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In:

Kerstin-Anja Münderlein (Ed.), Crime Fiction, Femininities and Masculinities : Proceedings of the Eighth Captivating Criminality Conference, Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, 17p.. 2024. DOI: 10.20378/irb-92502

Bookpart - Published Version

DOI of the Article: 10.20378/irb-94622

Date of Publication: 15.04.2024

Gender and Genre: A Study of Indian English Women's Crime Fiction

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Abstract

Crime fiction was long considered unsuitable for local production in India or the Global South (Meyer, *Glocalizing* 1). However, a radical change has been increasingly evident in recent years, where a surge in the production of Indian crime fiction has been observed and Indian writers in English have taken up the genre with an unprecedented enthusiasm. Indian English crime writers are certainly influenced by their American and European counterparts, but they appropriate the genre to suit the local Indian contexts. This trait is prominently evident in the increasing presence of women writers who often employ female detectives to investigate crimes against women. This chapter will study two Indian crime fiction series by women writers which provide a corpus to assess how the generic conventions have been modified to accommodate a female detective and to root these novels in an Indian milieu. It will discuss how these women detectives can be seen as a reflection of the uninhibited independent twenty-first century Indian woman and as Maitreyee Chaudhuri suggests a "celebration of the new-found 'self' of Indian women" (152). It will also discuss how these works provide a space for creating new roles for women while also illustrating a wide spectrum of female experiences. Lastly, this chapter will try to explore these works in the context of India's economic growth and how they affect and are affected by India's publishing industry.

Keywords

Female sleuths, Indian English crime fiction, new woman, glocalisation

Introduction

Crime fiction has enjoyed an undying popularity across ages and countries and has "come to have a worldwide literary market with substantial economic consequences" (Nilsson et al. 2). The genre has a recognisable form, since every crime narrative has almost the same elements, and that contributes to its sustained success across boundaries (14). The globalisation of crime fiction, leading to translation and adaptation, has made the genre popular with Indian readers and writers as well. India has experienced a recent rise in crime fiction which has become, as Emma Dawson Varughese says, "a dominant trend in the development of the post-millennial writing scene" (100). However, that does not mean that the Indian crime novel in English has an international presence. It is still written and marketed for the English-speaking, urban reader, with city book stores and social media promoting the niche content through hashtag campaigns and social media contests. Neele Meyer states

that the "the rise of crime fiction in India can be linked to efforts of multinational publishing corporations such as HarperCollins or Penguin Random House" ("Challenging" 107) which promote genres that are popular with the global market but do not usually find an audience in India. The integration of India's publishing industry with the global industry has stimulated the growth of crime fiction in India.

Moreover, another reason, cited by Meyer, is the rise of a heterogenous middle-class that "increasingly read in English and want to read about themselves in novels that include characters and settings that they can relate to" (108). Donner, in her book *Being Middle-Class: A Way of Life* (2011), discusses the growth of this heterogenous middle-class who wish to be identified as being in the middle, not poor nor rich, and this new middle-class is identified and differentiated on the basis of economic grounds and consumption practices (3). Claudia Kramatschek, in her essay "Farewell to Spice and Curry" (2007), has explained the phenomenon of the younger generation of authors, writing in English, saying that one can clearly see a shift towards localism – that is, towards the history of the particular cities where these authors choose to live and the microcosm of one's own experienced reality. In terms of literature, this comeback is connected to an opening towards genre fiction and what might be called the tiny form (Kramatschek). Detective fiction, produced by contemporary Indian English writers, mainly caters to these same Indian readers, and strongly reflects a "turn to localism in India's post-millennial literature" (Meyer, "Challenging" 106). This fiction has given birth to diverse forms of genre literatures like sci-fi, detective fiction, chick-lit, young adult literature, and mythological thrillers. Suman Gupta says that the commercial fiction produced in English can be rightfully called the product of the traction between the global and the local forces:

