



Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame

written by Supriya Kelkar

About the Book

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Resources on the web:

leeandlow.com/books/strong-as-fire-fierce-as-flame

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

SYNOPSIS

India, 1857

Meera's future has been planned for her for as long as she can remember. As a child, her parents married her to a boy from a neighboring village whom she barely knows. Later, on the eve of her thirteenth birthday, she prepares to leave her family to live with her husband's—just as her strict religion dictates. But that night, Indian soldiers mutiny against their British commanders and destroy the British ammunition depot, burning down parts of Delhi. Riots follow, and Meera's husband is killed. Upon hearing the news, Meera's father insists that she follow the dictates of their fringe religious sect: She must end her life by throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

Risking everything, Meera runs away, escaping into the chaos of the rebellion. But her newfound freedom is short-lived, as she is forced to become a servant in the house of a high-ranking British East India Company captain. Slowly through her work, she gains confidence, new friends, new skills—and sometimes her life even feels peaceful. But one day, Meera stumbles upon the captain's secret stock of ammunition, destined to be used by the British to continue colonizing India and control its citizens.

Will Meera do her part to take down the British colonists and alert the rebellion of the stockpile? Or will she stay safe and let others make decisions for her? It really comes down to this: how much fire must a girl face to finally write her own destiny?

BACKGROUND

Author's Note from Supriya Kelkar

Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame is the fictional account of one girl's experiences during a volatile period of injustice, racism, sexism, and deep unrest in history. I hope readers understand the gravity of the situation and know that no actions with fire or dangerous materials should ever be taken without adult supervision.

While this story, its characters, and the North Indian villages and town it takes place in are fictional, several of the concepts and incidents mentioned are based on historical events. But with so few middle grade historical novels set in South Asia in publication today, it is sometimes easy to assume everything in this book was the standard for everyone there in 1857. In reality, that is far from the truth, as the South Asian region is full of diverse cultures, religions, languages, and traditions.

The diverse stories and experiences that took place in the South Asian region during the time of European colonialism have often been overlooked in books published years ago that many readers still treasure today as classics. I remember being shocked in elementary school when I read *The Secret Garden* and recognized that part of the story took place in India. Growing up, I had never read a book that wasn't from India that had Indian characters in it. I immediately felt a deep sense of pride and a connection to the book. But as I read more, I couldn't shake this uncomfortable feeling that the book did not think highly of Indian people. They were in the background. The story was Mary's even when it took place in India. Indians were described as "not people" but "servants who must salaam to you." I was overcome with a feeling of embarrassment and deep shame. Books like *The Secret Garden* and work by Rudyard Kipling, like *The Jungle Book*, are just a few examples of how racist many "classics" from this time period can be. Native people are viewed through a colonial gaze. Their lands serve as exotic, thrilling backdrops to stories, but their people are rarely even treated like people. Their stories are in the background, unseen, forgotten, not important enough to be told on the page, while the colonizers' stories are prioritized.

When the inherent racism in these stories is pointed out, the idea is sometimes met with pushback. Excuses are made, saying it doesn't matter if someone finds something racist in these stories, because these books were written a long time ago, and that's just the way people thought back then. But that isn't the way everyone thought back then. That excuse is once again only thinking about the people colonizing, not the people whose lives were forever changed from being colonized.

I was inspired, in part, to write *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* to challenge these notions. I wanted to tell the stories that weren't considered important, because they are important, and they shouldn't be hidden or overlooked. I peppered this book with several real-life incidents I found in my research to paint a more accurate portrait of what was going on in lands and nations where colonial powers had taken over.

The journals and diaries the British memsahibs write in this story are based on real journals and travel books. I based Mem sahib's observation of the British dancing in the Taj Mahal on an excerpt

from Fanny Parkes's writing. She was a memsahib who spoke fluent Hindi and described British ladies and gentlemen having a band play on the marble terrace of the Taj Mahal, as they danced "quadrilles in front of the tomb." Travel books written by memsahibs in India were widely read and passed around in the United Kingdom. They were one of the main ways people in the UK learned about the European experience in India. These books were many times filled with derogatory, racist observations, including the animal¹ Mem sahib compares Meera to. They used words like *indolent*, *cunning*, *devious*, *scum*, and *servile* to describe the Indian population whose land they had invaded. They pointed out problems in the land they were in without acknowledging their colonial interference was also a problem. And they viewed the traditions, cultures, and religions of India through a prejudiced, colonial gaze, in which the native ways were looked down upon, ridiculed, and considered backward or morally inferior.

According to author and historian William Dalrymple, during the Victorian era, much of British colonial history was rewritten to take out the looting and plundering and reframe the brutality as an exchange of ideas, art, and railways from the West to the East.²

The toast Captain Keene gives "to the corpse of India" is one I borrowed from not a memsahib but the British governor-general of Bengal, Lord Wellesley, who said it in one of his toasts. The story the collector tells about buying an Indian baby for a few coins is also a true story from the early 1800s, as was the remark the collector makes, referring to Indian children as "swarms of little, naked bronze children," a quote which came from a magistrate stationed at Meerut.

I thought these true stories and quotes were necessary to accurately portray a colonizer's mindset, since many journals and books have been published glorifying colonialism.

In reality, colonialism was a vicious, cruel, racist practice that led to the deaths of millions of people around the world, and whose effects continue to be seen today. I hope this book serves as a reminder of what the experience of colonialism was for those who were colonized.

I hope this book tells just one small part of a much bigger story that has largely been erased in our lifetime. And I hope this book encourages readers to question who is being centered in colonial stories and in all stories, to find out who is telling the story, and to remember who is being left out. Because *that matters*.

¹Nupur Chaudhuri (1994) Mem sahibs and their servants in nineteenth-century India[1], *Women's History Review*, 3:4, 549-562, DOI: 10.1080/09612029400200071

²theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/04/east-india-company-original-corporate-raiders

Historical Note from Supriya Kelkar

Sati

Meera's experience with sati, the ancient but relatively infrequent tradition where a widow immolated herself on her husband's pyre, was not the norm for the majority of South Asian girls in the 1800s. But Meera's lack of opportunity due to her gender is something she had in common with many girls in South Asia in the 1800s, and is something she has in common with children all over the world, even today.

