



## Last Resort Lalli or the New Age Miss Marple

Shrehya Taneja

“Crime has always been a part of our lives. Open a daily... you notice... crime stories... Indian writers, especially in English, did not actually tackle the subject until recently... suddenly... last four-five years, there has been an avalanche of crime writing in India”- Sarma (*Making Crime Pay*, 2015)

Crime has penetrated the daily newspapers and the television set at home entering the domestic landscape and molding the taste of the emerging Indian nation which is now a global market. The ‘India Shining’ slogan adopted in 2004 by the political BJP<sup>1</sup> marked a shift in Indian lifestyle. This slogan became synonymous with rapid development that transformed the image of the nation worldwide. The campaign sought to depict economic change that swept the Indian market in 1990’s hinting at global lifestyle, availability of imported brands and the awareness of an efficient economy that allowed a better lifestyle. The post-millennial Indian nation that might have it all emerged significantly changing the expression of the Indian realities. What appeals to the palette of this new rising India striving to make its mark on the global consciousness? What is this new post millennial India reading?

Suman Gupta<sup>2</sup> (2015) traces the development of ‘Indian English literature’ to 1980’s where the publishers at domestic and foreign markets forayed into the publishing business with fiction written in Indian English. Gupta believes that the Indian market differentiates between commercial fiction and literary fiction represented by writers like Rushdie, Nair and Ghosh; these two arenas are not mutually exclusive and are judged according to the commercial profits. To map the advent of Indian English writing and to gauge the Indian reader’s interests, we need to move beyond the horizons of academic criticism by examining the reception of Indian English fiction and its circulation in the publishing industry. Emma

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<sup>1</sup> Bhartiya Janta Party

<sup>2</sup> Professor Suman Gupta (1966) is the Head of Department of English and Creative Writing at the Open University, United Kingdom. His interests include modern and contemporary Indian literature as well as political philosophy. His work marks a significant contribution in tracking the progress of Indian Literature. Some of the books on which he co-authored include-*Philology and Global English Studies: Retracings* (2015), *Consumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology* (2015) and many more. He has also edited *India in the Age of Globalization* (2003), *English Studies on This Side: Post-2007 Reckonings* (2010) and many other volumes.

Dawson Varughese<sup>3</sup> (2013) locates the emergence of a 'New India' and a 'New Indian cannon' in 1980's that catered to different 'societal changes'. She details various genres that arose in post-independent India.

While Varughese examines several genres-emergency literature, epic, and fantastical narratives, Young India's fiction-this paper focuses on the genre of Indian detective fiction, a subgenre of crime writing. This paper focuses on the depiction of the female detective in Indian English writing while examining the nature of Indian detective fiction that responds to its literary ancestor, Golden Age crime fiction through Swaminathan's<sup>4</sup> silver haired detective, Last-Resort Lalli. The texts that the paper interrogates include second and the third novel in the Lalli series, *The Gardener's Song*<sup>5</sup>(2007) and *The Secret Gardener*<sup>6</sup>(2013), respectively. Contemporary Indian detective fiction acquired the status of a flourishing genre in the Indian market by being able to capture the reader's imagination. An article titled, 'Reading in India' (2007) registers Swaminathan's detective fiction as favorable. Lalli received numerous mentions in many dailies and made a mark as a popular Indian detective in Varughese's 'Crime Writing' (2014). This character recalls Agatha Christie's Miss Marple<sup>7</sup> making it an ideal point of investigation for its readers. The paper focuses on critically investigating the relationship that Lalli both recalls and shares with Miss Marple.

The genre of detective fiction has become an urbane phenomenon that depicts the multiple diverse realities of India. It has its origin in Golden Age crime fiction that became popular in Britain during the World Wars. The detective story provided an escape from the reality of a life for the British Empire dealing with its waning power. Orsini<sup>8</sup> (2004) follows the advent of detective fiction in nineteenth century India where Holmes's descendants move from Bengali to Hindi literature. A major reason that this genre flourished in the commercial market was its engagement with the colonial India. Orsini's informative essay fails to examine the profile of the contemporary Indian reader of a detective novel. She paves the path for further examination of this phenomenon that has entered the urban space and the domain of English fiction being produced by Indian authors. What are the reader's expectations from the detective fiction novels in Indian English? How do women writers and their creations, the female detectives, impact the genre?