> the condition of English-language commercial fiction in India has something to do with the English-speaking middle-class youth and with global awareness or globalization processes in relation to a changing sense of national awareness or local lives. These are obviously closely intertwined; arguably it is the youth in question who cultivate the local/global awareness, and equally the local/global awareness in question appeals to the youth. (*Consumable* 26)

Indian English crime fiction writers certainly draw inspiration from their Western counterparts but adapt them to local themes and contexts. For instance, Lalli mysteries focus on the unspoken horrors of homicide, a theme that has been explored by international authors like Liza Cody and Eleanor Taylor Bland. But Lalli mysteries are always set in Mumbai and focus on specific neighbourhoods and have an array of Indian characters who belong to various strata of the urban middle-class group. Shrehya Taneja asserts this view: "The Indian detective negotiates an epistemological framework that borrows from European form to express a non-European reality. Subject to its own forces of production in the marketplace, detective fiction is a dynamic literary form responding to the cultural expectations of a changing Indian society" (38).

The novels thus produced offer a variety of choices and topics that display "the tensions and contestations that result from a wide span of different views that coexist in a coherent Indian middle-class space and are often played out in the private sphere" (Meyer, "Challenging" 108). These developments and complex tensions have also affected women's writings in India. Indian English writings have long portrayed the women as the victims of social injustice and exploitation. However, critics like Lau (2010, 2013) and Varughese (2013) note that the past decade has witnessed a radical change in the portrayal of women. Indian English women are now writing more about the new Indian women who are educated, career-oriented and usually belong to the urban middle-class strata (Meyer, "Challenging" 108). The portrayal of women has moved beyond the self-sacrificial Sita-Savitri archetype and instead now portrays women who can exercise their personal autonomy without any guilt or social censure (Lau, "No Longer" 283). The crime novels under analysis here move beyond the traditional discourses and stories of motherhood and marriage and instead provide the writers with an alternative space to create new roles. These novels tell the story of "the 'new Indian woman' working, living alone in the cities, hanging out with women friends, drinking, dating and having fun in spite of the enormous social pressure to get married" (Lakshmi).

Such narratives of detection have also frequently been the subject of postcolonial analysis. However, academics like Emma Dawson Varughese and Neele Meyer have questioned the applicability of such postcolonial readings. They disproved the pervasive postcolonial myth that reads these narratives as an appropriation of the literary style of the coloniser and a subversion of the dominant form. The post-millennial Indian detective fiction has its roots in this historical context and is clearly a product of the changing consumer habits. For instance, Meyer presented a Scandinavian example where authors altered the basic norms of detective fiction to create noirs that evolved to be more of native forms than borrowed forms, escaping the "writing-back formula" (Meyer, *Glocalizing* 9). The development of Indian detective fiction can also be seen in light of this process of innovation.

Shobha Dé was a pioneer of Indian popular fiction written in English, and Rachel Dwyer has noted that Shobha Dé projected a confident nativism that pushed the west and anxieties about the west into the background: "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). The development of modern Indian detective fiction, where the genre is appropriated into a regional, more especially Indian, idiom, can be traced back to a similar argument. The structure is creatively altered to reflect the goals, insecurities, and lives of a burgeoning new middle class as well as an Indian perspective. Once again, according to Dawson Varughese, "post-millennial fiction in English from India is not recognisable by the tropes and guises of Indian postcolonial texts" (143). Indian contemporary genre fiction is shaped by the needs of

the local market and is written in English for the local market. In order to read selected works from modern Indian English detective fiction, this chapter aims to employ a critical framework that goes beyond the postcolonial paradigm and takes into consideration the social and historical aspects of the genre's creation and circulation. It will make an effort to follow the example set by academics who have closely read genre fiction without imposing a postcolonial framework, such as Suman Gupta, Emma Dawson Varughese, and Neele Meyer.

