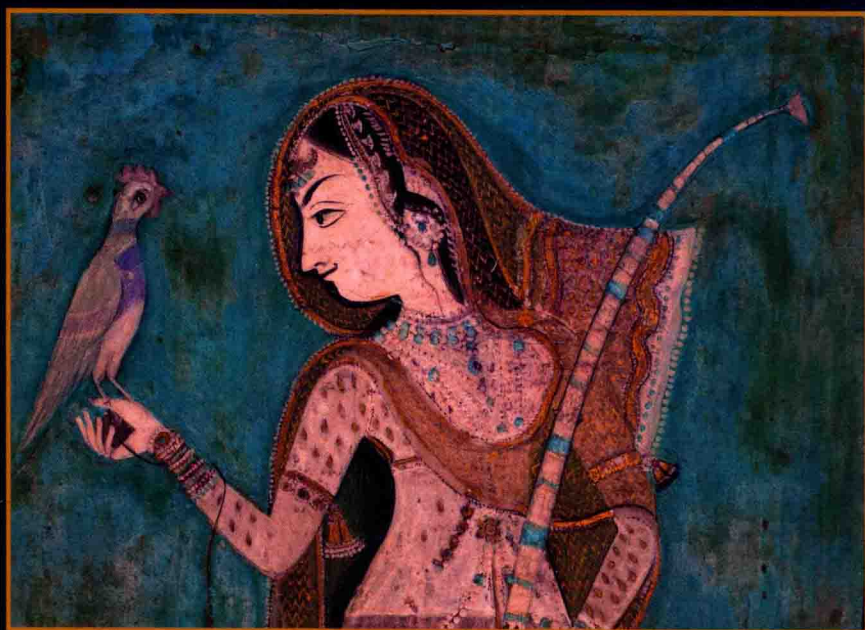


FROM ANTIQUITY  
TO MODERNITY

STUDIES ON MIDDLE EASTERN  
AND ASIAN SOCIETIES

# Emerging South Asian Women Writers



*Essays and Interviews*

EDITED BY

Feroza Jussawalla and Deborah Fillerup Weagel

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*Praise for*

## **Emerging South Asian Women Writers**

“Arguably, one of the pressing obligations for literary academics in the West is to provide opportunities for colleagues in the emerging world, and particularly women, to be seen and heard, authors who otherwise might have little access to publishing houses focused on profit. This intelligently conceived collection of analytical essays does just that, introducing readers to women who often write of local and personal concerns that may surprise postcolonial theorists. Emphasis on scholars in India is welcome as well. The book’s interviews are fascinating windows into the worlds of writers seeking larger audiences, and clearly deserving them. The editors’ introduction is an eye-opener, demonstrating the extent to which this ‘emerging’ world is more than ready to be heard—and one result may be an enlarged comprehension of globalization.”

*John C. Hawley, Professor of English at Santa Clara University and  
Editor of the Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*

# Emerging South Asian Women Writers

# FROM ANTIQUITY TO MODERNITY

STUDIES ON MIDDLE EASTERN AND ASIAN SOCIETIES

Jamsheed K. Choksy  
*General Editor*

Vol. I

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Every volume is peer reviewed and meets  
the highest quality standards for content and production.

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To our colleagueship, families,  
and support systems

In the new world,  
this is what we have become—  
Chiffon Saris.  
—Anomalies—  
Is it better to be  
—Dharmavaram—  
Conjeeveram—?

Feroza Jussawalla, *Chiffon Saris*

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” She asserts that in order for a woman to develop innate gifts, she needs a certain degree of financial freedom and private space in which to create. The concept of having one's own room, or space, that can be segregated from the activities of home and public life can be considered both literally and metaphorically. How does a creative, intelligent, and gifted woman find a room of her own both physically and mentally? How does she attain a position in which she can have the necessary solitude and space to transform the meanderings of her mind and heart into structured and concrete expression? Although Woolf was an author, her words are not limited to writers. They can be applied to any type of academic, artistic, musical, and/or creative output. Furthermore, they can be useful in analyzing not only the lives of her contemporaries, but women in the past and future, not just women in England, but women all over the globe.

Deborah Fillerup Weagel  
*Women and Contemporary World Literature:  
Power, Fragmentation, and Metaphor*





## *Acknowledgments*

We express sincere appreciation to those who have assisted in the publication of this volume. First and foremost, we thank the authors for their contributions and for their patience as we have worked on this book. We are also grateful to international scholars who have participated in the peer review process and who have provided useful feedback for some of the essays and interviews. We acknowledge emerging South Asian women writers who have inspired the collection and who are an important focal point in the articles and interviews. It is our desire to recognize their efforts and to help their work become better known.

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Chanda, Geetanjali Singh. "Womenspace': Negotiating Class and Gender in Indian English Novels."

Ganapathy-Doré, Geetha. "Speech-Act: An Interview with Susan Visvanathan."

