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Deconstructing “The New Indian Woman”: An Analysis of the Sleuth Heroines of Indian English Women’s Detective Fiction

By Somjeeta Pandey¹ and Somdatta Bhattacharya²

Abstract

Feminist discourses on the “New Indian Woman” focus on the woman’s body as a surface upon which modernity is inscribed. Sexual transgression has been the only lens through which the New Woman has been usually studied and analyzed until now, thus offering a superficial definition of modernity by women being defined only by the corporeal. This is problematic not only because it offers a reductionist view of modernity but also “constructs a boundary around the notion of modern womanhood that excludes woman whose bodily autonomy has been compromised, for example through sexual assault” (Daya, “Embodying Modernity” 97). This paper will study two novels, Kishwar Desai’s Witness the Night (2010) and Kalpana Swaminathan’s I Never Knew It Was You (2012), closely analyzing the women sleuths as portrayed in these texts: Simran Singh in the former, Lalli and Sita in the latter. The paper will move beyond the existing discourses on the New Indian woman and demonstrate how the New Woman in these narratives of detection is transgressive in contesting dominant ideals of femininity. The aim will be to understand how these women detectives contest and challenge patriarchal hegemonies through their behavior and how their acts of detection also are essential acts of rebellion against a largely misogynistic system. Swaminathan's Lalli and Sita and Desai’s Simran can be seen as a reflection of the uninhibited, independent, professional, twenty-first century Indian woman. The paper seeks to reconstruct the figure of the New Indian woman through the representations of these women fighting crimes against women in modern-day India, enacting their autonomy and rebellion in the process by deftly taking on the role of a detective, traditionally a profession for men. The aim will also be to discuss how these works provide a space for creating new roles for women, while also illustrating a wide spectrum of women’s experiences. Lastly, the paper will explore these works in the context of India’s economic growth and how they affect and are affected by India’s publishing industry.

Keywords: Detective fiction, Women sleuths, New Indian Woman, 21st century women’s fiction

Introduction

The New Indian woman is often discussed in academic and popular discourses as the embodiment of the “new India”—an emerging superpower. Shari Daya argues that the identity of womanhood is “coterminous with the ideals of nation” and one keeps evolving with the evolution of the other (“Embodying Modernity” 475). This connection can be effectively traced in the

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changing terrains of the representation of women in contemporary Indian fiction. Indian women’s writings have also long been defined through their portrayals of women as the victimized “other”, consequently reinforcing the image of the Indian woman as being at the receiving end of social, cultural, and political injustice (Lau, “No Longer” 279). However, with the emergence of the new India, as Lau suggests, Indian women's writings are "now showcasing women protagonists casting aside guilt and the traditional teachings of modesty and shame and reaching out increasingly towards self-fulfillment and happiness, which includes sexual autonomy” (“No Longer” 280). The figure of this New Indian Woman who is constantly contesting the cultural and traditional barriers has been commonly studied by feminists through the lens of sexual transgression. Academic studies have reiterated the New Woman as an object, a body upon which modernity has been inscribed, through the explorations of this figure in popular media such as television, advertising, and fashion magazines (Manekar; Chanda; Rajan; Munshi). Such discourses that treat the New Woman as an object are regressive because they offer a superficial definition, “allowing little room for the agency of women who actively contest imposed identities and roles in the quintessentially modern project of self-determination” (Daya, “Eating, Serving” 475). This paper seeks to move beyond such existing discourses and read and interpret the New Woman as a productive subject. Borrowing from Daya and Lau, who have argued that sexual transgression is the primary premise upon which the New Woman is constructed (Daya 2009, Lau 2010, 2013), this essay attempts to explore the New Indian Woman through narratives of detection that show her in transgressive roles, and contest dominant ideals of femininity. As Felski suggests, considering women’s lived experiences and texts as paradigmatic will alter our views on modernity; we shall keep this view in focus in the present essay (1995, 4).

The essay begins with a section that traces the growth of Indian English commercial/popular fiction in the context of economic liberalization and the rise of an Indian middle class. It then looks at the consequent boom in detective fiction, written by women in India in this post-1990s period. The next section analyzes Indian women’s fiction and the figure of the New Indian Woman in these literary texts, providing a historical context to the whole formulation. The final section of the essay closely analyzes two novels by two contemporary Indian authors of detective fiction in English to examine the characters of their women detectives in the light of the theories of the New Indian Woman discussed above.

Rise of the New Indian Middle Class and Remaking of Reading/Publishing

The early years of the 1990s in India witnessed ground-breaking changes in the country’s economic structures and policies that will have definitive implications for the society, polity and culture. The economic reforms of 1991, forced by circumstances and the balance of payment crisis, ushered in major sociocultural and economic transformations in India. The country came out of “the restrictive regime of the License Raj and the old centralized bureaucratic state which stifled industries to become a vibrant, free-market democracy” and came to be regarded as an emerging global superpower (Ghosh 73). The new economic policies revived the national GDP figures, per capita income, employment opportunities, and assured a sense of self-reliance. The transformation over the years was so striking that India was now in a position to provide aid to underdeveloped countries. In addition to creating wealth, it spurred further investment in and the adoption of new technology, which paved the way for the creation and growth of modern amenities like malls, multiplexes, restaurants, and industries like e-commerce, tourism, transportation, and IT, to name a few. This phase was also marked by the emergence of a new middle class identified based on their consumption practices (Donner 3). This group is “highly heterogeneous and mainly