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Emma Dawson Varughese is an independent research scholar who has done significant work in tracing the rise of genre fiction and their resonance with the sociopolitical circumstances which led to their rise within contemporary Indian literature. Her publications include *Beyond the Postcolonial: World Englishes Literature* (2012), *Reading New India: post-millennial Indian Fiction* (2013) *Genre Fiction of New India: post millennial configurations of Crick Lit, Chick Lit and crime writing* (2016) and many other such valuable research work.

<sup>4</sup> Kalpana Swaminathan (1956) is a writer and a surgeon who has authored The Lalli series. She has written many other novels including *Ambrosia for After* (2003)s, *Jaldi's Friends*(2003) and *Bougainvillea House* (2006) and many more. Lalli first appeared in *Page 3 Murders* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Abbreviated as TGSO

<sup>6</sup> Abbreviated as TSG

<sup>7</sup> Dame Agatha Christie (1890-1976) was a famous English novelist, playwright and short story writer. She created many memorable detectives like Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Miss Marple first appeared in *The Thirteen Problems* (1932).

<sup>8</sup> The essay referred to here is *Detective Novels: A Commercial Genre in Nineteenth Century North India*.

The launch of Doordarshan in 1959 and eventual onslaught of entertainment channels introduced various shows to the imagination of the Indian public. The rise of the urban middle class in the 1980's can be charted through televised Doordarshan serials like *Buniyaad* and *Hum Log*<sup>9</sup>. Both shows, written by Manohar Joshi, consolidated the position of Indian middle class in the post-partition era. *Hum Log* showcased the Basesar family's struggles through its visible symbols of modernity be it gramophones, transistors, and the two bedroom flat. *Buniyaad* charted the journey of a Punjabi family as they progressed from pre partition Punjab to the post partition era. The space occupied by the family undergoes many conflicts related to their survival. The viewers of daily soaps imbibed an ideological cultural experience which condemned the breaking of the patrilineal familial structure while dramatizing the social evils of partition, dowry, and domestic violence as invading the isolated structure and tearing it apart. These shows epitomized the nostalgic past and privileged the joint family system. *Hum Log* had Ashok Kumar appearing after every episode's conclusion acting as the voice of reason debating dilemmas faced by characters and steering the audience in a particular direction. These serials engaged with the contemporary culture of commercialization that began in tandem with these popular shows. The time slots between shows advertised products for the family like 'two minute Maggi Noodles' and 'Hamara Bajaj' scooters paving the way for an urban middle class which distanced from the immediate aftermath of partition, began coming into its own.

Tharoor (*Celebrate College, but Doubt the School*, 2000) commented on the reality of the evolving middle class that composed an India with its multiple truths and realities. He identified the connection between nostalgic intellectual tradition which privileged the reading of the epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana, a past symbolized by the erstwhile Master Haveli Ram who participated in nationalistic movements against colonialism remaining rooted to the Indian way of life. The characters like Nanhe and Majhli who wanted to embrace the life of a cricketer and an actress, respectively, indicated the ambitions the Indian middle class harbored introducing an anglophone present. The families who had worked hard after Independence had been able to amass a certain amount of wealth allowing them to educate their children from English speaking institutions. These students, with the consciousness of their antecedents and a bloody past, formed a reading and writing public that composed a large chunk of the nation and sought to create its own literature. It is during this rich historical moment in which writers like Tharoor, Ghosh, Sealy, and Menon emerged. They could choose from multiple cultural experiences where they simultaneously viewed the works of Indian playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, and Badal Sircar while enjoying Shakespearean theater. "Increasingly, the urban Indian reader is well travelled, discerning and demands variety" - Aniyam Nair (2007) It is this reading public home at different worlds that would be confident in reading Christie while experimenting with their own Indian detectives negotiating an Inter-War Britain and a post-colonial India. It was during the 1980's -90's that popular Hindi detective dramas were launched. Some of these successful shows include *Byomkesh Bakshi*, *Jasoos Karamchand*, *Raja aur Rancho*, *Tehkikat*, and *Saboot* starring Anita Karwal as the Indian female detective. Thus, the Indian reader comes from a tradition of reading British detective fiction, vernacular detective fiction, and watching television serials adapted from popular crime shows.

