



‘Ethnic’ writing for a broad audience

How an author learned to balance explanations of her characters’ motivations with the action of her story for a readership unfamiliar with Indian culture

EVERY WRITER has his or her own particular challenge, be it dialogue, setting, characters, plot or pacing. My challenge as an Indian-American author is to create credible ethnic characters that appeal to a primarily American audience. If a reader does not connect with my protagonist, I will have failed in achieving my primary objective: to touch an individual’s mind and soul, however briefly.

In an American fiction market brimming with Caucasian, black and even Latino characters, there are few that are Indian. Despite the rising popularity of ethnic fiction, particularly from Asia, it is still a mere fraction of the thousands of fiction books American publishing houses churn out each year. So when I decided to step into the nearly impossible-to-penetrate realm of fiction, especially mainstream fiction, I knew I was in for a serious challenge.

Yet, when I took up creative writing as a hobby five years ago, I had the naïve yet blasé attitude of a neophyte. I was merely doing it for fun and had no plans to publish anything, anytime, anywhere. My thoughts were private, and I would write solely for my own pleasure.

So, where was I going to start? Since the writing-industry pundits advise

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beginners to write what they know, I picked the most significant event in my immediate past for a topic: my only child leaving home to join a university far from home. Our family lived in New

Jersey, and Boston University was, well, all the way in Boston—some 300 miles away. For an overprotective Indian mother, it might as well have been the wilds of Africa.

The brief essay I hammered out on the subject was not exactly riveting. But my muses were already whispering in my ear, prodding me to query a few publications, find out if it had any merit as a journalistic piece. After several days of hesitating, I submitted my article to *India Abroad*, a popular Indian-American newspaper. It was a brave move on my part, but I did not expect a response.

Imagine my astonishment when I saw my essay spread across half a page in *India Abroad*’s magazine section several weeks later, complete with a lovely illustration and my name in bold letters! And they were going to pay me for it—a king’s ransom of \$50.

Suddenly, my adrenaline level surged. I was back at my computer, furiously typing up another article. If a major ethnic publication had accepted my work, there had to be other, smaller ones that might be interested. And there were. Naturally, there were rejections as well, which stung like tiny stab wounds, but I went on to have nearly 25 articles published in a matter of two years in both print and electronic periodicals.

After that modest taste of success, I could not stop there. I started writing short stories with Indian heroes and heroines. My stories were suitable for ethnic Asian publications, but how would the mainstream American ones

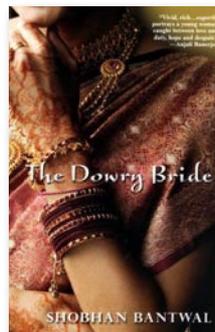
react to my submissions? And my ambitions were gently shifting in that direction. Would they be willing to accept stories that hinged on arranged marriage, dowry abuse, virgin brides and grooms, and male dominance? Would they even consider characters like obedient wives and mothers who, despite advanced degrees and flourishing careers of their own, catered happily to the men in their lives?

What does the average American know about the life of an average, middle-class Indian man or woman? Little, in all likelihood. Too often books and films have portrayed the extremes of Indian culture to American audiences. The real India lies somewhere between the glitz and glamour of Bollywood

movies and the poverty and despair of literary novels and documentaries.

To learn the techniques of making my stories more appealing to non-Indians, I enrolled in a creative-writing course at my local community college. My biggest disappointment came after I read one of my stories to my classmates for critique. They just could not comprehend why a modern young woman could not walk away from her spineless husband and abusive in-laws. And if she happened to fall in love with another man and wanted to make love with him, why did she not jump into bed with him instead of fighting the urge?

Nonetheless, the course proved to be a much-needed eye opener for me. I had to get more creative in creating my characters. I could not assume that my read-



Bantwal grappled with how to best reach her audience.



ers would connect with them instantly, or understand their rationale, let alone sympathize with them. I was forced to explain the logic behind their actions. But in doing so, I had to ignore one of the primary rules of fiction writing—*show, don't tell*. This was a mantra that had been drilled into me right from the beginning, and yet, the only way for me to make my characters come alive was to *tell* readers about them, as in the following passage:

Suicide went against her Hindu beliefs, but she was convinced that in her case it was the right thing to do—the only thing. Didn't the holy book, the *Bhagvad Gita*, preach that doing one's duty towards family and society without giving thought to one's own needs was the ultimate test of a true Hindu? In that case, she was doing what she felt was her duty—looking out for others. ...

It took me a long time to learn the craft of keeping the telling to a minimum and making it interesting enough to keep my readers turning the pages. But when I submitted one of my short stories to a short-fiction contest and won honorable mention, I knew I was finally beginning to get to where I needed to be. It was a promising start.

After that, two more of my stories won awards. I dreamed about writing a full-length novel. Writing the novel, however, was not half as challenging as finding an agent who would consider a story with a controversial topic and an Indian backdrop marketable. The pile of agent rejections grew painfully high. But I refused to give up, especially because by then I had a small critique group lined up. My two critique partners, Caucasian women who proved to be a good test market for whether my writing would appeal to non-Indians, liked the story and encouraged me to keep looking for an agent.

Just before I finally landed an agent, three different agencies offered me rep-

resentation, so I chose the one best suited for my writing. And yet, when my agent sold my book, *The Dowry Bride*, to Kensington in a two-book deal, it took a while for the truth to sink in.

I had finally created credible characters, with all their vulnerabilities, flaws, quirks, virtues and vices! And a traditional American publisher had liked the players and their stories enough to buy the manuscript.

The road to creating shy yet sociable, timid yet sufficiently bold women clad in saris and *lehengas*, and making them sympathetic to my readers, has been a challenging one. Presenting sensitive, softhearted males as real men and not wimps, and authoritative males as essentially good at heart is even harder.

I still struggle with finding the balance between explaining and over-explaining an Indian word, custom, tradition or adage. Indians are not prone to emotional displays, so, rather than using action, I often have to bring readers into a character's mind to see where he or she is coming from.

Exoticism goes only so far in stirring readers' interest. Along with it, the characters need to be three-dimensional, with a balance of good and evil, handsome and ugly. They need to capture not just the minds but also the hearts of readers. To top it all, they need to do all of the above within the first few pages.

Tell, don't show comes into play to a great extent when creating ethnic characters for a mainstream American audience. Unfortunately, when I do that, my Indian readers often find my clarifiers tedious and redundant. As long as I continue creating ethnic characters, I will probably have to keep walking, very carefully, on a tightrope.

Shobhan Bantwal

Shobhan Bantwal is the author of the novel *The Dowry Bride*. Her work has appeared in publications including *India Abroad*, *India Currents*, *Desijournal* and *Little India*. Her second novel, *The Forbidden Daughter*, is due out this fall. Web: www.shobhanbantwal.com.