

Trailblazing Women: Unraveling Mysteries in Indian Literature

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ABSTRACT

The development of Kannada detective fiction reflects a dynamic interplay between indigenous storytelling traditions and the conventions of mystery writing. This article explores the historical trajectory of the genre, focusing particularly on its early pioneers, with an emphasis on Nanjangud Thirumalamba, the first detective fiction writer in Kannada literature. Thirumalamba's contributions through *Daksha Kanya* and *Vikrama* mark a significant moment in the evolution of Kannada detective narratives, showcasing both narrative ingenuity and socio-cultural engagement. Additionally, this article examines Kamala Sathianathan's *Detective Janaki*, recognized as the first Indian detective novel written by a woman in English. Sathianathan's work not only asserts female agency within the genre but also highlights the intersections of gender and investigative fiction in the Indian literary landscape. By tracing these foundational texts, this study seeks to contextualize the growth of detective fiction in Kannada literature while underscoring the pioneering roles played by women writers in shaping the genre.

Keywords: Kannada detective fiction, Nanjangud Thirumalamba, *Daksha Kanya*, *Vikrama*, Kamala Sathianathan, *Detective Janaki*, women writers, mystery genre, Indian literature, literary historiography, gender and detective fiction

INTRODUCTION

The study of Kannada detective fiction reveals a fascinating interplay between indigenous narrative traditions and the conventions of Western mystery writing. The genre's origins can be traced to *Choragrahana Tantra* (1895), authored by M. Venkatakrishnaiah, popularly known as Tataiah. His work, influenced by Western detective fiction, introduced elements of suspense, rational deduction, and investigative logic, thereby situating Kannada detective fiction within a transnational literary framework. My personal exploration of this genre led me to acquire a rare copy of *Choragrahana Tantra* through a website dedicated to Tataiah, providing critical insights into the early development of mystery writing in Kannada. Later, my discussions with Mr. Raveesh, a senior theatre personality, led to the discovery of *Shodha*, an anthology of Kannada detective stories that further contextualizes the genre's evolution.

Desha Kulkarni's introduction to *Shodha* offers a historiographical analysis of Kannada detective fiction, affirming that its roots extend back to *Choragrahana Tantra*, which demonstrates a deliberate blending of Sanskritic elements with contemporary mystery tropes observed in Bengali detective fiction. This early attempt to localize the genre within the Kannada linguistic and cultural milieu underscores the adaptability of detective fiction as it engaged with broader literary movements in colonial India. The early 20th century witnessed further innovation with writers such as Vidwan Vidyabhushana Balasaraswati, whose *Chitraguptana Daphtaragalu* gained widespread popularity, indicating the genre's appeal to a broad readership. Subsequent authors, including A. N. Swamy, Kerur, and N. Narasimhaiah, expanded the narrative scope of Kannada detective fiction, employing various storytelling techniques ranging from moralistic drama to literary naturalism.

As Kannada detective fiction continued to evolve, authors such as Manu and A. Bharat introduced scientific and psychological realism into their works, aligning investigative methodologies with global literary trends. Kulkarni's historiographical insights highlight how these writers not only localized detective fiction within Kannada sensibilities but also transformed the genre into a medium for examining social, moral, and epistemological questions. By bridging traditional Indian storytelling with modern investigative logic, Kannada detective fiction has emerged as a distinct literary tradition that both entertains and critiques, offering compelling narratives that resonate across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

