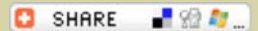


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Author

Shobhan Bantwal



Books by Shobhan Bantwal

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BIO

Shobhan Bantwal was born and raised in India and came to the United States as a young bride in an arranged marriage. She has published short fiction in literary magazines and articles in a number of publications. Writing plays in her mother tongue (Indian language—Konkani) and performing on stage at Indian-American conventions are some of her hobbies. She lives in New Jersey with her husband. Shobhan loves to hear from her readers.

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INTERVIEW

October 5, 2007



Sometimes fiction illuminates a problem so shocking that it's almost difficult to believe. This is the case with debut novelist Shobhan Bantwal's [THE DOWRY BRIDE](#), which explores the darker side of marriage in her native country of India. Bantwal's story, which follows the arranged nuptials of a young girl whose new family plots to murder her when her dowry isn't paid, is based on the horrific practice of bride-burning, bride abuse and the dowry system as still practiced in India. In this interview, Bookreporter.com's Cindy Crosby talks with Bantwal about the problems of the dowry system, the role of astrology and horoscopes in her life and in her fiction, and her own arranged marriage, which has lasted for nearly 34 years.

Bookreporter.com: THE DOWRY BRIDE began as a short



story. Why did you decide to develop it into a full-length novel?

Shobhan Bantwal: THE DOWRY BRIDE was a homework project for a short creative writing course I enrolled in at a local community college five years ago, when I decided to take up writing. The working title was "Bride Without a Dowry." As the course progressed and I built the layers onto my story and read to the class a few paragraphs each week, my classmates/critics had lots of curious questions about the dowry system. Most of them had heard of the term but very few knew what it involved and that it could even trigger extreme abuse in rare cases. They seemed intrigued, but I wasn't quite sure they liked the story, mostly because at the time it was a somber literary piece and had a sad ending.

BRC: Despite that, you went ahead with it anyway?

SB: My instructor advised me that it was quite good, but it had too many characters for short fiction. He said it had potential for a full-length novel. His remarks were enough to get me started on developing the story into a novel.

BRC: In THE DOWRY BRIDE, Megha Ramnath overhears her own murder plotted because her dowry hasn't been paid. The themes of "bride abuse" and "bride-killings" may sound foreign to western readers. Yet you say that anywhere from 5,000 to 25,000 dowry brides are killed and maimed each year.

SB: Statistics on bride killings and injuries in India vary greatly from as low as a few thousand to as many as 25,000 per year, depending on the source. It is hard to judge the validity of these claims, since only a percentage of the crimes are reported and/or documented. No one seems to know the exact number. There are various reasons for this: the girls' families and neighbors rarely report such crimes or file charges for fear of reprisal; corruption and indifference are not uncommon amongst the police, especially in small towns, and they tend to look the other way; the bureaucracy that handles the documentation is slow and inefficient; the legal system is overburdened and too sluggish in processing the few cases brought to trial. Personally, I believe the true number of deaths and maiming is likely to be somewhere in the middle of the scale.

BRC: Although you say THE DOWRY BRIDE is entirely fictional, some of its elements are based on facts about the dowry system. Tell us a little about the system as it functions today.

SB: The dowry system apparently started centuries ago as a means of equitable distribution of family property amongst boys and girls in a primarily patriarchal society. Since girls, after marriage, typically left their parental homes and assimilated themselves into the husband's family, the parents often gave them some cash, jewelry and whatever else they could afford as a gift. It was insurance of a sort, in the event she became a widow or was abandoned by the husband for any reason.

Unfortunately, what started out with good intentions has deteriorated into a custom whereby the groom's family often considers dowry an entitlement rather than a gift. In fact, it

seems to have gone from being an offering to a mandatory contribution that is often demanded by the groom's parents and even extorted in some cases. When the expected dowry is not paid, sometimes the bride is subjected to abuse and in rare cases even killed, so her widowed husband can remarry and look for another dowry.

BRC: Is this widespread?

SB: Despite the hype and drama in *THE DOWRY BRIDE*, I would like to emphasize that dowry is not the norm in Indian marriages. Most marriages occur without a hint of dowry, but a small percentage of them do involve the archaic practice, and an even smaller percentage end in abuse.

BRC: Why hasn't there been outrage expressed from women all over the world about "bride killings"?

