

Contesting Gender Aesthetics: A Feminocentric Approach to Crime Writing in Select Novels of Kishwar Desai

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Abstract Kathleen Klein's notion of a feminocentric mode of crime writing asserts the need to reformulate the genre's problematic traditions that are aligned with stereotypical representation of women characters. Kishwar Desai's novels appropriate Klein's vision of a feminocentric model in the context of Indian crime fiction and highlight the suffering of women through her female protagonist, Simran Singh. Taking a constructive detour from the usual macho detective themes, she traverses into the domains of crime that have a gendered impact and deals with the theme of female infanticide, commercial surrogacy, sexual harassment and rape from a female point of view. In this light, the present article examines the ways in which Desai's works disrupt the genre's long-established tropes and propose an alternate form of discourse through a feminist literary analysis of her crime series, *Witness the Night* (2010), *Origins of Love* (2012), and *The Sea of Innocence* (2013).

Keywords Crime fiction; detective fiction; gender; social commentary

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Introduction

The history of crime fiction exposes how the genre has always remained a male-dominated space. The conventional image of a detective is of someone who is the ultimate figure of masculinity, a defender of patriarchy, and an enforcer and guardian of order (Devereux 19). Crime fiction until the twentieth century included only male protagonists and antagonists, with marginalised female characters depicted as being in danger, in need of assistance, or as seductresses, but never as the ones wielding any form of genuine agency. Though women writers and detectives have long been prevalent in crime fiction, the detective—regardless of gender and sexuality—is constantly in negotiation with certain masculine codes, and discerning the change in the role of the detective requires understanding the extent to which she or he abides by or confronts these long-established conventions (Plain 11). Roth reiterates this view in his *Foul and Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction* (1995) as he studies 138 novels and short stories from the 1840s to the 1960s and asserts that during this period, the genre was highly conservative and excessively masculine (xiii). He further states: “My controlling assumption is that in detective fiction gender is genre and genre is male; Jane Marple and Modesty Blaise are feminine notations that perform a masculine function” (xiv) and also attributes the characterization of female characters to “flesh out male desire and shadow male sexual fear” (xiv).

While literature in itself adapts to social changes regularly, popular genres such as crime fiction can be even more responsive to the growing number of female readers and authors who want to see themselves and their experiences highlighted, mirrored, recuperated, made visible and vocal (Molinaro 100). Contrary to the early stages of the form in which women were mainly addenda or were featured in antagonistic roles, crime fiction embodies sufficient potential to include a feminist message by analysing sexism and misogyny, and by depicting settings in which women gain agency and power (Molinaro 100). Furthermore, a feminist engagement may benefit the types of violations investigated by crime fiction by increasing the possibility of investigating crimes that disproportionately affect women.

In her book *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, Kathleen Gregory Klein

posits that “the predictable formula of detective fiction is based on a world whose sex/gender valuations reinforce male hegemony” (226). While Klein observes only a few changes in the contemporary renditions of the genre, she proposes numerous ways of reformulating it. She calls for a ‘feminocentric’ model of crime writing that incorporates “questions of gender—intertwined with those of class, race, sexual preference, and social attitudes—if it is to succeed” (227). She also suggests the replacement of murder with crimes of social importance: “Social injustice, industrial corruption, rape and battery are serious crimes which also ask the readers to rethink their expectations of fiction and life” (228). Some of the other measures proposed by Klein include the replacement of female stereotypes with actual women, a thorough rethinking of the genre’s essential structure, and rejection of closure that more or less reaffirms the status quo. The present paper studies how Kishwar Desai’s novels fulfil Klein’s vision of a ‘feminocentric’ form of crime writing by refusing to conform to the conventional mode of crime writing and instead use the genre as a vehicle to highlight feminist concerns.