The emergence of detective fiction in Kannada literature in the early 20th century reveals a dynamic and evolving narrative tradition, deeply influenced by indigenous storytelling methods and Western detective conventions. One of the earliest and most influential figures in this development was Vidwan Vidyabhushana Balasaraswatti, also known as Balasaraswati Naraharisharma, whose Chitraguptana Daphtaragalu garnered immense popularity and saw three reprints between 1914 and 1931, indicating its wide readership and enduring appeal. His style, marked by colloquial and conversational narration, made complex themes accessible to a broader audience. Around the same time, A. N. Swamy's Kaushala (1914) depicted the dramatic rescue of a kidnapped girl, aligning detective fiction with the popular taste for moralistic and socially engaged storytelling. Kerur's Belli Chukke (1930) introduced a Watson-like character, Vatatmaja Pandita, and attempted to ground the genre in realistic characterization and tightly structured plots, reflecting a growing interest in literary naturalism. The experimental range of the genre broadened with N. Narasimhaiah, whose writing style departed significantly from his contemporaries, showcasing a distinct narrative voice. Subsequent contributions by V. G. Krishnamurthy and T. K. Ramaraya enriched the genre through thematic diversification. The evolution of Kannada detective fiction also witnessed a shift toward scientific and psychological realism, especially in the works of Manu and A. Bharat, who employed methods of investigation rooted in rational deduction and psychological profiling, thereby aligning with the evolving global standards of the genre. As Desha Kulkarni's introduction to Shodha underscores, these writers not only localized the detective genre within Kannada sensibilities but also transformed it into a site for exploring social, moral, and epistemological questions. In this manner, Kannada detective fiction established itself as a vibrant literary form that both entertained and critiqued, bridging traditional narrative structures with modern investigative logic.

Despite offering a valuable overview of the evolution of Kannada detective fiction, the anthology Shodha, as introduced by Desha Kulkarni, notably excludes women authors who have significantly contributed to the genre. This omission is particularly striking given the pioneering role of Nanjangud Thirumalamba, the first woman to write detective fiction in Kannada, whose works like Daksha Kanya (1915) and Vikrama (1916) not only engaged with the conventions of mystery and detection but also foregrounded themes of women's empowerment, education, and agency. The absence of such voices reflects a broader trend in literary historiography where female contributions are often marginalized or overlooked, despite their critical interventions in both genre development and social discourse. When I brought this to the notice of an old friend, Mr. Murthy, he gave me the book mentioned below.

"Nanjanagudu Thirumalamba: A Study" by Dr. Arjunapuri Appajigowda

According to this book, Nanjangud Tirumalamba (1887–1982) stands as a pioneering figure in Kannada literature, recognized as the first woman to write detective fiction in the language. Beyond her literary endeavors, Tirumalamba was a fervent advocate for women's rights. She opposed practices like child marriage, dowry, and the tonsure of widows, and she championed women's education and autonomy. Her writings often highlighted the importance of love, affection, patience, and sacrifice, qualities she attributed to her protagonists, aiming to inspire societal change in perceptions of women's roles.

Tirumalamba's contributions extended beyond novels; she was also a publisher and editor, founding the publication house Sathi Hitaishini and editing magazines like Karnataka Nandini and Sanmargadarshini. Her works were widely recognized and used as textbooks across various educational institutions in India. In 1980, she was honored by the Rajya Sahitya Academy, and her legacy continues through the Tirumalamba Award, presented to outstanding female writers.

What follows is a critical examination of two of her detective novels, Daksha Kanya and Vikrama, which she is purported to have composed in an effort to accommodate the preferences of her readership.

Daksha Kanya (1915)

Nanjangud Thirumalamba's Daksha Kanya (1915) stands as a seminal work in the history of Kannada literature—not only as the first detective novel written by a woman in the Kannada language but also as a powerful feminist statement. Writing at a time when female voices in literature were rare, Thirumalamba pioneered a form of narrative that merged popular genre fiction with socio-political reform, particularly concerning women's roles in education, family, and society. Through Daksha Kanya, Thirumalamba presents a

unique amalgamation of detective fiction and feminist ideology, where the figure of the “New Woman” is carefully sculpted through central female characters who are rational, daring, and committed to truth and justice.

Published in 1915 and later prescribed for the B.Sc. curriculum of Mysore University, *Daksha Kanya* gained not just literary acclaim but academic recognition, signaling the importance of its themes in a modernizing society. The narrative orbits around the patriarch Tarapathraya, his two wives—Sunandadevi and Gange—and their children Vinda and Mohana Kumara. The other characters include Balawantha, Yashawantha, and Supanta. However, the novel significantly departs from conventional narratives by positioning female characters as central agents of knowledge, action, and reform.

