

Discussion Questions for *The Mistress of Bhatia House* by Sujata Massey

1. Gender roles play an important role in how people, especially potential clients, interact with Perveen. How do you think she handles the different expectations that men and women have of her?
2. A person's reputation is a key theme in the novel, especially when it comes to romantic or sexual relationships. For example, it is said that "Colin's reputation could be destroyed if word got around about a woman seeking him out" (p. 29). Additionally, as Perveen explains to Judge Kanga, "If an unmarried woman is exposed for having had intercourse, she is likely to lose the chance to work in a respectable occupation, or to remain accepted by her parents and family. She would likely never find a groom willing to take her in marriage" (p. 408-409). Discuss the importance of one's reputation in today's society. How have things changed or not changed since then?
3. Uma Bhatia introduces Perveen to *Woman and the New Race*, a 1920 text by Margaret Sanger about how contraception should be more accessible to married women. Are you familiar with this text? Do you think the claims it makes are still relevant today? Why or why not?
4. The tension between Perveen and Gulnaz due to Gulnaz's role as a new mother causes Perveen to have some conflicting feelings about her womanhood. How does this internal struggle affect your opinion of her character?
5. Do you think Gulnaz's decision to go home to her family was the right thing to do for her? How about for Khushy and Rustom? Why or why not?
6. Perveen's life has its own constraints and challenges, but, as she learns over the course of the story, her family's financial status allows her more freedom than lower-caste women like Sunanda. How do you think Perveen handles this privilege?
7. Did you suspect foul play in Sir Dwarkanath's death? Were you surprised when his killer was revealed?
8. What was your initial opinion of Cora? Did your perception of her change over the course of the story?
9. In the novel, Perveen is Bombay's only female solicitor and Dr. Miriam Penkar is the city's only Indian female obstetrician-gynecologist. Do you think their unique social statuses bring them closer together? If so, how?
10. Who or what would you say is the primary antagonist of the novel? Is it the killer, society, or something else?