Sati was a fringe tradition carried out by a few families in India in the past. Some widows went

willingly, seeing it as a sign of their virtue, and as a way to follow their husbands into the afterlife, or to purify their husband's sins through their virtuous act. Others were forced to. When the British collected statistics on sati in the Bengal, Madras, and Bombay Presidencies from 1815 through 1824, the total number of reported incidents was 6,632 ¹. Sati was opposed in the 1800s by both Indian activists, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and British men, including Lord William Bentinck ². In modern-day India, sati is against the law.

Dowry

Dowry is land, wealth, or gifts given from the bride's family to the groom's. Examples of the practice of dowry can be found from many parts of the world, including Europe and Asia.

In 1661, a large portion of Mumbai, India, was actually given to the British as part of a dowry. When Prince Charles II married the Portuguese princess Catherine de Braganza, the "island of Bumbye" was part of her dowry. The prince then gave the island to the British East India Company, passing around a land and its people as if they were inanimate objects one could own.

Dowry is illegal in India, although some families do still practice it, despite it being against the law.

Child Marriage

Child marriage is still an issue in many countries. Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married as children (before the age of eighteen). According to UNICEF, more than one in three of these women was married before the age of fifteen. Child marriage affects boys and girls, but since girls are oftentimes married to older men, the issue of child marriage affects girls throughout the world at a much higher rate. A Save the Children report found that around the world, every seven seconds a girl under the age of fifteen is married. In the United States of America, the child marriage rates have dropped by half since 2000 ³, but five out of every thousand children ages fifteen to seventeen are married. In addition, at the time of this writing, two American states allow girls as young as twelve and thirteen and boys as young as fourteen to get married with parental and judicial permission ⁴.

In India in the 1800s, many people began to oppose the practice of child marriage. One of them, Rukhmabai, refused to move into the house of her husband after she was married as a child, a couple decades after this story takes place. Rukhmabai wanted to go to school, but a married girl had to drop out of school unless she obtained her in-laws' permission to continue her education. Rukhmabai protested the marriage in court and went on to get the education she had fought for, becoming one of the first female doctors in India in the late 1800s.

Schools for Girls

The school Bhavani attended is based on Bhide Wada, one of the first schools set up for girls in India. It was founded in 1848 by two women, Savitribai Phule and Fatima Begum. Although they faced a lot of protest and adversity, they succeeded in making the school a place to combat ignorance and "social slavery" for their female students. In the mid-1800s, girls often had to leave the few schools that existed for them after a couple years to get married.

Matrilineal Society

The matrilineal Indian society Bhavani mentions to Meera is in Travancore, in Kerala ⁵. Married women there did not leave their home to go to their husband's when they got married, but instead, grooms moved into their bride's childhood homes. Women controlled the household, the way men did in other parts of South Asia. And the birth of baby girls was celebrated.

Board Games and Language

Pachisi, the game Meera plays with Abbu, is known in America as Parcheesi. Pachisi is just one of many games from South Asia that later became popular board games in the West, like chess, and snakes and ladders—also known as Chutes and Ladders. In addition, the word thug and many other words like bungalow, bazaar, jungle, bangle, veranda, loot, pajamas, khaki, and shampoo came to the English language from South Asia.

Stepwells

Stepwells are large wells with a series of steps one can climb down to reach the water. These architectural marvels can look mazelike, depending on their size, and can be in several different shapes, including round or rectangular, and made up of several stories. Some stepwells have dozens of steps, and some have over a thousand. When the British came to India, they found the stepwells to be dirty and started using other types of wells. The last new stepwell was constructed in 1903 ⁶.

Rampur Greyhound

The collector's dog, the Rampur hound, is one of many endangered Indian dogs that are becoming harder to find because the British brought foreign dog breeds to India, which resulted in crossbreeding, and because of the preference for non-native dog breeds in modern-day India. Half of the indigenous dog breeds of India have died out and have not been seen in living memory ⁷.

Swastik

The swastik, or swastika, Meera mentions is a symbol that dates back to ancient India. It is a symbol of well-being and good luck. It is also an auspicious symbol in other South Asian religions like Buddhism and Jainism and can be found in and outside of homes and in temples. The word *swastika* is a Sanskrit word, the ancient language of India. Hitler and the Nazis stole the swastika and tilted it at an angle to twist the ancient symbol into a symbol of hate and devastating cruelty ⁸. The original symbol is still used in South Asia and by many in the South Asian diaspora today.

British East India Company and Colonization

Colonization is the practice of settling in, taking control over indigenous people of a certain place, and imposing another belief system and government upon the existing culture. Centuries of colonization have led to huge shifts in the global economies of countries that were colonized, as many went from lands rich in resources to places that struggle, depleted of their wealth. Conversely, the countries doing the colonizing became wealthier as they stripped their colonized lands of their resources in order to benefit themselves. Colonization was a brutal practice in which religions and cultures of the colonizers were often seen as superior to the indigenous ones. The colonized people were often treated poorly, with violence, and in many millions of instances, by losing their lives.

Countries that engaged in the practice of colonization around the world include Portugal, England/the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Russia/the USSR, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, the Ottoman Empire/Turkey, and the United States.

Several European powers subjected the South Asian region to colonization, including the Dutch, Danish, French, Portuguese, and British.

Parts or all of the South Asian subcontinent were known by several names at the time of this story, including "Bharat," and the Persian name "Hindustan." The region was not a unified nation-state but a land of many kingdoms and empires sometimes at peace, sometimes in the midst of lots of bloodshed. I chose to use the word India because the fictional villages and town the story takes place in are in modern-day India, but the region referred to by all these names include parts or all of the present-day nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India, depending on who used these terms in the 1850s.

The British East India Company started off as a company that traded in silks and spices, but quickly evolved into a dangerous colonizer, an unregulated private company comprised of 250 clerks—backed by 20,000 local Indian soldiers—that became the ruler of Bengal in the 1700s under the leadership of Robert Clive. The Company had no interest in making sure the region survived. They pillaged and stole from the subcontinent, torturing South Asians to find their treasuries and loot them. That wealth went to the West, primarily to the United Kingdom by way of the British East India company and later the British government. These brutal practices changed the South Asian region from one of the richest areas in the world to one of the poorest.