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<sup>9</sup> *Buniyaad* premiered in 1986 and was directed by Ramesh Sippy. It starred Alok Nath as Master Haveli Ram and Anita Karwal as Lajwanti, the lead protagonists of the show. *Hum Log* aired in 1984 was the first television drama series to be launched in India was directed by P. Kumar Vasudev. It starred many actors like Vinod Nagpal and Jayshri Arora.

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. Why do these adaptations appeal to the Indian readers? The rise of the female fictional Indian detective is an emerging phenomenon which requires investigation. Rather than tracing similarities between these genres or looking at Lalli through the lens of adaptation, the paper attempts to trace a critical response towards Christie through her. An Indian reader familiar with Christie's Miss Marple inevitably attempts to trace parallels with Swaminathan's Lalli. Swaminathan debated her decision to choose an older detective, a female aged 63 years, in an interview. She was confronted with the question whether an elderly detective can live up to the challenges of a darker universe where every character is suspicious and the detective constantly doubts. The existence of an elderly spinster, Miss Marple in a fictional universe, according to Swaminathan's critics, provided her with a framework that she could exploit while assuring her readers that her famed-silver haired detective was not a novel experiment, it had a literary predecessor.

Roma Rajpal (2012) commented that the Indian detectives are post-colonial hybrids comfortable in many worlds. Like the reading and writing public, they converse in English while munching pakoras and tea. This post-colonial moment in detective fiction has bestowed it with possibilities allowing the genre to respond to its literary predecessors by harnessing its potential to tell an innovative story. Responding to the legacy of Golden Age crime fiction writers becomes a task for Swaminathan which encompasses several arguments. The Indian landscape and the gap of almost two centuries with the varied epistemological framework that the evolving detective figures face become important themes. It is the erosion of the family that impacts the Indian social landscape. The appearance of crime from within the internal labyrinth of family becomes the pervading concern of Indian detective fiction. Swaminathan utilizes the generic convention to speak about the dominant familial institution where detective supposedly becomes a beholder of conventional moral values, rescuing the domestic space from chaos and restoring it to a peaceful state.

Miss Marple's adaptation as the central reference by Swaminathan becomes clear in *The Gardener's Song*. The text creates a dialogue between Lalli and Miss Marple over generations. Miss Marple and Lalli as elderly spinsters reside at their homes with cases knocking at their doorsteps. Nothing escapes Miss Marple's eyes and the Vicar describes her as dangerous (*The Murder at the Vicarage*, 1930). Miss Marple prides herself as an aficionado on human nature. For her, human nature is same everywhere while Lalli collects curiosities. Her curiosities recount grotesque nature of the crime committed by ordinary individuals. From Miss Marple, Swaminathan borrows the deceptive appearance of elderly spinster who clucks like a harmless motherly hen, a ruse that both adopt to fool others.

Swaminathan reflects on the parish of St. Mary Mead where everyone knows everyone. The village community lends itself to the cloistered and diverse Indian realities, here specifically the building, Utkrushi A in *The Gardener's Song* where Lalli and Sita reside. The apartment complex housing sixteen families recalls St. Mary Mead with the elderly spinsters who make it their business to be informed about the entire village news. The figure of Mr. Rao represents the amateur detective who recalls both Miss Marple and other nosy elderly women like Mrs Price Ridley, Miss Weatherby, and Miss Hartnell who populate the Vicarage and pass moral judgments in their drawing rooms. Mr. Rao performs the function of the detective within the Indian family system who does his duty by finding faults in others while upholding the family's reputation. Miss Marple could have been a female Mr.

Rao, the interfering neighbor who became a nuisance to others, if not for her sensibility. He is the failed amateur detective contrasted against the successful professional detective. Nothing escapes Mr. Rao but he spreads it to the entire building tarnishing reputations in the bargain. The structure of the cramped apartment depicts the shift from Golden Age Crime fiction to post-colonial India where the apartment symbolizes the urban Indian realities. The apartments become isolated communities that house compact living spaces where all the residents are intimate with other's lives.

