the miserable existence she has to look forward to. She's correct in her assessment of the situation, and she remains miserable until Mrs. Mehta abandons her.

His tuberculosis is of a new kind that does not respond to medication. Still, with complete rest he may have weeks, perhaps months to live.

-- The Doctor (Chapter 2 paragraph 50)

Importance: This quote confirms that Hari is very ill and not likely to survive. Koly believes Hari when he tells her he is likely to die because he looks so sick, but she is now faced with the irrefutable truth.

I wanted to believe that the Ganges would make Hari better, but when I looked at Hari, my hope slipped away like a frightened mouse into a dark hole.

-- Koly (Chapter 3 paragraph 7)

Importance: Koly knows that her situation will become more tenuous if Hari dies and leaves her a widow. There is literally no hope for a woman in Koly's culture to marry again if her husband dies, even if he dies at a young age as Hari does.

It was about a flock of birds flying day and night through the skies. Among them was one homeless bird, always flying on to somewhere else.

-- Koly (Chapter 4 paragraph 44)

Importance: This is a reference to Koly's favorite poem. Mr. Mehta has secretly taught her to read, and she loves poetry. The reference to the homeless bird is, of course, a means of tying the story to the title of the book.

Remember that without her dowry we would never have had the money to go to Varanasi, and her widow's pension these two years has added to Chandra's dowry.

-- Mr. Mehta (Chapter 5 paragraph 17)



Importance: This is the first time Koly realizes that the envelopes that arrive from the government each month contain money in her name because Hari left her a widow.

With all these questions I did not think to run away today or tomorrow, but as long as I had the thought of someday, I could stand Sass's scolding.

-- Koly (Chapter 6 paragraph 29)

Importance: Koly has just learned that she can have the pension check mailed to her at some other location if she leaves the Mehtas' house. That thought gives her hope that she might someday escape her miserable existence.

This time there was no money for a funeral in Varanasi. Sassur's thumbs were tied together to show that he could no longer work, and his big toes were also tied together so that his ghost could not return.

-- Koly (Chapter 7 paragraph 2)

Importance: Koly's dowry money was used for the trip to Varanasi and for Hari's funeral. When Mr. Mehta dies, there is no money available for the same kind of funeral. The traditions and customs of the culture are interesting, if overly superstitious.

If my family learned what had happened to me, it would bring them unhappiness and even shame.

-- Koly (Chapter 8 paragraph 13)

Importance: Koly has a little cash because Mrs. Mehta gives her money to buy food before abandoning her. Koly briefly considers the possibility of trying to return home to her parents. However, she knows she won't truly be welcomed because, among other reasons, "widows are unlucky."

It was only natural that Raji should want a wife, but his words silenced me. I could only think how lucky a woman would be to be married to Raji; he was so kind and clever.

-- Koly (Chapter 9 paragraph 49)

Importance: Raji has just told Koly that he is working hard in the city to save enough money to return to his farm, build a house, and plant crops. He says that once he is able to return, he'll want a wife. Koly doesn't consider that he might be thinking of her because it's virtually unheard of for a woman to marry twice in this culture.

I had known that Raji would make a fine husband for some lucky girl, but I could hardly believe that he had chosen me or that his family would accept me.

-- Koly (Chapter 11 paragraph 17)

Importance: Raji has just explained to Koly that he doesn't want to marry a girl who can bring a dowry to him. He wants to marry someone who will be his wife and his friend. He insists Koly is that woman. When Koly asks about his parents' reaction to his plan, he says he doesn't have any close family. So, there's no one to object.



It was not only the room that brought tears to my eyes but the idea of a room for me taking shape in Raji's mind, and then being built with his hands.

-- Koly (Chapter 11 paragraph 59)

Importance: Koly has just received Raji's letter in which he says he has a surprise for her. He has constructed a room for her onto his house, especially designed to catch the best hours of sun so that she'll have a good place to work on her embroidery. This eliminates any doubt she's holding onto about the marriage.