The Lotus Singers

SHORT STORIES FROM CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIA

Edited by Trevor Carolan

Foreword by Urvashi Butalia

Literature/Asian Studies

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With a foreword by Urvashi Butalia

With its stunning profusion of cultures, languages, and landscapes, South Asia has long captivated the imaginations of people around the world. Enlightenment-seekers and entrepreneurs, anthropologists and activists are drawn there for reasons as diverse as the place itself. The South Asia portrayed in this collection has something to offer each of them, and yet it resists being seen through any single lens. These eighteen stories—a rare combination of translations and original English works—offer a nuanced perspective on this rapidly changing region that only fiction can provide.

"This anthology brings together an extraordinary mix of new and known voices from South Asia. Together, the stories in this excellent collection tread that fine line between fear, hope, and desire, where it is hard to disentangle one from the other. Seeming at first to confirm our expectations of the standard stereotypes associated with South Asia—poverty, caste, and the pressures of the traditional family—they turn those expectations around in bold, subtle, and intriguing ways, forcing readers to rethink everything they thought they knew about this place at the crossroads of the world."

—Ira Raja, editor of *Grey Areas: An Anthology of Contemporary Indian Fiction on Ageing*

About the Editor

For 25 years, Trevor Carolan has published extensively on literature, ethics, and wisdom traditions from Asia. He earned an interdisciplinary Ph.D. at Bond University, Australia and teaches English and Creative Writing at the University of the Fraser Valley near Vancouver, Canada. In 2010, Cheng & Tsui published his companion anthology to this present volume entitled *Another Kind of Paradise: Short Stories from the New Asia-Pacific.*

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Friends of 40 Years
Aum Shri Ganeshaya Namah . . .

Contents

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Aum Shanti,

Trevor Carolan
University of the Fraser Valley
British Columbia, Canada

Foreword

A Strange Animal

South Asia is a strange sort of animal. A large landmass, made up of several countries, some elements of a shared past in history, some commonalities and overlaps in myth, belief, legend, folklore and religion, and yet very different political trajectories in the post-independence period from the mid-twentieth century on.

Putting together an anthology of stories from South Asia is a brave—some might even say foolhardy—enterprise. The skeptics might ask if geography is a sufficient condition to tie such a collection together. Or, questions could be raised about content, about language, about power—most collections that claim to focus on South Asia end up concentrating mainly on India—about representation, and so on. Further, readers may wish to interrogate the very concept of South Asia—at its simplest level, south of what and where, which countries does it include, where does the Middle East end and South Asia begin, should Afghanistan be a part of South Asia or not? Or at a more philosophical level, they may ask what countries as diverse as Nepal and Sri Lanka have in common that enables them to be seen as part of a larger whole.

And yet, there is something, unnameable perhaps, elusive even, but strong and enduring, that links the histories, the presents, the people and the problems of this diverse region. Even just the physical features—or indeed the political faultlines—testify to this; India and Pakistan may on and off be locked in enmity and tension, but their rivers provide ample evidence that there is no escaping their joint present and future. Sri Lanka and Nepal may be thousands of miles apart, but the history of conflict and militancy links them experientially in many different ways.

Further, at a people-to-people or civil society level, the links are even stronger. Activists fighting against big dams, or nuclearization, or violence against women, or repressive laws, or for human rights, have formed formidable links across South Asia, and draw strength from

campaigns in each other's countries. Travel further adds to this, despite the many restrictions that exist, particularly between India and Pakistan. Friendships and family relationships add another dimension.

And these are not the only links. A further, complex underlayering is provided by literature, perhaps the most enduring of South Asia's connectivities. Even a cursory look at South Asia provides evidence of a literary landscape that is rich with different forms and languages. Novels, poetry, non-fiction writing, literary narratives, biographies, autobiographies in not one, but many languages not only proliferate within South Asia, but carry South Asian writing to the world. Notwithstanding the importance of print—and more recently electronic forms—the largely oral cultures of South Asia lend themselves to another literary form that populates the region, and this is the story: short, long, told, retold, created in myth, transferred into real life, subversive, innovative, funny, sad . . .

