

Discussion Questions

1. The Oankali identify intelligence and hierarchy as the human race's fatal combination of characteristics. Do you agree? What do you think are humans' most advantageous and dangerous qualities?
2. What are some political and social hierarchies in our world? Why do they exist, and how could they weaken us?
3. What do you think are the flaws of the Oankali's species?
4. Jdahya says to Lilith that "intelligence does enable you to deny facts you dislike" (page 42). What do you think he means by this?
5. Why do you think the Oankali are reluctant to allow Lilith writing tools or books?
6. Throughout the book, what distinctions are drawn between humans and animals?
7. In what ways, explicit and subtle, does Jdahya encourage Lilith to mentally and emotionally adapt to the Oankali and the genetic trade they have planned?
8. Lilith repeatedly must learn to accept ideas—like human-alien breeding—that she at first finds strange or repellent. Can you think of an idea you rejected at first but then grew to accept or believe in? What changed your mind?
9. Kahguyaht says that at first, "I believed that because of the way human genetics were expressed in culture, a human male should be chosen to parent the first group" (page 124). Why do you think the Oankali chose Lilith to Awaken and lead the first group of humans to return to Earth? Do you think her identity as a Black woman affects the way the group responds to her leadership?
10. Lilith tells the rest of the humans that she will not allow rape within their group, but then she lets Nikanj have a sexual relationship with Joseph even though he says he cannot give it permission to do so. Discuss the role of consent, in both sexual and other contexts, throughout the novel.
11. What parallels do you notice between the Oankali's treatment of the humans and colonizing countries and cultures in our own world?
12. Paul and Joseph both have trouble acknowledging that the ooloi are a third sex, which Lilith considers "a kind of deliberate, persistent ignorance" (page 99). Why do you think the two men react this way? Can you think of similar instances of deliberate ignorance within our own society?
13. Discuss the intersection of sex and gender within the novel.
14. The Oankali give Lilith increased strength, a natural resistance to cancer, the ability to pass through doors and raise furniture on the ship, and an eidetic memory. What special abilities would you most like to possess?