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A BRIEF PANORAMA OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Editor

Dr. Ashish Gupta



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A Brief Panorama of English Literature

Edited by Dr. Ashish Gupta

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Redefining a Genre: Kishwar Desai's *The Sea of Innocence*

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The opening pages of Kishwar Desai's *The Sea of Innocence* (2013) thrusts the reader headlong into a vortex of sexual suggestion and imminent violence shattering the myth of serenity that defines Goa that idyllic destination, which had been a major draw of tourists from the West since the influx of the backpacker generation of flower children in the 1960s and 70s.

The locale, a sleepy hamlet, whose placid torpor is disrupted by the hint of sinister goings-on is a deliberate choice on the part of the novelist; one that is in the tradition of the escapist genre of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple Series. But, the parallel with Kishwar Desai in *The Sea of Innocence* can be extended no further. For, in the case of Agatha Christie the exponent of the Golden Age of detective fiction between the World Wars, there would appear to be a severance of fiction from the reality of a lived existence. Kishwar Desai on the other hand infuses realism by raising the issue of gender based sexual violence, a phenomenon which has been raising its ugly head in the subcontinent judging by the statistics of National Crime records of crimes against women. National Crime Records Bureau recorded 1839 rapes in 2013 in one takes the instance of Maharashtra and 3438 in 2014, which implies an 87 percent increase in crimes of this nature.

If realism was so central to this genre it is never more apparent than in the counter tradition of crime and mystery fiction; that crime and mystery fiction with a distinct feminist coloration of the late twentieth century of Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky. Sara Paretsky had this to say of the genre 'Crime fiction is the natural medium for writing about social justice'. This counter tradition was a far cry from that of the British one

which produced the elderly staid spinster Miss Marple from St. Mead, who came upon murders in large country houses peopled by a select upper middle class milieu and who was tagged as exemplifying a 'conservative social vision' (Scaggs: 48) and which has since been criticized for having excluded the 'devastation of the Great War and the social economic upheaval of the 1920 and 1930s depression' (Scaggs: 48).

It is this counter tradition of mystery fiction of Muller, Grafton and Paretsky which Kishwar Desai that seems to dictate the rhythm of her trilogy of novels. *Witness the Night* 2010 which won the Costa First Novel Award and was shortlisted for the Man Asian literary prize; the *Origins of Love* which was published in 2012 and *The Sea of Innocence* in 2013. In an interview with Homa Khaleeli, Desai said it was 'pure fury' at violence against women that turned her into a novelist. In *Witness the Night* she dealt with sex-selective infanticide and foeticide, in *Origins of Love* with the exploitation of impoverished women in the entire rent-a-womb/ surrogacy industry and in *The Sea of Innocence* Desai she focused on the subject of sexual violence and rape, something she said was becoming 'endemic' in India.

A historical review of the evolution of crime fiction would reveal that the genre of crime fiction was a male dominated one and by insinuation one which begs the question whether presided over by a patriarchal mindset. Edgar Allan Poe in his fictional creation of the detective C August Dupin presents 'an intelligent but eccentric detective who solves crimes through the process of rational thinking. Poe calls this process "ratiocination"'. It is Dupin who dominates *The Murder in the Rue Morgue*(1840/41), *The Mystery of Marie Roget* (1842/3) and *The Purloined Letter*(1844).The extraordinary analytic ability which bordered on prescience, that faculty for deduction is exhibited also by both Sherlock Holmes and Mycroft Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Greek Interpreter* 1893 when their observations of a casual passerby through a bow window at the Diogenes Club, resulted in them arriving at the following accurate conclusions: that the passerby had been recently discharged from service in India as non -commissioned officer in the Royal Artillery, had been recently bereaved; had lost his wife in childbirth and had two

children, an infant and the other a trifle older. And all this from his 'sun baked skin' the attire the man sported, his badge of mourning and the packages in his possession. In fact, early in the story Watson engages **Holmes** in a dialogue on the subject of his own pre-eminence in intelligence, his personality as that of an 'isolated phenomenon' and his 'unemotional character'. These extraordinary powers of deduction caused both Sherlock and Mycroft to reign supreme in this field unchallenged by the female of the species in *The Greek Interpreter* as Holmes in the mysteries *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* authored by Doyle and thus reinforced the stereotype. and this undisturbed till the introduction of Miss Marple by Agatha Christie.

Drew R. Thomas in his study of Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe suggested that the creator of Sherlock Holmes was inspired by the model of Poe's Dupin. In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue(1941) according to Scaggs the narrator of the story makes particular mention of Dupin's 'peculiar analytic ability' and his uncanny capability to read the mind of the narrator in the course of their walk through the city. In fact in the hundred years following Poe it was with very few exceptions 'masculine heroism and rationality that solves crime and restores the social order,' (Scaggs:20). Poe and Doyle created sleuths who fit squarely into a matrix created by a masculine world view, a characterization which highlighted the inequalities between the sexes.

Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton and Sara Paretsky introduced a variation in their delineation of female protagonist sleuths in crime thrillers. To reverse the stereotype characters introduced into this genre were Sharon M McCone (Marcia Muller) Kinsey Milhone (Sue Grafton) and V I Warshawski (Sara Paretsky).

Margaret Kinsmen in her study of feminist crime fiction opined that 'For women to find a voice, a voice telling them that they may have adventures, that action, is a woman's appropriate sphere, has been the difficult task of the last centuries'.