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determined in relation to its economic behavior, consumption patterns, and a quest for upward mobility” (Meyer, “Challenging Gender” 108). However, the emergence of this aspirational middle class masked growing inequalities in both rural and urban India, as well as unequal distribution of social and political influences, which has had a lasting impact on both the polity and society. The increasing prominence of the middle-class also resulted in a “growing amnesia” towards poverty and the poor in liberalizing India (Fernandes 2416). Fernandes further elucidates:

The visibility of the urban middle classes sets into motion a politics of forgetting with regard to social groups that are marginalised by India's increased integration into the global economy. The politics of forgetting in this case does not refer to processes in which particular places or nations are left out of economic globalisation. Rather, it refers to a political-discursive process in which specific marginalised social groups are rendered invisible and forgotten within the dominant national political culture. The politics of forgetting, in this sense, is not merely an inadvertent process of particular locations being left out of economic globalisation. It is a political project that seeks to produce a sanitised vision of the economic benefits of globalisation. (2416)

As Fernandes has noted, the new middle class whose emergence had definite links to the commodities made available by the liberalization of the economy, is characterized by new consumption practices: “The ‘newness’ of this Indian middle class is a cultural characteristic that is marked by attitudes, lifestyles and consumption practices” (2415). The emergence of a new kind of readership (and consumption of literary material) can be read as a part of this newness and as a product of educational opportunities and cultural avenues opened up by liberalization. Suchismita Ghosh has noted a new generation of readers “who have become an increasingly emboldened social class, owing to their increased income and enhanced power to spend” (74). Often belonging to the first generation of young people educated in English-medium private schools, they are equally proficient in technical and professional knowledge systems. They are the “new generation,” in the words of Ritty A. Lukose, who admire capitalism and are goaded by the ambition to get rich (6). To fit into the neoliberal social order, they prefer jobs in the private corporate sectors, consume without guilt, and uphold a view of consumerism that largely characterizes the changed economic perceptions in India. They subscribe to the role of a consumer-subject constructed by the state and endorsed by the corporate-driven media. This new readership has also sought out cultural material that subscribe to these markers. On the whole, this has triggered a revolution of sorts in the Indian publishing industry.

Since the 1980s, India has seen a rapid increase in the number of international and independent publishers entering the country. The current development in Indian English fiction is supposedly rooted in Amitav Ghosh’s success with *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and the establishment of Penguin India in 1985 (Gupta, “Indian Commercial Fiction” 46). The face of Indian literary fiction is represented by writers such as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Anita Nair, Vikram Chandra, Amit Chaudhuri, Kiran Desai, Allan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, and Aravind Adiga. Indian literary fiction has a presence beyond the national borders and is often the only face of Indian literature outside India, and its success is often measured in terms of its circulation in the Anglo-American market (Gupta, “Indian Commercial Fiction” 47). However, post-millennial Indian writing in English, a product of the demands of an emerging new readership discussed above, has gone beyond these well-known names and has witnessed a significant growth
notably in genre literatures like chick lit, crime lit, crick lit, sci-fi, mythological thrillers, etc. This commercial fiction, in-tune with the ideas and ideals of the aspirational middle class, is produced primarily for the mass consumption of these new Indian readers, is more a matter of “internal interest”, and is often not taken “seriously” by critical commentary, or not even often considered “literary” (Gupta, “Indian Commercial Fiction” 47). Even in scholarly works tracing the development and evolution of Indian literary history, where Rushdie is hailed as the “messiah” of Indian fiction (Mee; Naik and Narayan), the new writings in genre fiction find scant mention. However, Indian commercial fiction has shown a steady rise as an alternative to literary fiction. Only a handful of scholars such as Emma Dawson Varughese, Neele Meyer, and Pooja Sinha have talked about the development of these genre literatures.

The “Indianness” and the middle-class content of such writing have gained these narratives a wide readership among the Indian middle-class readers (Dawson 16). McCrum talks about the demographic of this readership:

This new middle-class audience—small entrepreneurs, managers, travel agents, salespeople, secretaries, clerks—has an appetite for literary entertainment that falls between the elite idiom of the cultivated literati, who might be familiar with the novels of Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie, and the Indian English of the street and the supermarket. Theirs is the Indian English of the outsourcing generation.

It is women and men who identify with such a demographic that are often the consumers of this fiction, who can see themselves or women they know in the characters on the pages. The writers too, often drawn from the same aspirational class, have embraced their experiential worlds and immediate locales, turning away from grand national narratives, allegories, and sweeping landscapes of predecessors such as Rushdie. Claudia Kramatshek, in her essay “Farewell to Spice and Curry”, has explained that the younger generation of authors writing in English demonstrate:

. . . a marked turn toward localism . . . meaning toward the microcosmos of one's own lived world, to the history of the individual towns where these authors lead their lives. In literary terms, this return is associated with an opening toward genre literature and toward what might be referred to as the small form.

The exponential rise in the production and consumption of narratives of detection and the figure of the New Indian Woman need to be read in the context of such changes in the politics and patterns of consumption.

