

**THE EGREGIOUS, THE EERIE, AND THE SINISTER:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF KISHWAR DESAI'S *THE SEA OF
INNOCENCE***

¹**Joshna R Ubbeti,**

PhD Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of Engineering,
Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India
Email: ujrani.gf@andhrauniversity.edu.in

²**Rama NH Alapati,**

Associate Professor of English, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of
Engineering, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India
Email: alapati.dr@andhrauniversity.edu.in

Abstract: Kishwar Desai, a highly acclaimed novelist and journalist, has gained recognition for her literary contributions in the genre of crime thrillers that explore the consequences of gender-related issues. Through her extensive journalistic investigation, she has delved into the examination of instances of injustice and acts of cruelty perpetrated against women in specific regions of India. This served as a catalyst for her to explore the theme of sexual violence within the context of her crime thriller fiction, drawing inspiration from actual instances that have occurred in some regions of India during the past ten years. This study aims to analyse the prevalence of egregious sexual violence in several regions of India. In her work titled *The Sea of Innocence* published in 2013, Kishwar Desai addresses the case of Scarlett Keeling, focusing on the themes of rape, murder, and drug abuse. Additionally, Desai incorporates the narrative of the victim of the Delhi bus gang rape into her analysis. The author depicts a sombre setting in which a young girl mysteriously disappeared amidst the nocturnal shores of the popular tourist destination, Goa. The author adeptly depicts the temporal race to uncover the truth behind the enigmatic phenomenon, imbuing the narrative with a sense of adventure.

Keywords: Sexual violence, gang rape, murder, drugs.

Sexual abuse represents a prevalent and egregious transgression perpetrated against women on a global scale. The issue of gender-based violence against women is a pervasive global phenomenon that encompasses several forms, including but not limited to rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, honour killings, dowry violence, human trafficking, forced marriages, and the exploitation of women. India is widely recognised as a highly desirable tourist destination that garners significant global attention and attracts a large number of visitors. However, it is important to acknowledge that certain regions within the country also possess a darker aspect. Based on the annual data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India for the year 2019, it has been observed that a significant number of women, over ninety-seven, have unfortunately experienced incidents of rape, molestation, or sexual abuse throughout various regions within the country. When discussing instances of sexual abuse, it is important to acknowledge that individuals of various gender identities, including men, women, and transgender individuals, can be subjected to such abuse. However, it is worth noting that women tend to constitute the majority of victims in a significant proportion of cases. Regrettably, women have been subjected to blame by dominating males, resulting in the prevalence of gender-based violence in various regions across the globe. The act in question, albeit commonly perceived as a

physical attack, has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the immediate physical harm inflicted upon the victims. These consequences encompass both the physical and emotional aspects of their identities, impacting them throughout their lifetimes.

This study investigates the persistent occurrence of sexual violence that has become increasingly prevalent in specific regions of India, reaching a state of being considered endemic. In light of the case involving Scarlett Keeling, a British girl who was subjected to sexual assault and murder in Goa in 2008, as well as the subsequent incident involving the demise of a paramedic student in Delhi, Kishwar Desai highlights the significance of examining the experiences of both genders as victims of sexual violence and discrimination. Through this amalgamation, Desai tenaciously explores and reveals profound depths of human behaviour that exist within specific sectors of the nation.

A beautiful holiday hideaway where hippies and backpackers while away the hours. But beneath the clear blue skies lies a dirty secret. . . And so the unspoilt idyll of Goa seems just the place – white beaches, blue seas and no crime. . . there was a looming darkness around the edges. Like a hungry nocturnal sea animal, it padded through the sand, seeking victims (Desai 14).

Simran Singh, a determined social worker and investigator, accompanied by her adopted daughter Durga, is currently vacationing in Goa. During her leisure time on the beaches, she receives an anonymous video message of a distressing nature from her acquaintance Amarjit, who is employed in law enforcement. The video depicted an incident where a teenage girl was subjected to abuse by a group of unidentified guys. This incident served as a reminder to Simran of the abhorrent and horrifying gang rape that occurred in Delhi involving a paramedic. The individual depicted in the recorded footage is a fifteen-year-old British girl named Liza Kay. Following an assault, specifically a suspected gang rape, she becomes unaccounted for in the idyllic setting of Goan beaches. The occurrence of her disappearance subsequent to the severe assault gives rise to a phenomenon known as a "conspiracy of silence," as the fate of her existence remains unknown. The case involving Liza was of significant prominence and complexity, causing widespread impact throughout the nation, particularly in the region of Goa.