This chapter will analyse the Lalli series by Kalpana Swaminathan and the Simran Singh mysteries by Kishwar Desai and will closely study the detectives in these series. The attempt will be to understand how these female detective characters contest and challenge the patriarchal hegemonies that exist in Indian society. For this, the chapter will examine the ways in which these female sleuths blur the lines between the private and public spheres by negotiating the gendered spatial practices which link men to the public sphere and limit women to the private sphere. The chapter will also explore how a genre like detective fiction, in the hands of these women authors, can make space for these liberated fictional women, and simultaneously create a space to voice the many oppressions women face. Such modifications and adaptations of the generic conventions of detective fiction are significant for any understanding of the social history of the genre. To do so, the rest of the chapter has been divided into two broad sub-sections. In the first section, the chapter will discuss crimes against women in modern-day India and how these narratives present such crimes with the female detectives fighting them. The section will also attempt to put forward the voices of the victims/survivors as presented in the novels and will focus on the avoidance of closure, a technique used by the authors that critiques the conservative form of detective fiction and instead focuses on the crimes rather than on providing an infallible solution. The second section shows the female detectives as urban *flâneurs* and how they critique and resist the gendered spatial practices.

Swaminathan's Lalli novels use a Holmes-and-Watson-like narrative situation by including Lalli's niece Sita as a homodiegetic narrator (Meyer, "Challenging" 109). Lalli is "sixty-three, five foot six barefoot" (*Page 3 Murders* 3), has eyes that are "black and gleaming when quiescent" (3) and her hair is "a silvery froth" (3). Lalli has an MD in forensics (189) and is famously known as Lalli L.R., where L.R. stands for "last resort" because she is the last resort of the police, and every homicide file has a blank sheet of paper at the end which is kept reserved for Lalli to fill in (10). In all of the Lalli mysteries to date, Lalli has been portrayed through the narrator Sita's eyes, and very little has been mentioned about her past. Lalli is a descendant of the spinster detective type, the "elderly busybody" (Craig and Cadogan 11), a worthy successor of Christie's Miss Marple (11). And, although she descends from a band of spinster detectives, what separates her from her literary predecessors like Miss

Marple is her training and experience as a homicide police detective. Kishwar Desai's detective mysteries introduce Simran Singh as an uninhibited woman in her mid-forties, a psychologist-cum-amateur sleuth. Simran Singh is a forty-five-year-old "professional but unsalaried, social worker, rudely called an 'NGO wali' and a rather amateur psychotherapist" (Desai, *Witness* 5) whose only aim is to make sure that there has been no "miscarriage of justice" (8). Like the hard-boiled detectives, Simran is a chain-smoker, loves her whiskey, and she is least bothered about what others might think of her habits.

Female Detectives Fighting Against Crimes Against Women

William Stowe credits detective fiction's conservatism as the reason behind its continuing appeal. According to Stowe, traditional detective stories tend to affirm rather than to question social structures, moral standards, and ways of knowing, rather than subjecting them to thorough, principled criticism. Crime is typically seen as a symptom of personal evil rather than social injustice, and the detective is portrayed as the quintessential embodiment of competitive individualism. However, the gradual development of the genre has witnessed detective writers re-moulding and modifying the conventions of the detective novel to use the genre "as vehicles for social and cultural criticism" (570). Contemporary detective stories of Hispanic, Kenyan, African, and Scandinavian writers have tended to offer a commentary on the societies in which the texts are produced and on which they are based. It is now known for its sociopolitical analysis, its evocation of catharsis and vicarious justice in an unrelenting social landscape, its capacity to amuse, and its potential to enlighten (Naidu and Roux 284). Authors like Margie Orford have brilliantly used the crime genre to address concerns about gender and violence. The crimes that Orford portrays are crimes that are specifically committed against women. For instance, *Daddy's Girl* (2009) depicts not only the kidnapping of a young girl, the shooting of two sisters, and the brutal stabbing of a gang leader's daughter, but a culture of violence against women and children. In India, women writers of the genre have used detective fiction, much like Kenyan noir, as a "genre of social critique" (Augart 82), and they have frequently adopted as well as modified the generic conventions to discuss the oft-silenced femicides and domestic abuse. Augart writes: "Since the crime novel which has as its setting a society which the author wishes to critique, one can find reflected within the genre the values and beliefs, but also the shortcomings of a society. Thus, crime novels are enabling spaces in which to criticize society from within the literary and fictional framework" (82).