**Post-millennial Detective Fiction and the New Indian Middle Class**

Crime fiction as a genre has an extremely popular presence internationally, but India “has long been perceived as an unsuitable background for crime fiction – at least for authors writing in English” (Meyer, “Challenging Gender” 106). Studies conducted by scholars like Francesca Orsini show that the roots of detective fiction in India go back to the nineteenth century when detective fiction was introduced in translations in Bengali, Hindi, and other languages from English (227). Detective fiction was slowly gaining ground by the early twentieth century and was being written originally in almost all major Indian vernacular languages. The earliest detective novels by Indian writers, originally written in English, include S. Mukherji’s *The Mysterious Trader* (1915), S.K. Chettur’s *Bombay Murder* (1940), and Kamala R. Sathianadhan’s *Detective Janki* (1944) (Khair
64). However, the last decade shows very different statistics. Indian detective fiction in English, as Emma Dawson Varughese says, “is a dominant trend in the development of the post-millennial writing scene” (100). As discussed above, detective fiction produced by Indian English writers mainly caters to Indian readers and strongly reflects a “turn to localism in India’s post-millennial literature” (Meyer, “Challenging Gender” 106). While it bears the remarkable imprint of the emergence of a new aspirational class and revolution in perceptions, this popular fictional form is not regarded as literary enough, unlike mainstream literature and is treated as the “gossipy café of Indian writing in English at home” (Gupta, Consumable Text 141). Critical readings of such narratives of detection have often focused on postcolonial concerns. However, scholars such as Emma Dawson Varughese (145) or Neele Meyer (106) have questioned whether such postcolonial readings are pertinent. They have debunked the ubiquitous postcolonial trope of reading such narratives as appropriation of the colonizer’s literary form and a subversion of the master form. The post-millennial Indian detective fiction is firmly a product of the new consumption patterns and rooted in this specific history. Meyer, for instance, has cited a parallel from Scandinavia where authors have modified the generic conventions of detective fiction to invent noirs that have evolved to be more of native forms than borrowed forms, thus moving beyond the grip of the “writing-back formula” (Meyer, Globalizing Genre 9). This process of invention can also be read into the evolution of Indian detective fiction. Rachel Dwyer has pointed out that Shobha De, the pioneer of Indian popular fiction in English, has pushed the West and anxieties regarding the West into the background, and projected a confident nativism: “the West is not seen as being of great importance to anyone; it is sketchy and unreal, more of a giant supermarket than a place of interest” (211). A similar argument can be traced into the evolution of contemporary Indian detective fiction where the genre is appropriated into a local, Indian idiom. The form is innovatively transformed to accommodate an Indian sensibility, as well as to reflect the aspirations, insecurities and lives of a rising new middle class. Dawson Varughese has reiterated that “post-millennial fiction in English from India is not recognizable by the tropes and guises of Indian post-colonial texts” (143).

Contemporary genre fiction in English in India caters to a local audience and is defined by the demands of this market. This essay deploys a critical framework that goes beyond the postcolonial paradigm, and which takes into account the social and historical contexts of the emergence and circulation of the genre, to read select texts from contemporary Indian detective fiction. It will follow the model provided by scholars such as Suman Gupta, Emma Dawson Varughese, and Neele Meyer who have closely read genre fictions without imposing a postcolonial framework.

**Indian Detective Fiction and the New Indian Woman**

As discussed above, detective fiction in English has seen an unprecedented rise in India, especially in the last ten years (Dawson 100). Within this emerging and popular genre, works highlighting women detectives have interestingly carved a space for themselves and have gained readership and popularity. Many women writers have debunked the figure of men detectives and have created women sleuths, not just to solve crimes but also to highlight the social prejudices against women that are prevalent in India. Authors who have created women detectives and detective novels include Manjiri Prabhu, Kalpana Swaminathan, Kishwar Desai, Madhumita Bhattacharyya, Swati Kaushal, Shweta Taneja, and a few others. The women sleuths created by these authors range from young private investigators like Bhattacharyya’s Reema Ray or Prabhu’s Sonia Samarthis to Kaushal’s senior police detective Niki Marwah; from a middle-aged, amateur sleuth like Desai’s Simran Singh to Swaminathan’s spinster sleuth, Lalli, a retired cop. Shweta Taneja has experimented with the form by creating a new sub-genre, detective fantasy fiction,
featuring a woman *tantric* detective, Anantya Tantrist. Standalone crime novels featuring women sleuths have also been produced by women writers like Usha Narayan, Kiran Manral, Aarti V. Raman, and others.