Liza, a bold and daring individual, embarked on a journey from London to Goa alongside her older sister Marian, with the intention of partaking in a budget-friendly vacation. The individuals cohabitated at a lodging facility adjacent to Anjuna beach. The individual established rapid social connections both on the beach and within the hut, resulting in a significant allocation of time and energy towards engaging with these newfound acquaintances. Prior to her disappearance, Liza encountered a captivating and influential government official within the confines of a shack located on Anjana beach. This individual expressed their intention to offer her employment within a travel business. Upon receiving confirmation that her employment was secured; Liza accompanies an apathetic Marian to a social gathering that proves to be both unpleasant and strange for the latter. In addition to the supervisor, several other customers of the travel firm also attend the event.

Liza possessed knowledge of the proprietor of the modest dwelling, and one of the individuals inhabiting said dwelling was her acquaintance, Curtis. Marian and Liza were administered beverages that had been adulterated with medicines (51). Following the consumption of beverages, Marian experienced a state of mental confusion and then lost consciousness. Following the conclusion of the party, Liza's whereabouts became unknown, with Marian being the last individual to have sight of her sibling. Upon regaining consciousness, Marian discovers the absence of her sister and proceeds to express her

concerns on Liza to her acquaintance, who happens to be connected to a law enforcement official. However, she is cautioned against speaking out, as doing so may potentially jeopardise her safety. There were concerns regarding the alleged sexual assault and even homicide of Liza. Due to Marian's lack of protest regarding Liza's abduction at the beach, only a limited number of individuals were aware of their familial connection.

Rape and murder of Liza Kay:

“It was an accident and they had to get rid of her. . . Drug dealers are convicted killers” (320). Liza experiences an act of physical aggression perpetrated by her acquaintance Curtis D’Silva and a group of individuals in the context of a social gathering. The Goan minister, Vinay Gupta, identified and mentored Liza. The protagonist receives preferential treatment, which subsequently complicates her efforts to extricate herself from the clutches of Vinay Gupta. In the novel *The Sea of Innocence*, the character Liza is first assigned the task of transporting illicit substances, but her reliability is compromised due to her escalating heroin dependency. Gupta engages in non-consensual sexual activity with Liza, and subsequently, his associates perpetrate a highly violent act of sexual assault against her. During the act of sexual assault, the perpetrator inadvertently causes the victim's death. The individual in question had signs of being previously exposed to a retail environment, resulting in a diminished desirability and subsequent transfer to individuals of questionable character for the purpose of elimination.

Vishnu, a server employed at the establishment, possessed a close acquaintance with Liza and consistently endeavoured to safeguard her in an indirect manner. Regrettably, his efforts proved futile in preventing the occurrence of her sexual assault. The only action available to him was to record a video of the inhumane incident for the purpose of gathering evidence against the individuals who have been found guilty of the crime. The individual possessed a collection of images featuring Liza, with each image capturing a close-up perspective and originating from a mortuary setting. The gender of the individual in question is labelled as "Female Identity Unknown" (323). The initial image displayed in the profile depicts the countenance of a deceased female, featuring somewhat ajar blue eyes. The skin was intentionally incised in order to get a clear impression of the teeth for the purpose of identification. The second photograph provided evidence of severe instances of molestation and rape inflicted upon her. The third piece of evidence illustrates the physical aggression inflicted upon her by acts of pushing and physical assault. The fourth image depicted a body that had been incised from the neck to the abdomen, presenting an opportunity to collect samples for forensic analysis in order to ascertain the primary cause of death. The sixth image depicts her hand contorted in a manner suggestive of defensive resistance against a perceived assault. Furthermore, the sixth individual exhibited signs of physical discomfort on her back and was subjected to acts of sodomy (324). The aforementioned images were previously unseen, and the official documentation had assigned another designation to her physical remains. The unnamed female body discovered in the guest house at Vagator beach has been identified as Vira Jennings, a native of the United Kingdom. Based on the accompanying forensic investigation, Vira's cause of death was determined to be accidental, specifically resulting from a drug overdose. According to the source, Liza (Vira) is interred in London by her fiancé Curtis D’Silva, who hails from Goan and Portuguese ancestry. This event elicits a strong emotional response from Curtis. (334) The individual in question, Vira Jennings, is known to operate under the pseudonym or alias. Liza Kay's burial was conducted discreetly, unbeknownst to her immediate family members. The deceased individual's body was classified and documented as a 'unidentified female.' Thus, the case of Liza continued to be classified as a missing person case in the region of Goa.