The apartment buildings in the new mega cities provide a visual image of globalized India as a direct outcome of the India Shining campaign focused on neoliberalization of policies exposing India to world markets. They become synonymous with material desires of middle class to inhabit the urban imagination with their improvised world class lifestyle. The globalized Indian lifestyle was reflected in consumption of commodities be it Sita's culinary dishes, Kashish's indie pop concert, police procedural tools, and Rita Gomes catching a flight to Dubai to start her own entrepreneurial endeavor of a make-up saloon. The building residents, Padmanabhan, Ramachandran, Betty, Benny, the Patels, Vaibhav Rao, Mr. Rao, and Sita symbolize Christie's urban readers. Sita as the urban cosmopolite recalls Miss Marple's cases when she refers to atropine eye drops in murdering someone and poison pen while attempting to solve Mr. Rao's murder. The atropine eye drops featured as the solution to a mystery that Miss Marple solved in *The Thumb Mark of St. Peter (1928)* whereas, the poison pen recalls *The Moving Finger (1942)*. Sita functions as the narrator, participant reader, and amateur detective who attempts to find the murderer based on her knowledge of reading detective fiction making apparent the connection between Miss Marple's novels and Lalli's detection.

Utkrushi becomes the center of action. There are various incidents emphasizing the breakup of the familial structure like the divorced Patels, Latika facing domestic violence or Srikanth Rao turning into the black sheep of family. Mr. Rao employs his disguise of an interfering neighbor while solving a real mystery. *The Secret Garden* also focuses on conflict within the family. Anil and Priya Chauhan's marriage is in danger and Priya's son Jai decides to seek shelter with Lalli to understand why he cannot play cricket with his new father. Priya earlier married to Hrishikesh Sawant was a victim of marital rape and domestic violence. Jai faced the brunt of his alcoholic father foregrounding another dysfunctional middle class family. Anil's marriage with Varsha Gurav exposes an emotionally abusive relationship where Varsha does not return Anil's affection. Swaminathan critically adapts Christie to initiate discussions about the Indian middle class and problems faced by women. Lalli with the outward appearance of a comely matron like Miss Marple is sought by every member of the society especially women.

Lalli runs the risk of becoming a stereotype that endorses a Western mode of thinking. Transposing the privileged first world woman into third world leads to the emphasis of the contrast of representation of the third world woman as imagined by the Western readers versus the Indian woman represented by an Indian female writer. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1987) cited five approaches in which the discourse around the third world woman is depicted by Western imagination. They are habitually defined as victims of male violence, universal dependants and their identities are subject to institutions of family, religion and economic liberalization. All women, except Sita, within textual universe have their identities defined in connection to their families. Both Vanaja Rao and Varsha Chauhan are wives first. The female characters in *The Secret Garden* are depicted as having dual identities which they are in the process of renegotiating as hidden secrets tumble out. The

restoration of broken familial structure becomes the detective's assumed primary function, but Lalli is interested in unveiling the dual personas of criminals within these families. The accommodative ideal, the woman who does everything for betterment of her community and her family to the exclusion of herself shaped by the emergent nationalist discourses and the colonialist discourse has ceased to be.

The novels create a dialogue about the intrinsic violence practiced both within and without organized institutions that undermine the agency of women. Kumudben recounts the story of her niece, Sonu's dowry death while Latika narrates her plight of being burnt like Sonu so that she can be literally and metaphorically silenced. Kumudben here becomes the voice of reason who wants to protect the Sonus of the world. This discussion happens in Lalli's apartment effectively creating a feminist space in her abode and bestowing agency on the women of Utkrushi. Moreover the doing away of any title before Lalli's name as opposed to the attachment of the respectable prefix Miss or Mrs. signals an escape in reader's mind since, Lalli refuses to let her marital status define her identity. The police detectives conjecture Lalli's history. She is introduced as the narrator's distant aunt. The absence of an organized familial structure re-aligns the reader's imagination fixing her as an individual choosing to privilege her identity of an investigating expert.

Lalli interrogates the hidden realities of the progressive middle class family unearthing different feminisms. The 'cultural other' or here the third world woman has a past of her own; a collective memory passed through generations which makes itself explicit in the attitudes, social modes of behavior, and crimes committed against them. This inherited communal memory indicates the shift towards an Indian audience for whom dowry deaths have become the norm and needs no introduction. However to club all women as being universally oppressed is to take away from their individual narrative voices, where their experiences vary but a shared understanding helps them to tackle the problems.