SB: I believe bride killings fall more or less into the same categories as female genital mutilation in some of the African countries, ethnic killings in certain parts of the world, and female feticide and infanticide in others. People are aware that such atrocities happen, but the thought is too unpleasant to dwell on. Also, it is not something that affects large segments of the population. Dowry deaths are a small fraction when juxtaposed against India's vast population of a billion plus. Besides, if the very society where these things occur does nothing about it, it is difficult for outsiders to intervene. Unless the parents of the brides-to-be refuse to pay dowry, and India changes from a male-oriented society to more a balanced one, the practice is likely to continue.

BRC: What are the "pro-dowry" arguments, and are they addressed in the novel?

SB: Since my story hinges on one extreme case of dowry abuse, I have not offered any "pro-dowry" arguments, especially since the story is told mainly from the point of view of the protagonist, the woman who is the victim. There is no redeeming quality in the way dowry was demanded in the story. Perhaps in real life, a dowry given in the true spirit of a gift could be the means to help a widow get back on her feet, or be used in times of need by both she and her husband.

Nonetheless I've learned of an interesting development that has emerged in India in recent years. Apparently some resourceful young women who want an easy way out of a bad marriage have started to use dowry as a means to do so --- by falsely accusing the husband and his family of dowry abuse. "Reverse Victimization" is what it's been called, where the men are crying foul because they have become victims of false allegations.

BRC: Your own engagement and marriage would seem unconventional, by American standards. Explain how your family picked a husband for you.

SB: In most conventional arranged marriages in India, parents on both sides use an efficient network of relatives, friends, neighbors and even co-workers for matchmaking. Helping someone find a suitable match is considered a good deed, worthy of a blessing. In my case, my aunt mentioned a certain young man to my parents as a potentially suitable husband for me, after which my in-laws

and my parents had our horoscopes matched by their respective astrologers.

Meanwhile both families made discreet inquiries about each other (something that's routinely done and expected) and decided they would make acceptable in-laws. When the two astrologers pronounced that this was indeed a good match, my future husband and I were introduced to each other. Contrary to popular belief, we had the freedom to reject each other, but we seemed to hit it off. Two days after we met we were engaged. And, less than two weeks later, we were married.

BRC: What were the challenges of coming to New Jersey from India as a young bride in an arranged marriage?

SB: First of all, there was climate shock, followed by culture shock. Coming from a small, conservative town with warm temperatures year-round was a difficult adjustment. Homesickness hit me hard, too, especially because I hardly knew my husband. We had to learn to adjust and get to know each other. But love did come, even if it was slow to blossom. Also, after the first few months and especially after experiencing my first summer here and getting to know more people, I embraced American culture wholeheartedly. The one advantage I had over many other immigrants is the fact that I was educated in schools and colleges that taught in English. Language wasn't a barrier and that helped make the transition so much easier.

BRC: It sounds as if your marriage has been a successful one. Did you pick a spouse for your daughter?

SB: My husband and I have been happily married for nearly 34 years. As a matter of fact, we introduced our only daughter to her future husband. Of course, she was born and raised in the U.S., so she dated the young man for several months before accepting his proposal. They were both given all the freedom to do whatever they wanted. The young couple has been happily married for more than three years. So in many ways I think it was a good East-West mix of meeting and marrying someone.

BRC: You say you were lucky enough to be born into the "Saraswat Brahmin caste." Briefly explain the caste system in India.

SB: Hindu society has four main castes (and several sub-castes), with the Brahmins considered the top of the hierarchy. Brahmins in ancient times used to be the most highly educated and hence were priests and teachers to the rest. And Brahmins supposedly did not practice dowry. But things have changed in modern times. The castes are intermixing (which is a good thing in my opinion), but certain undesirable customs are also crisscrossing the boundaries of caste. The Saraswat Brahmins are a very small minority that still seem to adhere to those old-fashioned ideals of intellectualism and non-dowry marriages, therefore I consider myself lucky to be born in that particular sub-caste of Brahmins. My late parents and in-laws valued a good education over wealth.

BRC: What role does the caste system play in your story?

SB: In the novel, I deliberately made Megha's family a Brahmin one, so it adds to her confusion about why so-called enlightened Brahmins are resorting to violent practices. In her young and

idealistic way she wonders why her parents had to pay dowries to get their daughters married and why her otherwise devout Brahmin mother-in-law would dream up such a horrific death for her son's wife.

