

READING GROUP GUIDE

APSARA ENGINE by Bishakh Som

978-1-936932-81-8 pbk • \$24.95 • 248 pages • April 14, 2020



1. In the opening story “Come Back to Me,” Som disassociates image and text throughout the narrative. She does the same in the later story “Love Song.” What effect does this have? Where are there connections between the images and the text, and where do the two seem completely untethered from each other? Overall, do these stories read like one narrative?
2. In “Throat,” the humanoid-animal pet appears to be partially a dog, partially a woman of color. By the end of the story, what do you think the “pet” was trying to say? What could the relationship between the woman and the “pet” represent?
3. The titular friends in “Meena & Aparna” clash repeatedly, but the strength and endurance of their friendship is evident. At the end of the story, Som introduces a “twist” ending. Did you expect this resolution? Why or why not?
4. Som frequently devotes entire panels to a single character’s facial expressions. This is especially evident in “Meena & Aparna” and “Pleasure Palace.” How does Som use the *absence* of dialogue to build tension and tell a story?
5. At the beginning of “Pleasure Palace,” the narrator Edith says in her inner dialogue: “At the very least, these people are silly, but not, I think, malicious” (88). Do you believe that Craig’s treatment of Edith is ultimately harmless? Or could his behavior be indicative of greater social forces at work? Why or why not?
6. Consider the maps, architecture, and landscapes seen in “Apsara Engine” (76–81) and “Swandive” (155, 156, 157). How would you describe them? How are they similar or different to other depictions of the future you’ve seen in other books or art? What kind of future does Som imagine using these visuals?
7. Both “Love Song” and “Come Back to Me” feature protagonists who are taken away by strange creatures. In “Come Back to Me,” Sara is taken away by a sea creature; in “Love Song,” the protagonist is taken away by a human-bird hybrid. What do these creatures represent? Are there similarities between the two stories in terms of how the creatures are used?
8. In “I Can See It in You,” the central character Rajiv feels increasingly untethered at a party, especially with the appearance of an ex-girlfriend. How do the interpersonal relationships portrayed in “I Can See It in You” tie back to *Apsara Engine*’s themes of cultural expectations and crossing boundaries?

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