It is widely recognised that Goa is a prominent destination for drug consumption. Since the era of the hippie trail in the 1960s, this location has gained significant popularity among international visitors. The authorities are concerned about the presence of illegal narcotics and the prevalence of aggressive activities in the vicinity of beaches, as well as the smuggling of drugs across international borders. During a series of narcotic drug searches, law enforcement authorities confiscated a range of illicit substances, including ecstasy tablets, marijuana derivatives such as oil, ganja, and charas, as well as cocaine, methamphetamine, ecstasy powder, and heroin. In the state of Goa, there exists a prevalent phenomenon where drug dealers frequently establish collaborative agreements with law enforcement authorities. Engaging in the act of purchasing or selling illicit substances can lead to apprehension, legal prosecution, and subsequent incarceration. The illegality of drugs is a commonly known fact; however, it is often misunderstood by a significant portion of the population. The act of individuals engaging in drug trafficking and subsequently reporting their accomplices to law enforcement authorities represents an often-observed fraudulent scheme.

According to a political leader, the presence of a 'drug mafia' in Goa is non-existent. Goa, being a popular tourist destination, experiences the illicit smuggling of narcotic substances for the purposes of commerce, consumption, and transit. The individuals engaged in illicit drug trafficking engage in covert and highly structured operations. Given the ethical obligations and legal responsibilities associated with their role, ministers are inherently disinclined to engage in activities that promote drug smuggling. Consequently, the task of facilitating such illicit operations is typically delegated to individuals distinct from the ministerial sphere, such as the proprietors of beachfront establishments. A multitude of instances of collusion among law enforcement, political figures, and drug syndicates may be readily identified.

In the novel *The Sea of Innocence* (2013), set one year prior to Liza's disappearance, the character Liza, known for her affinity for parties, becomes entangled in drug use. The individuals who perpetrated the assault against her during the gathering also coerced her into transporting illicit substances on their behalf, exploiting her youth, possession of a foreign passport, and financial vulnerability. The individual displayed a strong enthusiasm to commence employment; yet, their age and lack of qualifications rendered them ineligible for engaging in tasks of substantial accountability. In the meanwhile, the minister afforded her the opportunity to indulge in leisure and derive pleasure for a period of time. Subsequently, Liza predominantly allocated her time at Fernando's modest dwelling in close proximity to the shoreline, where she is provided with complimentary substances, beverages, and sustenance. Despite her status as a youngster, she is excessively administered medicines and even provided with 'cocaine' as a result of her privileged client status. The trap was evident to many in Liza's vicinity (310), yet she remained oblivious to its presence, ultimately leading to her downfall and demise.

Individuals who exhibit a high level of desperation in their pursuit of increased financial resources may resort to any means necessary to attain their objective. Not only do they perpetrate the killing of innocent juveniles, but they also persist in exploiting them posthumously. Despite the unfortunate demise of Liza, the individuals involved in illicit drug trade persisted in their endeavour to transport narcotics to London by exploiting her deceased body. The majority of her internal organs were extracted during the post-mortem procedure, whereupon plastic bags containing cocaine and heroin were found within the body (338). Liza's remains were transported to London by her grief-stricken fiancé, accompanied by

many associates of Gupta's criminal organisation, who took care to remove certain packages from the body. According to the source (340), deceased individuals have been effectively utilised as ideal carriers for illicit substances. Furthermore, Simran and Marian, who is Liza's sister, were also administered drugs due to their perceived suspicious behaviour. They were subsequently warned against pursuing any form of inquiry or investigation. In the context of Goa, these ladies encounter contrasting aspects of existence within a nocturnal utopia, encompassing both exhilarating and perilous dimensions.

In contrast to Liza Kay, a British youngster, Scarlett Keeling, also a resident of the United Kingdom, experienced a contrived adult existence and was subjected to a series of unsettling circumstances. The individual in question met a tragic demise as a result of a fatal drug overdose, followed by acts of sexual assault, homicide, and subsequent disposal of the body on a coastal shoreline. The individual was propelled towards the shoreline by the force of the waves, resulting in the discovery of their person with various contusions and half attired.

The first assessment by the Goa police classified the incident as accidental. However, subsequent inquiry conducted by the victim's family led to a second post-mortem study in March 2008. This examination found that the victim had been subjected to drug administration and sexual abuse prior to her drowning at the beach. Desai (year) references the posthumous publication of Scarlett's diaries and communications in various media outlets and publications. Shortly prior to her demise, an electronic message was dispatched.

I went to a beach party. . . last night took sum md an lsd and xstasy I was soooo fuked man an the police raided it an. . . I got dragged away by some weird man an everyone else had legged it an I was fukin buzzin man so I got a taxi back. . . turns tryin 2 rape me an I feel so shit right now. . . (106)

The occurrence of sexual assault and homicide, such as the case of Scarlett Keeling, as well as the disappearance of Liza in the novel, might be attributed to the unpredictable and unstable environment prevalent in Goa (77). In contemporary society, instances of rape and murder have unfortunately become prevalent, constituting a relatively small fraction of Goa's historical record. The external appearance of the state suggests a state of tranquilly, however it too experienced internal conflicts. Incidents of this nature are not limited solely to Goa; they have occurred and continue to occur in various other regions and tourist locations within India. Furthermore, the potential for such incidents exists in numerous global tourist hotspots at present.

