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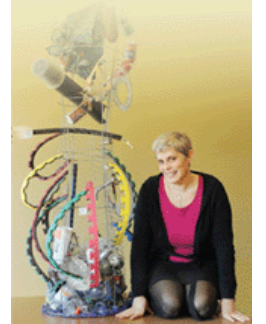
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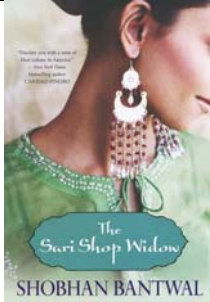


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## Old-Fashioned Love

### A second-generation Indian-American faces remarriage in Shobhan Bantwal's third novel

Thursday, August 27, 2009 11:06 AM EDT  
By Megan Sullivan



AFTER writing about dowry-related domestic abuse and gender-selective abortion in her first two novels, *Dowry Bride* and *Forbidden Daughter*, Robbinsville author Shobhan Bantwal was ready to tackle a lighter subject.

"When writing about intense topics that are emotionally deep, it takes its toll," Ms. Bantwal says. *Sari Shop Widow* (Kensington, \$15) still fits into the women's fiction realm, but this time Ms. Bantwal wanted to portray the immigrant experience to her American audiences. Instead of being set in India as in her prior books, the narrative unfolds in Edison, N.J.

The drama centers on Anjali Kapadia, a 37-year-old shop owner in Little India who has been a widow for 10 years after her husband died of a brain aneurysm. The scenario draws a contrast between the treatment of widows in the United States compared to India, where remarriage is often frowned upon or forbidden. Anjali gives up her job in public relations and marketing at an ad agency in New York City to join her parents' sari shop business in Edison.

"She transforms an ordinary sari shop into something very fashionable and upscale," Ms. Bantwal says. "It's successful for a while, but now she's afraid they're going into bankruptcy. Her uncle, a dictatorial but rich man from India, arrives to help her." Ms. Bantwal added a touch of romance by having the uncle bring along a young Indo-British man as his partner, who becomes a potential love interest for

Anjali.

Anjali already has a white American boyfriend, but she keeps it a secret because she knows that her old-fashioned parents wouldn't approve of his occupation as a bar owner. "My protagonist has a boyfriend on the side who fulfills her basic needs but her parents don't know about it," Ms. Bantwal says. "They want her to have a second relationship as a marriage and she's not happy with anyone they introduce her to." Ms. Bantwal says many second-generation Indians and Pakistanis often face similar conflicts in their life due to culture clashes. "Their parents expect them to do certain things and live a certain way, and their friends and peers expect them to be different," she says. "I put that conflict in the book."

In researching for the book, Ms. Bantwal talked to colleagues who own clothing stores about fashion and other aspects of operating a business, but she says she shops in Little India so it wasn't difficult to describe. In her own closet hang tunic tops (or *kurtis*) and a wide range of saris both old-fashioned and the more modern kind with beading. "I've been collecting them since the day I got married," she says.

Many retail stores in the United States, from upscale fashion boutiques to department stores, sell embroidered and beaded tunic tops, shawls and colorful skirts from India. "You can walk into Wal-Mart these days and find a tunic top that looks very Indian," Ms. Bantwal says. Other Indian fashions showcased on the American fashion scene in recent years include salwar-kameez, lehenga-choli and sakra.

The theme of the novel allows Ms. Bantwal the pleasure of describing in detail the vibrant, luxuriant garments in fabrics of all textures and colors. In one scene, she illustrates a wedding ensemble Anjali is going to design for a young woman getting married, right down to the beads, sequins and gems to match.

Born and raised in a large, conservative Hindu family in a small town named Belgaum in Southwestern India, Ms. Bantwal came to the United States in 1974. An arranged marriage brought her to New Jersey, where she raised a daughter with her husband. Ms. Bantwal, who has a master's degree in sociology from Indian University and a second in public administration from Rider University, balances a full-time state job with her fiction writing.

Her segue into this newfound passion began after writing, directing and acting in a humorous play at an Indian-American Konkani convention in Chicago in July of 2000. She subsequently decided to become a freelance writer for a variety of Indian and Indian-American publications and later tried her hand at short fiction. Her work was well received, so she decided to take things a step further by writing a full-length novel and finding a literary agent.

Now, a fourth book is already in the works, for which Ms. Bantwal expects a September 2010 release. It will focus on a middle-aged woman living in the United States who is in a happy, arranged marriage. One day, she gets a mysterious letter from an anonymous sender saying that she has a son who is dying of leukemia in India. As a young woman in college, she had an affair with someone and gave birth to an illegitimate child, but when she woke up from having a Cesarean section, her family told her the baby was dead. Thirty-years later, she discovers the child actually lived and had been given up for adoption. "It's an ugly secret that comes to haunt her present marriage more or less."

Although she began writing later in life, Ms. Bantwal has been making up for lost time by churning out a novel every year since the release of *The Dowry Bride* in September of 2007 — pretty impressive for someone who can only write during nights and weekends. "Some writers are very prolific, I know fellow authors who write three or four books a year with a full-time job and kids," she says. "I don't know how they do it, I don't know if they sleep or eat."

*Shobhan Bantwal's The Sari Shop Widow will be released Sept. 1. She will sign the book at Edison Public Library, 340 Plainfield Ave., Edison, Sept. 11, 6 p.m. and at Barnes & Noble, MarketFair, 3535 U.S. Route 1, West Windsor, Sept. 16, 7 p.m.; www.shobhanbantwal.com*

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