Gupta argues that crime writing produced by the women writers featuring women sleuths can be called the product of the traction between the global and the local forces (*Consumable Texts* 26). While they draw inspiration from their western counterparts, they adapt these narratives to local themes and contexts. This argument harks back to the nativization of the form and genre we have discussed above. For instance, Kalpana Swaminathan’s Lalli mysteries focus on the unspoken horrors of homicides, a theme that has been explored in great depth by authors such as Liza Cody and Eleanor Taylor Bland. But Lalli mysteries are almost always set in Mumbai and focus on specific neighborhoods, and have an array of Indian characters who belong to various strata of the urban Indian middle-class, and employ an Indian idiom. This emphasis on local settings and plots can also be traced in Madhumita Bhattacharyya’s Reema Ray mysteries which are set in Kolkata and Mumbai, Manjiri Prabhu’s Sonia Samarth mysteries which are set in Pune, and Swati Kaushal’s Niki Marwah mysteries set in Shimla, to name a few. Shrehyaa Taneja has pointed out this process of remaking the form at play in these narratives, in her essay “Last Resort Lalli or the New Age Miss Marple”:

The Indian detective negotiates an epistemological framework that borrows from European form to express a non-European reality. Subject to its forces of production in the marketplace, detective fiction is a dynamic literary form responding to the cultural expectations of a changing Indian society. (38)

As discussed earlier, these works are written by local authors for local audiences and the authors wilfully refrain from producing crime fiction stories that cater to the tastes and expectations of international readers (Meyer, *Globalizing Genre* 9).

The remaking of the form to reflect the local and the immediate also demands the inversion of narrative traditions as well as reinvention of characterization, to accommodate the emergence of a new gender dialectic of the new urban middle class. Central to this is the figure of the New Woman, a figure derived from the experiential worlds of urban Indian middle-class women (Rajan 130). The construction of this New Woman, across various disciplines, has been studied by feminist thinkers (Rajan; Chanda; Oza; Munshi; Thapan). This paper analyzes this figure in a few select narratives of detection.

**“New Indian Woman” in Indian Women’s English Fiction**

Indian English Women’s writings have long depicted women as victims of societal exploitation and patriarchy—Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), Anita Desai’s *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) are examples that come to mind. One of the dominant themes in the characterization of Indian womanhood is self-sacrifice and the woman’s willingness to short-change herself for the good of the family, and the expectation that she will do so (Lau 2013, 279). Readings by scholars such as Ruby Lal show that in the nineteenth-century Urdu, Hindi, and traditional English stories, a woman is considered ideal only when she behaves modestly and obediently in her “married home” and when her behavior is marked by a lack of independent initiative and thought (330). This portrayal, concludes Lal, valorizes a restrained woman, and is regressive. The depiction of these women's lives emphasizes a lack of independent agency on the part of the character (Lal 337).
However, the past decade has witnessed a radical change in the way women authors represent women (Lau; Varughese). Women authors are increasingly writing about urban, middle-class, educated and independent women while simultaneously portraying a picture of a changed society that increasingly normalizes single women, extramarital affairs, and divorces. In Lau’s words:

IWE (Indian Writing in English) by women is now showcasing women protagonists casting aside guilt and the traditional teachings of modesty and shame and reaching out increasingly towards self-fulfilment and happiness, including sexual autonomy. Middle-class Indian women past the first flush of youth are depicted as more autonomous than ever before, daring to defy societal taboos and getting away with it relatively unscathed. (“No Longer” 280)

This change in the depiction of women can be partly attributed to the changes in Indian urban middle-class lifestyles, as discussed above. The newfound wealth amongst Indian middle-classes is evident in the westernized coffee-shops, malls, restaurants, and branded goods. These factors have cemented India's new identity as a powerful modern nation, often called “new India” (Daya, “Embodying Modernity” 97).

Central to this new identity, Daya asserts, is the construction of the figure of the New Indian Woman, the defining characteristics of which have been discussed by feminist scholars through the explorations of media, beauty pageants, and magazines (Daya, “Embodying Modernity” 97). The modern woman is constantly defined by her autonomy, which is a sharp contrast to the Sita-Savitri model of the ideal Indian woman who is always depicted as subservient to her family. The New Indian Woman is resilient, independent, and capable of making her own choices (Daya, “Embodying Modernity” 99).

The redefinition of the figure of the Indian woman is often bound by persistent gender roles. Ipshita Chanda has explored the figure of the modern New Woman in Indian television advertisements and argued that the gender roles in the household remain unchallenged by the advertisements, thus showcasing the need for buying appliances to free up the women’s time and allowing her some freedom from her household chores. Lisa Lau also contends that modernity and women’s autonomy are acceptable but to a certain extent, “as long as they are carried alongside the continued habit of selflessness and sacrifice on the part of the women” (2013, 283).

The post-millennial new wave of writings by women often radically contests these expectations. They portray a New Indian Woman who can exercise her liberty without any guilt or social censure (Lau 2013, 283). Such writings move beyond the domestic sphere of motherhood and marriage and narrate women’s struggle to strike a balance between the private and the public, and how these struggles impact the identity of the New Indian Woman. Lisa Lau, in “Literary Representations of the New Indian Woman”, says:

The New Indian woman finds herself constantly negotiating, constantly nudging out a little more space for herself to function with a little more autonomy…The literature does not depict the single, working, Indian woman as having suddenly become confrontational, demanding, hectoring…However, autonomy, hard won, has its rewards—greater power of decision-making, the delight in self-hood and empowering sense of self definition, greater levels of individual fulfilment. (285)

Women authors of detective narratives studied in this essay seem to constantly strive to create an alternate space for women characters. In this environment, they can break away from principal
stereotypical social roles of daughter, wife, and mother, and exist for themselves, bringing to focus the many social processes and injustices. The novels of these authors tell the story of “the New Indian Woman working, living alone in the cities, hanging out with women friends, drinking, dating, and having fun despite the enormous social pressure to get married” (Lakshmi). The idea of the family as an institution that provides support and protection is also debunked by these novels.