In many ways, an anthology such as this therefore begins with both a tremendous advantage and its opposite. A wealth of stories to choose from, combined with the difficulty of a complex choice: will nationality define choice? Or language? Or class? Or gender? And the categories could go on.

Clearly there are no easy choices. But there are abundant cautions, and one of these, which this particular anthology exercises, is to not allow the "big brother" (or indeed big sister, for India's self-image is that of a motherland) to dominate. Another is to bring the voices that are too often ignored—in this case, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives—into the fold; a third is to watch out for language. Perhaps because of the colonial past of most—happily not all—countries in the region, English is predominant and gets more importance than the indigenous languages (it's also the language of social mobility), so it needs particular attention to seek out other languages—something that the editor of this anthology has carefully exercised.

Questions may still remain, and there may well be no satisfactory answers. In the end, any selection of stories, voices, narratives has to be personal, even though the editor may have in his or her mind questions and doubts about precisely the sorts of things that are mentioned above. But no matter how or what, the final decision will come from the

reader—and it is to the reader that this volume is now offered, in the hope that she will find here something of the many facets—the concept, idea, and reality—of South Asia.

Urvashi Butalia
New Delhi

Introduction

South Asia is a world of stories. Step off an airplane, arrive by long-distance jeep, railway carriage, rattle-trap bus from the north, or land from a ferry or ship up from the south or west, and you enter into a world of storytellers. Some are wonderful and adventurous, others more slippery or deceitful; there are some who weave other times, other lives within the tapestry of their stories. But always there is a story, and somewhere at its heart, within many layers like the petals of a lotus, is a portrait of oneself.

Forty years ago, flying into Delhi from the Arabian Gulf, a man noticed my fingers tapping to the tabla rhythms of Alla Rakha, the hand-drum accompanist of sitar master Ravi Shankar. An invitation to his home followed and I found myself in a palace unlike anything I'd known until then—a big story. Two days later, the Taj Mahal in Agra beggared what I'd seen in Delhi, but not before a sleight-of-hand artist thinned my wallet amidst a skein of tales about the Taj and the extraordinary characters associated with it. Such cautionary experience, one intuits, is worth the price: I've avoided trickery on the road ever since. Good stories are like this. They may come with a bite, but they give us what we really want as a reader—typically in a way we never quite expect.

My own interest in South Asia began when as a student, I grew up watching the films of Satyajit Ray—his sultry, grainy black & white *Apu* trilogy that offered images of a world apart. Then came a wedding invitation to Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) from travel friends. I was on my way there when I detoured through the palaces of old Hindustan. With the nuptial ceremonies concluded in Kolkata, I took to wandering Ray's Bengal region. A taste of yoga, and I woke one morning with the sounds of the boat traffic on the Hooghly River in my ears. In the fashion of the times—The Beatles had made their way to Rishikesh in the hills a few years previous—I bumped into a wandering monk in the course of his pilgrimage on foot from southern Thailand to the holy places of the Buddha's life in the plains between India and Nepal. We knocked about together and were joined by others attracted to our unlikely

twosome—retired scholars of Sanskrit and Pali, Dalits, the lot. Everyone had a yarn to share. It seemed to be the expected price of joining in our travelling gallimaufry.

Later, during further university studies, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* revealed that even in the Middle Ages a story was better than ready money when it came to striking up convivial company for a journey ahead. Returned home from my own first ramblings in South Asia, I brought a lot of stories with me. They were, I discovered, the ideal souvenir.

What follows is a compendium of 18 short stories. With a little imagination, readers may sense a kind of journey in their collective voice, a series of recent images and encounters with the "Seven Sister" nations of the South Asia region. As veteran readers, travellers and scholars learn, writers and artists from a specific country or region can offer a kaleidoscope of insights into its daily life and times. South Asian writers are no exception.