The female detective not only exposes the societal prejudices that are still lurking in twenty-first century Indian society, but she also unabashedly debunks traditional concepts of family honour. Crimes against women like rapes, infanticides, homicides, domestic abuse, and forced surrogacy, which are usually brushed under the

carpet, are taken up in these crime narratives and the female sleuths are seen deftly solving them. A feminist perspective can be effectively included into detective fiction, according to Nina Molinaro, by analysing sexism and misogyny as well as by creating settings in which women gain agency and legitimacy (100).

In both *I Never Knew It Was You* (2012) and *Witness the Night* (2010), the narratives of Lalli, Sita and Simran are juxtaposed against narratives of other characters whose belief in systems and opinions towards social institutions such as family and marriage are completely at odds with that 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 female sleuths delve deeper into the mysteries, they discover the price Indian women have to pay to uphold the abstract concept of family honour. 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 for "mental unsoundness and insanity" so that her family will be able to "control her" movements of all kinds, by holding her captive inside the house (168, 169). Similarly, another character, Anais, is renounced by her family for marrying a man outside her religion. Swaminathan, here, underscores the toxicity of home spaces, spaces which often secretly serve as breeding grounds for crimes; crimes which are driven by "embarrassment" (175) and are never even often perceived as crimes (176). 'Crime' and 'criminality' are shown as problems situated often within families and homes in these novels. In *I Never Knew*, the jyotish (astrologer) is a man who commodifies religion and spirituality, and advises the family to commit a 'crime'.

In *Witness the Night*, Simran Singh returns to her homeland of Jullundhar, a small hamlet in Punjab, to help Durga, the lone survivor of a brutal murder case in which all of her family members were discovered dead. Simran finds Durga in a deplorable condition. Simran Singh decides to solve this case despite the police's near complete lack of cooperation because she has a gut feeling that Durga was more of a victim than the suspected killer she was being shown as, and Simran Singh feels "that the evidence was too obvious" (5). Singh reveals the harsher truths that exist in suburban Indian communities in spaces such as Jullundhar where female foeticide is still pervasive, as she goes deeper into the unhappy lives of Durga and her older sister, Sharda, through Durga's journal entries. When Sharda fell in love with a man below her social status and was found to be pregnant, she was called "disobedient" and was taken far away from the family home. To save the family's honour, Sharda was declared "possessed" and she was also "exorcised" because she had been "spoilt" (144). Sharda, Durga's elder sister, thus, 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 female family members is a leitmotif in both these novels.

"Feminocentric texts" are books that place women at the centre and are motivated by heinous crimes including rape, violence, industrial malfeasance, and social injustice. According to Kathleen Klein, such works go beyond the reductionist framework of detective fiction, which is predicated on a society where the values of sex and gender uphold masculine hegemony (*Woman* 228). Such works reject the notion of murder as the only gory and heinous crime worth investigating. Women authors, such as Swaminathan and Desai through their works such as *I Never Knew It Was You* and *Witness the Night*, thus, not only modify the generic conventions, but also portray strong women characters who dauntingly take up a male-dominated profession and fight against crimes against women. Purnima Mankekar has shown how 'entertainment' narratives in India perpetuate the idea that it is the women's virtuous behaviour that distinguishes middle-class respectability (152). Lalli and Sita do not operate within such stereotypes and are not afraid to lay bare the crimes that happen within the domestic sphere in the name of family honour. 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" (Lau, "Good Girls" 290). Simran Singh rebels against small-town gender norms by fleeing from Jullundhar at the age of twenty and recounts the time with a flippancy that is the mark of her revolt:

> I broke all the rules and my mother's heart, as well as my engagement to a Sardar who appeared to have a Very Promising Career in Hosiery. Initially, because all around me girls were being 'arranged' into marriages, I assumed that I had no choice, even though I was eighteen and above the age of consent. Fortunately, the lingerie business can be very liberating. Once I thought I had learned enough about v-fronts and padded bras, and the difference between synthetic and natural fibres . . . I felt I should move on. (*Witness* 11)

Singh is neither portrayed by Desai as a vamp nor an outcast. The easy tone with which she talks about her past shows that her choices are normalised in the narrative (290). She confesses to having multiple love interests and claims unabashedly that most men she has come across are "self-obsessed and boring" (177). She smartly keeps dodging her mother's concerns about her unmarried status and shows no regrets, whatsoever, at being single 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 behaviour in small-town India, her acts of selecting a much younger partner and openly talking about her sexuality are signs of 'liberated behaviour', and the narrative normalises these choices. Such narrative choices are more than female assertion via sexual liberation and are also a rebellion against the conventional wisdom of home and domesticity being safe refuges.

Both *I Never Knew* and *Witness the Night* do not find conventional closures and are only partially solved at best. In another essay titled "Habeas Corpus: Feminism and Detective Fiction" (1995), Klein discusses how the satisfaction of a perfect closure in detective fiction has been challenged by the hard-boiled writers. She writes:

> The satisfaction of the classic detective novel, with solutions to criminal behaviour which depended on the security of police action, legal systems, and judicial disinterestedness to produce a return to the Edenic world that had been disrupted by crime was rightly critiqued by hard-boiled initiators . . . But the optimistic kind of conclusion to detective novels, singling out the criminal and reifying the innocent, has not disappeared but merely changes configuration. The detectives of such hard-boiled authors as Robert B. Parker or Andrew Vachss recognize that the world is corrupt in ways they cannot hope to change, they settle for intervention on a small scale. (181)

The convention of providing one 'infallible solution' by the earlier detectives is also critiqued by the hard-boiled writers. Desai and Swaminathan follow a similar strategy and avoid bringing closures to these novels. Klein believes that to contest the formulaic nature of the detective fiction genre, women writers should revise and reconstruct the structure of the narratives. Klein believes writers need to move beyond the closure of the traditional detective format and adhere to an open-ended narrative 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" (*Woman* 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, much like Sayers's *Gaudy Night*, which also does not reach a complete solution, despite Peter Wimsey solving the puzzle. Maureen T. Reddy writes that female readers of crime fiction are usually taught to read as males while holding the feminist sensibilities in abeyance (12). When narratives of crime allow an unconventional reading, from a female point of view, she states, the texts turn richer and more interesting. Desai's *Witness the Night* does not reach a proper closure, but just like *Gaudy Night*, the novel emphasises more on offering an insight into the intimate lives of women in an orthodox small-town. Desai here also offers a voice to the victim/survivor, Durga, a voice which her family and society had till then silenced. In the guise of a detective novel, *Witness the Night* introduces the victim's voice through her diary entries and the murkiness behind the façade of upper-middle class 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 unconventional choices she had made. Also, *Rassiwala* (the astrologer), 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" 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, even with policing, and the judiciary system unless there is a radical restructuring of the social order.