The essay will analyze two Indian English detective novels by women authors, Kalpana Swaminathan’s *I Never Knew It Was You* (2012) and Kishwar Desai’s *Witness the Night* (2010), and pay close attention to the characters of the women detectives in the two novels – Lalli and Sita in the former, and Simran Singh in the latter. The attempt will be to understand how these women detectives contest and challenge the patriarchal hegemonies and how their acts of detection also are important acts of rebellion against a largely misogynistic system. These novels have been chosen keeping in mind the fact that both Kalpana Swaminathan and Kishwar Desai are Indian writers who have stayed and worked in India and their works are deeply embedded in the Indian urban middle-class lives. Swaminathan’s Lalli is well over sixty and unmarried, while Sita is in her mid-thirties and has no plans of getting married. Desai’s Simran is in her mid-forties, happily unmarried, and not pressured by her mother’s nagging about the expectations of marriage and grandchildren. This essay reconstructs the figure of the New Indian Woman through the representations of these middle-aged Indian women fighting against crimes in modern-day India, enacting their autonomy and rebellion by deftly taking on the role of a detective, traditionally seen as a man’s profession.

**Lalli, Sita and Simran Singh: An Analysis of Select Women Detective Characters**

Swaminathan’s Lalli, who can be referred to as the “desi Miss Marple” is a spinster detective, a retired policewoman who has spent thirty years of her life in the police force, is “sixty-three, five foot six barefoot, a hundred and ten pounds on the bathroom scales” and has never “ever been married” (Swaminathan, *The Page 3 3*). Lalli has an MD in forensics and has the nickname “Lalli L.R.,” where L.R. stands for “last resort” because she is the last resort of the police (Swaminathan, *The Page 3 189*). Every homicide file has a blank sheet of paper at the end, which is kept reserved for Lalli to fill in (Swaminathan, *The Page 3 10*). In all Lalli mysteries, she is portrayed through the eyes of the narrator, Sita, and very little is discussed about her past. Lalli is a descendant of the legendary figure of the “spinster detective,” or the “elderly busybody,” a worthy successor of Christie’s Miss Marple (Craig and Cadogan 11). Although one may find in her character traces of the spinster detectives, Lalli’s training and experience as a homicide police detective clearly distinguishes her from her literary predecessors like Miss Marple. For her investigations, Lalli depends on a vast network of informants and has her police team, which aids her in solving the cases. She is presented as a brilliant mind who finds out the criminal’s identity halfway through the novel (Meyer, *Globalizing Genre* 118). Lalli’s niece, Sita, represents a younger generation of women who idolize Lalli.

Kishwar Desai, on the other hand, creates a larger-than-life heroine, a forty-five-year-old spinster Simran Singh, who is a “professional but unsalaried social worker, rudely called an NGO wali and a rather amateur psychotherapist” (Desai 5). Her only aim is to ensure that there is no “miscarriage of justice” (Desai 8). She feels that the criminal community trusts her because she is “an oddity, with my convent-school Hindi and salon-cut curly hair,” one who looks “far removed from the world of shady deals and drugs and knives and punishments” and “they know I am just a powerless social worker, from my outsized red bindi to my kolhapuri chappals” (Desai 8). Lalli,
Sita, and Simran are liberal representations of the New Woman, women who are independent and can exercise complete autonomy over their lives. This is brought out more clearly when the novels interweave their personal and professional lives with narratives of other women who have little or almost no independence or control over their lives.

In both *I Never Knew It Was You* and *Witness the Night*, the narratives of Lalli, Sita and Simran are juxtaposed against narratives of other characters whose values and opinions towards family and society are completely at odds with those of these three women. In *I Never Knew It Was You* the heterogeneity of the middle-class is underscored through the narratives of Aftab, the “jyotish” (astrologer), and the Pereira family. Swaminathan’s *I Never Knew* is a story of murder and detection only on the surface, and as the women sleuths delve deeper into the mysteries, they discover the price Indian women have to pay to uphold the abstract concept of family honor. Maybelle, a Christian woman, falls in love with Aaftab, a Muslim man, and the consequences are harrowing. She is declared a schizophrenic by the family doctor and is issued “a certificate of mental unsoundness and insanity” (Swaminathan, *I Never Knew* 168) so that her family will be able to “control her” (Swaminathan, *I Never Knew* 169). On the other hand, Anais is renounced by her family for marrying a man outside her religion. Swaminathan underscores the toxicity of home spaces, spaces which often secretly serve as breeding grounds for crimes; crimes which are driven by “embarrassment” (*I Never Knew* 175) and are never often perceived as crimes (*I Never Knew* 176). Crime and criminality are shown as a problem situated often within families and homes in these novels. In *I Never Knew*, the jyotish is a man who commodifies religion and spirituality in the name of securing a better future for the family and advises the family to commit a crime. In *Witness the Night*, Simran Singh returns to her hometown, dusty Jullundhar, to assist Durga, the sole survivor of a horrific murder case where all her family members were found dead and Simran finds Durga in a tattered and battered state. With almost no cooperation from the police, Simran Singh intends to solve this case because something tells her “that the evidence was too obvious” (Desai 5), and maybe Durga was more of a victim than the alleged murderer she was being portrayed as. As Singh delves deeper into the sorrowful lives of Durga and her older sister, Sharda, through Durga’s journal entries she unravels the darker realities that exist in small Indian towns like Jullundhar where women feticide is still commonplace. Sharda, Durga’s elder sister, had also met with the same fate as Maybelle because she had fallen in love with her private tutor and was impregnated by him. The family as a site of violence against women family members is a leitmotif in both these novels. Like Maybelle, Sharda’s family members forcefully admitted Sharda into a mental asylum after she had been found pregnant. The graphic details of Sharda’s conditions are heart-wrenching:

She was chained to the bed, and her hands clenched and unclenched relentlessly as she screamed unintelligible words that only she could understand. . . Her head rolled from side to side, her blank eyes opened and shut as she tried to articulate to some unseen person her anguish in an unending repetitive cycle. . . Froth poured from the corner of her mouth. The beautiful, once soft lips twisted back in an animal snarl as she shouted out her wrath and helplessness. (Desai 183-4)

Literary works that are driven by serious crimes like “social injustice, industrial corruption, rape and battery” and have women in central roles are called “feminocentric texts” (Klein 228). Kathleen Klein believes that such works move beyond the reductionist formula of detective fiction...
which is based on “a world whose sex/gender valuations reinforce male hegemony” (228). They can also blatantly reject the Detection Club oath laid down by Ronald Knox and discard murder as the only gory and heinous crime worth investigating. Women authors thus not only modify the generic conventions, but also portray strong women characters who dauntingly take up a profession dominated by men and constantly fight against crimes against women. Lalli and Sita are seen to take apart prevalent conventions that exist in India regarding family integrity and honor. Purnima Manekar has shown how entertainment narratives in India perpetuate the idea that it is women’s virtuous behavior that distinguishes middle-class respectability. Lalli and Sita are not afraid of laying bare the crimes that happen within the domestic sphere in the name of family honor. Lisa Lau correctly notes that although images of modern-day women have surfaced in Indian writing before, these narratives mark a radical shift in that these new-age women are “no longer posited as the outsider, the lost, the depraved” (“No Longer” 290). Simran Singh rebels against small-town gender norms and ceremoniously breaks off her engagement and her mother’s heart, and leaves Jullundhar for good. Singh is not portrayed as either a vamp or an outcast, for her acts of rebellion. Her choices are normalized in the narrative. She confesses to having multiple love interests and that most of the men she has come across are “self-obsessed and boring” (Desai 177). She smartly keeps dodging her mother’s concerns about her marriage and shows no regrets, whatsoever, at being single, unmarried, and childless at the age of forty-five. She meets Gurmit Singh, a young reporter, during the course of the investigation, and immediately initiates a love affair with him. Set against the norms of gender behavior in small-town India, her acts of selecting a much younger partner and openly talking about her sexuality are liberated behavior.

The character of Simran Singh is reminiscent of the male detectives of the hard-boiled tradition of detective fiction. When the reader encounters her for the first time in the novel, it is three in the morning, and she reaches out for a cigarette to clear the cloud of confusion regarding Durga’s case (Desai 4); later on, she lights another (Desai 6). By the time the first chapter draws to a close, she has decided to stock up some liquor (Desai 15). Singh is a loner, “a gin-swilling, cigarette-smoking forty-five-year-old renegade” (Desai, 57) who has inherited her father’s fortune. She confesses to having nicotine-stained teeth (Desai 43) and only a glass of cold beer can calm her down (Desai 56). Talking about the hard-boiled PIs like Marlowe, Hammett, and Continental Op, Rita Elizabeth Rippetoe writes in *Booze and the Private-Eye*:

> Each of these heroes is also physically tough, able to stand up to beatings, druggings, and other attacks while mocking their opponents with wise-cracking answers. Part of this toughness is the ability to hold their liquor; they can drink inordinate amounts and still function, shrugging off the effects of intoxication as easily as those of physical beatings. (10)

In small-town Jullundhar, in north India, where women are judged at every step, Singh dares to buy her own liquor, even though that incurs risks of being frowned upon by the rickshaw wallah or the liquor shop attendant. She can also exhaust her entire stock in a night. *Witness the Night* does not record a single instance of Singh’s eating habits or food preferences, much like Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander series, and she is only seen lighting a cigarette or “diminishing Punjab’s liquor stock” like the tortured, divorced Swedish detective (Desai 84). In this, she also reminds us of a host of other fictional detectives from different contexts: Philip Marlowe to Jules Maigret, Kurt Wallander to Harry Hole. And yet, Simran Singh is at the center of the novels, neither a vamp nor a tramp. She hardly bothers about conventional notions of femininity and bonds with Gurmit Singh.
Singh over a glass of whisky. These are symbolic of an open challenge to patriarchy. In Meyer’s words,

Furthermore, topics like motherhood, marriage, and family that commonly dominate Indian women’s writing are omitted in these novels. Instead, they employ strong and active female figures that strikingly take up new roles and professions. These observations show how women writers are pushing the boundaries of the female experience in Indian crime fiction. (“Challenging Gender” 111)