Kishwar Desai is a writer, columnist, and playwright who began her career as a journalist and later as a political reporter. She has also worked extensively in television and broadcast media before pursuing a career as a writer. Desai grew up in India but currently balances her time between London, Goa, and Delhi. This sense of dual national identity complicates Desai’s representation of the Indian society; instead of portraying a romanticised version of the country, her status enables her to depict the nation in a neutral, unprejudiced manner. *Witness the Night*, her debut crime novel received the Costa Book Award in 2010 and has been translated into more than 25 languages. The work was also shortlisted for the Author’s Club First Novel Award and was on the Man Asian Literary Prize longlist. Desai introduces her protagonist, Simran Singh, through this text, who later appears in the subsequent works as well. The second novel from her Simran Singh series, *Origins of Love*, was published in 2012 and was followed by *The Sea of Innocence*, published in 2013.

Desai belongs to the category of ‘social crime authors’, as all of the novels described above deal with issues of social significance. She refers to her novels as social thrillers as they expose the inequalities, injustices, and cultural practices of the country. In this way, she belongs to the group of contemporary crime fiction writers who use the genre as a medium to raise social awareness. While talking about the Simran Singh series in an interview with PTI (Press Trust of India), Desai says:

I base the plot on research—because even though the genre is fiction—

I don't want people to ever forget that all this is actually happening around us. So while my characters and narrative are all part of my imagination, I do constantly refer to real-life events, with names and places so that people can give the story a context. (qtd. in "Kishwar's New Novel")

The issues she raises are crucial in present-day society, and her use of the genre as a medium of social commentary is admirable. While *Witness the Night* deals with the theme of female infanticide, *Origins of Love* addresses issues such as surrogacy, international adoptions, and HIV/AIDS. Similarly, *The Sea of Innocence* focuses on the concerns surrounding sexual harassment and rape. The contemporary reality of gender-based violence in the country is a prevalent theme in all of Desai's novels.

A Feminocentric Approach to Crime Writing in Select Novels of Kishwar Desai

Stephen Knight expresses his concern when he opines that the crime genre presents "an inherent difficulty for writers speaking as women, and usually as feminists, in a form which is deeply implicated with masculinism" (163). This is owing to the fact that propagating a feminist sexual politics through the genre is not as easy as replacing the male protagonist with a female counterpart. Munt argues that despite the genre's apparent "unsuitability for women, crime fiction clearly can manifest feminine novelistic forms and feminist political agendas" (207). The primary apprehension that arises when analysing women writers' use of a male-dominated genre is whether their writings are truly subversive or merely parodic of established male literary traditions. Similar arguments can be found when investigating the criticism levelled at American crime writers Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton. Both of these writers challenge the masculine hard-boiled¹ fiction through the representation of their female protagonists. But the mere replacement of a male protagonist with a female one does not necessarily warrant the subversion of gender stereotypes. For instance, Johanna M. Smith elaborates upon Paretsky's failure to gender the canon through her writings by citing an example from *Burn Marks* where Paretsky's protagonist, V.I. Warshawski deliberates on whether caring for her aunt should take priority over her work and in doing so, coyly positions that "it just felt good to have some man [...] think [...] that I should be working" (qtd. in Smith 80-81). According to Smith, such instances demonstrate how Paretsky's works remain

1 Hard-boiled crime fiction is a rough, unsentimental subgenre of American crime fiction distinguished by depictions of explicit sex and violence, metropolitan environments, and fast-paced, colloquial conversations. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, George Harmon Coxe, and William Riley Burnett are among the genre's most prominent practitioners.

“male-defined, sometimes to the point of unintentional parody” (81).

Sue Grafton’s protagonist, Kinsey Millhone has also faced similar criticism for adopting the detective fiction formula without properly altering the genre’s sensibilities. However, even though Grafton does not radically subvert the detective fiction formula, her works nonetheless reflect a feminist subjectivity throughout them and provide women with an opportunity to assume the subject position (Jones and Walton 143). Although these works have been criticised for presenting a masculine model of femininity, viewing the world through the eyes of a female or minority detective broadened the perspective of the private-eye novel to include issues related to gender and race (Geherin 163). Such critical debates on writings from other nations make us question whether in the genre of Indian crime fiction, women are truly subversive or if their works merely come off as poor imitations of their male counterparts. The present study reveals that while Desai’s protagonist Simran Singh does abide by some of the masculinist conventions, she also creates a unique identity of her own in these novels that categorically differentiates her from the former crop of detectives and disregards various existing social constructs.