"She was an elder chanting the collective memory of her tribe...all those gathered about her remembered... wept...commonality of grief...arise from a shared memory and within that memory...many daughters have died... many mothers torn their hearts for them?"- Swaminathan (TGSO, 2007)

Lalli's occupation as a former policeman and her disguise as an elderly spinster allows her to come in contact with different Indian women. As opposed to Miss Marple, who is largely acquainted with people belonging to aristocratic class, Lalli by the virtue of her profession as a detective is engaged with the casteist, class-based and patriarchal structure of the Indian society. While in Utkrushi, we are confronted with urban middle class educated women capable of some agency of their own, in *The Secret Gardener*, Swaminathan creates diverse characters who belong to the fringes of the society. The action moves to a less crowded textual universe ushering in characters who act as the eyes and the ears of the society like Maruti the gardener, the Kapadias, Sukesh an electrician cum thief, Usha who lost everything in an earthquake in Gujarat and now runs a small time business, and Kesar Bai who was sold off into prostitution, later rescued by Lalli. Varsha's past is thoroughly explored as Sita and Lalli visit her college and track her domestic life. She is bestowed with a past of her own as are Kesar Bai, Usha Kapadia, Priya Chauhan, and Mrs. Kolse.

The factor that unites the female characters is the lack of agency that has turned them into victims be it Usha, Kesar, Priya, or Mrs. Kolse. Mrs. Kolse like Priya has an unhappy marriage and both the women do not exercise the option of ending their marriages

recalling Lalli's words in the second novel about the compulsive need of the middle class to maintain their hypocritical façade of respectability. However, Kesar and Usha choose to respond. Usha Kapadia is an independent business woman selling Kutchi handicrafts, beads, fabrics, and costume jewellery. Kesar's evident enjoyment of her sexuality, her advice to Suresh to end his life, and her penchant for classical music create a unique character. Usha's independent venture selling feminine products and Kesar's music and her sexuality become their means of reinventing their self, allowing them freedom of choice and agency.

It is significant that Priya chooses to take shelter with Lalli after she has been raped, Usha opens up to her about her travails and even Mrs Kolse responds to Lalli like Ahilyaba Sawant. Lalli becomes synonymous in the imagination of female characters with security enabling them with a voice away from repressive family structures where they are able to narrate their problems. Different Indian feminist approaches emerge within the textual universe. It's the engagement with the silent struggles of female characters that mark the transition from the second to the third novel. Swaminathan breaks away from the structure of the conventional detective novels with labeled chapters as here the novel is divided into three parts providing us with the beginning, the middle, and the end. However, in both the novels, Lalli does collect the concerned characters together and provides a solution for them.

The structure of the novel, *The Gardener's Song* is in tune with Christie's formulaic writing. Sita influenced by Christie's novels detects a pattern in a poem that supposedly provides the clue-puzzle structure which the reader or the detective solves. Swaminathan both adopts and subverts Christie's technique of structuring events according to a poem, "Ten Little Indians" in her novel, *And Then There Were None* (1939). The events of the novel fit the pattern of the poem and invoke Christie's writings. *The Mad Gardener's Song* (1967) is a nonsensical poem written by Lewis Carroll<sup>10</sup> which even though follows a rhyme has no reasonable explanation. Swaminathan links events in this poem in a rational manner by calling it 'The Gardener's Song' erasing the word "Mad" from the title. The Mad Gardener speaks about the disappointments he faces, characteristic of the ordinary middle class life which keeps him from tending to his garden be it the relatives overstaying their welcome, the cold winters, the need for luxuries, and finally, the hopelessness of the human condition. The poem plays on the bitter realities of the middle class life displaying the motives of the middle class mind whose liberal modern lifestyle is dependent on economic prosperity. The Gardener, Yellapa, is an inquisitive onlooker who, recognizing kinship with the Kannada Raos, approaches Vanaja and ultimately foils her plans. Here, he becomes the eyes and the ears for the professional detective.

Moving onto the criminals, Mr Rao's naiveté lies in his inability to suspect Vanaja of the crime. He cannot imagine a female criminal. This assumption is strengthened when everyone suspects Anil as the murderer. Priya is ready to end her marriage with Anil because she believes him to be the culprit. Miss Marple's cases focused on many female criminals. Both Vanaja and Varsha seemed ordinary women who turned into murderesses. Varsha is a compulsive killer who murders to gain her motives beneath her persona of an amiable educated achiever. She was subjected to imagined and actual sexual assault by Makarand, her stalker. Vanaja borrows a leaf out of Lalli's book. She employs her disguise of a dutiful daughter-in-law while aiding her husband in the blood diamond business by using

