

Shortlist for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature announced at LSE

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On 27th November the shortlist for the fifth annual DSC Prize for South Asian Literature was announced at the London School of Economics for the second year in a row. **Sonali Campion** reports on the event.



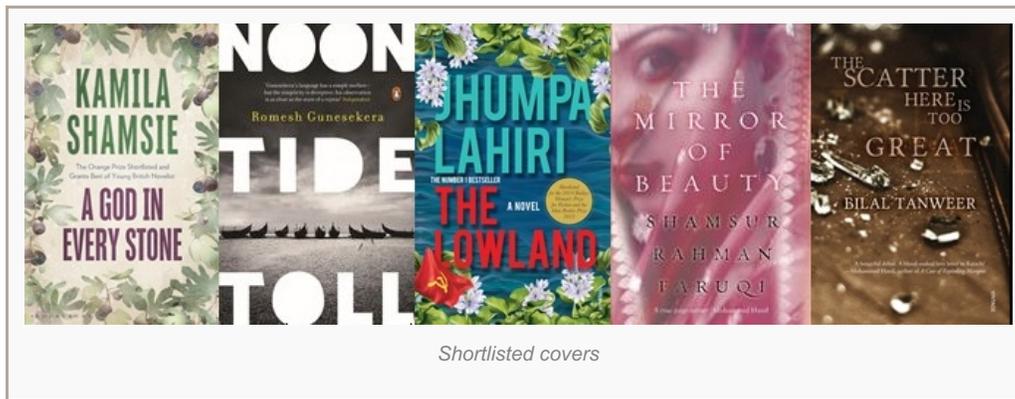
The \$50,000 DSC Prize was co-founded in 2010 by mother-son duo Mrs. Surina Narula MBE and Mr. Manhad Narula. In the five years since it was established it has grown to become the leading international prize for showcasing South Asian literature. As Mrs Narula highlighted in her short introductory speech, the Prize recognises that South Asian literature – in English or in translation – needs to be shared and celebrated. Writers do not have to be South Asian to qualify; the jury is simply looking for the best writing about any of the nine countries in the region. This year’s long list featured ten books penned by authors from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, a number of whom now live and work in the UK and America.

Authors, the jury panel and guests were welcomed by Dr Mukulika Banerjee, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the LSE South Asia Centre (launching in June 2015). She drew attention to the appropriateness of LSE’s Shaw Library as a venue for the announcement: guests were surrounded by shelves of books, and the portrait of Dr Indraprasad Gordhanbhai (IG) Patel, former governor of the Reserve Bank of India and Director of LSE 1984-1990, served as a reminder of LSE’s longstanding ties with the Indian subcontinent. LSE also shares the wider vision of the DSC prize. A number of international universities have set up India Institutes in recent years, but the decision to set up a *South Asia* Centre at LSE has been driven by a commitment to the region as a whole.

The shortlist was announced by an international five-member jury panel that comprised: Keki Daruwalla, Indian writer and poet (Chair of the Jury); John Freeman, author, literary critic and former editor of *Granta*; Maithee Wickramasinghe, a professor of English at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka and the University of Sussex, and an expert on gender studies; Michael Worton, Emeritus Professor at University College London, who has written extensively on modern literature and art; and Razi Ahmed, founding director of the annual, not-for-profit Lahore Literary Festival.

Mr Daruwalla called it “an honour and a pleasure” to be invited to chair the panel and to have the opportunity to read this year’s entries. He noted how far South Asian literature has come since the 1930s when native authors had to have British connections in order to get published and Western writing on Asia was heavily shaped by the colonial perspective. Today writing on South Asia is enjoyed by readers and celebrated in writing circles around the world, in part because there is a rich tradition of writing in English, but also because the region itself provides such fertile ground for fiction to grow.

Quoting Samuel Johnson, Mr Daruwalla said “the worst fault that poetry can commit is to be dull”. He argued the same can be said of novels, and that although there were good books and not so good ones among the 75 entries, not a single one was dull. The jury had been impressed by the variety of themes, landscapes and styles explored as the action “took a global jaunt”. There were murder mysteries, stories exploring the experiences of the diaspora and books based on the 1984 riots, World War I and the Maoist era in West Bengal, to name but a few.



Each member of the jury then took turns to reveal a short-listed book and to read an extract. Mr Daruwalla began with *The Mirror of Beauty* (Penguin Books, India), a 900-page saga written in Urdu (and translated into English) by renowned Indian poet and one of the foremost Urdu theorists Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. The book tells the story of Wazir Khanam, a beautiful and independent woman who lived in the 18th century and had a string of lovers, from a British Officer to a Mughal Prince. Mr Daruwalla praised the way in which Faruqi paints the dying Mughal Empire on the cusp of the 19th century, and the “tremendous depiction” of the historic female character.

Maithree Wickramasinghe revealed the next shortlisted book *A God in Every Stone?* (Bloomsbury, India) by Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie. The novel contrasts three empires –Ancient Persian, Ottoman, and British – straddling boundaries of geography, history and race to tell a story of ill-fated love. Professor Wickramasinghe described it as a book of “vivid visual imagination, achieved through an ambitious span and scope, bold in its creativeness and craft”.

John Freeman announced the second shortlisted Pakistani author: Bilal Tanweer, whose debut novel *The Scatter Here is Too Great* (Vintage Books/Random House, India) is a series of vivid vignettes centred on the Cantt Station bombing in Karachi. Dr Freeman commended the variety of voices and the “gritty and poetically vernacular” language Tanweer uses to weave the contrasting stories “into a tapestry of profound beauty”.

Razi Ahmed described it as a pleasure to announce Jhumpa Lahiri as fourth shortlisted author, as her novel *The Lowland* (Vintage Books/Random House, India) was “personally one of my favourites”. Set in Bengal in the mid-twentieth century and centred on the activities of the Naxalite Movement, the book explores how political activism tears a family apart.

Michael Worton introduced the final book, *Noontide Toll* (Hamish Hamilton/Penguin, India) by Sri Lankan-born British writer Romesh Gunasekera. Set in Sri Lanka, the book is about a van driver who relates stories about each of his passengers, and questions whether we can ever truly leave the past behind. Professor Worton spoke of the book as a “fascinating, amusing, troubling and often deeply moving” collection of stories, infused with melancholy but also an “undertone of pragmatism, and ultimately even optimism”.

The event concluded with a vote of thanks from Mr. Manhad Narula, who used the occasion of the DSC Prize’s fifth anniversary to acknowledge the contribution of those who have worked to ensure its success to date.

The DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2015 will be awarded at the Jaipur Literature Festival on 22nd January 2015. It has previously been won by H.M. Naqvi for Home Boy, Shehan Karunatilaka Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew, Jeet Thayil for Narcopolis and Cyrus Mistry for Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer.

About the Author

Sonali Champion is Editor of the *India at LSE blog*.



Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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