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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Henna Artist by Alka Joshi

Summary

Escaping from an arranged and abusive marriage, seventeen-year-old Lakshmi makes her way alone from her 1950s rural village to the vibrant pink city of Jaipur. There she becomes the henna artist - and confidante - most in demand 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.

Vivid and compelling in its portrait of one woman's struggle for fulfillment in a society pivoting between the traditional and the modern, *The Henna Artist* opens a door into a world that is at once lush and fascinating, stark and cruel. (from the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

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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