Female Detectives as *Flâneurs*

Crime narratives are thus concerned with the prospect of reconstructing, remapping, and thereby remaking the city in addition to the true representation of the city and the disclosure of its secrets (Andrew and Phelps 3). According to Rowland, "the city became not simply the setting for crime fiction but a character and text in its own right" (19). Readers "can safely walk streets that normally they may fear to tread" when they see the world through the eyes of the detective *flâneur*, according to Andrew and Phelps (3). Elfriede Dreyer and Estelle McDowall claim that the *flâneur* "garners meaning from urban space, thereby adding meaning to the space itself, and can be viewed as the symbolic representation of 'modernity and personification of contemporary urbanity', specifically in the realm of social and literary analysis" (30). Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, who regarded Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) as the foundation of the *flâneur* theory, are responsible for the *flâneur* theory's inception. Traditionally, the city is seen and experienced more through the male consciousness than the female, since women 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). Therefore "the *flâneur* is someone who seeks meaning from city spaces but also bestows on them individual meaning" (101). The *flâneur* is somebody who is a part of the crowd but is still detached from it, reading the city and its people from a distance. As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson argues, in the original theorisation of *flânerie* a woman cannot adopt the role of *flâneur* because she can never achieve the necessary detachment/distance to observe. Ferguson writes that women undermine the objectivity that characterises the authentic *flâneur*. It appears that no lady is able to separate herself from the city and its charms. She acts on her yearning for the objects strewn out in front of her, making her unfit for *flânerie*. The *flâneur*, on the other hand, is interested in the city as a whole rather than a specific area. Women are crucial elements of the urban drama that *flâneurs* see, which is another reason why they should not be included in the fraternity of *flâneurs*. Along with the other attractions that the city offers, a woman standing on the street is to be "consumed" and "enjoyed" (27-28).

Davies argues that even if a woman cannot be a *flâneur* in accordance with the original notion, she might now play a position that is quite similar: investigator (102). Ferguson notes that the *flâneur* is connected to information, just like the narrator and detective (31). However, the theorisation of the *flâneur* is a gendered one –there cannot be a female counterpart of the *flâneur*, or a *flâneuse*, because a woman 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 is a similar one for her (Davies 102). Typical to the investigative process, these Indian women 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 also to comment on the changing dynamics of modern Indian cities. The women detectives, Lalli, Sita, and Simran turn *flâneurs* by observing, or rather detecting city spaces and by drawing conclusions from their observations (107). The streets of these Indian cities are usually 'owned' by normative heterosexual males, yet these new women walk the mean city streets, making their ways past the female fears of being stared at or groped or followed.

Feminist critics agree that female detectives bring a different sensibility into the act of detection and solve crimes like no male detectives would (Craig and Cadogan 13; Reddy, 20; Makinen 99). Women's lived experiences are different, as are their experiences with law enforcement, which is often reflected in fiction written by women, with characters of female detectives at the centre. Women detectives decidedly have some advantages over their male counterparts as they are perceived as harmless and are often entrusted with information that would otherwise be difficult for many men to elicit. The paradigm of the "spinster detective", Miss Marple from Agatha Christie, is described as a "garrulous and nosy", "gossipy old lady" (Reddy 20). Typically, people "underestimate her intelligence, allowing themselves to be deceived by appearances" (19), but Reddy demonstrates to the readers the benefits of feminine ways of thinking:

> Miss Marple's interest in people is not mere nosiness, but evidence of a lifelong study of human nature to which she has brought, and through which she has cultivated, acuity, insight, intelligence, and imagination. Miss Marple invariably sees something about people that others do not, evidencing a shrewdness and an awareness of a potential (or realised) evil that does not belie, but explores, her conventionally feminine exterior. Miss Marple's habit of disguising her sharp mind is a conventionally feminine strategy akin to Christie's portrayal of her character as no threat to established social arrangements. (20)

Lalli is a descendant of the legendary figure of the spinster detective, the "elderly busybody" (Craig and Cadogan 11), a worthy successor of Christie's Miss Marple. The appearance of an elderly spinster allows Lalli to "cluck like a harmless motherly hen, a ruse that both [Miss Marple and Lalli] adopt to fool others" (Taneja 38). Lalli "could be anyone she chose with practically no change in costume" (Swaminathan,