Simran describes herself as a “middle-aged, meddlesome social worker or NGO-wali” (Desai, *Witness* 6) and amateur therapist. She acts in ways that are considered unconventional in India; she smokes, drinks, has several relationships with men, and is not afraid to confront the rules or those in authority. Through the character of Simran, Desai subverts the conventions of the crime genre and exposes the plight of women in the country. It is interesting to note that Desai weaves her plot around themes that are relevant in present-day Indian society, with most of them revolving around gender-based issues.

***Witness the Night* and Female Infanticide in India**

Desai’s *Witness the Night* deliberates on the theme of female infanticide in the country. In a nutshell, female infanticide refers to an act of killing newborn female children within a year of their birth. The novel’s plot revolves around a 14-year-old girl who is discovered, barely alive, raped, and chained to a bed in her house, where her whole family of 13 members is found dead. Because she was the only one at the crime scene, she is presumed guilty and imprisoned. The plot then advances to Simran Singh, a social worker who is summoned by her old acquaintance Amarjit, the Punjab Inspector General, to examine her mental state and determine if she can be further probed. Simran, on the other hand, finds it difficult to believe in Durga’s culpability and sets out to examine the circumstances leading up to the killings. As the plot progresses, she uncovers that the dead family used to practice sex

selection themselves and through this, Desai highlights the social reality of female infanticide and foeticide in Northern India. *Witness the Night* is, without a doubt, a political novel. It sheds light on a society that, according to Desai, is engulfed in an incredible paradox: one of the world's most dynamic and fast-growing economies, but also one in which women are frequently viewed as both second-class citizens and catastrophic economic liabilities (East). Desai offers her perspective on male inclination in a patriarchal environment throughout the narrative: "It doesn't matter where you live, or how old you are. You can be educated, middle class, British but your longing for a son will never leave you" (55–56).

Female infanticide in India is a long-standing phenomenon induced by societal ills such as poverty, illiteracy, child marriage, the dowry system, unmarried women giving birth, female genital mutilation, starvation, maternal sickness, and so on. It is a brutal reality that female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are still practised in present-day India despite it being criminalised, partially due to the patriarchal nature of Indian society. Although the nation prohibited selective abortion of female foetuses in 1994, the practice is still widespread. A recent study titled "Female Infanticide Worldwide: The Case for Action by the UN Human Rights Council" by the Asian Centre for Human Rights¹ revealed that India witnessed one of the highest female infanticide cases in the world in the year 2018 ("India Witnesses One"). This is leading the country's sex ratio to fall considerably, which is likely to have catastrophic ramifications for the population's gender balance. According to another 2011 report published in the British medical magazine *The Lancet*, up to 12 million female foetuses were terminated in India during the preceding three decades (Saikia et al. 813). Saikia et al. also state that, due to sex-selective abortion, India is home to half of the world's missing newborns (813). Similarly, in a study conducted in 2020, the United Nations reports 142 million 'missing women' worldwide during the last 50 years, out of which India and China accounted for 45.8 and 72.3 million cases respectively ("India Accounts For"). The two countries account for around 90–95% of the estimated 1.5 million missing female births globally each year ("India Accounts For"). This highlights the severity of the themes that Desai discusses in her novel.

Origins of Love and Commercial Surrogacy

Desai's second novel *Origins of Love* combats India's surrogacy industry and is a difficult but imperative read. Against a fictitious framework, the novel expertly

¹ Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) is a Delhi-based NGO committed to the advancement and preservation of human rights and basic freedom in Asia.

examines several contentious reproductive topics such as IVF, surrogacy, sperm/egg donation, and adoption. Desai brilliantly depicts the clinics into which impoverished young Indian women are compelled to go due to economic or familial obligations. Consequently, they assume the role of battery farms for hopeful western parents who send embryos to Mumbai for the surrogates to bear for nine months. Once this is done and the baby is born, the parents fly to the clinic to collect the child. Desai not only succeeds in portraying the inner workings of both sides but also weaves a captivating narrative out of the situation.