As a global audience saw a few years ago with the Academy Awards sweep by the film *Slumdog Millionaire* out of Mumbai, India, our world is changing. More than ever, Asia especially commands our attention. We need to know what is happening in this rapidly transforming region of the planet. As a companion volume to *Another Kind of Paradise: Short Stories from the New Asia-Pacific,* published a year ago by Cheng & Tsui, the editorial approach of this volume has been to locate stories from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives with an engaged literary focus. These are stories that talk to us about what is important in the contemporary life of these South Asian societies. As you will find, the collection focuses on a broad horizon of impact issues—on social, gender-based, economic, spiritual, and inevitably, political challenges to cultural orthodoxy as they are presented to us by many of the region's most distinguished storytellers. These are literary voices speaking not from a comfortable distance or from South Asia's far-flung diaspora, but from the home range; they are sure of their ground.

Because the challenge of a foreign language usually cuts us off from reading about Asian cultures in the original, the perspectives that present us with the most insight into new peoples and cultures are often found in good translations, or in stories by native-born writers fluent in English. Works of this nature shape what follows.

We live in a Global Age, and if there is a guiding ethic for our twenty-first century it is that we inhabit an increasingly interconnected world. What is essential to remember is that during crisis periods, humans frequently look for someone else to blame. But this is a dangerous game that cuts both ways, and learning more about each other—and how people of other cultures live their everyday lives—is an effective way of avoiding cross-cultural clashes. This kind of knowledge, however, requires more information than a three-minute evening news clip can provide: it's a matter of *engagement* with the world.

Through heavy trans-Pacific migration to North America during the past 20 years, opportunities have come for most of us to meet new people from Asian societies—through work, business deals, at school, or perhaps through neighbours or a shopkeeper nearby. Within the deeper structure of our growing relationship with Asia, one can also see how South Asian concepts like yoga, meditation, and vegetarianism are quietly becoming part of our own. With the staggering size of its population, it is instructive to remember that the South Asian sub-continent and adjacent area is roughly half the territorial size of the U.S. Within this geography, however, lie the Himalayas, the Sahara-like deserts of Rajasthan and eastern Pakistan, the vast north-central Ganges plain of old Hindustan, the breathtaking southern country of the Ghats and Deccan Plateau, and an undulating line of coastal plains that range from southern Karachi in Pakistan to Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh. To this, add the island states of Sri Lanka and the Maldives with its fragile sea-level ecosystem that makes it the world's poster state for negative global climate change effects. Within this region—the planet's least prosperous—lives nearly one-quarter of the world's population, more than half a billion in marginal, if not impoverished, conditions.

Despite headline-making political or religious strains, the seven South Asian nations comprise a geocultural region that shares deep history, as well as cultural and social traditions. India and Pakistan, for instance, have had a quarrelsome relationship since Partition in 1947, but also share widespread use of the English and Urdu languages. With their neighbours, they also share economic aspirations and commonalities, including the needs of the poor and of women and girls especially.

Within both Hindu and Muslim patriarchal systems, South Asian women remain vulnerable. Violence and rape are endemic subjects in

literature from the region and a furious volume could be gathered around these themes alone. Among women writers there—who, it deserves noting, have courageously refused to remain silent—education and choice are persistently adopted as topics for their ability to serve as vehicles of female empowerment and self-improvement.