Gardener's Song 37) to extract the required information. She is a chatty old lady and, like Miss Marple, nothing escapes her eyes as she moves around in the city, looking for clues to solve the mystery. Her appearance as a harmless elderly spinster brings her in contact with other women and she engages herself "with the casteist, class-based and patriarchal structure of the Indian society" (Taneja 40), detecting the social. Many "defects and deficiencies popularly attributed to women may acquire a positive value in the context of detective fiction" (Craig and Cadogan 174). For example, nosiness – "a fundamental requirement of the detectives – is often considered a feminine trait" (13). Lalli and Simran's nosiness play a vital part in establishing the truth of an occurrence. Simran Singh, again, calls herself "a powerless social worker" and only gets into the system when she feels there "has been a miscarriage of justice" and that the criminal community trusts her "when I tell them I want to see them free and living in a just world, they know I mean what I say because I wear my idealism like a brahmastra, ready to slay all the rakshasas" (Desai, *Witness* 8). In both cases "women sleuths are far more than gimmick-like stand-ins for the male detectives of a masculine genre" (Gavin 269).

The readers travel across the rapidly transforming landscapes of Bombay in Swaminathan's Lalli series. Sita observes:

> Vile Parle is quickly reinventing itself as Lalli and Sita stroll through the alleyways of the Bombay marketplaces, evading dawdlers and ignoring hawkers). . . . Although, for the time being, one can still reflect on the gushing nalla at Irla and meander through the labyrinth of Parla, the communities of Edla and Pedla will soon be little more than colloquialisms (*I Never Knew* 37, 32-33).

The women in these novels are seen to not just access the public space for work; they also loiter, without anything specific to do. This act of loitering in the public spaces of Indian cities and towns, by these female detectives, again symbolises an act of resistance against the traditional gendered spatial practices; and 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" (Meyer, "Challenging" 115). These female 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" (115). Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade in their seminal text *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (2011) write about the significance of loitering:

> Loitering is significant because it blurs these boundaries – the supposedly dangerous look less threatening, the ostensibly vulnerable don't look helpless enough . . . For women, such a space of ambiguity can be powerful. Since the very act of being in public without purpose is seen as unfeminine, loitering fundamentally subverts the performance of gender roles. It thwarts societal expectations and enables new ways of imagining our bodies in relation to public space. This can be very liberating since any performance of femininity is otherwise inadequate to counter their out-of-placeness. (182-83)

During a visit to a market, Lalli reminisces about old mansions and "raddi shops" (scrap dealership) that used to exist there 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 South Asian globalisation and technological modernity, which are often also related to the rise in crime and criminality and the need for increased policing of urban spaces. The modernisation evident in the reconstruction of Vile Parle appears to be synonymous with the rise of the middle class and their newly-found wealth. Such 'upgradation' shows catering to global from local tastes. Lalli and Sita are not just detectives here, but they are elevated to the position of philosopher and commentator of urban modernity.

Simran Singh, the *flâneur*/detective, comments on the gendered spatial practices in a small town like Jullundhar, "a dusty, haphazardly constructed city in Punjab" which resembled "an ambitious village" (*Witness* 10). The patriarchal and orthodox mindset of the town makes it a claustrophobic space for women like Simran who do not conform to conventional norms. She has returned to her hometown "still unmarried but a woman of the world, veteran of several love affairs, seasoned traveler" (11), but has a "very good idea what it was to grow up as a small-town girl" (9). This understanding immediately helps Simran not only to form a bond with Durga but also to comprehend the trauma that Durga has had to go through. Simran, however, is not Durga, does not care to adhere to the societal norms, and chooses to move freely through the small-town cartography. But once in a while, she takes a rickshaw instead of walking, 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 favour of a boisterous attack on unsuspecting women of all ages" (40-41) which points to the male perception of women in public spaces as "improper" and "sexually available" (Ganser 76), a reason why the act of flânerie becomes difficult for women. 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, *Witness* 86). It is only in a metropolis like Delhi that Simran can be anyone she chooses to be without being judged and she returns to the city when she can.