The British East India Company took advantage of the decline of the Mughal empire in India, the support of the British parliament, and the British East India Company's colossal army to take over many parts of South Asia, and by 1765 it had a monopoly on trade there. Economist Utsa Patnaik calculated that Britain took \$45 trillion from India between 1765 to 1938. This is a conservative estimate and doesn't even include the massive debts Britain imposed on India in this period of time.

The British East India Company was able to scam the South Asian subcontinent by taxing Indian goods through collectors and then using a portion of that same tax revenue to purchase the goods through traders. So, as academic Dr. Jason Hickel puts it, instead of paying for them out of pocket, the British "bought" the goods from weavers and artisans with money they had just taken from them. Some of the goods went to Britain and the rest were reexported elsewhere so the British East India Company could once again gain money, much more than they "bought" the stolen goods for.

In 1858, after the rebellion was over, the British Parliament transferred powers from the East India Company to the British government, also called the British Raj. The Raj allowed Indians to now export their goods directly to other countries, but those goods could only be purchased through Council Bills, which was special currency one could only buy through the British Crown, thus ensuring the money for these items went to England too. When Indians went to cash that special currency, they were given rupees out of the tax money that had just been collected from them. Once

again, as Dr. Hickel says, “they were not in fact paid at all; they were defrauded ¹⁰.”

The cruel practice of colonization continued under the British Raj’s rule for almost another century. The subcontinent finally gained its independence, and India was partitioned into the countries of India and Pakistan in 1947. (East Pakistan later became the country of Bangladesh.)

The Portuguese controlled the Indian territories of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, which didn’t gain independence until 1961 ¹¹. They also ruled over Daman, Diu, and the Indian state of Goa, in the middle of India on the western coast. Daman, Diu, and Goa continued to be under the rule of the Portuguese colonial forces long after 1947, finally gaining independence to join India in 1961 ¹².

Puducherry, once known as Pondicherry under colonization, was under the rule of the French East India Company, and later the French government, until the 1960s, when it became part of India ¹³.

The impact of colonization can still be felt in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and any country that was colonized, including the United States of America. Colonization sometimes separated populations into nation-states. Decades of colonial meddling has led to displaced people. And many countries have been left in poverty after colonial powers stole their riches and resources. Some colonized countries, like Haiti, even had to pay their colonizers “reparations” to get them to leave ¹⁴.

The impact of colonization can also be seen in the countries of the European colonial powers that still retain the wealth that was moved to the West. And it is important to remember that the Industrial Revolution, which benefited these countries, didn’t occur just through innovation. It came at a terrible cost to colonized people and lands, whose resources, riches, and lives were looted to make other people and lands prosper.

Famine

Although there was not a major famine in India from 1857 to 1858, when this story takes place, there were several devastating famines in India during the centuries of British East India Company and British rule, during which millions of Indians died. India once had one of the largest economies in the world and was one of the top five most powerful economic empires of all time ¹⁵. As one of the richest regions in the world, India’s textile and skilled artisan work was sought after worldwide. But during the British colonial involvement and rule, many Indians were forced to go into agriculture jobs, and most of the grain they grew was then shipped to England. When monsoons were weak and there was less rain than usual, farms didn’t yield as much as they normally would, and the British still took most of the food. So locals who grew the food would starve, while millions of pounds of grain from India fed people in the United Kingdom.

With ten mass famines since the 1860s during the period of British colonization, an estimated fifteen million Indians died due to these cruel practices. These famines and the exporting of grain continued into the 1900s, well after the events of this book ended. The devastating Bengal famine of 1943 killed three million Indians ¹⁶. As with the famines of the 1800s, food was being shipped out of India to feed others. In this case, lauded British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had voiced his disdain for Indians—who he called “a beastly people with a beastly religion”

¹⁷—ordered the diversion of food from India to “already well-supplied” British soldiers and stockpiles throughout Europe during World War II ¹⁸.

Household Staff

The household staff of a large bungalow in India often consisted of the gardener (mali); the cook (khansama or bawarchi); a servant who washed the laundry (dhobi); one who cleaned out the toilets before there were sewers; one who dusted; a watchman (chaukidar); someone to handle the horses (ghodawalla); a bearer (baira) in charge of all the servants, and the bearer’s assistant (khidmatgar), who would set the table in addition to helping the bearer; and the man or boy in charge of manually operating a fan (pankha-walla). Fans could be the kind Vinay uses in this story or like a large panel of a curtain attached to a string that would be waved back and forth by a servant.

In 1857, servants did not eat food from the British households they worked for. Because Meera and Bhavani are children, and girls—who also would not have been employed at this point in history—I took the liberty of allowing the girls to eat from the captain’s kitchen for the purposes of this story.

Barracks

The barracks built by destroying an old fort that Bhavani mentions are based on what really happened at the Red Fort in Delhi. Once the British seized the fort, they destroyed some of its existing architecture to build barracks, sacrificing the palace’s beauty and culture so that they would easily have a preexisting wall around the barracks. In 1857 British government officials and soldiers destroyed parts of the Taj Mahal by chiseling precious stones and lapis lazuli out of the monument¹⁹. The stolen jewels Bhavani mentions are based on the colonial legacy of looting other countries of their native wealth, such as when the British took the massive Kohinoor diamond from the ten-year-old heir to the Punjab throne for Queen Victoria to wear.

Until 1725, India was the world’s only source of diamonds. The world’s oldest gemology texts came from India ²⁰. The Kohinoor diamond remains part of the British crown jewels today, and can be seen on display in the Tower of London.

Juruoor Singh

The character of Charan is based on a real young woman in the early 1800s. She pretended to be a man by the name of Juruoor Singh and served as a sepoy for a couple years to try to save her brother, who was imprisoned for debt, by earning enough money to free him. When it was discovered that she was really female, she continued to serve and was treated with respect by her fellow sepoys. She was finally discharged and given a large sum of money, along with a recommendation to the nawab of the city where her brother was imprisoned, to place both siblings under his protection ²¹.

Sepoys and the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857

The word sepoy is the anglicized version of the Hindi word for soldier: sipahi. Sepoys were native infantrymen in the East India Company’s army in South Asia. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 is considered the impetus for the large-scale rebellion against the British that soon followed.