The plot of the novel opens with an HIV positive English infant in an incubator, with no idea how she became infected, other than the knowledge that she was born out of an Indian womb. Simran is motivated to learn how newborn Amelia got infected, given the kid was conceived and carried at a fertility clinic owned and operated by her friend Anita and her husband. The setting of the novel then changes to London, where she introduces Kate and Ben, a couple longing for a child. As Kate experiences yet another miscarriage, she realises that something must be done. She becomes desperate and turns to surrogacy as an option to conceive a child and is even willing to spend the duration of nine months in India. Desai cleverly avoids incorporating too many connections from *Witness the Night* so that her second novel can be read on its own. Each chapter introduces a fresh situation, broadening Desai's depiction of a world in which women and children may be readily abused and unethical physicians can amass billions.

Commercial surrogacy is any form of surrogacy in which the surrogate mother is paid for her services in addition to covering medical expenses. The alternate variant of surrogacy is called altruistic surrogacy, where a woman offers to carry a pregnancy without the element of monetary compensation. Nobody could have guessed that commercial surrogacy, which was created, born, and flourished in the United States, would go to India and Thailand by the early 2000s (Rudrappa 286). Though official figures are notoriously difficult to obtain, a Delhi-based organisation called Sama Research Group for Women and Health conducted a United Nations-supported study in 2012, and the results were astounding. The surrogacy market in India was estimated to be more than \$400 million a year, with over 3000 fertility clinics spread across the country (Bagri). According to certain estimates, India's current surrogacy industry is worth more than a billion dollars (Tripathi). The government of India imposed a ban on transnational commercial surrogacy in August 2015, limiting it to heterosexual married Indian couples without any children and are able to convince a relative to become an altruistic gestational mother for them (Najar).

Desai explains her motivation for choosing surrogacy as the theme for her work in an interview with Arunima Mazumdar; she wants to create awareness about the process so that people have greater clarity about it. She is of the view that, if the ‘business’ continues unabated, without the passage of ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology) Bill¹, the consequences can be catastrophic. This process interferes with the emotional and physical health, as well as the fertility cycles, of women who, due to poverty, do not have access to insurance or psychiatric counselling (Mazumdar). She discusses a slew of disturbing aspects that come with the country’s surrogacy growth. In the novel, women are pressured to have more children than would be healthy in a natural cycle; an inordinate amount of fertility drugs are pumped into their bodies to a point that their ovaries are severely swollen. More often than not, these women are lured and persuaded into being surrogates by the prospect of monetary rewards. However, even this financial remuneration ends up being taken from them by the male members of their family. Desai describes clinics that maintain records of caste and creed, religion, and physical attributes as people come in search of custom-made babies. What’s worse, because these facilities rarely take any safety precautions, a disease might pass unnoticed from the donor to the mother and from the mother to the baby.

***The Sea of Innocence* and Rape, Sexual Harassment**

Desai’s third novel of the Simran Singh series, *The Sea of Innocence*, describes the darker side of Goa: “There was a looming darkness around the edges. Like a hungry nocturnal sea animal, it padded through the sand, seeking victims [...]” (10). The novel starts with Simran going on a vacation to Goa with her daughter, Durga. While being there, she receives a disturbing video of a foreign citizen being raped by three males on her phone. She is perplexed as to who might have sent her the video and later identifies the girl in the video to be a British national named Liza Kay, who had mysteriously disappeared. Simran investigates Liza’s abrupt disappearance and interviews various people. While they claim to have known her, none of them was willing to provide any additional information about her. Other recordings depicting similar instances emerge as the plot proceeds, leaving Simran to uncover what is going on.

1 The ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology) Bill was recently passed by the Lok Sabha towards the end of 2021. In vitro fertilisation, embryo transfers, and sperm banks—yet another infertility related service and business that is rapidly rising in the nation—will be regulated under the aforementioned bill. Sex selection and sex determination are likewise prohibited under the ART Bill.

