

The Henna Artist by Alka Joshi

Reading Guide Questions

Please be aware that this discussion guide may contain spoilers!

1. Lakshmi is such a strong and multifaceted character. What makes her that way? What are three things a great protagonist needs to truly stand out?
2. Could Lakshmi have found another way to escape her abusive marriage? What do you think of the choices she made to change her circumstances?
3. Should Lakshmi have tried to make her marriage work the second time around? Why or why not?
4. What do you think Lakshmi has ultimately learned about herself and about her place in the world by the end of the novel?
5. What do you see as the basic similarities and differences between Lakshmi and the Maharanis she works for? Who has more freedom? Who has more advantages?
6. Lakshmi and Malik are very close, even though she is Hindu and he is Muslim. What does this say about the relationship between these two religions?
7. What does the novel show about the caste system in 1950s India and people's ability to navigate the rules and restrictions within it? Is this same caste system still in place today?
8. When Radha enters Lakshmi's life, Lakshmi becomes responsible for raising her headstrong younger sister. Do her conflicts with Radha resonate with any of your experiences parenting teenagers?
9. The lullaby that Lakshmi uses to test whether Radha is really her sister was composed by their father. If you were to create such a lullaby, what familial clues would you include to identify members of your circle?
10. Indian proverbs are used throughout the text to emphasize certain points in the novel. Do these sayings resonate with you or remind you of proverbs from your own upbringing? Do any in particular stick out in your mind?
11. What does the novel tell you about the role of the henna artist in Indian culture in general and in wedding traditions in particular? What does the henna itself symbolize? Did the description of any of Lakshmi's henna applications particularly appeal to you?
12. Lakshmi's knowledge of natural health remedies is recognized as valuable not just by the Maharinis, but by Dr. Kumar, too. What role do natural remedies play in modern medicine in India and in conventional medicine elsewhere? Do you rely on any particular natural remedies yourself for certain ailments?
13. This novel is set in the 1950s just as one hundred years of British rule is ending, and Indian society is going through a huge transition. What did you learn about life at that time of cultural shift in India's history? Did that realization change any of your assumptions about India?
14. Given what you know about India now, has the status of Indian women changed much since 1955, do you think? On what are you basing your assumptions?

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