

# *Operation Monsoon*

by Shona Ramaya

Graywolf Press

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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Paul Pratt Memorial Library, Cohasset, MA

Massachusetts  
Honor Book  
2004



### **SUMMARY:**

In vivid prose, author Shona Ramaya deftly portrays a modern India where ancient belief systems are challenged by the transforming influences of multiculturalism and globalization. In five provocative stories, the changing social politics of contemporary India and the complexities of reconciling socio-economic traditions with the competing influences of science, technology and Western culture, are revealed through the interactions of the stories' richly developed characters.

In the title story, "Operation Monsoon," a young Indian terrorist is romanticized by his distant cousin and marketed by an American academic anxious to exploit the Third World for her professional gain. In "The Matchmakers," a young woman crippled by polio operates a successful Internet matchmaking service that is mimicked by a sinister matchmaking business conducted on the streets. "Gopal's Kitchen" reveals an India where selling organs for money is commonplace and karmic debts are irrevocable. The story "Re: Mohit," chronicles a young Indian expatriate's disenchantment with American dotcom office culture through a series of emails written to his younger brother in India. In "Destiny," an Indian graduate student researches how the belief in destiny functions in a superstitious Indian village, only to find that she, too, falls sway to the power of myth and superstition.

"Operation Monsoon" illuminates the ancient mores of India against the backdrop of a techno-driven, global new age, and leads one to ponder the social and economic effects of globalization and technology on cultural identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Shona Ramaya's literary voice resonates with our times.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. India's monsoons occur during three months of the year, causing all events to revolve around the rain. How is rain integral to the story "Operation Monsoon?" What does the rain symbolize for the "terrorist," Manik? How does the author use the rain as a metaphor for transformation?

2. Young female protagonists, influenced by Western culture, challenge the socio-economic belief systems of their upper-middle class families in the stories “The Matchmakers,” “Operation Monsoon,” “Destiny” and “Gopal’s Kitchen.” In what ways do these characters challenge their culture’s marriage and class structures? How has the exposure to different cultures brought about by immigration changed young people’s ideas about marriage and class systems? What evidence is there in the stories to suggest that globalization has transformed post-colonial Indian society?
3. The story “Destiny” vividly depicts the power and influence of a village’s mythical and superstitious ideology. A belief in fate or destiny dominates the actions of the villagers. How does a deterministic belief system impact the lives of the characters in the story? How does isolation from Western influence benefit or harm the village?
4. “Gopal’s Kitchen” tells of a family’s beloved cook who dies and is replaced by Gyan, the man who received his kidney. Is the old adage, “The sins of the father are visited upon the heads of the children,” pertinent to this story? What role does fate play? How does the author weave together the mystical and realistic threads of the narrative? What social messages about exploitation are evident in the story? How does a belief in karma influence the action?
5. In “The Matchmakers”, an evil matchmaking business is conducted on the streets, creating a parody of Bela’s dotcom enterprise. In “Destiny,” Lachmi relents to the karmic demands of redemption resulting in her tragic demise. How does the power of individual imagination work to shape the outcome of events in both stories? In what ways are the characters manipulated by the illusions created by others? How do the characters in both stories misconstrue what is happening around them? Do you think that people bear a moral responsibility to refrain from drawing conclusions that, if vocalized, may adversely affect the lives of others?
6. Throughout the stories we are aware of the contrast between science and myth. How do belief systems based on myth sustain themselves in an increasingly technological world? How has technology empowered the lives of the stories’ characters? How has it enslaved them?
7. The academics in “Destiny” and “Operation Monsoon” use the Third World to further their academic careers. In what ways do the characters misinterpret or distort their representation of Third World culture to further their professional goals? Is Beverly’s romanticizing of the terrorist naive or disingenuous? How is the theme of exploitation illustrated in the stories?

8. In an interview about this book, Shona Ramaya said: “It is a global culture that we have around us now. People are not so concerned about re-establishing roots in a different culture.” How does the story “Re: Mohit” reflect this viewpoint? Has dotcom address supplanted geographical address? What are the advantages or disadvantages of cultural assimilation?
9. Books by South Asian authors, such as Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahir, Arundhati Roy, and Rohinton Mistry, are very popular in America. Why do you think people enjoy reading about “exotic” cultures? Do you think that globalization is diluting the uniqueness of cultural values and identity?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Reprinted from <http://www.project-impact.org/PI Philly Lit/literary Shona.html>

Shona Ramaya was born in Calcutta and spent her teens in New Delhi. After completing her undergraduate work there, she went on to graduate study in English literature at Syracuse University. Before arriving at Trinity, she was Assistant Professor at Hamilton College, NY, in the Creative Writing Program. Her previous books include *Operation Monsoon: Stories, Beloved Mother, Queen of the Night*, a collection of stories, and *Flute*, a novel. She is currently completing a novel about dowry death in India. She is the editor of *Catamaran: South Asian American Writing* and lives in Massachusetts.

### **HELPFUL LINKS:**

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<http://www.graywolfpress.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=384>



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