The Sea of Innocence is an undeniably relevant novel in the present age or any age for that matter. Desai repeatedly alludes to real-life crimes and uses the form as a medium to express her thoughts and mark her protest against the happenings in the country. The novel is dedicated to Jyoti Singh, a physiotherapy student who was raped and assaulted by six men in New Delhi in 2012; to Scarlett Keeling, a 15-year-old British girl who was also sexually assaulted and killed in Anjuna beach in Goa in 2008; and to “the thousands of women who have been raped and murdered in India - in hope that one day they will get justice” (ii). Talking about the novel, Desai says:

[...] I think readers will find a very strong and eerie resonance between my narrative and recent incidents of rape and gang rape in India. After all, there is a common background narrative that connects the story of all women in India - and I think that is reflected in all my Simran Singh novels - whether they deal with foeticide or renting out wombs or rape. (“Kishwar’s New Novel”)

A Non-Conformist Writer at Work

In his popular book *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, modernist poet Wallace Stevens writes, “[r]eality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor” (179). Crime fiction has an extensive history of functioning as a form of escapist literature by rejecting realism and favouring the imaginary. Take the example of twentieth-century British crime writing for example. The twentieth century was a momentous period in the history of Britain, with both the World Wars and the economic depression ravaging the stability of the nation. However, even when violence was at its full swing, crime fiction remained the most widely read genre during the period because, amidst all the violence, these novels provided its readers with the much-needed escape from what was happening around them. In other words, crime fiction became a form of escapism; the genre became a medium of containment, a narrative that “makes safe” (Plain 3) and provided the readers with the reassurance of justice. They believed that similar to how crimes are solved towards the end of these novels, the adverse happenings around them will also come to an end someday and that justice will ultimately prevail. Contrary to Wallace Stevens’ assertion and the history of crime fiction as a medium of escapism, Desai builds her plots on real crimes, and as a result, rather than employing the genre merely as a means of escapism, her works confront problems that are widespread in the community. This technique of constantly referring to real-life crimes make

her narratives realistic and represents the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. Frank Moorhouse analyses this type of crime fiction that combines reality and fiction and asserts, “where boundaries between the real and the fictive dissolve, a space is opened up for the exploration of social and cultural anxieties, disturbances and crises that resist simple resolutions” (qtd. in Shaw 51). Desai steers clear from the standard conceptions of justice usually associated with crime fiction, which ask for a happy conclusion at the end of the novel. All three of her works under consideration reflect distorted notions of justice and this is discussed in detail later in the article.

Simran’s investigation provides a chance for the authorial voice to expose the many facets of Goa’s quick spiral into notoriety as a consequence of rising crime, drug trades and rave events that frequently end in absolute mayhem. The region is no longer the safe haven that it once used to be, owing to these issues. As much as it is a murder mystery, this novel is also an assessment of contemporary society, since Desai paints a sordid picture of how women tourists—or women in general for that matter—are mistreated in the country. Even though sexual assault and abuse is not an easy topic to discuss, Desai doesn’t hold back from presenting the horrors of the same. Her approach when it comes to narration is direct and with new incidents of abuse against women emerging practically on a daily basis, she does an excellent job of articulating concerns about the unfair treatment of women in Indian society and the sense of insecurity that accompanies it. These examples demonstrate how Desai’s writings successfully align with Klein’s concept of incorporating gender issues into the core of crime narratives.

Wayne Templeton posits that ethnic detective fiction commonly deals with two variations of offences: the immediate, obvious ones that are usually resolved in the text’s resolution section, and larger, more pervasive injustices that are beyond rapid remedy (38). The fundamental goal of the investigators in these books is not merely to investigate the former, minor crimes, but to keep pointing out the larger ones and explaining how they continue to victimise people (Templeton 39). Any crime fiction that aims to function as a source of social critique, including the ones described in this paper, makes a similar case. Even though the perpetrator is identified and convicted, the larger underlying offences remain unaddressed at the conclusion of these books. While the immediate crimes in Desai’s novels are individual crimes that are solved towards the end of the novel, the wider, more pervasive crime that she intends to emphasise through these works is the country’s present-day reality of gender-based crimes. Her works reflect a lack of societal indignation since sexism and misogyny are so pervasive and embedded in our culture that they are not even

considered wrong. As a result, it is not shocking that the crimes stay unresolved at the end of these novels. Writers of feminist crime fiction adopt it as a means of social commentary, revealing how these societal constraints and entanglements make it difficult for a crime to be investigated, or even regarded as a crime at all (Meyer 113). As a result, both investigators and novelists can only do as much to raise awareness about these issues. These writers often experiment with the resolution part of the genre; lack of standard resolution is a way of shifting the focus of the text to larger societal flaws rather than individual crimes. In a chapter devoted to Liza Cody's work, Mary Hadley associates a lack of conclusion to gender:

In the traditional British detective novel, the idea was that the world was a just place, and the detective, police force or the judicial system would remove the criminal and re-establish the status quo, but in the female hard-boiled novels, [...] this restoration does not happen since the detectives all question the worthiness of the justice system and the establishment in general. (66)

This is evident in all of Desai's works under consideration. Her works constantly deal with systemic flaws such as corruption and shortcomings of the society, while maintaining a core focus on gender-related issues in India. In *Witness the Night*, even though the patriarchal oppressive structures prevalent in present-day India is blamed for Durga's conduct, and it is argued that her family and society compelled her to behave the way she did, the resolution is unsettling as the real culprits escape any form of punishment (Morgan 6). The police officer is paid with Durga's family home at a reduced rate in exchange for letting Durga and Sharda move out of the city with Simran, the tutor is exonerated, and the women are depicted as victims of their situations (Morgan 6). Similarly, the ending of *The Sea of Innocence*, in which the British woman's case is resolved whereas the Indian woman's case remains open, depicts the disparity in justice based on nationality and the reduced status of local women in Indian society. This lack of closure and conventional endings is precisely what Klein outlines in her feminocentric mode of crime writing, and Desai's novels adhere to them, thereby challenging rather than reaffirming the status quo.

Neele Meyer argues that, in crime fiction, female protagonists frequently have an upper hand over their male equivalents when it comes to gathering information. Oftentimes, they are successful in obtaining information that their male counterparts were unable to collect and consequently, these women "challenge gendered spatial practices that confine women to the private sphere to protect them

from the apparently dangerous public sphere” (Meyer 112). Desai’s protagonist, who functions in public without much difficulty, defies the notion of women being restrained and having limited access to the public sphere. While the media and public discourses frequently stress the threats of the public domain for women (Phadke et al. 51), texts such as Desai’s raised concerns about the largely quiet abuse prevalent within families. Such depictions stand in stark contrast to the normative patterns of crime writing, in which the public sphere is frequently used as a site of transgression.

Conclusion

To conclude, all three novels in Desai’s crime series employ the genre of crime fiction to highlight feminist issues through the narrative. Her works categorically disregard the centrality of masculinity and demonstrate how women can equally renegotiate the space usually occupied by men in the genre. Elizabeth Fletcher stresses that even the simple gesture of choosing a woman as the lead character of crime fiction may be construed as a feminist act (197). Kishwar Desai’s nuanced curation of the character of Simran Singh in the series effectively blends with Klein’s feminocentric model of crime fiction. Contrary to stereotypical representations of female protagonists, Desai creates a genuine investigator with flaws that make her more relatable. She never cleanly or swiftly solves the cases she is given, and she frequently ends up discovering broader issues that are well beyond her capacity to resolve. When it comes to her role as a social worker, she is continually beaten by the community in which she lives, leaving the reader with a negative sense of her experienced India and little guidance on how to tackle the issues that appear to afflict the current Indian milieu in which she is placed (Morgan 13). Her enthusiasm and dedication, on the other hand, make her a compelling figure to a modern reading public, and the quick-paced storylines make Desai’s works engaging. Desai deviates from the normative tropes of crime fiction, thereby producing an alternate form of the genre told from a feminist standpoint. Such depictions question the genre’s established rules and illustrate how generic traditions are bound to change over time. While the trope of murder is still a part of Desai’s novels, they nevertheless focus on larger societal themes such as female foeticide and infanticide, commercial surrogacy, rape, and sexual abuse which integrates the conventional construct to make it real and relevant. This demonstrates crime fiction’s potential to address key social concerns and sheds light on the genre’s deep analytical possibilities, which have previously gone unnoticed.

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by the “University Grants

Commission” (190510080572/NET JRF-JULY, 2019).

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