



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE IMMORTAL KING RAO BY VAUHINI VARA

1. For one of her book's epigraphs, Vauhini Vara selects a quote from Thomas Piketty that asks how the nation-state, and by extension capitalism and ownership society, can be transcended. Is *The Immortal King Rao* an answer to Piketty's question? Why launch a novel with the words of an economist?
2. Vara spent nine years as a technology reporter at the *Wall Street Journal*. How does her background complicate a reading of *The Immortal King Rao* as science fiction, and of the near future that Athena inhabits as dystopian fiction? Do other elements of the novel throw these categorizations into question? How would you classify the book?
3. *The Immortal King Rao* opens in the 1950s, with the birth of its title character. Then, a few pages in, we're transported back to the preceding century for a microhistory of Pears soap in the British Empire. When and where does the story of King Rao truly begin? How does King's story change when you widen the lens through which it is viewed?
4. In defiance of those who pity King for being born "under a bad star" (p. 17), Sita chooses to give the baby an auspicious name. How do acts of naming and renaming impact the course of characters' lives in *The Immortal King Rao*? How do omens shape their trajectories?
5. How did it feel to be addressed as "dear Shareholder"? Why does Vara implicate her reader in this way?
6. We first learn that Athena has been charged with murder from the Algorithm. Does this make the allegation more credible, or less? How did your judgment of Athena's guilt or innocence change over the course of the novel? Would you convict her of the crime?
7. How do the Garden and Blake Island—the sites of King and Athena's respective childhoods—resemble one another? Do both, in some ways, echo the Garden of Eden? If so, when do you think expulsion from Eden occurs for King and Athena, and why?
8. The Raos are members of the Dalit community, the lowest caste in Hindu India. What does it mean to be Dalit in *The Immortal King Rao*?
9. Is King's Clarinet "a gift" (p. 74) and, if so, to whom?
10. When King asks Athena to inject him with the Clarinet, she clarifies, "If I have led you to believe that I am the kind of daughter who might have refused him this . . . then, Shareholder, I have allowed you to be misled" (p. 74). Did you ever feel misled by Athena as a narrator? Do you think that the order in which the novel's multiple narratives unfold was a deliberate choice on her part?
11. Through the Clarinet, King literally lives on in his daughter. What does this say about the relationship between parents and children? In what instances does Athena follow in her father's footsteps? Is she able to diverge from his path?
12. Athena identifies herself repeatedly as a Rao. What, if anything, does she inherit from Margie? What about from Elemen Ex, her surrogate mother?
13. What does King learn about death growing up in the Garden? Beyond King's immortalization in Athena, do other forms of life after death exist in the book?
14. As she grows older, Athena's bond with her father is challenged by her deep desire for independence and emancipation from him. How do these conflicting impulses resurface throughout the book?
15. Is invention in *The Immortal King Rao* a positive or a negative concept? Do you consider Athena to be an invention?





Colorado Book Club Resource

16. At the conclusion of Part I of the novel, Athena returns to Neil Armstrong’s observation of the clouds’ resemblance to white lace. Why does she think of this observation as “a prayer or incantation” (p. 109)? When she offers it to the reader, what is she giving us?
17. Why does King choose the name “Coconut” for his personal computer? How does the company reflect the Garden’s legacy?
18. How does Vara derail the stereotypical tech company origin story, which, as KUOW Radio notes in an interview with the author, centers on “mostly white guys in a garage”?
19. Do you think Margie is the true genius behind Coconut? What are her ambitions—for herself and for the company—and how do they differ from King’s?
20. Theft—of soap tins, money, ideas, even a name—is rampant in *The Immortal King Rao*. Are these acts of theft ever justified? Can stealing in the novel be generative, as well as destructive?
21. Before she leaves Blake Island, Athena has never encountered another person who is not her father. What does she learn about socialization when she arrives on Bainbridge Island?
22. Vara’s characters are connected in unexpected ways—Miss Fit and Cora Burroughs, for instance, or Athena and Elemen Ex. How do you understand these connections—are they the product of coincidence, or something more?
23. Can Social be a platform of resistance? Why are the Exes so adamant in their refusal to use it as a tool?
24. How does the account of Pedda’s stroke that King gives at Sharefest differ from the memory of the incident that he passes on to Athena? What kind of story is he trying to tell through memory?
25. Both King and the Algo are equated to God. Which of the two has a greater claim to the title? Are gods a benevolent or a malevolent presence in *The Immortal King Rao*?
26. In the latter half of the book, Vara draws a direct line from the British East India Company to Shareholder Government. Did this parallel surprise you? How do conditions under Shareholder Government replicate the India of King’s childhood?
27. When King remains in the loft of King’s House as Chinna is murdered, he is taking “a kind of action that resembles inaction,” which, Vara writes, is “the kind on which all of society is founded” (p. 356). Do you see “action that resembles inaction” in the workings of Shareholder Government? Are those who embrace the policy of nonaction responsible for its consequences?
28. Vara spent twelve years writing *The Immortal King Rao*. How do you think the novel might have differed if it was published a decade ago?
29. Writing about *The Immortal King Rao* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Justin Taylor calls the novel “pitiless” (it’s a compliment), adding, “Vara respects her reader and herself too much to yield to the temptation to console us.” Do you agree with Taylor’s description? Why would the reader require consolation? What is the value of pitilessness in a novelist?
30. In the final pages of the book, Vara presents opposing perspectives—that of the philosophers Zhuangzi and Thomas Nagel—on the question of whether one individual can truly understand what it’s like to be another (or, for that matter, to be a fish or a bat). Does *The Immortal King Rao* endorse either Zhuangzi or Nagel’s point of view? What importance does Athena attach to the possibility of communion between individuals?
31. Athena tells us the story of her father’s life so that we can determine whether or not she is to blame for his death. Is that her only motivation? What other questions does Athena want us to answer?

Discussion provided by the publisher.



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