

Lifting the Sari

By Shobhan Bantwal
Author of **THE SARI SHOP WIDOW**

When my arranged marriage husband of 35 years, a diehard fan of thrillers and mysteries, started reading my debut women's fiction book, *THE DOWRY BRIDE*, he was unprepared for what was to come.

He turned to me with an odd expression when he came to the scene where my shy protagonist and the hesitant hero finally surrender to their mutual attraction and make love. "You have sex in your story!" my husband commented, his eyes round with astonishment.

"That's why it's called a romance, dear," was my wry response. He was one of my first readers within the immediate family, and his reaction of surprised delight gave this anxious new author some much-needed confidence.

Nonetheless I chose not to confess that I had been plagued with doubts about introducing that scene into my book. Was I capable of writing convincing love scenes? Would Indian characters wearing saris and kurtas and indulging in carnal pleasures sound realistic to my readers? I realized I would never find out unless I tried to work in at least one incident involving sex.

I could envision the scandalized looks on the faces of my conservative family and friends when they realized that wholesome Hindu men and women were reveling in hot, glorious, mind-numbing sex in my tales. This notwithstanding the simple fact that India is probably the only ancient culture that boasts a 1,700-year-old primer on the art of love-making, a sex education textbook known as the *Kama Sutra*. Erotic sculptures abound in centuries-old Indian temples, too. I wonder when Indian society turned prudish.

As an Indian-American woman, when I first took up creative writing I naturally gravitated toward what practically every South Asian author writes—literary fiction—because I felt it was

expected of me. But I simply could not get into it. I had never truly enjoyed the slice-of-life type of fiction I was forced to read for my few English literature classes in college. Even the rare love scene was a work of lyrical beauty but sadly lacking in sizzle and passion.

I was always a romance fiction addict, in most all of its sub-genres. So at the age of 50, teetering on menopause, I decided to take the plunge and write what I liked—women’s fiction peppered with romance. And so began my adventurous journey to becoming a published author of romantic Indian fiction—a tricky path that very few, if any, Indian writers have chosen to tread.

Naturally I doubted that any reputable agent or publisher would bother to consider my stories, which did not really fit into any genre. My writing is commercial fiction, a potpourri, “*Bollywood in a Book*,” with high drama, emotion, romance, and cultural details.

Despite numerous rejections from agents, I persisted in writing my kind of ethnic romances. Eventually, in 2006, I signed on with a highly reputable New York agent who represents a number of bestselling authors, and landed a two-book contract with Kensington Publishing. My first two novels, *THE DOWRY BRIDE* and *THE FORBIDDEN DAUGHTER*, are set in contemporary India and deal with hot-button social issues.

THE SARI SHOP WIDOW, my third book, is set on the streets of Edison, New Jersey’s *Little India*, and tells the tale of a young, widowed businesswoman who rediscovers the magic of love, family, and her roots while she fights to save her floundering sari boutique.

The unique *Bollywood in a Book* concept seems to have worked for me. My Indian characters, despite their old-fashioned ways, do enjoy sex, and they keep my readers entertained.