

# Stories from South Asia

John Welch, Editor

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176 PAGES

One of the best aspects of teaching literature classes at any level now is the amazing variety of material from around the world available in the English language. This phenomenon is in part the legacy of the British Empire, and much of the best of this writing comes from the former “jewel” of that empire, South Asia (British India in the colonial era). With the observation a couple of years ago of the fiftieth anniversary of independence for India and Pakistan (I’m not sure how this occasion was observed in Bangladesh), several efforts were made to create collections of the “best” of South Asian or Indian writing.

The most notable and noted of these was Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth White’s *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing, 1947–1997*. This 553-page tome includes work by over thirty Indian writers. It has come under intense criticism because of its almost exclusive focus on writers whose medium is the English language, and one of its editors, Rushdie, has elicited even more criticism for statements in the introduction to the book which seem to indicate that he thinks the English writing of South Asia is better and more important than the writing taking place in the region’s vernacular languages. South Asian writing in English has certainly had a greater effect outside of the region than that in the vernaculars if only because of its accessibility to both non-South Asians and South Asians who may not read the particular language in which these works are composed.

There is a small publication which goes a significant way towards correcting this oversight of South Asian vernacular writings. The compendium, *Stories from South Asia*, published in Great Britain includes not only a good collection of stories from many different languages and regions of South Asia, but also background information on the authors and stories as well as classroom assignments and exercises for your students. The works in this book cover the time period from the composition of the Vedas (c. 1000 B.C.E.) in the opening poem “Aranyani: Forest Spirit,” to the mid-1980s, with poetry by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others. Forms represented include the aforementioned poetry, short stories, songs, and chapters from longer works.

Many little- or unknown authors are included in this volume. Some are literally unknown, such as the original authors of the two opening works, “Aranyani: Forest Spirit,” originally composed (orally) about three thousand years ago, and “Nine Tamil Poems,” also composed orally, between 100–300 C.E.

Others, such as Vyankatesh Madgulkar (*The Village Had No Walls*) are little known outside South Asia because they do not write in English. Still others from Pakistan (Faiz, Kishwar Naheed), or Bangladesh (Dawood Haider), are not well known in India or the West.

Some of the more famous South Asian authors included in this collection are Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Mohandas Gandhi, Anita Desai, A. K. Ramaujan, and R. K. Narayan, authors whose work is familiar to many Americans, and who may even be known to a few of your more well-read students. Their inclusion also means that you or your students would be able to obtain other works by these authors if they are so interested, whereas the works of most of the other authors in this collection would be difficult to find in North American libraries. The greater availability of the works of such authors as Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, Vikram Seth, and Salman Rushdie excuses their absence from this volume.

One benefit of this collection over *Mirrorwork* is that it is much shorter, with the stories themselves taking up 130 pages, and classroom exercises, assignments and a few photos consisting of forty pages rounding out the anthology. It is a very manageable volume. While the classroom exercises and assignments are geared to specific portions of the British educational system, they are also adaptable to American classrooms and should be useful for educators of grades six and higher. The Commentary section includes a short biography of each author, a vocabulary of non-English words, and ideas for both discussion and writing specific to each piece. The Ideas for Coursework section includes fourteen suggestions for projects or essays which pertain to the volume as a whole. These include preparation and taping of a radio program based on the stories in the volume, and writing an essay about the importance and role of the different languages in South Asia as these issues are addressed in this book.

This book should be of use to both language arts teachers and others who address world culture and history in their classrooms. Its accessibility and inclusion of background information and classroom suggestions make it of great value both to novices to the field of South Asian literature as well as to those already familiar with the field. ■

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