

# ROMANCING *the* GLOBE: SOUTH ASIAN ROMANCE

BY ALYSSA COLE



The second in a series of articles exploring romance fiction around the world

A couple of years back, I sat in on a cringetastic Q&A where people said things to a South Asian romance author that deserved a swat on the nose with a newspaper. “Women are allowed to read there?” “Don’t you get in trouble for writing about sex?” “Well, good on you, because women there need to be freed from the misogynistic society they live in. The men are just awful.” (Note that that both India and Pakistan have had female heads of state, while many men in the United States think Hillary Clinton should make them a sandwich.)

As with many “exotic” locales, South Asia can become a default set of images in people’s minds, and romance is no different. To many Western readers, this region is encompassed by henna and bangles and Bollywood (these defaults are often India-specific). But South Asia is more than that, especially when it comes to

romance novels. Although romance fiction has always been popular there, most books were only available in regional languages (e.g., Urdu, Tamil, Bengali).

Over the last few years, however, South Asian romance in English has become more widely available. HQN India started publishing in 2008 (before this, the market consisted of only global titles) and hasn’t looked back since—Indian titles in that market outsell global ones by far. In 2013, Naheed Hassan, who is of Pakistani descent, launched Indireads (<http://www.indireads.com/>). The Web publishing venture produces romance novels targeted at the previously overlooked South Asian romance reader. (You can find their free anthology, *Love Across Borders*, on the site: <http://www.indireads.com/love-across-borders-free-ebook/>.)

In this month’s “Romancing the Globe,” we chat with several authors who publish in the South Asian romance community. The authors discuss their writing lives, their inspiration, and what romance means to them.

**Alyssa Cole: What is considered romance in your region? For example, by RWA standards, a romance**

must have “a central love story and an emotionally satisfying ending.” More specifically, readers and authors here believe a romance must have a happily ever after or, barring that, a happy for now ending. Can the same be said of South Asian romance? If not, can you explain any differences?

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— Shilpa Suraj

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**Falguni Kothari:** Yes, the same can be said for Indian romance novels. Although, I think genres are less defined in India. My novels have been called anything from chick-lit to women’s fiction to romance, depending on who is reviewing them and for what purpose.

**Zeenat Mahal:** I think the requirements you’ve mentioned are a prerequisite of the romance genre everywhere. In South Asian romances, family is a lot more vocal.

**Aarti V. Raman:** In India, we are big fans of happily ever after. Bollywood has romanticized love to no end, and our publishing industry does the same too. So yes, in a way, we love our HEAs as much as anyone else, but the key difference I would say, is the kind of people who fall in love, how they manage to stay in love, and the obstacles (social, financial, familial) facing their relationship as they embark on this wonderful journey.

**Shilpa Suraj:** Strong, emotional love stories with dramatic, splashy happily ever afters are usually the norm in India. I think one small difference in the romances here is the fairly prominent role that family and friends play in the stories. Our relationships, romantic and familial, are a crazy, chaotic, fun tangle that always comes through in our stories.

**Adite Banerjee:** Our perceptions of romance have been shaped by Bollywood. That translates into larger-than-life

escapist stories about lovers overcoming challenges for the sake of love. A happy-ever-after ending is now quite the norm. There is one major difference between Western-style and South Asian-style HEAs. We believe in a HEA that includes the family as well. So instead of the hero and heroine riding away into the sunset, we would have the hero riding a horse to wed the woman of his dreams with family in tow!



**Cole:** Why do you write romance? Why is romance important to you?

**Kothari:** Most of my stories have a romantic bent because I love analyzing relationships, finding out what makes it work and tick. Also, I want my readers to experience the same highs and lows as the couple falling in love. While

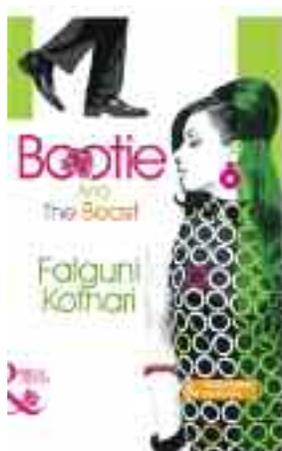
“serious” books and non-fiction have their place in the world, I like the little bit of happy escapism a romance novel provides its reader. The romance could be based in reality, but the fairytale of two lovers coming together has to put a smile on the reader’s face. What could be more thrilling than to have the power to do that?

**Mahal:** I grew up watching Bollywood movies and listening to love songs from movies. I cannot imagine a world without romance. I’m from Pakistan, and Urdu and Punjabi poetry is also mainly about love. So I’ve always enjoyed reading romance, and nothing compares to the warm afterglow of a satisfactory HEA.