Although there were many underlying causes to the sepoy mutiny, it started in 1857 when the East India Company switched from their old rifle cartridges to ones that were greased. Rumors began to spread that the cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat. Because the sepoys had to bite off the ends of the cartridges to load their weapons, they were upset—eating beef is against Hinduism and eating pork is against Islam. Tensions began to rise further in spring when sepoys became convinced of the validity of another rumor, that the flour being sold in the markets was mixed with the powdered bones of bullocks ²².

On March 29, 1857, a Hindu sepoy named Mangal Pandey, upset over having to bite into a cartridge greased with cow lard, incited others to rebel. They shot a couple of their commanding officers before Pandey was arrested. He was set to be executed for his actions on April 18, but, fearing a full-scale revolt, the East India Company moved his execution date up to April 8 ²³. After Pandey's death, the rebellion continued to spread, with sepoys mutinying in various towns in April, until the big rebellion in Delhi in May.

The sepoys took the city of Delhi by surprise, attacking the British there. Some killed European women and children in the process. The sepoy siege of Delhi incited other Indian civilians to fight back against the colonial regime as well. During the chaos, the massive magazine where the British munitions were stored was blown up.

It took several months for the British to regain control of Delhi in September. And when they did put an end to rebellions, they often punished countless Indian civilians and Indian freedom fighters in cruel ways, including hanging them without trial or strapping them to canons to execute them ²⁴.

The Rebellion of the Rani of Jhansi

With the resistance now in full swing, mutinies were spreading across India. In Jhansi, the king died, leaving Rani Lakshmibai without an heir. According to Hindu law, the rani could adopt a son and name him as her heir, but the British did not recognize her adopted son as the legal heir and annexed her kingdom.

Some historians think that Rani Lakshmibai instigated the sepoy rebellion in Jhansi on June 6, 1857, in which many European citizens of Jhansi, including officers, clerks, and their families, were killed ²⁵. But there are several conflicting theories.

One such conflicting theory comes from Indian historian R.C. Majumdar, who wrote that the rani had nothing to do with the atrocities against the European citizens in Jhansi and did not want to participate in a rebellion initially. But the sepoys mutinied and forced her to dig up her guns, or they would kill her ²⁶. Majumdar states that the mutineers forced her to pay them, and only then recognized her as the rani of Jhansi. The British initially believed that the rani was innocent in the murders, but later came to suspect her. She was unable to convince them of her innocence and only later, in 1858—when she realized she would be put on trial for the crimes she did not participate in—did she decide to fight the British ²⁷.

According to Majumdar, “once she arrived at this decision she never wavered for a moment, and fought with courage, determination, and skill, which won unstinted admiration, even from her

enemies." This courage could be seen in March of 1858 when the rani's troops engaged in a fierce battle with the East India Company at Jhansi. Even though they were surrounded, Rani Lakshmbai did not surrender. Instead, she and a handful of guards were able to escape and head east to join up with more rebels, where she took the fortress of Gwalior. She then went on to combat the British counterattack at Morar, where she fought on the battlefield dressed as a man and died. Her bravery inspired and continues to inspire countless Indians across the country.

The British East India Company, which had been in India since the 1700s, relinquished control of India to the British crown in 1858. The violent uprising against the British continued for several decades on a smaller scale until finally, in the 1900s, led by Mahatma Gandhi and many others, a new era of the freedom movement began, that of nonviolent civil disobedience. India finally gained independence on August 15, 1947.

Several women were part of the freedom fight in the 1900s, including many who were imprisoned by the British for their involvement in the movement, and some who went on to serve as congresswomen. Nineteen years after India's independence, and a little over a century after this story takes place, a woman became prime minister of India in 1966.

While many societies have improved their treatment of girls and women, there is still a long way to go to achieving true equality in many countries, including the United States and India. This book is in honor of brave children everywhere, speaking up and speaking out against injustice, violence, patriarchy, and colonialism to ensure that equality and equity exists in their generation and beyond.

¹Uttee Revisited: From the Iconography of Martyrdom to the Burkean Sublime by Monika Fludernik; *New Literary History* Vol. 30, No. 2, Cultural Inquiries (Spring, 1999), pp. 411-437.

²<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/Why-sati-is-still-a-burning-issue/articleshows/4897797.cms>

³<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/married-young-the-fight-over-child-marriage-in-america/>

⁴<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/01/child-marriage-is-rare-in-the-u-s-though-this-varies-by-state/>

⁵<https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/what-end-kerala-matrilineal-society>

⁶<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/review-vanishing-stepwells-india-180962637/>

⁷<http://qz.com/india/971238/the-indian-dogs-that-are-dying-out-because-everyone-wants-a-labrador/>

⁸<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/bangalore-times/What-the-Swastika-means/articleshows/994390.cms>

⁹<https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/indepth/opinion/britain-stole-45-trillion-india-181206124830851.html>

¹⁰<https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/indepth/opinion/britain-stole-45-trillion-india-181206124830851.html>

¹¹<https://www.britannica.com/place/Dadra-and-Nagar-Haveli>

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/place/Goa/History>

¹³<https://www.britannica.com/place/Puducherry-union-territory-India>

¹⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/12/06/in-1825-haiti-gained-independence-from-france-for-21-billion-its-time-for-france-to-pay-it-back/#3045e953312b>

¹⁵<http://fortune.com/2014/10/05/most-powerful-economic-empires-of-all-time/>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/29/winston-churchill-policies-contributed-to-1943-bengal-famine-study>

¹⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/not-his-finest-hour-the-dark-side-of-winston-churchill-2118317.html>

¹⁸<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2031992,00.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.tajmahal.gov.in/history-of-the-taj-mahal.aspx>

²⁰ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-koh-i-noor-diamond-and-why-british-wont-give-it-back-180964660/>

²¹ Broughton, Thomas Duer, *Letters Written in a Marhatta Camp During the Year 1809* (Archibald Constable and Company, 1813), 196-198.

²² Malleson, G. B. *The Indian Mutiny of 1857* (Seeley, Service and Co. Limited, 1912), 62.

²³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mangal-Pandey>

²⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/05/skull-indian-executed-cannon-mutiny-should-repatriated-innocent/>

²⁵ Majumdar, R.C. *The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857* (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1957), 270.

²⁶ Majumdar, R.C. *The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857* (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1957), 276.

