

Discussion Questions for *The Lion Women of Tehran*

There are three sets of questions available for this year's book — choose the one that suits your book club best. Warning: spoilers ahead!

Adapted from SuperSummary.com:

1. Ellie and Homa want different, even opposite things out of life. Did you feel more connected to one character than the other? What did this teach you about yourself?
2. In what ways could you relate to and understand the struggles of women in Tehran? What did you find difficult to identify with?
3. Comparing Ellie and Homa, consider how each woman grows and matures in relation to and distinct from one another. What point do you think Kamali is making with these distinctions?
4. Explore the several references to Persian culture, language, and legend throughout the novel. What does this add to the story in terms of setting, metaphor, or symbolism?
5. Analyze the contrast between Iranian culture and U.S. culture as they are portrayed in the novel. What message does the author convey with this distinction?
6. Ellie and Homa are children in Tehran during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. How does the detailed depiction of characters in this setting make the backdrop more accessible? What, if anything, did you know about the revolution before reading this book?
7. "I knew belief in the powers of other people's jealousy and the jinxing of an evil eye needed to be cast off. But at the age of thirty-eight, in the middle of that massive Manhattan department store, I was still unwittingly beholden to superstition."
8. Ellie accidentally shares information that lands Homa in prison. Consider Ellie's sense of guilt, particularly when she learns that Homa was attacked while she was in prison. How does Ellie's guilt manifest itself in the story?
9. "A bird from the fables. A bird from our ancient Persian Zoroastrian mythology. The Huma bird never rests on the ground. They say this bird lives its entire life invisible above us all."

Homa is depicted as a character driven by strong ideals and courage. In what ways does her strong sense of justice inspire others? How might it also lead to personal challenges in her life?
10. Considering the symbolism of the recipe book that Homa gives Ellie in relation to Ellie's eventual restaurant. What do both the recipe book and restaurant say about the bond between these two? What does food itself represent within the text?

11. Jealousy plays a significant role in the relationship between Ellie and Homa. How does the novel suggest one can transform feelings of jealousy into positive growth?

From Reading Group Guides and MarjanKamali.com:

1. The book opens from Ellie's point of view in 1980s New York City. What are some observations she has about the city? What does this tell you about how she sees herself there? Discuss how she describes New York in the first chapter and in Part Five compared to how she describes Tehran. What are the differences?
2. How would you describe the city of Tehran during Ellie and Homa's childhoods? What feelings does it invoke? How was Tehran different for both girls before they lived in the same neighborhood?
3. Ellie's mother has an obsession with the evil eye. Where do you believe this originates? What effect do you think this has on Ellie's mother's outlook on life, and how might it affect Ellie as she grows up?
4. Ellie spends much of her childhood mourning her father's death. How does her image of him compare to the man Ellie's mother reveals him to be later in the book? How does Ellie's relationship with her mother change once she finds out? How does this help explain Ellie's mother's actions throughout the book?
5. How would you describe how Ellie's mother thinks of Homa? Why do you think she feels this way? How does this foreshadow what happens later in the book?
6. Seven years pass between Part One and Part Two, and we find Ellie at an upscale school in a nice neighborhood with a new group of friends. How has her life changed, and how have her relationships changed, or stayed the same?
7. Describe the role politics in Iran plays throughout the book. How does it propel the plot forward? Does it function as a main character? How do the characters interact with politics, and how does it shape their futures?
8. Two themes of the book are betrayal and jealousy. How was this explored throughout the book (i.e. between characters, through the setting, between social classes, in politics, etc.)? Were there instances of betrayal that surprised you?
9. Homa's experience in prison devastated her plans and set her on a new trajectory for the rest of her life. What might have happened if she was not imprisoned and raped? How might her life have turned out differently? Would Homa and Ellie have remained friends?
10. Part Four opens from Homa's point of view. How are her and Ellie's voices different? Discuss how the author uses shifting points of view as a plot device and what it adds to the narrative.

11. Homa talks about growing up to be “lion women” throughout the book. How would you describe “lion women,” and how do Homa and Ellie understand the idea? How might it apply to women in general?

12. Discuss the romantic relationships throughout the book. Mehrdad and Ellie, Homa and Abdol, Ellie’s mother and Ellie’s *baba*, Ellie’s mother and Uncle Massoud, Sousan and the Colonel, and so on. How do these relationships demonstrate gender and societal norms in Iran from the 1950s to the 1980s? Do any of them subvert traditional gender roles? How?

13. The author explores the bonds between mother and daughter throughout the book. Discuss the mother-daughter relationships for each character and what they have in common.

14. In the final chapter and epilogue, we fast forward to 2022 and find out that Homa remained in Iran to fight for women’s freedoms, and Ellie followed her dream of opening an Iranian cafe in America. How do these two women embody what it means to be Lion Women? How do they reflect on their pasts, and what do you think their hopes are for their futures?

15. Before the Islamic Revolution, women in Iran enjoyed many liberal freedoms that Western women are familiar with. What did you know about Iran before reading this book, and how have these characters and their stories changed your understanding? Now, Mahsa Amini has inspired another generation of Iranian women to protest and fight against oppression. What role do women play in political movements around the world? How much has changed since Ellie and Homa’s childhoods in Iran, and what has remained the same?

16. This book is propelled by relationships between women. Describe those relationships and compare them to each other. Do you see relationships like these in your own life? What makes relationships between women special?

AI-Generated Questions:

1. How does the relationship between Ellie and her mother evolve?
2. What is the significance of Homa's "lion woman" concept and how do both Ellie and Homa embody it differently?
3. How does the friendship between Ellie and Homa change and develop under the pressure of their diverging paths and political upheaval?
4. Analyze Ellie's mother's character, particularly her obsession with the evil eye and her often-narcissistic behavior. How does this impact Ellie?
5. Discuss the themes of betrayal and jealousy as they appear throughout the novel.

6. How does the author use the historical and political context of Iran to shape the story and characters' lives?
7. How do silence and voice act as forms of power or survival for the characters?
8. How does the novel explore the theme of national identity?
9. What does the novel reveal about the struggles and resilience of women in Iran?
10. How does the author use time jumps and shifts in point of view (e.g., Ellie in Part One, Homa in Part Four) to tell the story?
11. How do the characters' romantic relationships and their differing dreams for the future impact their lives and friendship?
12. How does Ellie and Homa's friendship evolve over the course of the book? In what ways are their lives similar and different?
13. How is loyalty portrayed in the story? Consider Ellie and Homa's loyalty to each other, to their country, and to their own principles.
14. How does the novel explore the role of women in a traditional and changing society? What are some ways gender roles both restrict and inspire change?
15. How did Homa's time in prison change her trajectory? How did it affect her view of the world?
16. Was Ellie's inadvertent betrayal of Homa a result of youthful carelessness or a deeper issue? How did this moment test their friendship?
17. How do you interpret the choices the characters make in the final chapter and epilogue? Does Homa's decision to stay in Iran and Ellie's decision to open a cafe in America seem in character?
18. What were your overall impressions of the book? Were there any parts of the story that were difficult to read or understand?