Conclusion

The changes in the Indian publishing industry, which in turn were influenced by the emergence of a new confident middle-class with disposable income and a model of Indian womanhood hitherto unseen, have given birth to this new genre of detective fiction written originally in English, with female sleuths at the centre, which as Khair says is "a marker of significant cultural and economic changes" (71) and "is consumed primarily within India, seen to display a kind of Indianness that Indians

appreciate" (Gupta, "Commercial" 47). The authors are undoubtedly inspired by their Western counterparts, but they have modified the generic conventions to suit the local needs and have appropriated the genre by embracing an array of Indian settings and characters. This allows the authors to choose topics that suit and are symptomatic of the Indian context. Kishwar Desai chooses to expose the hypocrisies of the upper-class Indian society, by revealing the shams that lie beneath the façade of respectability. Kalpana Swaminathan chooses to discuss crimes that are usually normalised within the family, crimes which are not even conceived as such. Both the authors focus on women's concerns and depict the various shades of Indian women, from the detectives to the victim/survivors. The crucial question that needs be asked at this point is, of course, do these representations have the ability to change centuries of expectations and perceptions? Kathleen Gregory Klein believes that "the persistent undermining of the woman detective's credibility is located in three competing and cooperative arenas: the literary, economic, and political" (*Woman* 224) and the strength of this triad makes a female representation of the male heroic detective a kind of a parody. The world that this genre creates, like its glorified detective, is illusory and the way justice is served and the social order restored artificial (228). In lieu of the changes in the woman's social and economic conditions, the readers have certainly expected changes in the portrayal of the women detective figures and such an expectation is not unrealistic (223). With an increase in the number of working middle-class women with disposable incomes, and more at ease in the public space, the readers definitely want realistic and relatable portrayals of women in fiction. The female sleuths under analysis here are Indian urban women who have rejected marriage and motherhood and are in the unusual business of solving crimes. Lisa Lau writes:

> The pressures on and expectations of single women are significantly different in urban India from that of their married counterparts. It may be assumed that single women, without roles and duties associated with husband, in-laws, children, would have more freedom to negotiate their identities and also more freedom of personal autonomy; but even scratching the surface rapidly reveals that the single status for a young woman in India may not necessarily be an advantageous one in these terms, and that they function under different but still considerable constraints. ("Literary Representation" 272)

However, we do not see "the pressures on and expectations of" Lalli, Sita, and Simran Singh in very telling ways. The two women authors largely create them as aspirational figures to be looked up to as influencers, moving beyond stereotypically defined roles of a wife, a mother, or a daughter-in-law. Kathleen Klein believes that detective novels should cast "plausible women", "real women portraying authentic, lived experience" (*Woman* 228). The detectives, Simran Singh wearing a "shabby saree, bright yellow" with a "bindi" on her forehead (*Witness* 115), and Lalli in a "burnt orange Kalakshetra sari" with a "pendant at her neck" (*I Never Knew* 74), seem

relatable enough, despite their rejection of several patriarchal norms. A deeper engagement with the preferences and predilections of these fictional women reveals that "many Indian women live in worlds that bear no resemblance to those in chick-lit novels. Nearly two-thirds of the population here still lives in rural areas, where girls grow up in families that provide many opportunities to boys but none to girls" (Lakshmi). But these novels can be seen as an important harbinger of change, with women not only as objects in detective fiction, but as subjects, with agency. Women in crime writing have been carelessly offered roles of victims and even perpetrators, but women dedicated to ideals of law and order go against traditional expectations from them, with their irrationality and excessive emotional behaviour. In Lalli, Sita and Simran, as Maitreyee Chaudhuri puts it, there is "the celebration of the new-found '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 the readers to escape from their real world to a fictional world that offers women choices beyond "falling in love, going mad or dying" (Russ 80). Finally, to refer to Klein again, "if women's stories are to be authentically told, they must be spoken in women's voices" (*Woman* 228), and these stories exactly do that: they present the interior lives of women and tell their stories that deserve to be told and heard, by other women and men.

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