The past two decades have seen the Indian novel rise to international stardom with such acclaimed practitioners as Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, and Aravind Adiga. Modern literature there has been dominated by fiction—though this does not diminish the importance of poets or playwrights in India and throughout the region—and the South Asian novel is top-heavy with male authors. Why this is the case does not have a definitive answer. However, in discussions with writers, translators and publishers from South Asia, one suggestion that arises repeatedly regarding why women excel at writing short stories, even dominating the genre, is that it is probably a case of "available time." Traditional South Asian family obligations loom large here and women are compelled to devote long hours to children, parents, husbands, and often other work commitments. Generally limited in the amount of time they have available to write, women writers, it seems, are becoming modern masters of the shorter form—a situation seen elsewhere throughout East and Southeast Asia. Indeed, readers will note the preponderance of women among the contributors to this present edition.[1]

As a visit to one of South Asia's literary events indicates—book fairs in Dhaka, Lahore, Kolkata, Colombo, Mumbai, Katmandu, Galle, the major Jaipur Literature Festival, or the enormous Delhi Book Fair biennial—the South Asian book trade is well-established. People read avidly and the cult of the author is taking shape here too, as surely as it has in North America or Britain. The widespread and growing use of English means that writers can now be read beyond their own national borders, and translation among regional languages is on the rise. Similarly, other voices are emerging from the smaller nations of Nepal, Bhutan, and the

[1]Literary matters aside, it remains a truism that in spite of the social restrictions under which South Asian women may labour, they have confounded the odds and succeeded in rising to high political office more regularly than anywhere else in the world. The list is substantial—Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike and President Chandika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, and Bangladeshi Prime Ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed.

Maldives, ready to capitalize on the global appeal of English in porting their literary wares to the larger world. Accordingly, a wave of new talent is preparing to take its place on the South Asian literary stage. Many of these younger authors have attended schools in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America; subsequently, their interests, values and appetites are simultaneously local, cosmopolitan, liberal, and influenced by consumerism. Add to this the unstoppable challenges of global culture and its fascination with the internet, cell phone technology, and pop music, and one finds that ideas and events that that were unthinkable even a decade ago—individual yearnings of every calibre—are now at the heart of South Asia's developing literary agenda.

With this as background, and with the added phenomenon of global travel, South Asian societies may no longer be as "exotic" as they long were to the West. Yet the human predicament is fully explored in narratives such as Salil Chaturvedi's "Nina Awaits Mrs. Kamath's Decision" with its story of a blind girl in love, or in Niaz Zaman's portrait of a slum-dwelling mother in "The Daily Woman." Readers will also see the emergence of timely, feminist writing from Islamic societies like Bangladesh and Pakistan in tales by Jharna Rahman and Hasan Manzar, with a striking parallel account by Kunzang Choden from the hermetic mountain landscapes of Bhutan. An enduring respect for tradition across religious divides and in changing times survives in Sunil Gangopadhyay's "Virtue and Sin," whereas tradition is given a shaking in Ela Arab Mehta's "Bablu's Choice." Contemporary issues of ageing and the demands of pluralism and diversity are manifest in the stories by Usha Yadav and Mridula Koshy. Surrealism, too, appears in Manjula Padmanabhan's unexpected "A Government of India Undertaking," where the uncanny may be a natural response to the random chaos of South Asia's daily urban experience. Suffering, the poet Auden argued, is something about which old masters are never wrong, and as Mahasweta Devi, a matriarch of Indian writing, establishes with her stinging tale "Arjun," what India's Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen calls the "durability of inequity and injustice" is also tragically alive and flourishing.[2]

[2]See *The Little Magazine,* Vol. III, p. 9, 2009

Stories like these provide us with a keener sense of place and a system of enquiry for understanding how certain characters and their actions may reflect cultural values and traditions, how rewards and punishment are meted out in cultures foreign to our own. They establish the criteria for judging why certain literary works are important to their respective peoples.