²⁷ Majumdar, R.C. *The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857* (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1957), 298.

²⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lakshmi-Bai>

Additional Resources from the Backmatter

For a timeline and glossary, see the "Timeline" and "Glossary" sections in the back of the book for more information.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

- Ask students what they know about India being colonized by Britain. Are students familiar with the British East India Company? Tell students that the British colonized India for more than 100 years. What have they learned about British colonization in school?
- Why might someone need to leave their home? What are different factors that play into people leaving their homes unexpectedly?
- What does education mean to you? What does it mean to have the right to an education? Do people have a legal right to an education? Who in the world today still does not have the right to an education?
- What does it mean to be brave? Think about a time when you had to be brave. What did you do? How did you feel?
- What does it mean to be resilient? How do you demonstrate resilience even though something may be challenging? Why is it important to be resilient? Do you think it can be learned? How so?
- Have you ever solved a problem? What did you do? Why did you have to solve that particular problem? How did you think quickly? How were you acknowledged afterward?
- Ask students to think about their family and what family means to them. How is family important to you? How do you interact with your family members? How do you help them? What about siblings, if any? How do you help your siblings, and vice versa?
- What does it mean to stand up for what you believe is right? What are some instances in history where people stood up for what they believed in even though they encountered adversity and opposition?

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- **Book title exploration:** Talk about the title of the book, *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*. Then ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?
- **Read Supriya Kelkar's biography:** Read about Supriya Kelkar on the jacket back flap as well as on her website [supriyakelkar.com](https://www.supriyakelkar.com). Encourage students to think about what could have been her inspiration for writing *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.

- Encourage students to stop and jot in their reading notebooks during the read-aloud when they: learn new information, see a powerful image, have an emotional reaction or an idea, have a question, or hear new words.
- Have students quickly write a feeling in their notebooks during reading. After reading, ask students why they wrote down that feeling and have them write a journal entry about it.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- how the British East India Company oppressed people in South Asia for hundreds of years
- what sati is and how the tradition was implemented by some families in India
- why and how Meera had to leave her home
- what life is like in the captain's home and what Meera's job is in the estate
- how Meera and Bhavani's relationship changes and grows throughout the story and what they learn from each other
- how Meera demonstrates bravery as part of the resistance against the British East India Company
- how and why trauma can affect people differently
- what racism and discrimination Meera experiences from the British people
- how Meera is treated by her family because of gender norms and expectations
- why it's important to learn about colonization through the lens of the oppressed

Encourage students to consider why the author, Surpiya Kelkar, would want to share Meera's powerful story with young people.

VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below.

Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word. (Many of the Spanish words can be found in the book glossary, but there are also some that are not included. Students could be encouraged to create a log of these words—they will not be listed here.)

Content Specific*

sati, sepoys, sari, namaste, okra, Indranagar, nawab, kurta, rani of Jansi (Rani Lakshmibai), mehendi, henna, magazine, barracks, canons, cartridges, Meerabai, mangalsutra, widow, funeral pyre, rebels, East India Company, bungalows, namak, beedis, hibiscus, bougainvillea, veranda, collector, Hindi, Dharamveer, ayah, Diwali, turmeric, sandalwood, gulmohar tree, plumeria tree, gallows, cowrie shell, pachisi, Gwalior, pajama, puja, rangoli, neelkanth, koel

*For specific words and their definitions, refer to the Glossary in the back of the book.

Academic

translucent, verdant, evicted, merriment, bazaar, abolition, colonizers, dacoits, thugs, bandits, wailed, riots, bangles, spectacle, unwavering, illuminating, ambushed, detectable, thundered, scrawny, trespassing, hatchling, flogged, laborers, guttural, caressed, collided, pyre

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.**

Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

Chapters 1-8

1. Who is in Meera's family?
2. What is sati? What happens when sati is performed?

3. What does Meera's father, Babuji, think about her education?
4. What are sepoy's? What do they do?
5. Who is Krishna?
6. What do Meera's family plan for her and Krishna?
7. Who is Ravi? What happened to him?
8. Who is Sheela? Why is her name Shalu now? What does she tell Meera?
9. What happens with Meera's kite? How does Krishna react?
10. What does Meera find out about Krishna? What does her family want her to do?
11. Where does Meera go after she finds out what Babuji wants her to do?

Chapters 8-19

12. Who does Meera meet on the boat? What do they tell her?
13. Where does the boat go? Why does this make Meera nervous?
14. Who is the rani of Jansi? Why is she important?
15. Where does Bhavani want to take Meera?
16. Who is Bhavani looking for? Where does she think she could be?
17. Who is sepoy Charan? How does he help Bhavani and Meera?
18. Who is Captain Keene? What does he tell Bhavani and Meera? Where does he send the girls?
19. Why did Meera think Bhavani was hiding something? What was she doing that made Meera think this way?
20. What does Meera discover why Bhvani wanted to get to Captain Keener's estate?
21. What British woman does Meera meet? How does she act toward them?
22. Who is Lal? Where does he live?
23. Who else do Meera and Bhavani meet at the captain's house? What do they tell them about working at the captain's house?
24. What do the captain and the other people sitting at his table discuss at breakfast? How does it make Meera feel? How does she react?
25. When does Bhavani discover that her sister is at the collector's house?
26. Who is Franny? What does Vinay tell Meera about her?
27. What does Bhavani do to Lal's cage? What happens afterward?
28. Who does Meera see in town? How does she react?
29. What does Bhavani confide in Meera about the resistance? How does Meera react and what does she tell Bhavani?