**Raman:** I don’t know about other writers, but I believe “Love makes the world go round,” and it’s as good a reason as any to write. Writing romance is like creating a perfect world for just one moment where everything is okay, and people get to live in that moment, when they reach the end. This is not to say real life sucks too much or too little, it’s just that romance always provides that extra patina of escapism to an otherwise okay story.

**Suraj:** I write romance because all the stories bubbling inside me and waiting to be told always have a love story between two strong characters at their cores. I love the happily ever afters as much as any other romance reader. For me, reading or writing a book is about finding yourself in a happy, feel-good space, and that is what the romance genre is all about. As in life, no matter how hard the journey is, a happily-ever-after ending makes it all worthwhile.

**Banerjie:** There is a huge scope for drama, laughter, conflict and coming together that makes for a very emotionally satisfying read. That's the reason why I enjoy reading and writing romances.



**Cole:** Do you feel romance writers are looked down upon in your region, or are they given the same respect as writers of other genres?

**Kothari:** They are not taken as seriously as literary fiction writers, sure. But, I've seen a shift in India in the last few years, probably because a whole lot of male authors seem to be writing

romance these days.

**Mahal:** No. I think the idea of "high literature" and "popular fiction" is blatantly prevalent here in South Asia. Romance writers are not taken seriously. Romance is a woman's genre somehow, and most people regard romance writers as "fast" women who practice and encourage promiscuity. It's very unfortunate that writing about love is so discriminated against, while we all enjoy watching romantic comedies movies without judging the writers.

**Raman:** Yes, romance writers, like all writers of pulp fiction, are not given that much importance and are sometimes confused with erotica writers (me being one). But then again, romance writers don't write for respect like some of our more literary counterparts. We write to be read

and loved by everyone who loves romance. In fact, when I wrote *Kingdom Come*, which was published by Harlequin India last year, I was so enamoured by the idea of writing about this rough-tough badass bomb expert that I couldn't but help think about the kind of woman who might finally be his anchor, and so the story was born. It had nothing to do with wanting to be respected by the literary community, although that is a happy and lovely byproduct.

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**Suraj:** To some extent, and I suppose this is more true of non-romance readers, the perception of the genre is that romance novels are fluffy, frothy pieces of writing and not meant to be taken seriously. However, romance is a large market in India with a varied reader base and definitely a genre that holds its own in a highly competitive market.

**Banerjie:** The literary world looks down upon escapist mainstream fare, and it's no different in South Asia. Romance is considered synonymous with fluff, mush, escapist trash!

**Cole:** What romance novels have had the most influence on you? Do you read Western romance? We'd love to know what your favorite romance novels are!

**Kothari:** *Pride and Prejudice* was the very first romance I read, and I was hooked to books because of it. I grew up reading everything, including stacks of Mills and Boon books. All of them written by Western authors, as then there was no Mills and Boon Indian author imprint for Harlequin. I have many favorite novels, but three that I read over and over are *Pride and Prejudice*, *Outlander*, and *The Palace of Illusions*.

**Mahal:** I have read romance in Urdu and English, and I loved it. *Irani, Shama, Afshan* are some of my favorite Urdu romances. *Pride and Prejudice, This Heart of Mine,* and *Whitney, My Love* are my all-time favorites. I think everything I've ever read has left its mark on me, one way or another.

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“Like with any good story, we all have different readers from different age groups, male and female, who respond to us.”

— Aarti V. Raman

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**Raman:** I do read Western Romance. In fact, with the dearth of quality romance writing in India, and the fact that we've only had a thriving romance-publishing industry for the last seven–eight years or so, ensured that I read a lot of Western romance, which molded my writing sensibilities to a great extent. You'd be surprised to know that my debut novel *White Knight* features two Western protagonists. My absolute favorite romance authors are Nora Roberts, Catherine Coulter, Judith McNaught, Lisa Kleypas, Diana Palmer, Linda Howard, Gail Carriger, and, more recently, J. R. Ward and Nalini Singh. And, of course, all my lovely Southeast Asian romance writer friends.

**Suraj:** I read a lot of Western romance and am a huge fan of Nalini Singh, Suzanne Brockmann, Julia Quinn, and Lisa Kleypas. My all-time favourite novel is Lisa Kleypas's *Again the Magic*, a second chance romance with a hero to die for. I'm a sucker for them as evidenced by the fact that my debut novel, *The Girl He Left Behind*, is a second chance romance, too.