BRC: You say India is “simple yet complex, abundant yet lacking, progressive yet shockingly primitive.” Unpack that.

SB: A large percentage of marriages are still arranged and divorce rates are relatively low, which makes for a much less complicated lifestyle, where complexities like alimony, lawsuits, living arrangements for children, step-siblings and half siblings don't seem to factor in. However, despite the simplicity, extended families, where elders and widowed relatives and orphans often live together, can turn daily life into a very complex one. Also, ideally Hinduism is a way of life that teaches simple living and high thinking. Nevertheless, most Indians' lives are complicated by competition in every aspect, from education to career to marriage to retirement. Life in contemporary India is much more involved than it was half a century ago.

When I say abundant yet lacking, I mean India has vast natural resources as well as human resources. There are highly qualified professionals in every occupation and folks who own thriving businesses, but a large segment of Indians still live in abject poverty. In large cities, the most expensive high-rise building can exist next to a shanty. A famous historic monument that draws millions of visitors each year can be located in an area that lacks even basic hygiene.

As far as progress versus primitiveness, modern amenities, top-notch education, state-of-the-art technology, movie theaters and international cuisine are available to an average Indian, and still, in spite of so much Western influence, the age-old social practices like dowry and treating sons as assets and daughters as burdens continue.

BRC: What is it like for women in India?

SB: For several decades they have pursued higher education and careers in medicine, law, finance, and held high political offices. India had a female prime minister long before many of the Western countries put a woman in the role of chief executive. And yet, even high-powered career women in India often lead sheltered personal lives, where the men make the major decisions in the family.

BRC: The Hindu religion plays a large role in your story. What is your own religious background, and how do you believe it affected the writing of the novel?

SB: I was born and raised in a Hindu Brahmin family. Our small town had only one school that taught all the subjects in English, and that happened to be a parochial school, so my sisters and I had to attend that. But there was never any conflict. In the novel, I have tried to portray some typical Hindu practices without going into too much detail, just enough to hold my readers' interest. In other words, I wrote what I knew.

BRC: You used several points of view in the novel to help the story unfold. Was it more difficult to write as a man --- the cousin, Kiran and father-in-law --- or as the

psychopathic mother-in-law?

SB: Yes, it was a little more work to write in the male point of view. My thoughts come from the feminine perspective, hence thinking like a man was in some instances a challenge. While writing those chapters, I often had to remind myself that this was a man's mind I was thinking with. Amma's mind was not that hard to get into. It was relatively easy.

BRC: Astrology and horoscopes play some crucial roles in some of your characters actions. How do you use both astrology and horoscopes in your own life?

SB: In traditional Hindu lore, astrologers have always played a large part in daily life, especially marriages and careers. In my own case, like I mentioned before, two different astrologers were of the opinion that my husband and I would make an excellent match. Besides, there have been other predictions that have come eerily true in my own life, so remarkably close in fact that I can't dismiss them as a lucky guess or mere coincidence. Perhaps that's the reason why I have faith in good, educated astrologers. I must say it is hard to locate a good one these days.

BRC: What books might we find on your nightstand? What other writers do you enjoy reading?

SB: I recently read and enjoyed A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS by Khaled Hosseini. I love his writing, and coincidentally, Khaled and I are represented by the same literary agency. My bookcase has a large number of romantic mysteries, women's fiction, and medical and legal thrillers. I love reading Sandra Brown, Judith McNaught, Karen Robards, Dorothy Garlock, Nora Roberts, Dan Brown, John Grisham and Tess Gerritsen.

BRC: What do you do for fun when you aren't writing?

SB: I enjoy socializing with close friends. We often cook up a big meal and share it with friends and family and just hang out together. I also like growing summer flowers, but lately with a full-time job and my writing slowly turning into a second career, there isn't much time for anything else.

BRC: Speaking of which --- what's next for you, writing-wise?

SB: Since Kensington Publishing has offered me a two-book contract, I'm rolling around some ideas for my next book with my editor. So far it seems the second book will also be based in India. I'll have to wait and see how THE DOWRY BRIDE fares with readers around the United States and Canada before I think about the second book.

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