Chapters 19-36

30. What plan does Bhavani come up with to take the magazine?
31. Bhavani tells Meera, "Your pouch full of money isn't going to buy you real freedom." What do you think she means by this?
32. What does Bhavani tell Meera about her father?
33. What happens to Chhaya?
34. How does Meera feel about the cause and the resistance?
35. What kind of gift does Meera give Memsahib on Franny's birthday? Why do you think she did this? How does Memsahib return the favor?
36. What do Bhavani and Meera discover on the hill? What do they think Captain Keene is using it for?
37. Why does Meera get mad at Bhavani at the market? What does Meera tell her about her own life?
38. What rebel do Bhavani and Meera see that was captured by Captain Keene? What does Captain Keene do to him? How does the rebel react and what does he tell the crowd?
39. Where do Bhavani and Meera go after they see Javed?
40. What does Meera discover in Memsahib's journal? What else does she realize about how she and her friends and Indian people have been oppressed and tortured by the British?
41. What does Meera discover in Captain Keene's desk? What happens next?
42. What are the cartridges covered in? How does this demonstrate the atrocities that the British committed against Indian people?
43. What does Meera discover about Charan?
44. Who discovers Meera in the town again? What does she tell Meera? What happens afterward?
45. Who is also fighting the East India Company and leading the men in battle? What do they find out about how it ends?
46. How does Meera pay the oarsman? Where do they go next?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. What does the title *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* mean to you after reading the book? Why do you think the author chose this particular title?
2. Explore the structure of this text. Does the story describe events chronologically, as comparison, cause and effect, or problems and solutions? Why do you think the author structured the text the way she did? How does this story compare to other texts you have read?
3. How does Krishna react after he discovers that Meera took down his kite? How does this

foreshadow what's to come in Meera's life if she was to be married and live with Krishna and his family?

4. How does Meera feel about Ravi's kite during the story? What do you think the kite represents overall? How are kites critical to important scenes in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*?
5. How is Meera conflicted by her family's values and beliefs? Although she loves her family, why does she have to leave them?
6. How do Babuji's beliefs affect Meera and her life? What does he believe about women and education, as well as sati? How do these values affect Meera and other women?
7. Why do Memsahib and Meera connect over Lal, the bird? What does Meera discover they have in common? How does this temporarily change Meera's perspective about Memsahib?
8. Meera and Bhavani throughout the story refer to two powerful Indian female figures, Meerabai and the rani of Jansi. Who are these women, and what are they known for? How are they inspirational to young girls like Meera and Bhavani? How do these women help them to think about their futures?
9. How does Meera become progressively braver over the course of the story? How does she find the courage to join the rebels and change her beliefs? What are some things that she does, such as climbing the tree to get the coconuts, that help her build her bravery and strength?
10. Meera has a very complicated relationship with Memsahib. In what ways does Meera find comfort in Memsahib? How does Meera's thinking change when she realizes what Memsahib really thinks of the South Asian people whose land she is colonizing?
11. What is Meera's relationship like with Lal, the bird at the bungalow? How does she connect with Lal? What do you think Lal represents overall? How does Meera feel when Lal flies away? What did it signify when Bhavani opened his cage and he flew out?
12. How does Meera feel about her sister-in-law, Sheela, when she first sees her? How does Meera feel when she first runs into Sheela at the market in Indranagar? How is that different from Meera's interaction with Sheela the next time they meet at the market?
13. What do Meera and Bhavani represent in society? When they first meet, what are Meera's values? What are Bhavani's values? How does Bhavani help change Meera's way of thinking during the story, and vice versa?
14. What does the resistance represent? What are they trying to achieve? How is Bhavani a critical piece in the resistance against the British East India Company? How does Bhavani continue to remind Meera about the atrocities against Indian people from the British East India Company?
15. Meera wants to start a new life with the money she earned, but Bhavani said that she can't have freedom unless the country is free from British rule. What does Meera think about Bhavani's thoughts in the beginning? How does her mind change as they continue to live at the captain's house?
16. What does sepoy Charan symbolize? What does Meera discover about sepoy Charan? How does sepoy Charan play a critical role in the story?

Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. **Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion.** You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. What is one big thought you have after reading this book? Think about how Meera navigates and experiences her family history as well as trauma throughout *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*. How does she process trauma and change during the story? How does this change her moving forward?
2. What do you think is Supriya Kelkar's message to the reader? Think about possible motivations behind Supriya Kelkar's intentions for writing the book. What do you think she wanted to tell her readers?
3. Have students make a text-to-self connection. What kinds of connections did you make from this book to your own life? What do Meera's experiences, thoughts, and feelings mean to you?
4. Have students make a text-to-text connection. Did you think of any other books while you read *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*? Why did you make those connections?
5. Have students make a text-to-world connection. What kind of connections did you make between this book and what you have seen in the world, such as online, on television, or in a newspaper? Why did this book make you think of that?
6. What does "freedom" mean to you after reading? After reading *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*, how did it make you think differently about freedom and the true history of the United States? Analyze Meera's statement, "What use is a home when your homeland isn't free?"
7. Have students write a book review after reading *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*. Consult ReadWriteThink's lesson plan on how to teach students how to write book reviews (<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/what-think-writing-review-876.html>). Students can also refer to other book reviews for references. What did they enjoy about *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*? What would they tell a friend or another person who wants to read the book? Students can share their book reviews with small groups or the whole class.

ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:

- Review several chapters and have students summarize what happened, first orally, and then in writing.
 - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they learned from *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.
 5. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. How does Meera demonstrate persistence and resilience throughout *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*? Identify a scene from the story that exemplifies how Meera is resilient. What made you choose this particular passage? How did it affect you and what did you learn from Meera after reading *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*?
2. What kinds of emotions does Meera grapple with after she finds out her husband Krishna dies? Does she feel relief? Fear? Using evidence from the book, discuss how Meera experiences complex feelings after this critical scene when Krishna is killed during the uprising.
3. What are the coping strategies and techniques that Meera uses along her journey to a new life? How does she combat her negative thoughts and feelings in order to keep going? What happens when she arrives at the captain's bungalow? How do her coping techniques change? How does she remain positive?
4. How does the trauma of Ravi's death affect Meera and her family members differently? How do they each cope with the aftermath of his death?
5. What does Meera discover in Memsahib's notebook? How does seeing this image affect her and make her feel? How does this vision change her thought process and beliefs moving forward?

6. What does Meera teach Bhavani in the story about interpersonal relationships? Meera told Bhavani that she didn't know anything about Meera's life because she didn't ask. What does Meera teach her? How does this affect Bhavani? What does this teach you about the importance of checking in on others and supporting them?
7. Encourage students to identify passages where characters manage and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways. In a chart with five columns, write: What was the cause of the conflict? What was the consequence of the conflict? How does the character(s) resolve the problem? What are additional ways the character(s) could have solved the problem? What advice would you give?

