

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *SUCH BIG DREAMS*

1. Throughout the novel, we encounter many changing names: Bombay to Mumbai; Victoria Terminus (VT Station) to Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (although Rakhi says every- one still calls it VT Station); Mohammad to Babloo and back to Mohammad; Bansari to Rakhi and back to Bansari. What does this tell us about the importance, or lack of importance, in a name? Why does Rakhi return to using Bansari at the end of the story?
2. Fire plays an important role in Rakhi's life. Consider the dream in the opening sequence (p.1), Rakhi's failed attempt to burn down the girls' school (p.95), the fire involving Babloo and the paanwala (p.300), and the fire in Behrampada (p.328). How does each instance affect her life?
3. Babloo and the other street kids proclaim that they "do what [they] want," and have "complete freedom" (p.65). Later in the story, Rakhi laments, "What if your options are so limited you don't really have a choice at all?" (p.99). How does Rakhi have and not have the freedom to make choices in her life? What are the factors that affect the choices available to her? How do these choices, or lack of choices, propel her story to the point where she can assert "whatever happens, one thing I know is for sure: I will do whatever I want" (p.370)?
4. "Up close, I could see how her eyelashes resembled spiders' legs and the powder on her face cracked like the earth before monsoon season. Her mouth was painted with a thick pink ribbon of colour, and when her lips parted into a smile I swore she had a snaggletooth" (p.215–216). What does Rakhi's perception of Rakhi Tilak tell us about the cult of celebrity and illusions of celebrity perfection? How can we relate this back to Rubina Mansoor?
5. "You're not born only once, on the day your mother gives birth to you, . . . life forces you to give birth to yourself, over and over again" (p.216). Consider how moments of rebirth happen for the various characters in the novel.
6. Alex laments the challenges of being biracial, and of living a liminal identity. In Canada he is too brown, in India he is too white. How does he navigate his sense of identity in Bombay? How does his sense of belonging impact his actions?
7. Most of Rakhi's relationships are built around some kind of transaction. Consider her relationships with Gauri, Tazim, and Alex. Why might someone with Rakhi's history find herself in so many transactional relationships? Why might she be leery of other people's intentions?
8. "The only real-life stories I tell my tour groups are my own, never the ones about the other kids. Those are not mine to tell" (p.360). Why does Rakhi insist on telling only her own story? Examine instances in the book when Rakhi's power to tell her own story was taken away from her.

9. “What must it be like, being a starched-shirt Pali Hill rich boy like Alex? Or these white girls with yellow hair, all of them coming to India to dip their toes into our shit, pretending like our problems are their problems, then going home and never coming back?” (p.26). Discuss this statement and Alex’s story of his well-building trip to Honduras. How does the concept of foreign aid or intervention help and hurt the people in the story?
10. How do such privileges as wealth, formal education, English proficiency, and race factor into the story and into the lives of the characters? Which characters have which privileges, and how do these privileges affect their viewpoints and their actions towards one another?
11. After Rakhi confronts Gauri about the fire, Gauri states: “The Arora Group has too much money to be held accountable for things like this” (p.354). Then she goes on to tell Rakhi that she doesn’t owe her anything. How does accountability play out, or not, within the story? Who is accountable to whom, and what do they, and we, owe to one another?
12. How are dreams, both literal and aspirational, important in the story? How does the ending of the story align with Rakhi’s dreams? Are Rakhi’s dreams ultimately dashed or realized?
13. At the end of the novel, we see Rakhi leading “street life” tours. Discuss the morality of rich foreigners paying to witness squalor and the hardships of others. Why are we drawn to stories of struggle and poverty? What do you make of the story of Derekbhaiyya (p.259–61)?
14. Discuss the ending of the novel. How do you feel about where Rakhi ends up, three years later? How does this ending compare with your expectations? How might your expectations differ from Rakhi’s expectations for herself? Where do you think Rakhi will be in ten years?