



Exploring Junior Cycle Texts - *The Henna Wars* by Adiba Jaigirdar

The Henna Wars by Adiba Jaigirdar is a novel included as part of the Prescribed Material for Junior Cycle English (For the student cohorts commencing Junior Cycle in 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026 and 2027 and presenting for examination in 2026, 2027 and 2028, 2029 and 2030).

Junior Cycle
English

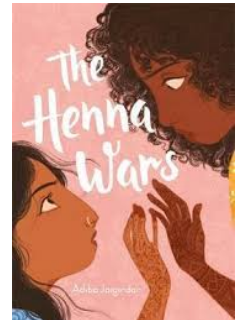


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Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- *The Henna Wars* covers themes which could be considered sensitive or controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.



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for this Text

Before you read...(Teacher Guidance)

The following activities invite students to activate prior knowledge, explore cultural context, and make predictions about *The Henna Wars*. You may wish to adapt or sequence the tasks according to your class context.

1. Book Cover Prediction

- Display the cover of *The Henna Wars* for the class.
- Invite students to spend a moment observing the visual elements.
- In pairs or individually, ask students to consider:
 - What kind of story they expect based on the cover
 - What clues the imagery gives about themes or characters

2. Traditions and Modern Life

- Ask students to mindmap ideas about a tradition or cultural practice that is meaningful in their family or community.
- Facilitate a short discussion on the following prompts:
 - Why might traditions like henna art be important to preserve?
 - In what ways might younger generations adapt or reinterpret traditions in contemporary life?

3. Historical Context / Research Task

- Assign students a short research activity focused on a time or place where young people from immigrant or minority communities faced challenges linked to culture, religion, or identity.
- Students identify:
 - The community, country, and time period
 - One or two challenges faced
- Invite them to make a brief comparison between this context and the experiences Nishat may encounter in the novel.



Extract *The Henna Wars*

Background to the novel:

This extract is taken from the opening chapter of *The Henna Wars* by Adiba Jaigirdar. The novel follows Nishat, a Bangladeshi-Irish teen who loves art and wants to start a henna business. When a classmate opens a similar business, Nishat faces competition, friendship challenges, and questions about identity. The novel explores culture, family, identity, friendship, and LGBTQ+ experiences in a modern school setting, with humor, heart, and themes of self-expression.

I wish I could bottle this uneventful moment - a flash of time when we're all at peace, together and apart at once - and keep it with me forever. I wonder if this is what things will be like tomorrow too, after I've told them. But then the moment's over and we're home and stumbling out of the car. Our churis jingle against each other, sounding too loud and bright in the dead-of-night quiet on the streets. Inside, I strip my face of all the heavy makeup Priti carefully dabbed onto it just hours before.

I slip out of my itchy, uncomfortable salwar kameez and bury myself in my blankets, where I pull up Google again and translate the word lesbian into Bengali. The next morning, Priti flits off to her best friend Ali's house with a smile on her lips. She's promised to tell Ali every detail she can about the engagement party, and the upcoming wedding. With pictures. There are still a few hours until Abbu has to leave for the restaurant, so it's perfect, really. I take my time making my morning tea, stirring especially slowly and going over the henna wars 5 the words I practiced last night. They seem lackluster and silly now.

"Ammu, Abbu, I have something to tell you," I finally say, trying to breathe normally but somehow forgetting how breathing works. They're sitting at the kitchen table with their phones in their hands, Abbu reading the Bengali news, and Ammu scrolling through Facebook - so reading the Auntie news! Bengali gossip. "Yes, shona?" Abbu says, not bothering to glance up from his phone. At least my momentary breathing amnesia isn't obvious. I stumble forward, nearly spilling my tea, and somehow make it to the chair at the top of the table. "Ammu, Abbu," I say again. My voice must sound grave because they finally look up, twin frowns on their lips as they take me in, trembling hands and all.

I wish all of a sudden that I had spoken to Priti. That I'd allowed her to talk me out of it. I am, after all, only sixteen, and there's still time. I've never had a girlfriend. I've never even kissed a girl, only dreamed of it while staring at the cracks on my ceiling. But we're already here and my parents are looking at me with expectation in their eyes. There is no turning back. I don't want to turn back. So I say, "I like women."

(Adiba Jaigirdar, 2020, The Henna Wars. Page Street Publishing Co., p. 5.)

Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidance)

The following questions may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel. Students may like to complete the activities individually or collaboratively.

1. Understanding the Scene

- What is Nishat preparing to tell her parents?
- How does the author convey Nishat's nervousness and anticipation?
- Ask students to identify three small details that make the scene feel realistic (e.g. everyday objects, routines, gestures).



2. Reflecting on Perspective

- Ask students to imagine they are Nishat and write 3–4 sentences describing how they would feel in this moment.
- Do students think it would be easier or harder today to tell their family something important about themselves? Why?
- How does the scene prompt them to think about cultural expectations or family pressures in their own lives or in wider society?

3. Exploring What Happens Next

- Invite students to predict what might happen immediately after Nishat says, “I like women.” How might her parents respond?
- Ask students to write a short dialogue showing the next moment, keeping the emotions and personalities of the characters in mind.

4. Letter to Priti

- Invite students to write a letter or message from Nishat to her best friend Priti following the conversation with her parents.

Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

The following questions may be based on the extract included or form part of your extended study of the novel. Students may like to complete the activities individually or collaboratively.

1. Character & Relationships - Role-Play Activity

- In pairs, invite students to role-play a short conversation between Nishat and Priti before Nishat speaks to her parents.
- Encourage students to explore how Priti might support or encourage Nishat, experimenting with tone, body language, and pauses.
- Ask students to swap roles and perform the scene again, this time imagining the perspective of Nishat’s parents.

2. Exploring Key Themes (Discussion / Reflection)

In groups, students discuss:

- Which themes emerge most clearly in this passage
- How Nishat’s age shapes her actions
- What the extract suggests about family, culture, and courage.

Each student then writes a short personal response summarising their group’s ideas

3. Class Debate

- Direct students to debate the motion: “Young people should always be completely honest with their parents about their identity, no matter the consequences.”
- Divide the class into two teams: For and Against.
- Each team prepares 3–4 main points supported by examples.
- Students may refer to Nishat’s situation in the extract to develop or illustrate their arguments.

4. Personal Reflection / Opinion Piece

- Ask students to write a short piece responding to the question: “What does Nishat’s journey teach us about identity, courage, and cultural expectations?”
- Students should express their own view and use examples from the text to support their ideas.