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

English/Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **The first lines of the book are “My father taught the village boys right outside our little earthen home, but I wasn’t a boy, so I didn’t get to learn. That didn’t stop me from trying, though.”** What do these lines tell us about how things are in Meera's life? What do they tell us about Meera's character? How does Meera's denial of an education inspire and affect her throughout the story? What does she discover about education when she leaves her home? How does Bhavani enlighten her about education in different parts of India? Write about these guiding questions and the overall theme of education in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* in a critical essay.
- **Have students compare and contrast Meera and Bhavani's development over the course of *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Students should create a Venn diagram that has Meera on one side, Bhavani on the other side, and the comparisons in the middle. How are their quests for freedom similar? How are they different? How are their personality traits similar? How are they different? Why is it important to analyze both Meera and Bhavani's lives? Based on this exercise, students should answer the following question in an essay: Do Meera and Bhavani have similar character growth? Why or why not?
- **Examine the different literary elements that author Supriya Kelkar uses throughout *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Have students come up with a list and select portions of the text that showcase a specific literary device (i.e. foreshadowing, flashback, metaphor, etc). Afterward, students can select one literary device and write about how that

was impactful when reading *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*. How do literary devices make the story engaging, and how do they contribute to the story overall? See PBS's Literary Elements and Techniques video for more information about how to teach about literary devices (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/litel18-fig/literary-elements-and-techniques-figurative-language/>).

- **As a follow-up activity, analyze the use of literary devices specifically when Bhavani and Meera find the cartridges in the bungalow on the hill in chapter 35.** How does Supriya Kelkar create the environment and set the stage? How does she describe how Bhavani and Meera go into the bungalow? What kinds of descriptions and figurative language does she use? Have students go back to this scene from chapter 35 and look at it carefully, examining the word choice, sentence structure, and use of dialogue. Afterward, students can reflect on the way that language can create a vivid scene and imagery as you're reading. How is that important with your own reading and writing? Have students write about a time that they felt scared, using what they learned about literary devices to influence their own writing.
- **Conduct a historical fiction unit featuring Supriya Kelkar's titles, *Ahimsa* ([leeandlow.com/books/ahimsa](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/ahimsa)) and *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Have students research the historical time periods in India in both these titles. How are the main characters Meera and Anjali similar? How are they different? How are their families similar? How are their families different? What did students learn about the fight for independence from Britain in India in both of these books? Students can write their findings in a graphic organizer and then write a critical essay comparing and contrasting *Ahimsa* with *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.
- **Have students come up with a list of questions to ask author Supriya Kelkar.** What do students want to know about the process behind writing a children's book? How did the author come up with the idea to write *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*? How did she conduct her research on Meera, sati, the memsahibs, and the British East India Company? Consider contacting Supriya Kelkar and inviting her to your school, library, or other relevant setting, or for a virtual author visit (<https://supriykelkar.com/>).
- **Encourage students to read Supriya Kelkar's blog post, "Decolonize Your Bookshelf: Supriya Kelkar's New Book Illuminates the Brutal Realities of Colonialism in India" (<https://blog.leeandlow.com/2021/03/18/decolonize-your-bookshelf-supriya-kelkars-new-book-illuminates-the-brutal-realities-of-colonialism-in-india/>).** Afterward, students can write about the following questions: How did *The Secret Garden* inspire Supriya Kelkar to write her book? How did she feel about literature growing up? How does Supriya Kelkar challenge what people think about colonialism in her book? To extend on students' thinking, see the activity related to the Author's Note in this guide for further work about critically analyzing historical fiction and colonialism.
- **Assign students different characters from *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* and have them brainstorm about a guiding question: What and how can this character teach us?** Students can think about different characters to examine as a whole class and then break into smaller, specific character groups. Encourage students to think about how characters have made mistakes and also have done good things in the book, and ultimately

what they learned from that character. Have students share out their findings: How is this character important to the book, and what lessons did they teach us over the course of the story? How did their actions develop the narrative, and why are they crucial to understanding the meaning of the book?

- **Have students identify a place in the story where Meera's character changes in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Why do students think that was a point where Meera changed? How does Meera feel before the change, what causes the change, and then how does she feel and act after? Create a graphic organizer with a column on the left that says "Before," a column in the middle that says "During," and a column on the right that says "After." Afterward, have students write an essay using evidence from the text to support their findings about Meera's character change.
- **Envision a sequel to *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* and have students title the second book.** What do they think it would be called? Then, students can write the first chapter to the second book. Where does Meera live? Who does she live with? What does she do? What is her relationship like with Bhavani? Students can also create a cover for the book (for more details see question 1 in the Art/Media section of this guide).
- **After students read Supriya Kelkar's Author's Note in the back of the book, have students analyze these two statements, "And I hope this book encourages readers to question who is being centered in colonial stories and in all stories, to find out who is telling the story, and to remember who is being left out. Because *that matters*."** Ask students the following guiding questions: Why do you think Supriya Kelkar concluded her Author's Note with these two statements? What did they learn from the Author's Note that they hadn't known before? Why do you think Supriya Kelkar wrote this book? How does this book differ from other books that they may have read about colonial periods before? How will *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* change their thought process about selecting books, specifically historical fiction titles, moving forward? Students can share their thoughts in a critical essay and then with a partner, small group, or whole class.
- **As a follow-up activity, have students conduct an audit of the historical fiction in their classroom library.** Students can work in small groups to analyze the historical fiction in their classroom. Students can answer the following questions: in what time place does this story take place? Who is featured in this story? Whose story is being told? Whose voice is being heard? Who is being oppressed and who is the oppressor? Who is the author and what is their background? If colonization is featured in any of the books, students can answer the following questions: Where does the book take place? Who is colonizing whom? What country does the story take place in? Who is being centered in the story? Afterward, students can reflect on their findings. What voices were being centered the most? What was it like to do this activity?
- **Conduct a study analyzing the way that colonization and India is presented in *The Secret Garden* versus *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Author Supriya Kelkar mentions when she read *The Secret Garden* as a young student, "But I quickly realized they weren't thought of as equals by colonizers in their land. They were thought of as less than, just there to serve the white characters the story was centering." After reading *Strong as Fire,*

Fierce as Flame, have students read *The Secret Garden*. Afterward, students can think about the following questions: If this was a second reading of *The Secret Garden*, what was it like? What did they learn? How did *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* help them think differently about the way colonization and Indian people were presented in the book? Additional questions can include: How was colonization presented in both books? How was the British East India Company depicted? How were Indian people treated and presented? Afterward, students can think overall about how they are going to analyze historical fiction titles moving forward. Why is it important to think about perspectives other than the colonizers?

