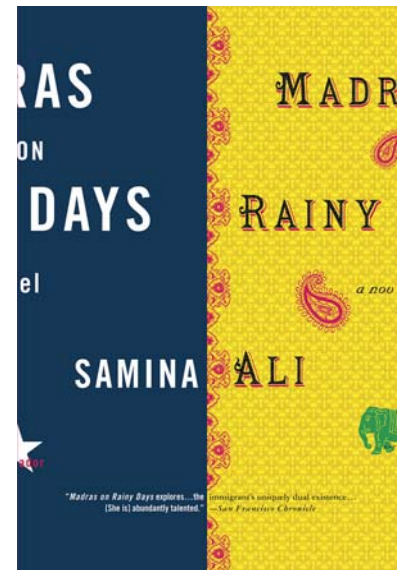


READING GROUP GUIDE

Madras on Rainy Days

by Samina Ali



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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Madras on Rainy Days*, are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Madras on Rainy Days*.

About the Book

MADRAS ON RAINY DAYS is a story about freedom. Set in the Old City of Hyderabad, India, the novel uses the image of the Old City walls to show a Muslim world that is contained and unchanging, no matter the progress outside. Layla, the main character of the book, has been raised in this rigid environment, but also in the United States. At nineteen, she is both a dutiful Muslim daughter and also an independent young American, and caught between these clashing identities, she struggles to find her true home. Believing it is in India, she reluctantly agrees to her parents' wish that she submit to an arranged marriage to a Muslim man named Sameer. As the wedding days progress, she slowly enters into the closed world of tradition and ritual. At her in-law's house, Layla is surprised to find the kind of home she had been yearning for. But her husband isn't what he pretends to be, nor is Layla the woman everyone believes she is, and their secrets could destroy this fragile union. On their honeymoon, as the monsoon rains beat against the windows, the couple must at last set aside the various roles they have been forced to play and confront who they really are.

"[Ali's] story is intriguing not for its surprises...but because she is one of a rare breed of writers who take us into the closed world behind a Muslim woman's veil."—Mitali Saran, *Far Eastern Economic Review*

“A lyrical debut.”—*Asian Week*

“[*Madras on Rainy Days*] introduces an abundantly talented new voice.”— *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Layla and Sameer tussle out not just their personal and sexual struggles, but the larger questions of where and how they can belong to both the United States and India. The novel has a fierce and shimmering intensity....*Madras on Rainy Days* has given us something new.”—*Star Tribune*

“This book goes to a place where few, if any, of its predecessors have gone before....A deeply feminist novel with richly drawn and complicated characters.”—*Ms. Magazine*

About the Author

Samina Ali was born in Hyderabad, India, and raised both in India and the US. She received her MFA from the University of Oregon. *Madras On Rainy Days* is her debut novel.

Discussion Questions

1. *MADRAS ON RAINY DAYS* opens with a blind alim, a mystical healer, who Layla visits because her mother believes her to be possessed. Yet Layla confesses that these are visits she must make each time she returns to Hyderabad from the United States. So what is truly possessing Layla that her mother is trying to rid? And why is it so important to her mother to rid Layla of these influences?
2. Although the novel is set in 1989 and is heavily centered on Layla's personal journey, in what ways does the story feel contemporary? What themes from the book exist today, in our world, that make the story compelling? It has been said that Islam is the main character of this novel. In what ways is this true?
3. The women in the novel are heavily confined to the home and to their limited fate: from the father's house to the husband's house. They have no personal identity other than being someone's wife, daughter, and/or mother. How is the religion of Islam being used to keep women oppressed? And how are both the male and female characters betraying women's right to freedom? Think of Layla's father and his co-wives, of Ibrahim after Layla tells him about his son and asks to leave the home, and also think of Layla's own mother and aunts. In what ways does Layla identify with her own nanny, Nafiza?
4. Although the novel is suggesting that women must occupy certain roles in this culture, Sameer also laments how he has had to become someone other than he truly is. On page 195, he tells Layla that he cannot be himself in India. What does he mean by this statement? What forces are keeping him, even as a man, from expressing himself in Hyderabad? And when Layla eventually exposes him to their families, what is the reaction of Abu Uncle, of Ibrahim, of Zeba, of the Muslim community?
5. Nate is an important character in the novel, although we see him only through the letters he sends to Layla. In one of them, he tells her that he loves her, yet Layla doesn't return to him nor did she, at the beginning, remain in the United States with him. Why would Layla, who has also grown up in America, return to India to get into an arranged marriage? What forces compel her to do so? What then

keeps her in her marriage with Sameer even after she learns that Nate loves her? Does giving her virginity to Nate necessarily mean she loves him? And is she really choosing Sameer over Nate or is she choosing something else, something more? Does she even have a choice?

6. Henna is Layla's best friend, confidante, and cousin. Layla says that they were both girls who grew up to be women who knew they would be sold to men in marriage and were looking forward to it. What is the importance of Henna to the overall theme of women's fate? Her sudden death is a surprise at the end, but how does this event help to change Layla and Sameer's relationship and why? Could this change have come about without this death? How does it influence Layla to make the decisions she finally does?

7. There is Muslim-Hindu violence in the book and Layla says that it is politics more than religion that causes such strife. In what ways is politics currently creating violence in the world, in the name of religion? Look closely at the words world leaders use in trying to legitimize their fight.

8. Layla begins the novel in a place of possession: she is controlled by cultural, familial, religious forces. As she journeys through the novel, she begins to distinguish between Islam, as a religion, and Islam as it is practiced in culture. Her learning about her religion helps her, by the end, to become self-possessed. No matter what religion or culture, people are controlled by familial and societal pressures. Think of ways in which you have sacrificed your personal freedom in face of these outside pressures.

9. On page 228, Layla says, "Love, why did we all confuse that emotion for what this really was, a desperate loneliness, a greed for human touch." In what ways is love denied in this novel? In what ways is it expressed? How do the characters put themselves at risk for such an expression, and what must they stand up against to love others? How does breaking love boundaries break the other silent boundaries imposed by religion and culture and family?

10. At the very end of the novel, Layla finally finds her freedom and says, "My body hidden and safe under the chador, belonging only to me." In what different ways did Layla have to fight for control of her body? The Western world has come to view the Muslim veil as an oppressive device. Yet, here, the chador provides Layla the freedom she has long awaited. With or without the veil, in what ways do women everywhere struggle for this very control of their bodies?

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