Herrero, M. Dolores. "Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled*: Female Subjectivity and Trauma at the South Asian/Australian Cultural Crossroads."

Jussawalla, Feroza. "South Asian Muslim Women Speak for Their Rights and Resistance."

Jussawalla, Feroza, and Deborah Weigel. "Guesteditors' Introduction."

Malik, Seema. "Injustice, Resistance and Subversion: A Study of Selected Plays by Indian Women Playwrights."

Ryan, Laurel. "Constructing 'Home': Eros, Thanatos, and Migration in the Novels of Anita Rau Badami."

Weigel, Deborah. "Language, Diaspora, and Identity: An Interview with Yasmine Gooneratne."

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## ***Introduction***

FEROZA JUSSAWALLA AND DEBORAH FILLERUP WEAGEL

Writing by men and women of South Asian origin has received considerable attention in the western publishing world and with the reading public over the last few decades. Much of this attention can be traced to the success of Salman Rushdie's groundbreaking work *Midnight's Children* (1980), for which he received the Man Booker Prize in 1981, the Booker of Bookers in 1993, and the Best of the Bookers in 2008. Arundhati Roy also gained recognition for her novel *The God of Small Things*, for which she was awarded the Booker Prize in 1997. The novel was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for approximately thirty-six weeks and was named one of the *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year. On both sides of the Atlantic, major literary lists, publishers, and prizes have borne witness to the fecundity of South Asian creativity, making whatever we want to call it—"postcolonial literature," "world literature written in English," or "national literature in English" (such as "Indian literature in English" or "Bangladeshi literature in English")—central to contemporary literary production. These literatures have also become central to the literary dialogues current both in the media and in academia. Consequently, these literatures have also become central to the academic study of literature per se, bringing with them the theoretical perspectives that have been used to understand them, from the early approaches such as Commonwealth Literatures, focusing mostly on the development of national identities, to the more complex theoretical approaches that constitute post-colonial criticism.

As Professor K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's seminal work *Indian Writing in English*, published as far back as 1962, shows, literature in English from South Asia and particularly from India, in English, is not a novel phenomenon. Since the 1800s there have been major writers in English literature emanating from India, and women have been at the forefront of writing. Indian literature in English is largely identified by the writings of R.K. Narayan,

Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and Khushwant Singh, who were widely read both in India and abroad. Familiar names of women authors include Aru and Toru Dutt, Cornelia Sorabji, and Sarojini Naidu, all of whom have been very well known. It was not until the work of Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004) and Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1927–2013) that South Asian women's writing started to be recognized on a larger scale.

In the past, various South Asian women succeeded in publishing their works, sometimes on a small scale. In the late nineteenth century, Toru Dutt (Torulata) wrote two novels, one in English and the other in French. Both were published posthumously: *Bianca, or The Young Spanish Maiden* (which was not completed) in *Bengal Magazine* in 1878, and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* in France. Although only twenty-one years old at the time of her death, Dutt drew upon her own limited experience to tell her stories. Other South Asian women writers who produced novels during the latter part of the century include Raj Lakshmi Debi (*The Hindu Wife, or the Enchanted Fruit*, 1876) and Krupabai Satthianadhan (*Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life*, 1894, and *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life*, 1895). Other poets and authors published their work into the early twentieth century: Sarojini Naidu (*The Golden Threshold*, 1896; 1905); Santha and Seetha Chatterjee (*Tales of Bengal*, 1922); Svarnakumari Debi Ghosal (*The Fatal Garland*, 1910, and *An Unfinished Song*, 1913); and Iqbalunnisa Hussain (*Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household*, 1944). The latter novel deals with the theme of *purdah* and veiling, which Feroza Jussawalla's essay considers in the current contemporary context of the controversy about wearing the headscarf. Cornelia Sorabji, the first Parsi woman writer to have both studied and published overseas, was an ardent defender of *purdahshins* or veiled women. In 1901 she published her landmark *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* and several other memoirs and a play. Her nephew, Sir Richard Sorabji, published *Opening Doors: The Untold Story of Cornelia Sorabji* (2010). Parsi writers, both men and women, have been central to the development of South Asian Writing in English. While Rohinton Mistry is the male Parsi writer most acclaimed for his stories about the small migrant Zoroastrian community from Persia that made India their home, Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa is best known for her novel of Partition, subsequent feminist works, and collaboration with Deepa Mehta. In addition, Bachi Karkaria is acclaimed for her journalistic writing. We have included here an essay on Thrity Umrigar. US academic Tinaz Pavri has just published *Bombay in the Age of Disco* (2015).