Among the most compelling characters is Vinda, the daughter of Sunandadevi, who defies the limitations imposed upon women of her time. She learns cycling and horse riding, physical activities emblematic of autonomy, control, and mobility—qualities often denied to women in early 20th-century India. These are not arbitrary details but deliberate choices by Thirumalamba to illustrate the emerging figure of the modern, self-reliant woman. Vinda not only acquires these skills but uses them to assist the government-appointed detective, Sreedatta Kumara, in solving the central mystery of the novel. Her transformation from a domesticated daughter to an active investigator symbolically represents women’s shift from the private to the public sphere.

The character of Sreedatta Kumara, while officially designated as the detective, is not the sole or even primary locus of reason and intelligence in the novel. Much of the investigative work is facilitated by the insights, courage, and social knowledge of the women, especially Vinda. As Dr. Arjunapuri Appaji Gowda notes, “Thirumalamba’s narrative subtly subverts patriarchal expectations by assigning deductive prowess to women characters, thereby undermining the traditional male monopoly on rationality and heroism” (Gowda 143). The involvement of women in investigative activities not only forwards the plot but also challenges gendered notions of intelligence and authority.

A closer examination of the narrative structure reveals how *Daksha Kanya* is not just a detective story with a female presence, but a feminist detective narrative. Thirumalamba consciously uses the detective genre as a rhetorical strategy to argue for women’s education and empowerment. In one scene, the novel emphasizes the need for women to be literate and worldly to ensure not just personal betterment but collective societal reform. These women are not passive recipients of modernity; they are active agents in the creation of a rational, ethical social order.

Further, the novel’s title *Daksha Kanya*—literally meaning “the intelligent daughter” or “capable girl”—is itself a celebration of female intellect. It stands as a counter-discourse to the then-prevailing image of women as weak, dependent, and irrational. The eponymous heroine embodies sharp observation, critical thinking, and moral clarity—traits that align her with the “New Woman” of global feminist discourse, but situated within an Indian cultural and historical context.

Thirumalamba also uses the novel to critique prevailing customs. The polygamous household of Tarapathraya and the internal conflicts between his wives and children reflect a society mired in feudal patriarchy. Yet, instead of descending into melodrama or moral sermonizing, the author uses the detective plot as a means to expose the underlying injustices of such a system. The resolution of the mystery becomes symbolic of the possibility of social justice through rational inquiry and gender equity.

Her feminist ideology is further illuminated in her authorial interventions. In the prefaces and public addresses associated with her works, Thirumalamba asserts that her intention is to “change the way we think about women” (Gowda 126). She viewed literature not merely as entertainment but as a vehicle for social reform, especially with respect to women’s liberation.

In conclusion, *Daksha Kanya* by Nanjangud Thirumalamba marks a watershed moment in Indian literature.

Through Vinda and other female characters, the novel articulates a vision of the New Woman as assertive, intelligent, and engaged with the world. It reclaims the detective genre from its masculine lineage and reorients it to serve feminist ends. Thirumalamba’s writing is a clarion call to recognize the intellectual and moral capacity of women, and her work remains both revolutionary and relevant in the context of feminist literary criticism.

Her legacy, as underscored by scholars like Gowda, positions her not only as a literary pioneer but as a torchbearer of feminist consciousness in Indian writing.

Vikrama (1916)

Vikrama (1916) was printed at Dharwad's Sree Krishna Printing Press. This book can be considered as both a literary and a pedagogic intervention. It was reprinted in 1927 and 1932 and was reportedly included in the educational syllabi of that time¹.

In the preface to *Vikrama*, Thirumalamba outlines her rationale for shifting to detective fiction after her initial didactic novels. She observed the growing popularity of detective stories among young readers and chose to capitalize on the genre's appeal to introduce progressive themes. "The youth of our country," she writes, "are drawn to tales of suspense and thrill; I chose to blend this appeal with important messages for women's progress" (Gowda 135). This strategic fusion of adventure, mystery, humor, and romance with social commentary exemplifies her innovative literary agenda.