With any anthology there are bound to be difficult decisions regarding what is included. Which writers could benefit from more exposure? Indian writers such as Anjum Hasan, Paul Zacharias, and Esther David all deserve to be featured in a collection of this kind, as do Mohammed Hanif and Mohsih Hamid from Pakistan, yet matters of availability, of access to translations, and of obtaining agreements enter into the final equation. Researching strong work by writers from distant places takes patience, time, effort and travel; in the end, an editor winnows and works with what the search turns up. In this respect I am indebted for advice from old and new colleagues alike from South Asia: writers, scholars, publishers, translators, friends, and strangers met by chance in restaurants and in transit all contributed suggestions and made valuable recommendations. What evolved was the decision to simply locate good short fiction—stories that reflect aspects of the current world in South Asia, its conditions of existence, the aspirations of those living there, the changing pressures on everyday life. From this arose the very heart of what *The Lotus Singers* brings to our awareness of Asia. Like the *padme,* or lotus, that grows in cultured garden ponds and scruffy drainage canals alike throughout the region—emerging white and serene, soft blue, or rose-red from the mud and grit of the world—these are the stories of a place and a time within an extraordinary, transforming human landscape. That South Asia happens to be Asia's *other* major world-power region, and which through old, enduring memory may be closer to the West than any other, makes it more than just important. With the vital potentiality of a genuinely "Indo-Pacific" region arising as this century progresses, knowing more about it will become essential generational knowledge. As an early step in this direction, and with gratitude for the years of wisdom she has steadily imparted during the long, slow evolution of this book, I offer it in homage to the great Mother soul of South Asia.

The Lotus Singers

Neeru Nanda  India

Born in 1953 in Lucknow, Nanda spent her early years there and was educated in Delhi. She spent 12 years as a freelance writer and was Managing Editor of the journals *Indian Interiors* and *Verve.* Her journalistic experience in covering the emergence of India's rapidly rising middle-class, consumer-minded society is a foundational element in her depiction of contemporary life there. While visiting her daughter in New York, an opportunity arose for Nanda to attend a creative writing workshop in narrative voice at Columbia University, and this was followed by her first collection, *If,* from which this story is selected. Her short stories are often rooted in her extensive travels and examine the impact of social privilege on local Indian life. Ruskin Bond, a widely-respected Indian author, has justifiably called Nanda's gritty writing "strong medicine." She studied classical Sanskrit and has said that she admires the writing of Virginia Woolf. She lives in Mumbai.

His Father's Funeral

It was burning hot—42° centigrade!

Shankar's cheeks were scorched and red. With the curve of his forefinger, he wiped the sweat off his forehead and collected the saliva in his mouth to spit it out, just as he had seen his elders do. He squinted up at the round, chubby face of his best friend Veer, and felt secretly pleased that Veer, who was a year older, was walking with him at the head of his father's funeral procession. Shankar was very uncomfortable. His starched, ready-made *dhoti* was poking him in his thin thighs and the sun was burning his freshly shaven head and his bare shoulders.

He moved closer to Veer and asked, "Can't I wear a cap?"

Veer, who was wearing a cap, a cream shirt and khaki trousers, looked over his shoulder to make sure that they were not being overheard, then winked at Shankar and said, "Go ahead, wear it!"

Shankar slyly slid the cap out of the folds of his *dhoti*. Just as he was about to put it on, Veer slapped his hand back and said, "Stupid, you can't. This is not a picnic. Put a big hanky on your head and tuck the ends behind your ears."

"I don't have a hanky," Shankar said.

"Take it from your fa . . . oh!" Veer cleared his throat awkwardly and lowered his eyes.

Shankar looked at him, wondering why Veer had stopped mid-sentence.

It was all right! He himself, the son of the dead father, had not got used to the fact that his father was dead and that this was his father's funeral. He remained silent for a while, then wiping the sweat off his upper lip, said, "I won't be going to school for some time."

"Your hair will not grow back for three months," Veer said with a knowing smile.

"Three months? Did yours take so long?"

"Longer."

The boys shuffled along in silence. Shankar looked at Veer's canvas shoes and then at his own bare feet, collecting dirt on the hot, tarred road.

"What happens when someone dies?" Shankar asked, looking back to ensure that nobody was listening. He saw a mass of white shirts moving towards him. He was reminded of the detergent ads on television where the white was so white it had this haze around it. And in that whiteness Shankar spotted the yellow marigolds and the red rose petals that covered the shrouded body of his father, tied tightly to a wooden platform that rested on his uncles' shoulders. It was hard to believe that inside the new, white sheet lay his ferocious father.