India has really been the leader in literary production in South Asia, which is why much of this literary history relies on Indian writers' production. In fact, during the mid-twentieth century, many writers from smaller

countries carved out of the subcontinent—and even the continent of Africa—trace their literary roots to India. Unfortunately, most of this literary history is ignored in favor of the current and contemporary scene. And yet, even the contemporary scene underscores the fact that South Asian women continue to write, even more ferociously and urge to be heard, even if they are ignored by mainstream western media. This volume seeks to give voice to those unheard voices.

Over the last decade or so, South Asian women's writing seems to have literally exploded. Almost every week, *The New York Times Book Review* seems to have a review of at least one South Asian (primarily from India) woman's book. Often *The New Yorker* will have a short story or a narrative. Between the Arundhati Roys and the Jhumpa Lahiris, however, there is a sea of names, sometimes supposedly well published by reputable New York publishers, who are lost in the mix and have short shelf lives. Sometimes a negative review causes an author to be put aside even as she is emerging. Those who we think of as the stalwarts of literary publishing are not necessarily so, nor recognized as being so, in South Asia. Women in South Asia are doing their best to get their voices heard, regardless of recognized outlets such as New York publishing houses. Arundhati Roy's novel, for instance, has not been as well received in India as has her political writing. Not only do Indian women seek whatever outlet to be published, but have had a long history of establishing themselves through self-publishing. And so it is that none of the Western media and academic world cover half the women who are producing today.

Small publishing houses, like Rupa in India, or Zubaan (for scholarly publishing), Nurjehan Aziz's Toronto South Asian Review Press in Canada, and others in the UK and Australia, are giving voice to the many Indian women who are producing good, if not great, literature. Nurjehan Aziz's short story collection series, *Her Mother's Ashes*, includes many writers seeking publication. Most important among these smaller self-founded publishing houses is Kali, a feminist press founded by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon. Butalia has had great success with her Duke University Press book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition in India* (2000). There are probably more women of South Asian extraction or origin, whether in South Asia itself, in countries like India and Pakistan, or overseas, not just in the US and the UK, but in the Caribbean, the African diaspora, and as this volume shows particularly, in Australia, writing their experiences, allowing their creativity to flow, than elsewhere. This is a bold claim and one which invites research. But a cursory look at the names of the many South Asian women writers, often not considered in reviews or academic studies, shows us how many new writers are emerging literally on a daily basis.



As readers and scholars we know the familiar names, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Chitra Divakaruni Bannerjee, and to a lesser extent, someone like Anita Desai's daughter, Kiran Desai, but do we know the names, Tanuja Desai Hidier, Shani Motoo, Kamila Shamsie, Quratullain Hyder, Uzma Aslan Khan, or even less so Renita D'Silva (*Monsoon Memories*), Madhulika Chauhan (*The One Night Affair*), Nitasha Kaul (*Residue*), or British Bangladeshi writer Rekha Waheed (*Saris and the City*), also published by a small press?

Other well-known writers of the in-between generation include Anees Jung (*Unveiling India*, 1987), Shashi Deshpande (*That Long Silence*, 1989), and Sunetra Gupta (*The Glass Blower's Breath*, 1993). Academic women writers include Kirin Narayan, Miriam Pirbhair, and, of course, Chandani Lokugé who is written up in this collection. Physician Sunetra Gupta is known for her fiction and her work in epidemiology. Manju Kapur, Professor of English, at Miranda House published *Difficult Daughters* (2010) which received the Commonwealth Award, *Custody* (2011), and several other works. Other writers have needed or maintained academic positions in South Asian countries and overseas.

Even some very well published authors, like Abha Daweswar (*Babyji*, 2005, and *That Summer in Paris*, 2006), or Kiran Desai (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, 2006), appear and disappear simultaneously as it were. Some other well published recent names that have made something of a mark, but have not been taken up either by the academic scholarly world of Postcolonial Literatures, or of the widely reviewing world of the mainstream media, are Indu Sundaresan (*The Twelfth Wife*, 2002, and *The Mountain of Light*, 2013), Anita Nair (*Mistress*, 2006), Amulya Malladi, (*A Breath of Fresh Air*, 2002), and Kirin Narayan (*Love, Stars and All That*, 1994). Parsi writer Thrity Umrigar is finding some recognition as we can see in the article by Geetanjali Chanda. Among Pakistani writers writing about contemporary issues is such a work as Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses*. A cross cultural author published by a small literary press in the US, FiveChapters, an online publisher of short stories, is Nina McConigley (*Cowboys and East Indians*), which tells of the cross cultural adventures of an Indian woman in Wyoming. The most grievous omission from critical consideration perhaps is Gita Mehta, wife of publisher Sunny Mehta (Knopf) whose finely wrought works from *Karma Cola* (1979) to *Raj* (1989), *River Sutra* (1993), and *Eternal Ganesha* (2006) (non-fiction), deserve more serious consideration. Even a writer as well known and filmically produced as Bapsi Sidhwa, recently said to me in an email that she considers herself also "still emerging." The vagaries of acknowledgment of these writers are quite quixotic.