The novel's central characters are Vikrama Sena, a professional detective, and his wife Bhavani, who collaborate to solve the mysterious disappearance of Madhusudan Bhattacharya, Lalithadevi, and their child Pradyumna. While *Vikrama* functions within the expected tropes of the detective figure, Bhavani disrupts these conventions. She is educated, insightful, and actively involved in the investigative process. Thirumalamba crafts Bhavani not as a secondary figure but as a co-investigator whose presence and intellect are pivotal to the plot's resolution. In doing so, Bhavani emerges as one of the earliest representations of the "new woman" in Indian detective fiction.

The depiction of Bhavani is particularly significant in the socio-cultural context of early 20th-century South India. At a time when women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere, Thirumalamba imagines a protagonist who is not only literate and mobile but also critical to solving complex social problems. Bhavani rides alongside her husband not as an accessory but as a peer, thereby challenging the conventional gender hierarchy. Her intelligence, courage, and rationality mirror the author's own aspirations for Indian women. As Dr. Arjunapuri Appaji Gowda observes, "Bhavani's character reconfigures the space of the detective genre, embedding within it the author's vision for empowered womanhood." (168).

Like Thirumalamba's earlier novel *Daksha Kanya* (1915), *Vikrama* reveals her dual concern: to entertain and to enlighten. The case at the center of the novel—of a missing family—is not just a narrative device but also a metaphor for the societal erasure of women's visibility and agency. The investigative journey becomes symbolic of a larger social awakening, wherein the female protagonist reclaims a space in public discourse. In this sense, *Vikrama* transcends its genre to become a political text, arguing for the reconfiguration of women's roles in both family and society.

Thirumalamba's engagement with detective fiction was not isolated but part of her larger commitment to women's rights and social reform. She was a pioneer in writing about women's education, the evils of child marriage, and the need for women's participation in nation-building. Her characters often embodied these ideals. As Gowda notes, "Thirumalamba's protagonists are more than just characters; they are articulations of her reformist consciousness" (177). Through *Vikrama*, she envisioned a new generation of women who could think, act, and participate in shaping society.

Furthermore, her innovative use of a popular literary genre to discuss serious issues illustrates her keen understanding of how to reach broader audiences. While many early reformist texts adopted a solemn or didactic tone, Thirumalamba chose to entertain while informing. The novel's humor, romance, and suspense work in tandem with its deeper themes, making it both accessible and ideologically potent.

¹ I could not find any official documentation confirming whether Nanjangud Thirumalamba's works were prescribed as school textbooks in the regions of Mysore, Madras, and Bombay. The only references to this claim appear in Wikipedia and in Dr. Appaji Gowda's *Nanjanagudu Thirumalamba: Ondu Adhyayana*. Wikipedia states that her writings received recognition from the governments of these provinces and were used as school texts for nearly two decades beginning in 1917. The term "Fifth Form" mentioned in these sources likely refers to the present-day First PUC (Pre-University Course), suggesting the possibility that one of her novels may have been included in either SSLC or PUC syllabi, perhaps in a non-detailed or supplementary form.

In conclusion, Vikrama is not merely an early detective novel in Kannada but a landmark in feminist literary history. Thirumalamba's portrayal of Bhavani as a sharp, courageous, and capable woman reflects a deliberate strategy to rewrite gendered narratives. By aligning the popular form of detective fiction with the imperative for women's awareness and agency, Thirumalamba carved out a distinctive space for herself and for women in the Kannada literary tradition. Her work continues to inspire and deserves renewed scholarly attention in discussions of Indian women's writing and early feminist thought.

Like Nanjangud Thirumalamba, Kamala Sathianathan holds a pioneering role in shaping early Indian women's detective fiction. While Thirumalamba wrote in Kannada, Sathianathan wrote in English. Both of them infused the detective genre with a distinctively Indian perspective, navigating themes of justice, gender, and societal norms.