In *The Sea of Innocence* Kishwar Desai's delineation of Simran Singh, the offbeat female private cum crusading social activist the novelist, helped women find just that voice. For the representation of Simran Singh challenges the stereotype of the

sleuth whose private life is as great mystery to the reader as is the identity of the murderer.

In fact Sara Paretsky when discussing her choice of VI Warshawski said 'There is a theme in crime literature of women being either the femme fatale or the victim. When I first read Raymond Chandler, in six out of seven of his novels the woman presented herself sexually, and it galvanized me into thinking, surely there are better ways of representing women, who are more believable and had to solve their own problems?'

Simran Singh whilst sensitive to the sinister drama unfolding beneath the surface juggles her concerns about threats to her daughter's sexuality allows the reader to range over her maternal concerns as to whether Durga's black nail polish portends she had turned goth, upping her state of preparedness for rings punched into the lips and safety pins in the belly, all this whilst the reader is privy to Durga's (her adopted daughter) tongue in cheek ribbing that she get a dragon tattoo as a marker of her newly avowed profession, read social activist.

In this beer swilling chain smoking avatar of a possible urbanized breed of professional in a contemporary India. Thus Simran Singh post - divorce is liberated enough to conduct her investigations in collaboration with her so-called ex and resist her mother's matchmaking designs to subtly nudge her back into a renewal of ties; she strides fearlessly forward following her leads and stringing her readers along through some nail-biting moments of high tension.

These departures from convention seem pretty feeble compared with the choice of subject of rape of a British national at this tourist destination; the story having been inspired by the Scarlett Keeling rape in Anjuna, Goa in 2008; also the topical Nirbhaya rape of Jyoti Singh.

Madeline Amelia Clements in her review of Kishwar Desai's novel was critical of her inclusion of rape stating that it places 'the reader in uncomfortable and almost voyeuristic relation to a series of disquieting events'. But in the novelist's defense as the reviewer further elaborated the author in *Witness the Night* (2010) which commenced the series along with *Origins of Love* (2012) and *The Sea of Innocence* (2013) had omitted the

customary disclaimer that the characters in the work were purely fictional. Desai in fact stated that 'while the characters and places in this book are entirely fictional the events which take place are not'. This holds true of *The Sea of Innocence* in fact, where she dedicated the the novel to the Nirbhaya rape victim, Scarlet Keeling and the thousands of women 'who have been raped and murdered in India'. Thus Desai makes no bones about social issues that are the subject of her novel and is a challenging counter to those who questioned her motives in cashing in on a topical sensational money churning.

Criticism has also been levelled at her for the inclusion of the graphic video messages to Simran Singh of the events preceding the brutal rape and murder. Could the progression of the plot necessitate the graphic video messages to the female sleuth Simran Singh of the events preceding the brutal rape and murder? Could the graphics be justified by the need to pinpoint the events leading to the crime of rape? Could the visuals possibly help in identifying where the responsibility for the commission of the crime could be laid to rest in the question of provocation for the rape?

In her depiction of Lisa Kay Desai, Madeline Amelia Clements states Simran 'attempts to piece together what happened...subject to the usual assumptions about an independent white girl's sexual looseness...who goes missing after an evening out at a shack on a stretch of paradisaal Goan beach.' Desai states 'Everything cannot be blamed on the outsider ...' (TSOI 77)

In fact, *State of Maharashtra v Madhukar NarainMandhikar* raises the issue of patriarchal laws which encroach on women's rights to privacy. In the instant case Madhukar Narain Mandhikar was a police officer who went in uniform into Banubi's home and forcibly had sex with her. In the subsequent inquiry the tribunal dismissed the case on the basis of allegations that Banubi 'was kept as a mistress' and was a known 'Awara', though the charge of the rape was substantiated. On an appeal the Supreme Court held that 'even a woman of easy virtue is entitled to the right of privacy and none can invade it as and when he likes...She is equally entitled to the protection of law.

Merely because she is a woman of easy virtue her evidence cannot be thrown overboard’.

R.K. Raghavan, former CBI director in an article in the DNA of April 11, 2015 draws attention to the fact that the onus is on the victim to prove she was violated. He cited the instance of the Supreme Court of India in an open court questioning two women who had alleged rape by persons acting on behalf of an industrialist and disregarding the provisions of Sect 327 (2) of Criminal Procedure Code which required that rape case hearings be conducted in camera; also the genuineness of the rape victim’s claims were questioned in the said instance.

Desai’s reflections in the novel draw attention to the contradiction of a culture which has been entrenched in India post the Portuguese colonization and its legacy of Christianity the landscape dotted with churches which ‘spoke of strong Catholic past, which was alive in many homes and villages. Alongside the beaches with their tourist, the drugs and the rave parties’ (*The Sea of Innocence*: 76). It appeared so peaceful but ‘from all accounts it too was torn between the ghosts of the Hindu, Muslim and Catholic history and the dreams of the future’. (*TSOI*: 76) The question of gender violence (read rape) in the case of Liza Kay seems to suggest it is a corollary of the ‘volatile nature of the state’. (*TSOI*: 77). Could the so called ‘contradiction of cultures’ be the *raison d’etre* for the crime or could the blame be laid elsewhere?

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