



Book Club Set

# The Colour of Our Sky

By Amita Trasi

## About the Author

Amita Trasi is the author of the novel THE COLOR OF OUR SKY. She was born and raised in Mumbai, India. She has an MBA in Human Resource Management and has worked with various International corporations for seven years. She loves traveling to different countries to immerse herself in different cultures and understand their history. She also regularly supports and donates to organizations that fight human trafficking. She currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and two cats. The Color of our Sky is her debut novel.

## About the Book

In the spirit of Khaled Hosseini, Nadia Hashimi and Shilpi Somaya Gowda comes this powerful debut from a talented new voice - a sweeping, emotional journey of two childhood friends in Mumbai, India, whose lives converge only to change forever one fateful night.

India, 1986; Mukta, a ten-year-old village girl from the lower caste Yellama cult has come of age and must fulfill her destiny of becoming a temple prostitute, as her mother and grandmother did before her. In an attempt to escape her fate, Mukta is sent to be a house girl for an upper-middle class family in Mumbai. There she discovers a friend in the daughter of the family, high spirited eight-year-old Tara, who helps her recover from the wounds of her past. Tara introduces Mukta to an entirely different world - one of ice cream, reading, and a friendship that soon becomes a sisterhood.

But one night in 1993, Mukta is kidnapped from Tara's family home and disappears. Shortly thereafter, Tara and her father move to America. A new life in Los Angeles awaits them but Tara never recovers from the loss of her best friend, or stops wondering if she was somehow responsible for Mukta's abduction.

Eleven years later, Tara, now an adult, returns to India determined to find Mukta. As her search takes her into the brutal underground world of human trafficking, Tara begins to uncover long-buried secrets in her own family that might explain what happened to Mukta—and why she came to live with Tara's family in the first place.

Moving from a traditional Indian village to the bustling modern metropolis of Mumbai, to Los Angeles and back again, this is a heartbreaking and beautiful portrait of an unlikely friendship—a story of love, betrayal, and, ultimately, redemption.

## Discussion Questions

1. When we first meet Mukta, she says “I did not know my body did not belong to me” when she was a child, just as her mother’s and her grandmother’s bodies had been dedicated to prostitution. Could Mukta’s mother have done more to help Mukta avoid the same fate as her? Why do you think her grandmother, Sakubai, insisted Mukta follow devadasi tradition rather than trying to escape it?
2. Tara says that Mukta’s arrival in their home “brought out Aai’s worst side.” Do you believe Aai is at all justified in her animosity towards Mukta, especially when we later learn that she suspected Mukta was Papa’s daughter? How would you have reacted in her situation?
3. Aai tells Tara “Your Papa has all these fancy ideas about equality. Society doesn’t function that way. We have to know our place in society.” Do you agree? Why does Tara befriend Mukta despite the obvious difference in status between them? As adults, did their places change at all or was Aai right that people are never truly equal in society?
4. Do you think Tara’s father did enough to give Mukta a better life? Would he have behaved differently if he’d been able to confirm that she was his biological child?
5. Could you forgive Tara for how she plotted to have Salim kidnap Mukta? Do Tara’s years of searching for Mukta absolve her for that one great act of cruelty?
6. What do you think of the love between Sanjeev and Mukta? Do you think it would have lasted if she’d managed to escape with him?
7. Could Mukta have ever escaped the brothel if Tara hadn’t saved her? What would have become of Asha otherwise?
8. Tara says of Raza, “In his eyes, I saw the same zeal to study that I had once seen in Mukta’s, the same glimmer of hope, of survival flickered there.” Unlike Mukta, Raza managed to escape being on “the lowest rung of the ladder in the underworld.” Was he better able to escape because he was a boy? Why has his path in life differed so much from that of his childhood friend Salim?
9. What does it say about Raza and Tara that they’re able to treat each other as equals—and fall in love—as adults despite the great differences in their religion and backgrounds?
10. Mukta tells Tara that she doesn’t want a DNA test to prove whether Papa is her father: “I want to remember him as my father whether it is the truth or not.” Would you have done the same? Were you disappointed or pleased by her decision?

11. At the end of the novel Mukta tells the reader: "...I understood that the threads of life don't always weave the way we want them to; sometimes the pattern at the end of our lives would be different than what we imagined it would be, and right now, I had nothing to do but be at peace with whatever remains behind." What do you think happens to Tara and Mukta after the novel ends? What does their future hold?

## Author Interview

**Q. The Color of Our Sky is your debut novel. Can you tell us a little bit about how you prepared for writing the book (e.g., your writing process, the research, etc.)?**

A. It wasn't a very straightforward process. I didn't really start off knowing that I'd write about the Devdasi cult that still exists in India. I wanted to write about the friendship between two girls from different caste/class systems (inspired by my own experience). So, that's where I began.

I started writing from their birth in different caste systems (in a village vs. a city) and I wrote detailed scenes with them growing up and retaining their friendship for three decades. The characters actually took me to where the story is now. I wrote more than 300 pages just to get to know my characters. Once I knew my characters well enough, and knew the story I wanted to tell, I got rid of more than half the writing, and reworked through many drafts to start the novel at critical points in each character's life.

I like to keep my characters very human because we all struggle with complex emotions at some point in our lives that often influences the path we take. The challenging part was to make the two characters sound different—Mukta had to exhibit a kindhearted, generous and humble nature while Tara had to be bold and high-spirited. I must say, I found it easier to write Mukta's storyline. Her character just drew me in and I really felt for her. It was emotionally draining to write some of the traumatic/difficult scenes.