Detective Janaki

Kamala Sathianathan's Detective Janaki was serialized between 1933 and 1934 in the Indian Ladies Magazine. This marks a watershed moment in Indian literary history as the first English-language detective fiction authored by an Indian woman. More than a pioneering genre work, Detective Janaki offers a radical vision of female agency and autonomy that aligns closely with the emerging archetype of the "New Woman"—a modern, educated, self-determining female figure who challenged Victorian domestic ideals and colonial patriarchy. Through her resolute and socially engaged protagonist Janaki, Sathianathan not only subverts the masculinist conventions of detective fiction but also weaves an incisive critique of the sociocultural injustices constraining Indian women.

Janaki envisions a future in which she and her female companions run a detective agency—an enterprise that symbolizes their collective aspiration to operate outside the private, domestic sphere. This departure from traditional roles is more than personal rebellion; it signals a structural reimagination of gender roles within Indian society. The very act of a woman becoming a detective—professionally involved in uncovering truth, seeking justice, and navigating public space—defies entrenched patriarchal norms. In order to liberate herself from the stifling constraints of an ineffectual father and a manipulative, emotionally neglectful stepmother, Janaki orchestrates a marriage of convenience—an act not of romantic submission but of calculated emancipation. Demonstrating emotional intelligence and pragmatic foresight, she interviews her prospective spouse to assess his compatibility with her aspirations, thereby asserting control over an institution historically used to circumscribe women's agency. Far from forsaking personal ambition, Janaki sustains both marriage and a burgeoning investigative career, embodying a modern Indian womanhood that challenges the binaries of public and private life. Through her deft negotiation of domestic obligations and professional pursuits, Janaki exemplifies the daily confrontations Indian women endure and overcome. Her characterization within the detective genre not only re-frames the trope of the sleuth as a woman but also reveals detective fiction itself as an empowering narrative space where the New Woman can interrogate, resist, and ultimately redefine patriarchal structures.

Significantly, Janaki's investigations do not center on abstract or apolitical crimes; instead, they confront deeply embedded social maladies such as inter-caste marriage taboos, the dehumanizing practice of untouchability, the marginalization of female education, and the exploitation of women by religious zealotry. These thematic concerns situate Detective Janaki within a broader reformist discourse that was gaining momentum in early twentieth-century India, particularly through women's journals and nationalist debates. By addressing these issues through the lens of detective fiction, Sathianathan renders the genre a potent instrument of feminist critique and social intervention.

In reworking the conventions of crime fiction to serve a feminist agenda, Sathianathan anticipates later developments in both Indian and global women's writing. Detective Janaki stands as a foundational text where the New Woman, recontextualized in an Indian milieu, takes charge of her own narrative—solving crimes, redressing injustices, and redefining the contours of womanhood. Through Janaki, Sathianathan proposes a vision of justice not as retributive or patriarchal, but as reparative and gender-conscious, thereby positioning her work at the intersection of genre innovation and feminist politics.

To provide a more comprehensive perspective on detective fiction, this article also explores the genre's development in Kannada, Tamil, and Urdu literature, drawing insights from select scholarly articles on these literary traditions.

"Kannada Popular Press: An Appraisal of Tabloid Culture" by Ramesh Aroli,

The article delves into the realm of popular fiction and pulp novels in Kannada literature, shedding light on its emergence and impact. It begins by highlighting the significant presence of popular pulp, spy-crime novels in Kannada literature, particularly during the Seventies and Eighties. Despite not being categorized as 'literary,' these works by writers like Narasimhaiah, BK Anantaram, Sudarshan Desai, H K Ananta Rao, and Koundinya enjoyed immense popularity.

Narasimhaiah, for instance, is noted for his prolific output, having authored over 550 detective novels and 50 social novels. His creation, 'Pattedara Purushottama,' became iconic, spawning sequels and contributing to the popularization of reading among the lower middle-classes. Sudarshan Muthalik Desai, another notable figure, gained fame for his detective novels like 'Keralida Sarpa' and 'Kari Naayi,' drawing inspiration from Hindi literature.

These novels, often produced by established publishing houses, were characterized by their affordability and accessibility, attracting a vast readership across major Indian languages. However, with the advent of television as a dominant entertainment medium in the late 1990s, the allure of these popular romantic fictions began to wane.

The article also highlights specific works like H K Ananta Rao's 'Anth,' which achieved cinematic success, emphasizing the enduring impact of these popular novels beyond the realm of literature.

