



[The henna artist]

By Alka Joshi

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Genre and Subject

Young women -- India -- Jaipur -- Fiction

India -- History -- 1947- -- Fiction

Historical fiction

Synopsis

Escaping from an abusive marriage, seventeen-year-old Lakshmi makes her way alone to the vibrant 1950s pink city of Jaipur. There she becomes the most highly requested henna artist - and confidante - to the wealthy women of the upper class. But trusted with the secrets of the wealthy, she can never reveal her own...Known for her original designs and sage advice, Lakshmi must tread carefully to avoid the jealous gossips who could ruin her reputation and her livelihood. As she pursues her dream of an independent life, she is startled one day when she is confronted by her husband, who has tracked her down these many years later with a high-spirited young girl in tow - a sister Lakshmi never knew she had. Suddenly the caution that she has carefully cultivated as protection is threatened. Still she perseveres, applying her talents and lifting up those that surround her as she does

Author Biography

Alka Joshi was born in India and raised in the U.S. since the age of nine. She has a BA from Stanford University and an MFA from California College of Arts and runs an advertising and marketing agency. She has lived in France and Italy and currently lives in Pacific Grove, California, with her husband. The Henna Artist is her first novel.

Discussion Starters

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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