The two detective novels under discussion here do not find conventional closures and are only partially solved at best. Klein believes that to contest the formulaic nature of the detective fiction genre, women writers should revise and reconstruct the narratives. Klein believes writers need to move beyond the closure of the traditional detective format, instead adhering to an open-ended narrative, one which would not necessarily end with the re-establishment of the status quo because “this attitude about conclusions might then suggest how fluid and political any society’s definitions of justice can be” (Klein 228). Throughout Desai’s narrative, the identity of the culprit is never revealed nor does the novel end with any hint of legal action being taken against the perpetrator. However, Desai here offers a voice to the victim/survivor, Durga, a voice which her family and the society had previously silenced. In the guise of a detective novel, Witness the Night introduces the victim's voice through her diary entries and exposes the sham respectability of upper-class Indian families and the murkiness behind the façade of their respectability. In I Never Knew, the narration is interspersed with Sita’s reflections about the difficult life that the now-dead Anais had led because of the choices she had made. Also, rassiwala, who provides easy solutions to disturbed people and provokes people to murder in the name of spirituality, is never caught. While Durga ends up being adopted by Simran, making it an all-women family, Swaminathan ends the novel with a hint of the rassiwala case being pursued in the future. One can argue that the avoidance of closure is a narrative strategy frequently used by these women writers, “to draw attention to other problems such as impunity or corruption” (Meyer, “Challenging Gender” 112). One can also argue that this lack of closure indicates that though the novel might have ended, the crimes that the novels have dealt with might never be eradicated in the real world.

Typical to the investigative process, these women private detectives enter and exit crime scenes incognito to track down criminals in the pursuit of justice. In all this, they are seen crisscrossing the cities and the towns they live and work in. The stories go beyond the processes of crime and detection and the narrators are seen to also comment on the changing dynamics of modern Indian cities. Traditionally, the city is seen and experienced more through the consciousness of men than women, since they did not always have the liberty to access public spaces as freely as men. Walter Benjamin’s theory of the flâneur is an interesting critical tool in understanding this gendered perception of the urban. Benjamin sees the “flâneur” as a modern urban spectator, who, as Ann Davies writes, “moves without specific purpose through the public and through public spaces but is not himself of the public and rather he observes it” (101). Davies connects the figure with that of the amateur detective and the urban investigator (101). However, the theorization of the flâneur is a gendered one – there cannot be a women counterpart of the flâneur, or a flâneuse, because women cannot observe the city spaces as detached or dissociated observers; she herself becomes the object of the gaze. Although she cannot be a full-fledged flâneuse, the role of a detective has bestowed upon each of these women a role akin to that of the flâneur (Davies 102). Swaminathan’s Lalli series takes the readers through the fast-changing
landscapes of Bombay, and while Lalli and Sita stroll across the streets of the Bombay markets “dodging dawdlers, ignoring hawkers” (*I Never Knew* 37), Sita notices:

Vile Parle is rapidly re-inventing itself. The villages of Edla and Pedla will soon be mere colloquisms though, for now, one can still muse over the gushing nalla at Irla, and wander through the maze of Parla.

In the four years I have lived here, I’ve watched the place erase itself, inch by inch, like a woman with a long-term commitment to plastic surgery. Very soon, though, the makeover will be total and extreme. Glass-skinned avenues will obscure the labyrinth of lanes. (*Swaminathan, I Never Knew* 32-3)

The women do not just access the public space for work; they also loiter around. This act of loitering in the public spaces of Indian cities and towns, by these women detectives, again symbolizes an act of resistance to the traditional gendered spatial practices. As Meyer notes, they “appear as urban flâneurs who are aware of the changes in society as well as in the cityscape, which is continuously modernized and rebuilt” (“Challenging Gender” 115). These women sleuths are shown as possessing a unique position in the city-space that allows them to unravel the “flaws and tensions inherent in the new middle class” (Meyer, “Challenging Gender” 115). During a visit to the market, Lalli reminisces about old mansions and “raddi shops” (bookstores) (*Swaminathan, I Never Knew* 48) that used to exist when she was young. But the old mansion has given way to a “conglomerate of offices and shops” and every doorway at Vile Parle is packed with tutorial classes where kids appeared with “laptop, ipod, Blackberry and gizmos” (*Swaminathan, I Never Knew* 48). These changes in the cityscape are clearly results of globalization and technological modernity, which are often related to the rise in crime and criminality. Lalli and Sita are more than detectives here and appear as philosophers and commentators of this urban modernity.

Simran Singh, on the other hand, comments on the gendered spatial practices in a small town like Jullundhar, “a dusty, haphazardly constructed city in Punjab” which resembled “an ambitious village” when she was twenty (Desai 10). She had broken all the rules as well as her mother’s heart by fleeing from the town and calling off her engagement with a Punjabi guy (Desai 8). The patriarchal and orthodox mindset of the town makes the town claustrophobic for women like Simran who do not conform to the conventional norms. She has returned to her hometown as “still unmarried but a woman of the world, veteran of several love affairs, seasoned traveler” (Desai 11), but she has a “very good idea what it was to grow up as a small-town girl” (Desai 9). This is an understanding that immediately helps Simran to not only form a bond with Durga but also to comprehend the perils that Durga has had to go through. Simran, however, does not care to adhere to societal norms and chooses to move freely. But once in a while, she takes a rickshaw instead of taking a walk, in order to save herself from being teased by “the Roadside Romeos, that peculiar species of Indian male which prefers to abandon all other activity in favor of a boisterous attack on unsuspecting women of all ages” (Desai 40-1) which points at the male perception of women in public spaces as “available,” “improper,” and “sexually available” (Ganser 76). Simran’s act of going to a liquor store by herself is a huge taboo for women and therefore stands out in the town (Desai 86).