Overall, the article offers insight into the vibrant world of popular fiction in Kannada literature, underscoring its cultural significance and enduring appeal, despite evolving entertainment trends.

"The Rise of Detective Fiction in Tamil" by Kanakaraj S.

The article traces the evolution of English influence on Indian literature, particularly in the realm of detective fiction, while shedding light on the socio-cultural backdrop of colonial India. It begins with the impact of Vasco da Gama's sea route discovery on European trade expansion into India and the subsequent establishment of English factories. With the introduction of English education by Macaulay, Indian mastery over the language grew, leading to the adoption and adaptation of English literary genres.

The birth of the novel genre in England eventually influenced Indian literature, with Bengali and Tamil writers pioneering the introduction of English social novel elements. However, it was the popularity of detective fiction, spearheaded by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, that captivated South Indian readers. The translation and adaptation of Sherlock Holmes stories led to a surge in demand for detective fiction, even during what literary historians dubbed the "dark age" of Tamil literature.

Pioneers like Pandit Natesa Sastri and later writers like Arani Kuppaswamy Mudaliar and Vaduvur Duraisamy

Iyengar played significant roles in shaping Tamil detective fiction. Their works catered to a growing reading public, using colloquial language and simple prose to engage a wide audience. Despite initial dismissal as "trash" literature, detective fiction gained recognition over time, with critics acknowledging its literary and artistic merit.

The article also highlights the unique contributions of individual writers, such as J.R. Rangaraju, who created memorable detective characters akin to Sherlock Holmes, and Mahadevan, who introduced a comic twist to the genre with his character Thuppariyum Sambhu. Additionally, it discusses the narrative techniques employed by Tamil writers, emphasizing the importance of maintaining reader interest, crafting intricate plots, and adhering to principles of fair play in storytelling.

Overall, the article underscores the cultural exchange between East and West through literature, particularly detective fiction, and the role of Tamil writers in adapting and innovating within this genre to meet the demands

of a growing readership in colonial India.

“Poe in India” by D. Ramakrishna.

This article discusses the reception of Edgar Allan Poe's works in various Indian languages, particularly focusing on translations of his tales and their influence on Indian literature. Poe's popularity as a writer of mystery and detective novels is highlighted, with specific tales like "The Purloined Letter" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" being particularly well-received among Indian readers. Additionally, the influence of Poe on Indian detective fiction writers, such as Tamilvaanan, is explored, with parallels drawn between Poe's detective Dupin and Tamilvaanan's protagonist Shankarlal.

“Homage to a ‘Magic-Writer’: The Mistriz and Asrār novels of Urdu” by C.M. Naim.

This article traces the manner in which George William MacArthur Reynolds, a once-popular English novelist, became the most sought-after novelist in Urdu literature across India between 1893 and 1923. His novels, particularly "The Mysteries of London" and "The Mysteries of the Court of London," were translated into Urdu by notable translators like Ghulam Qadir Fasih. Fasih, born in Sialkot in 1860, made significant contributions to Urdu literature by translating works of Reynolds, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, and others.

Fasih's translations of Reynolds's novels, serialized in the monthly magazine "Nāvilist," gained widespread popularity, introducing Urdu readers to the genre of mystery fiction. His translations, although likely abridged versions, sparked a trend of Urdu crime fiction imitations in the early 20th century. Reynolds's influence on Urdu literature, particularly through Fasih's translations, contributed to the development of crime fiction in the Urdu language.

In conclusion, my study of the detective novels of Nanjangud Thirumalamba and Kamala Sathianathan, alongside critical articles on the evolution of detective fiction in Tamil, Urdu, and Kannada, reveals the dynamic interplay between genre conventions and regional cultural contexts. The survey of Tamil, Urdu, and Kannada detective fiction highlights how the genre has evolved beyond mere entertainment, serving as a lens through which issues of justice, identity, and modernity are interrogated. Collectively, these texts illustrate the rich, multilingual tradition of Indian detective fiction and underscore the significant—yet often overlooked—contributions of women writers in shaping its trajectory.

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