

“A bold, ambitious, beautifully written novel.”
—TOM BARBASH, author of *Stay Up With Me*

ALKA JOSHI

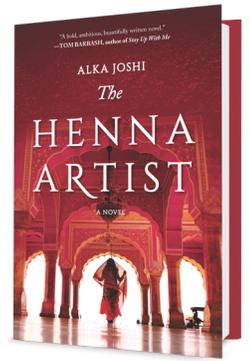
The

HENNA ARTIST

A NOVEL

READER'S GUIDE

Discussion Guide



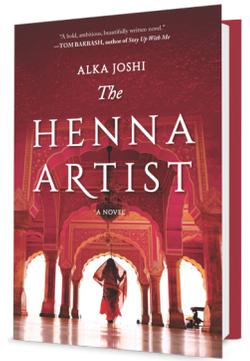
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 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?



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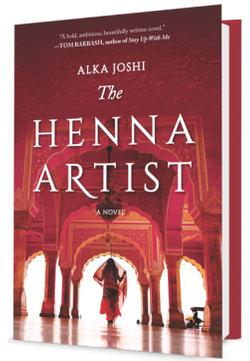


- 11) What does the novel tell you about the role of the henna artist in Indian culture in general and in wedding traditions in particular? What does the henna itself symbolize? Did the description of any of Lakshmi's henna applications particularly appeal to you?
- 12) Lakshmi's knowledge of natural 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?



Discussion Guide

A CONVERSATION WITH ALKA JOSHI



What inspired you to write *The Henna Artist*?

I have my mother to thank for my first novel.

When I was fifteen, my mother and I went shopping for school clothes. We'd been living in the States—in the Midwest—for six years by then, but she still wore saris. As we passed the dresses, she plucked one with a plunging halter top off the rack and asked me to try it on. An American girl might have thought her mother hip, but I was embarrassed.

For my sixteenth birthday, my mother made an appointment at Merle Norman Cosmetics so I could learn to wear makeup, something she knew nothing about but felt I needed to learn.

At eighteen, when I told her I wanted to sleep with my first boyfriend, she immediately took me to get birth control pills and urged me to experiment—she, who had had an arranged marriage at the age of eighteen and still stumbled over her English.

It took me years to understand that what my mother wanted was a life for me that she herself had been denied. She wanted me to experience the freedom of choice.

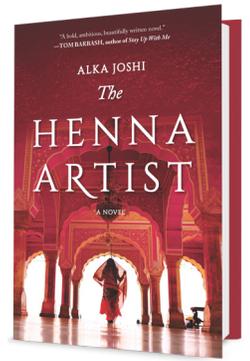
At some point, I began imagining a different start to my mother's life. What if her father hadn't made her marry at such a tender age? What if she hadn't had three children in rapid succession? What would a creative, fierce, smart woman like her have done to survive on her own if she had defied her father and refused to marry?

Lakshmi, the henna artist, embodies the alternative life I imagined for my mother. The frenetic period following India's independence from the British, when India was building new universities, government and cultural institutions, roads, dams and bridges at an unprecedented rate, was an ideal setting for Lakshmi to start a new life for herself. Like my mother, Lakshmi wanted to make her own decisions about what she would do, who she wanted to be with and where she would go. She rejected convention even when she knew the cost would be steep, not only for her but also for her family.



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Yet, like the citizens of a newly independent nation, Lakshmi finds that progress takes time. While Lakshmi is recognized for her talents publicly the way my mother was not, the cultural norms she grew up with will not easily bend to accommodate a clever, headstrong young woman. Ultimately, she is forced to create a new path that will satisfy her ambitions and society's expectations of her.

My mother is no longer with us, but she lives in every breath Lakshmi takes and every word she utters. Through Lakshmi, my mother revels in the freedom she never had in real life.

Are you working on another novel?

Yes, I am exploring what the future will look for a few of the characters central to *The Henna Artist*—the year is 1967 and the younger characters are now the new generation of progressive Indians moving the country forward.