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis Carroll (1832-98) was an English writer, mathematician, photographer and logician famous for writing nonsensical poems and Alice's Adventures.

her home-made agarbattis to get Latika unconscious. Swaminathan (2011) commented that Lalli is worried that the Indian society is teeming with sordid crime while pretending to be respectable. The disparate labels of the elite middle class or the low life mean nothing to her. Lalli is worried about the psychopath that hides beneath an ordinary self. There is the doubling of selves that happens in both the criminals echoed by Lalli's spinster-detective persona. The use of doctored agarbattis by Vanaja indicates the subversive manner in which the institution of religion proves advantageous to her, revealing the dual agency of religion. Varsha uses her sexuality to strike a bargain with Mr. Kolse to prevent him from revealing her hidden persona while playing the devoted housewife.

Lalli has been shaped by the Western crime shows that populated the audience's imagination. The professional female detective in two American crime dramas aired several years apart, *Body of Evidence* (2002) and *Rizzoli and Isles* (2010)<sup>11</sup>, depict the advent of modern forensic sciences. Dayle Hinman is a real life criminal profiler whose cases were dramatized for television. She analyzes body language, blood splatter patterns and the criminal's psychology to locate them. *Rizzoli and Isles* has been developed from a series of detective fiction books penned by Gerritsen and adapted for television. Doctor Maura Isles transforms the victim's body into an object of study allowing her to aid the crime solving process. The appearance of the criminal profiler and the medical examiner is a splitting of Miss Marple into different characters having access to various areas of technical knowledge. Lalli is an omniscient character who has gained both medical and psychological insight over the years but she calls in Doctor Qureshi just like the Florida police relies on Hinman, and Rizzoli seeks out Dr. Isles.

Viewers familiar with these crime dramas expect the stereotypical image of a professional detective, and hence, Lalli's penchant for dressing up for murder, reflected in Hinman's pantsuits while looking forward to both Rizzoli's no-nonsense attitude towards her choice of clothes. Lalli absorbs from crime dramas the professional detective's ability to dress for the job in a shirt and trousers. Negotiating the masculine space of the workplace itself offers a challenge that these fictional characters portray on the screen. Both Hinman and Rizzoli tend to downplay their sexual identity. Hinman adopts a professional attitude relying on logical analysis to locate her criminal. Rizzoli would rather be noticed only for her work as opposed to Dr. Isles who is comfortable negotiating her sexual identity where she both appropriates as well as distances her persona of an inquisitive female and a rational medical examiner. Hinman and Isles represent the entry of the forensic expert or the medical examiner in the novelistic universe.

Joy Palmer (2001) locates the popularity of the medical examiner with the rise of the medical mystery or forensic detective novel. These detectives read clues provided by the body transforming it into an anatomical text. The essential problem here is the visibilization of crime. If it was not for the corpse, the crime would remain undiscovered. The introduction of Qureshi, the medical examiner in *The Secret Gardener* foregrounds this trend. The representation of the brutalized body renders the narrative realistic and foregrounds the female gaze. Lalli and Sita look at the bodies of Mr. Rao, the dismembered body parts of Anil's Rita, Kesar, and Varhsa's parents. The masculine gaze of the detective is replaced by

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<sup>11</sup> Tess Gerritsen (1953) is an American novelist and a retired physician whose crime thriller, *The Surgeon* (2001) for the first time introduced the character of Jane Rizzoli who went on to feature in other works. In the television show, Angie Harmon stars a detective Jane Rizzoli and Dr. Maura Isles is played by Sasha Alexander.

the female as the textual universes confront the problems of the women. Qureshi's retrieval of the painted finger opens the door for the solution of multiple crimes. While Dr. Qureshi resorts to radiocarbon dating, Lalli goes to a makeup saloon to help them locate the year of the murder, privileging the opinion of a professional female like Arifa. The Rose Ionic nail paint, common place nail polish, synonymous conventionally with women, becomes a cultural apparatus that enables detection through a feminine mode of knowledge like gossip. The fragmented body parts reconstruct various cultural identities in the social sphere be it of Arifa, the owner of the saloon who identifies the expensive nail paint, or the ambitious Rita capable of affording it.

Swaminathan critically responds to Miss Marple by adapting her to negotiate Indian realities. She picks up newer perspectives and innovative strategies to enrich her character, Lalli, and the genre of Indian detective fiction shaped by both the Western imagination and the dialogic Indian realities.

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