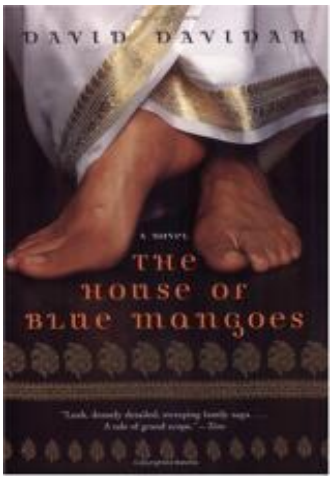
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The House of Blue Mangoes

by David Davidar



About the Book

It is hard to imagine a more challenging and complex country for the British Empire to have chosen for colonization than India. To the Western eye, India is a dizzying mosaic of flavors, sights, smells, and sounds. There are hundreds of different dialects and religious figures; thousands of caste and tribal divisions; a variegated geography that boasts tremendous rainstorms, stupefying heat, and impenetrable forests. There are as many ways to make fish biryani as there are women preparing it. And of course there are the infinite varieties of mango.

When we are first introduced to the fictional province of Chevathar, the British occupation of India is firmly established. Western influences have had their way in the country: in its churches and government offices, in the homes and in the minds of the Indian people themselves. But, as the saying goes, the natives are getting restless -- with their colonizers and with each other. In a country whose native faith honors the changing nature of the world, restlessness is a given. But the violence with which India's castes confront one another is devastating. On the eve of the new millennium, India's citizens -- white and native -- regard each other with suspicion, jealousy, and fear.

In **The House of Blue Mangoes** David Davidar shows us how one family copes with its country's divisiveness as it lurches forward into history. At first, under the guidance of Solomon, the Dorai family seems to have settled into a comfortable compromise between Indian culture and English rule. But Solomon cannot survive the ages-old rivalries that pit one clan against each other. Rather than compromising his own inherited position of power, he dies defending a defenseless cause.

After Solomon's death, the family is torn apart as Aaron becomes involved in a violent campaign for independence and Daniel pursues a career in medicine. Each son, in his own way, will greatly influence his family and his country. Aaron's ascetic devotion to independence transforms him into a criminal and a hero. Daniel's alchemic talent with native plants results in a medicine that convinces Indians that they can look like the English. Each son will die having accomplished much, but mourning the fact that he didn't do enough.

By the time the third generation of Dorai comes to maturity, India's struggle for independence has created a palpable strain on daily life. Daniel's son, Kannan, much to his father's distress, marries an Anglo-Indian woman and leaves Chevathar to help manage an English tea plantation. There he strives to be accepted by English society, even as he knows they regard him as second-rate. When a rash of killings throws suspicion upon Kannan, he resolves to prove his worthiness once and for all. But a harrowing encounter with a man-eating tiger and a disillusioned British officer convince him that he belongs in Chevathar, and he returns to run the family compound his father established in honor of what his father lost.

Davidar concludes his novel with poignant echoes of its opening scenes. Although India, the country, has changed and will continue to change in ways even Kannan cannot imagine, there is much that endures: the force and beauty of nature, the importance of family, and the peace that comes from understanding one's own impermanence. As he welcomes us into the story of the Dorai clan -- and a new day dawning upon a world both glorious and ominous -- so Davidar leaves us with a strong impression of India's contradictory nature: conquerors may come and go; feuds and loyalties may divide and unite; droughts, disease, and misfortune will give way to years of fertility, health, and wealth. But the sun will continue to rise, bringing with it the problems, pleasures, and promise of a new day.

Discussion Guide

1. The first scene in the novel -- the rape of a young girl -- takes place on the tarred road that runs "like a fresh scar" through the village of Chevathar. Solomon Dorai blames the road itself for the crime, as well as for other unrest plaguing his village. What does this road represent? What other roads figure prominently in the novel, and why?

2. After the rape, Solomon's wife, Charity, visits the family of the girl who was raped, to see if there is anything she can do to help. But, as she discovers, "There's nothing [she] can do?There was no terrible spill of anger here, none of the fury that drove the mythical Kannagi to burn up her tormentors. This was different, more practical, perhaps the only way left to the women of the village. There was good and evil, and both were necessary to keep the world in balance -- you raged against fate only when you didn't understand. It was best to accept and go on." (40-41) What do you think of this philosophy? Why doesn't it work for Aaron? To what extent do Daniel and his son, Kannan, rage against their own fates?

3. How do Solomon, his sons Daniel and Aaron, and his grandson Kannan each represent their respective generations with regard to culture and political climate? How does each character precipitate change in his family, and in the Dorai clan?

4. Likewise, how do Charity, Rachel, and Helen represent their respective generations? In a country that denies women many of the freedoms enjoyed by men, what kinds of influence do these women wield? How do they obtain their power?

5. Throughout **The House of Blue Mangoes** Davidar reminds us -- in stunning detail -- of India's natural beauty and

fierce climate. What role does nature play in the novel? What kinds of struggles do the characters wage against India's natural forces?

6. Like many other Indian clans, the Dorai family blends Hindu and Christian traditions. What are some of the results of this fusion? How does religion influence their lives? Can you think of ways in which your own religious beliefs reflect your family history and your environment?

7. Daniel's interest in siddah medicine leads him to a career as a physician, but he makes his fortune selling the popular skin-whitening cream he created. What does Daniel's success say about the British influence in India? How does his life embody both cultures?

8. Why is the scene in which Kannan hunts the tiger with Harrison important to the novel? Why do you think Harrison let Kannan live? Why did the incident convince Kannan that he needed to return to Chevathar?

9. How does Davidar use the mango as a metaphor for India and for the Dorai family?

10. Compare the novel's portrayal of Solomon in the first few pages with the final scene in which Kannan contemplates a mango he has just picked from the grove in Chevathar. How has Chevathar changed, and how has it remained the same? How do these scenes embody the novel's major themes?

11. Based on the novel's version of historical events, do you think India would have been better off without English rule? Give examples that support either argument.

Author Bio

David Davidar began his career in Journalism and now works in publishing. He is married and lives in New Delhli.

Critical Praise

"Thoroughly engrossing ? Davidar?s rich debut ? offers a sweeping and generous view of India?s fractured history."

The House of Blue Mangoes
by David Davidar

Publication Date: March 1, 2003
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 432 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 0060936789
ISBN-13: 9780060936785