- **Encourage students to watch the book trailer** (https://www.leeandlow.com/uploads/loaded_document/865/Strong_as_Fire_book_trailer_for_YouTube.mp4) **for *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame***. If the necessary equipment is available at school or in students' homes, encourage students to record and edit their own book trailers for *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*. For ideas, check out this Creating Reading Excitement with Book Trailers lesson plan (<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroomresources/lesson-plans/book-report-alternativecreating-c-30914.html>) by ReadWriteThink.org

Social Studies/Geography

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Conduct a research study on the oppression of people in India by the British East India Company.** Refer to the Background section of this guide for additional resources on teaching about the British East India Company. Guiding questions to ask include: When did colonization begin? Why did the British invade and occupy South Asia and the country now known as India? How did it impact individuals, communities, and the region as a whole, as well as the world? How were Indian people oppressed for hundreds of years under the British rule until they eventually gained independence in 1947? Consult the Backmatter in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*, as well as the PBS Learning Media's "East India Company in India" (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/9625833b-4105-4a07-8efe-e1a49620b3cb/east-india-company-in-india/>) and India Today's article, "When and why did the British first choose to invade India?" (<https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/when-and-why-british-first-came-to-india-1591166-2019-08-24>). Afterward, have students reflect on what they learned and display the resources and information they collected in a visual presentation.
- **Investigate the history of Indian women protesting gender inequality** (<https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/activism-and-womens-rights-in-india/>). Meera and Bhavani both experience forms of gender inequality as young girls. Meera's father denies her an education because she is a girl. Have students begin with analyzing what gender inequality looks like in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*, using Meera and Bhavani's characters as a guide. What else did women experience in India during that time period? What were expectations for women like? How might that have differed from region to region and family to family? How did those expectations change, or not change, over time? For more

resources, go to the Smithsonian (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/19th-century-lady-doctor-ushered-indian-women-medicine-180964613/>) and *India Today* (<https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/living-examples-of-matrilineal-societies-in-india-312344-2016-03-08>).

- **Research the individual events presented in the Timeline in the back of *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Divide students into groups to conduct a research study on each grouping of events. What did students find? What kinds of resources were they able to look at and get information from? Create an enlarged timeline in front of the class and students in their groups can add photographs and other pieces of information. Afterward, the class can reflect on what it was like to conduct detailed research on events and what they learned from the process.
- **Encourage students to learn more about Rani Lakshmibai, the female ruler of Jhansi** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/14/obituaries/laxmibai-rani-of-jhansi-overlooked.html>). Students can investigate the queen's life with the following questions: Who was Lakshmibai? What was she known for? How did she defy gender stereotypes during her lifetime? What other historical figures do you think of when you learn and read about the rani of Jhansi? How was she a critical figure and inspiration in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*? Students can share their findings in a visual presentation format of their choosing.
- **Have students research the food dishes that are mentioned in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Many culinary Indian dishes were mentioned in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*. Have students identify the different foods that were discussed in the book, find photographs, and compile recipes to create a *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* cookbook for the class. What were the typical ingredients (spices and herbs) used in these dishes?
- **Have students identify themes in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* and connect them to present-day issues.** Provide students with a graphic organizer that has "Themes in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*" in the left-hand column and "Present-day Issue" in the right-hand column. Explain to students that they need to list themes from *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* and present-day issues that relate to that theme. Once the graphic organizer is complete, have students select one theme and one present-day issue and write an essay explaining the connection between the two in more detail. Why did they pick this theme to focus on, and what are the implications in our society today? Consider modeling the theme of "gender" in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* and connecting it to women's equality in the workplace. Brainstorm with students how and why these two themes connect, and then have students write an essay about a different theme from their organizer.

Art & Media

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **For the question about the sequel activity in the English/Language Arts section, have students draw a cover image for their follow-up to *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** What kind of materials do they want to use for the cover? Encourage students to consider what they think will happen in the second book, and how that reflects the artwork for the cover. How can they use the current cover to inspire their work?
- **Have students research traditional clothing worn in India.** In *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*, there are many references to typical styles of dress. Have students print out photographs of the different clothing mentioned in *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*, and have students write captions underneath the photographs explaining the different garb.
- **Analyze the cover art for *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*.** Have students think about the different symbols that are present on the cover and create a graphic organizer with columns according to each of the symbols (i.e. the flowers, the young woman, etc.). Underneath each symbol, have students explain what they think it means and why it's important to the story.

School-Home Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

- **Have students interview a family member about something that they are passionate about and fought for.** Have students ask family members if they ever protested against something because of their beliefs. How did they feel? What inspired them to protest?
- **Encourage students to share what they learned from reading *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame* with their families.** For students familiar with Indian oppression from the British East India Company, what was it like to read a book that centered that oppression? For students unfamiliar with Indian colonization, have them start a discussion with their families about what they learned and what it was like to read about the horrors and atrocities that Indian people faced during British colonization.



Ordering Information

General Order Information:

leeandlow.com/contact/ordering

Secure Online Ordering:

leeandlow.com/books/strong-as-fire-fierce-as-flame

By Phone: 212-779-4400 ext. 25

By Fax: 212-683-1894

By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue,
New York, NY 10016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Supriya Kelkar grew up in the Midwest, where she learned Hindi as a child by watching three Hindi movies a week. Winner of the New Visions Award for Ahimsa, Supriya is a screenwriter who has worked on the writing teams for several Hindi films and one Hollywood feature. Supriya's books include *Ahimsa*; *Strong as Fire, Fierce as Flame*; *American as Paneer Pie*; and *That Thing About Bollywood*, among others. Visit her online at supriyakelkar.com.

REVIEWS

"An absorbing story about a strong girl living during tumultuous times." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Meera's transformation from a complacent girl to embracing her spirited convictions is nothing short of inspiring. Back matter, including an author's note, historical note, time line, and glossary are an integral enrichment to this novel." —*Booklist*

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