Compared to Simran’s freedom, Durga, Sharda and all the other women in the town are subject to different degrees of incarceration, be it at home, prison, or mental asylum. Simran points out how mental asylums are used as dumping ground for unwanted women (Desai 86). Durga's
diary entries capture the overt discrimination that a girl of her age faces in her own home. She calls her home a "Bhoot Bangla" (a haunted house) because nobody really cared about her existence (Desai 81). She was called a “kala teeka” when she was born because of her dark complexion, and as she grew up, the “regular application of Fair and Lovely” turned her darker complexion into a slightly acceptable one (Desai 35). Her skin color was not the only point of concern, but she also discerns differences in the way the two genders are treated in the household. She tries every possible means to behave like a boy, but she is “never treated with the same respect the Boys got” (Desai 35). As for her elder sister Sharda, she is called a witch because she wouldn’t die (Desai 82). When Sharda was born she was buried in a pot under the ground, but the dogs dug her out, and then she was fed opium and put in a pot of milk. The milk turned into butter, miraculously keeping the girl alive. According to the public/private dichotomy, the private space of the home is thought to be a place of refuge, a safe haven for women where they are safe from the dangers lurking “outside” (Ganser 68). These diary entries debunk this perception of family as an inviolable space of refuge. Home, to Durga and Sharda and girls like her, is a toxic space that is filled with nonchalance and discrimination against them, a space where "Boys were safe," a space where they were considered “paraaya dhan...wealth which belonged to someone else, i.e., the husband” (Desai 54). Simran escapes these gendered spaces of Jullundhar and embraces the anonymity offered by a metropolis like Delhi.

Conclusions

The economic changes in the wake of the liberalization of the Indian economy had far-reaching implications, and one of the most significant by-products was the emergence of a new urban middle-class. They had disposable income and consumption patterns that demanded new kinds of cultural texts that reflected the changing values and ethos of the Indian urban landscape. These in turn contributed significantly to a revolution of sorts in the Indian publishing industry. The production and publication of narratives of crime and detection with women sleuths at the center can be read as a result of these changes. As Khair says they are “a marker of significant cultural and economic changes” (71), and they are “consumed primarily within India, seen to display a kind of Indianness that Indians appreciate” (Gupta, “Indian Commercial Fiction” 47).

The authors of these texts are undoubtedly inspired by their Western counterparts, but they modify and reframe the generic conventions to suit the local needs and appropriate the genre by introducing an array of Indian settings and characters. They choose topics that suit, and are symptomatic of, the Indian context. Both the authors discussed in this essay, Kishwar Desai and Kalpana Swaminathan, focus on crimes against women typical of the South Asian/Indian setting and depict the various shades of Indian womanhood from that of the detective to those of the victims/survivors. Their women sleuths—Lalli, Sita, and Simran Singh—reflect the figure of the New Indian Woman who is unshackled by the opportunities opened by the liberalized economy and resultant social changes. They project the new values of middle-class, educated, employed urban women, and mark a remarkable shift from long-suffering women traditionally portrayed in Indian fiction. As Klein argues, these changes reflect the demands from a readership that represents and experiences this shift in the gender dynamics in the post-liberalization urban culture and life. The women sleuths under analysis here are Indian urban women who have rejected marriage and motherhood and are in the gender-atypical profession of solving crimes. The two authors create these sleuth heroines as aspirational figures to be looked up to, as influencers, moving with ease and grace beyond stereotypically defined roles of a wife, a mother, or a daughter-in-law. Klein believes that detective novels should cast “plausible women” and “real women portraying
authentic, lived experience” (228). The detectives here, Simran Singh wearing a “shabby saree, bright yellow” with a “bindi” (Desai 115) on her forehead, and Lalli in a “burnt orange Kalakshetra sari” with a “pendant at her neck” (Swaminathan, *I Never Knew* 74) seem plausible characters coming from a contemporary urban Indian setting. Their rejection of several patriarchal norms works as a necessary foil for the characterization and life choices of the victims/survivors.

In the final analysis, these novels can be read as reflective of an important change in the Indian literary scene, with women not only presented as objects in detective fiction but as subjects with agency, the new Indian women. Women in crime writing have traditionally been callously offered roles of victims and even perpetrators and instigators. In Lalli, Sita, and Simran, as Maitreyee Chaudhuri puts it, there is “the celebration of the newfound self of Indian women,” which is, in turn, a marker of the “celebration of India’s economic reforms” (152). Indian fictional detectives such as these allow readers to imagine a world that offers women choices beyond falling in love, going mad, or dying (Russ 84). Finally, to refer to Klein again, "if women's stories are to be authentically told, they must be spoken in women's voices" (228). These stories do exactly that, presenting the interior lives of women and telling their stories in the voices of women that deserve to be heard by other women and men.

**References**