Within the novel, Desai incorporates the occurrence of the Delhi bus gang rape in 2012, a highly publicised event that generated significant national and international attention. Jyothi Singh, a physiotherapy intern aged twenty-three, was subjected to a severe physical assault and sexual assault perpetrated by six individuals under the influence of alcohol. This incident occurred during her journey in a privately-owned bus in the city of Delhi, accompanied by a male companion. The male individual, in an act of safeguarding the female individual, endured severe physical harm inflicted by means of an iron rod, nearly resulting in fatality. Subsequently, the aforementioned rod was utilised to perpetrate an act of penetration upon the female individual. The individual's reproductive organs experienced severe rupture and mutilation, while their intestines were forcefully extracted and an iron rod was afterwards inserted. Following multiple surgical procedures, it was found that a mere five percent of her intestinal tract could be preserved. The child valiantly struggled for survival for a span of around twelve days, ultimately succumbing to her injuries on the thirteenth day following the assault. The occurrence elicited a widespread public reaction at the national level. The act in question was elevated to the status of a capital offence, resulting in extensive media attention

and widespread international condemnation. This abhorrent transgression is a seldom occurrence, and the perpetrators were duly penalised in order to ensure the administration of justice. The government of the ruling party faced significant criticism for its perceived failure in safeguarding the rights and well-being of women. The sexual assault in question was seen as a serious offence by society, and anyone found guilty of this crime were subject to the death penalty, a punishment reserved for exceedingly exceptional circumstances in India. Typically, the regulations of the Indian Union prohibit the disclosure of the rape victim's identity by the press. Consequently, the individual involved in this prominent case is well recognised as 'Nirbhaya', a moniker denoting fearlessness. The anguish and death she experienced gained international recognition as a symbol of women's defiance against sexual assault. When examining the instances of Jyothi Singh and Scarlett Keeling, it is evident that Jyothi Singh's case required a period of seven years to attain a resolution, whilst Scarlett Keeling's case achieved justice only after a decade had passed since the first occurrence and subsequent demise.

Despite a global rise in crimes against women, a significant proportion of these incidents go unreported due to a variety of factors. Individuals are experiencing emotional threats, physical torture leading to fatal outcomes, sexual assault, and extremely violent acts resulting in death. Subsequently, following a sequence of instances, the Government of India has implemented several measures aimed at raising awareness and enforcing more stringent regulations, with the objective of expediting the judicial process and promptly penalising those involved in crimes or acts of sexual violence targeting women or children. Within the realm of human rights and dignity, the Indian government, legal framework of the judicial systems, and moral systems have undergone enhancements, demonstrating prompt action in addressing any kind of injustice within the confines of the nation's laws, thereby mitigating the severity of each case.

Thus, the current study utilised literature as a means to examine the distressing phenomenon of sexual assault and its implications for social and gender dynamics. The novel's intricate plot interweaves various elements, shedding light on the dark aspects of inhumane behaviour exhibited by certain individuals. It explores real-life instances of rape and reveals gruesome truths, all within the backdrop of Goa's complex ecosystem. Additionally, the narrative delves into the clandestine business activities of ministers and their emotionless subordinates, including police officers, shack owners, and drug dealers. In addressing concerns pertaining to women, Desai also emphasised the inequities faced by female victims who are both vulnerable and blameless. The author expressed her dedication in her work to individuals such as Jyothi Singh, Scarlett Keeling, and numerous women who have suffered from rape and murder in India, with the aspiration that they would receive fair treatment under the law (Desai).

The literary contributions of Kishwar Desai have garnered significance via their portrayal of the challenges and hardships faced by women. The profound sensations encountered by the female characters in the text are an accurate reflection of reality, consistently unveiling previously unknown viewpoints of the human psyche with each subsequent reading. The story effectively unveils the profound insights into the intricate realities of existence primarily through its characters, who navigate through universally relatable circumstances, challenges, and predicaments. Over the course of time, the passage of years, progression of days, and ticking of minutes, there is a concerning trend of human rights violations resulting from an emphasis on fundamental human predicaments and their demarcation. Despite the significant changes brought about by globalisation during the period

in which Desai wrote her literary works, her novel continues to hold critical significance in contemporary times due to its relevance to current concerns.

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