**Banerjie:** I have grown up reading Mills & Boon romances, and Western authors like Penny Jordan, Anne Mather, Janet Dailey, and Carole Mortimer are among my favorite romance authors. Romance writing as a genre in India is a recent phenomenon.

**Cole:** What are some misconceptions about South Asian romance novels and the people who read those novels?

**Kothari:** I think the biggest (in my opinion) misconception is that South Asians are a culturally handcuffed lot. Yes, the Indian culture is vast and sometimes ingrained in our souls, but to imagine all South Asians must be pious or parent pleasers or society pleasers or poor or have at least one terrorist-like experience or an elephant in the backyard or feel like the proverbial fish-out-of-water outside of their home turf is silly. It might have been true two decades ago when the world was less digitally connected, but now the authors who use these tropes mean to use them for their familiarity or shock appeal rather than any cultural norm.

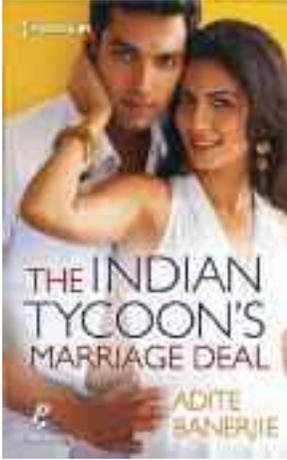
**Mahal:** Frankly, I have no idea. But I do get irritated when reviewers say that the book wasn't "Indian" enough or didn't "explain" the cultural differences. A book is not supposed to represent a culture or a people necessarily. It's a story, and there are a million shades of each one out there.



**Raman:** Until last year, I'd not read romances from Pakistan. To be honest, I didn't even know Pakistan had as thriving and hungry a romance-publishing industry as India. And I was blown away by the amount of talent and skill some of the writers displayed. So, I guess that would be a misconception. Another misconception is that only women read

romances. Like with any good story, we all have different readers from different age groups, male and female, who respond to us.

**Suraj:** Some people perceive Indian romance novels to be full of tropes like arranged marriages and over-the-top Bollywood-inspired wedding ceremonies. While these do exist and are even handled skilfully in some books, there are so many more who explore a range of topics, taboo and otherwise. Our romance novels are filled with stories written with wit, style, and emotion that suck you into a whole other world well worth discovering.



**Cole:** Are there any current trends in South Asian Romance? For example, here in the United States, we've cycled through vampire romance being the most popular, then BDSM, and then motorcycle gangs, etc. What interests your readers?

**Kothari:** I think college romance is big in India. And feminist literature is gaining popularity.

**Mahal:** Since genre writing is a comparatively new market in South Asia, I think readers and writers are experimenting with everything. We have paranormal, mythic, contemporary and historical romances, and all of them are very popular.

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“South Asian romance writers are adding a new cultural twist to the romance genre.”

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**Raman:** People in India are always fascinated by IIT-IIM, college-uni romances on a mass level, but when it comes to Mills and Boon, there is always a place for a smart, heartwarming or heartbreaking story between two absolutely relatable characters. YA is a trend that is catching on, but when it comes to romance, we are still trying to break the mold.

**Suraj:** A very popular trend in India is college romances, especially stories set in engineering colleges. I think there is a huge relatability factor with the reader base in a college romance that contributes to its popularity.

**Banerjee:** Campus romance is a huge trend in India. These are mostly about girls/guys finding love when they are

studying at one of the elite colleges. Arranged marriage is another well-loved trope.

**Cole:** What would you like people to know about South Asian romance writers?

**Kothari:** That we are here to stay. After all, a region that produces Bollywood movies by the score knows a thing or two about romance, *hm*? So, do sample our stories sooner rather than later.

**Mahal:** I guess that South Asian writers are diverse, and they experiment with genres and styles as many writers do. Sure, the shades, tastes and flavors of a place are very important in any story, but they don't always have to be contained to the geographical location the writer happens to have been born in.

**Raman:** India has a lot of vibrance and diversity to offer, which leads to a number of issues and problems, on a socio-economic and geo-political level, that we writers are constantly trying to explore and a lot of taboos that we are breaking with our writings. Please, do read us and join us on this exciting, path-breaking journey that we are on.



**Suraj:** If you pick up an Indian romance, you'll get drawn into a vibrant, colorful world filled with strong, emotional characters who go head to head with a myriad of conflicts, both internal and external. Take a chance on us. I promise you won't regret it.

**Banerjee:** The tribe of South Asian romance writers is growing. While the emotion of love is universal, the expression of it (romance) is uniquely South Asian in its flavour. Just as Bollywood has created its own unique identity with its song-and-dance extravaganzas, similarly South Asian romance writers are adding a new cultural twist to the romance genre.

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