From a research stand point, I have been following the work of many NGO's who have been successful in rescuing many girls/women from the human trafficking business—one in particular being the Apne Aap foundation in India. This is an area I truly care about and is close to my heart. Their work truly inspires me and a lot of my research comes from what they've done.

**Q. You mention on your website that you were inspired to write this story in part due to your experiences with the daughter of a servant who worked for your family. Why did you decide to add the element of the Devdasi into her storyline?**

A. Yes, I set out to write about a friendship between two girls and the character of Mukta was inspired by the girl, Shaku, who I met when I was nine years old. There are many elements of Shaku in Mukta including her generous and kind nature. As for the Devdasi storyline, I suppose when I was writing, the character of Mukta just took me there. Ending child sexual slavery is a cause I care about. So I suppose something in me was screaming to let a voice like Mukta be heard.

**Q. Mukta and Tara are both very resilient and strong women. Did you model them after anyone specific? Do you see elements of yourself in Tara (seeking redemption for girls like Mukta)?**

A. Mukta has elements of Shaku and yes, Tara does have some elements of me but she is a very different character in her own right. I think more than anything else, with Tara, I wanted to show a child who is caught between her mother's old fashioned ways and her father's need for doing what is right. This leaves her confused about her own compassion toward Mukta. At one level, she justifies her compassion by telling herself she is being loyal to her father and at another, she feels guilty that she even feels compassion for someone like Mukta. I think these are very complex emotions for anyone to handle, let alone a child.

As for seeking redemption for girls like Mukta, I do my bit. I think everyone has their own role to play. Spreading awareness, participating in fundraisers etc all contribute toward the cause. I don't think we are all cut out to get out there and raid brothels. It can be emotionally wrecking for people who aren't cut out for it. But I do think we can support people who are actually at the forefront in whatever way possible- volunteering, donations etc.

**Q. Mukta and Tara develop a strong friendship despite their caste differences. Do you feel that these sorts of friendships are possible in India today?**

A. In my opinion, it could be possible in cities where the lower castes have acquired a middle class "status" due to their education or rise in income and there are enough open minded people to accept such friendships. But if the lower caste child belongs to the poorer sections of society, such a friendship would be highly impossible, even in a city. The caste division is deeply ingrained in the day to day life of villagers in the rural areas. But I am hoping such friendships are possible on the sly.

**Q. You write some very difficult scenes in your book and while you never shy away from the darker elements, you chose not to be overly graphic or explicit in your descriptions of sexual abuse or violence (something I appreciated). Was this a conscious decision?**

A. Yes, very much so. I don't believe any scene of sexual abuse or violence has to be overly explicit or graphic in any way to get the point across. Readers are very intelligent people and I trust their intelligence. During my research, I came across some really horrendous and indescribable events in children's lives. I haven't described even a fourth of those horrors. As a woman, I have tried to be sensitive in portraying the abuse of a child, and as writer I have tried to deliberately weave words such that it cushions the blow. I believe these are some hard and bitter facts that have to be said— it's a topic that needs to be heard. If we don't want to hear of what is happening out there in the world, what chance do we have of helping in whatever way we can or even bring about a change in the slightest way?

**Q. In many ways *The Color of Our Sky* is an uplifting story that inspires hope, but it also highlights a social system with negative qualities. What do you hope is the main message that readers come away with after reading this book?**

A. Well, you said it— I hope it inspires hope. A hope that girls like Mukta out there have the support of people whose constant endeavor is to save such girls.

**Q. And a few questions about you as a writer and reader. Which authors inspire you?**

A. I love writing that's poetic. I am also drawn to writing that can embrace a simple emotion and present it in a way that you can feel it in your bones. The authors who really do this for me are: Arundhati Roy, Elizabeth Strout, Khaled Hosseini, Abraham Verghese, Alice Munro— just to name a few.

**Q. What books do you currently have on your nightstand?**

A. Oh, I have quite a few. I read different genres as long as the writing is good. I just finished *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins. I am listening to *The Hypnotists Love Story* via Audible and reading *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry* on my Kindle. I also have a paperback of Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* which I go back to from time to time.

**Q. Do you have any strange writing habits?**

A. Not really. I just write when I feel like it which is most of the time. My friends do complain that I go into a sort of "creative haze" when I am working on something and essentially become a recluse —their words, not mine.

**Q. Are you working on, or do you have plans for another book?**

A. Yes, but I wonder if it's too early to say anything about the book. I can clearly see it's going to be a love story in a time of conflict but ideas change and the pattern of a plot often changes along the way.

**Q. Is there anything else you would like to share about yourself or your book with readers?**

A. I wrote this novel because I really wanted to bring to light the life of a girl like Mukta (not that there haven't been other authors who have done it before me). I find fiction to be a great way of getting us closer to a character and delving into their lives. For me, this book was really a means of creating awareness about human trafficking. So, as readers, if you have the opportunity and the means, please do consider donating to organizations who are involved in helping such kids.



## Other Links and Resources

What is India's caste system?:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616>

The Ganges: Hinduism's Holy River:

<https://www.learnreligions.com/ganga-goddess-of-the-holy-river-1770295>

*The Color of our Sky – A sad, soulful, and revelatory story about a deeply troubled nation in transition:*

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/amita-trasi/the-color-of-our-sky/>

## Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes          No          Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: