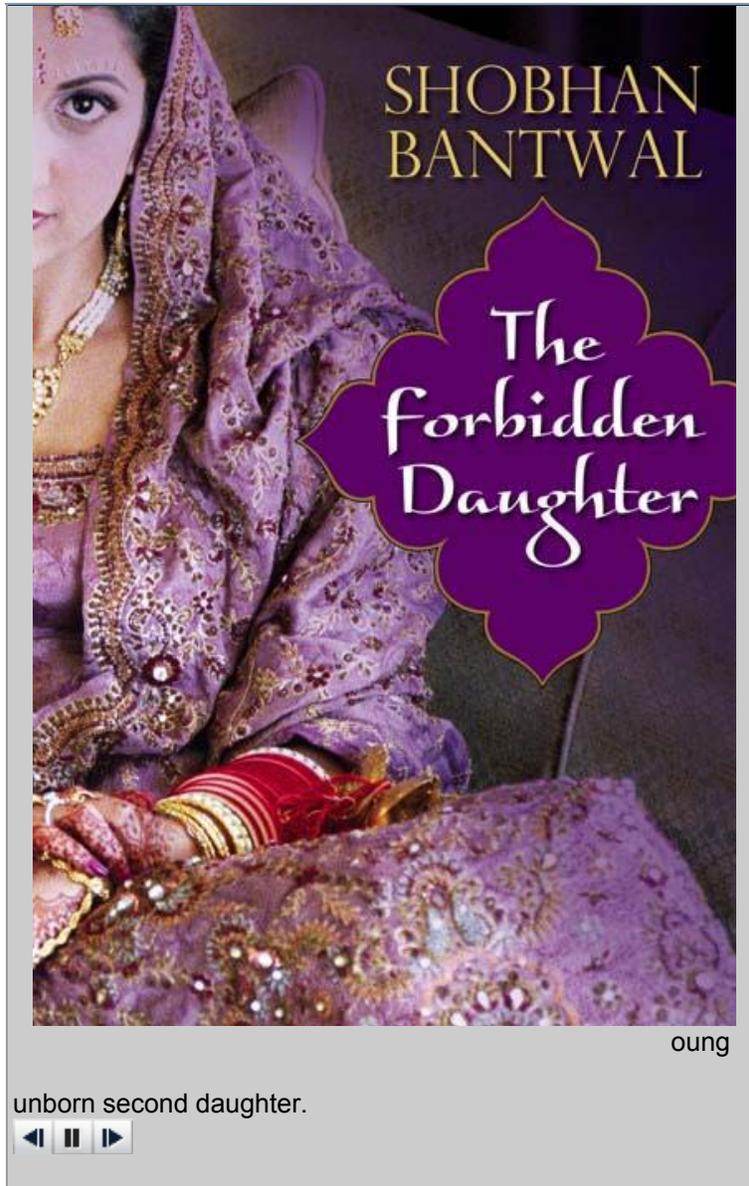


## 'Forbidden Daughter'

Shobhan Bantwal's second novel addresses gender-selective abortion in contemporary India.

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By Adam Grybowski



IN her first novel, *The Dowry Bride* (Kensington, 2007), Shobhan Bantwal examined India's banned dowry system, which is still a source of abuse and even murder in contemporary India. For her second novel, *The Forbidden Daughter* (Kensington, \$14), which will be released Aug. 26, Ms. Bantwal landed on another banned practice affecting women, gender-selective abortion.

One of Ms. Bantwal's goals is to bring these topics to American readers. Her readers are primarily non-Indians, she says, although many first-generation Indian-Americans responded to the subject of her first novel. Ms. Bantwal received e-mail messages from them, relating stories about the dowry system their parents had told them. For an American audience, such

be an "eye opener."

"When I was growing up in the '60s, I thought this practice (of dowry) would disappear in the next 30 or 40 years," she says. "But it's increased. This topic dovetails into 'The Forbidden Daughter' very well. But it's not quite a sequel."

Women's issues and domestic violence have intrigued Ms. Bantwal since her days as an undergraduate at Indian University in India. She has two master's degrees, one in sociology, also from Indian University, and the other in public administration from Rider University. Ms. Bantwal, a Robbinsville resident, moved to the U.S. in 1974 and has worked for the New Jersey Department of Labor for the past 16 years.

She is one of five sisters, each of whom were insulated from the practices she describes in her novels. "We were lucky to be born in an educated, broad-minded family," she says. In India, discussing the gender of a fetus is banned by law, though doctors and patients continue to do so, she says. *The Forbidden Daughter* tells the story of a woman who refuses to abort her second child and an unscrupulous doctor who becomes rich performing such gender-based abortions.

"In certain areas, (gender-based abortions) are very prevalent," she says. "And it's not certain classes, it's across the board, from the downtrodden to the wealthy. The thing is, very rarely does it get reported."

As such, is the novel a better form to probe this subject than, say, a piece of journalism?

For Ms. Bantwal, the answer is "yes." The novel better serves her readers. "When you introduce the story with a little intrigue and a little romance, more people will read it," she says. "I'm a better storyteller than a journalist. Ever since I was a little girl I've loved making up stories."

Ms. Bantwal was born and raised in Belgaum, a small town in Southwestern India. Her parents instilled in her a love of reading that still persists.

"When we were growing up, we didn't have a lot of entertainment other than reading," she says. There was no television and little radio programming. During the summer, when she had plenty of free time, Ms. Bantwal was encouraged by her mother to read.

"I just fell in love with 'Pride and Prejudice,'" says Ms. Bantwal, referring to the Jane Austen novel. "Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' I don't know how many times I read that." She read Shakespeare's histories, tragedies and comedies, and she read Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason mysteries. And then there were her mother's romance novels, which were off limits to Ms. Bantwal until she turned 16.

"Reading creates that ability to imagine things in your mind and inspires a more active imagination than watching movies," she says.

Ms. Bantwal did not begin writing until age 50. "I needed something to occupy my evenings," she says. Her husband had begun to travel for work. "I said, 'Maybe I need a hobby.' So I started writing articles for Indian-American newspapers, and they were well-received."

Ms. Bantwal then followed the arc of countless writers with literary ambitions: the journalist became a novelist. The seeds of her first novel took root in a short story she wrote for a creative writing class at Mercer County Community College. Pointing to the story's wealth of characters, her professor advised her to expand the story into a novel, a daunting task especially for a new writer.

"I had no idea how to expand a short story into a long story," Ms. Bantwal says. "I did it in bits and pieces." Outlining a story's structure is not her style. She holds a general idea of the story in her mind, knowing how it begins and ends without the distinct details of the in-between. "I work by the seat of my pants."

She also works with a monthly group that critiques her work. Beyond that, Ms. Bantwal relies on her instincts. "A storyteller is a storyteller," she says. "Fiction writing is an art, and there's very little someone can teach you about writing a book."

The plot of her next novel is based in the U.S., in Edison. She promises a lighter subject. "It doesn't have any major social or political issues. I thought a couple of heavy-duty books was enough."

*The Forbidden Daughter* by Shobhan Bantwal *will be released Aug. 26 (available in bookstores and online). Ms. Bantwal will read from and sign her book at Barnes & Noble, 3535 Route 1 South, West Windsor, Sept. 4, 7 p.m. (609) 716-1570. Shobhan Bantwal on the Web: [www.shobanbantwal.com](http://www.shobanbantwal.com)*