"He's gone! He's dead," Veer shrugged.

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. To heaven or to hell."

"You mean, he won't come back?"

"No. His body will be burnt and it will turn to ashes. How can he come back?"

"Who will burn it?"

"You."

"Me? I can't do it! And why *should* I do it? I didn't tell him to drink

and die!" Shankar exclaimed with a shiver. A frightened, uneasy silence followed before Shankar asked, "Did you have to do that for your mother?"

"No. In my case my father had to light the pyre. I was saved," Veer replied raising his eyebrows.

"I won't do it," Shankar said. "When your mother died did she come back?"

"I kept feeling she was around and that she was back. But I never saw her."

"Did you cry when she died?"

Veer did not reply. He looked at his feet and continued to walk.

"Did you?"

"Yes. I had to," Veer mumbled through clenched teeth.

"Why did you *have* to?"

"I saw my sister howl and shriek. It made me nervous. So I ran off to play marbles. My uncle saw me outside Vishnu's house. He hauled me off the ground and dragged me home by my ears, saying, 'This boy has no shame, no feelings. His mother is dead and he is playing marbles.' Then he slapped me and I started howling," Veer said, avoiding Shankar's eyes.

"Did your father cry?"

Veer turned around to look at his father who was walking with Shankar's uncle. Shankar turned too. He saw Veer's dark, tall, obese father and noticed that he had lined his shirt collar with his handkerchief to prevent the sweat dripping down his back. Shankar wished he could do the same. He was not even allowed to wear a shirt. His half-naked body was hot and glistening.

"Did your father cry?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you see him or were you too busy playing marbles?"

Veer lifted his hand in a mock backhand to Shankar. Shankar gestured back, daring Veer to hit him on this occasion.

"My father is a real actor," Veer said. "When my mother died, he sat down on his haunches, covered his head with his arms and wailed loudly. I don't think he really cried."

They both fell silent. It was just half an hour since they had left the house. They probably had to walk for another half hour. Why couldn't

they have taken a bus? Shankar had wondered earlier in the day, but had not dared air his opinion after seeing his mother's distraught condition.

"How did she die?"

"Malaria," Veer replied.

"Do you miss her and feel sad? Did you really cry for her?"

"She used to beat me and she was always so angry that I used to dislike her when she was alive. I used to think she was my stepmother. But you know what?" Veer whispered, leaning towards Shankar, "If one of them had to die, then it was better that my mother died instead of my father."

"Why?" Shankar asked, taken aback.

"Stupid," Veer hissed. "Who earns the money? Father. Who sends you to school? Father. Who buys the TV, radio, food, and clothes? Father. Understand?"

Shankar felt very agitated. He frowned and looked at the road below his feet—falling behind him with every stride he took. His *dhoti* went up and down his ankles and every time it moved, it scratched his thighs.

"Oh God!" Shankar exclaimed, rubbing his groin and wishing he were on the bus that was passing by. "Now what will happen to me? I wish my mother had died instead."

"There would be a different problem then," Veer said, wiser of the two. "Father drinks every night. My grandmother complains bitterly that half the salary goes on alcohol. He talks and sings all night and sometimes beats me up."

"Then what's the difference? At least your mother must have been more loving and must have cooked for you and washed your clothes." Shankar hoped that his plight would turn out to be better than Veer's.

"But my sister does that now."

Shankar resorted to silence. Suddenly, he became aware of what was going on around him. People were covering their heads as they passed the funeral procession. There were some that caught his eye and gave him sympathetic looks. He scowled back at them. This whole thing about his father dying was becoming a nasty affair in his mind. Look at him! He was without clothes, without shoes, without hair on this long, unending road to the crematorium. Anything was preferable to this—even an occasional beating.