



# “You are a Symbol, Persis”: The Complexity of Postcolonial and Feminist Progress in Vaseem Khan’s Malabar House Series

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**Abstract.** Vaseem Khan’s Malabar House series presents 1950s India as rife with opportunity and difficulty. Post-independence feminist and postcolonial emancipation is portrayed as a complicated and ongoing process, mirrored in discussions around Persis’ status as a symbol. Persis combats her society’s social problems, providing an example of agency in the face of oppression.

In 2002, Yumna Siddiqi argued that “there ha[d] been a recent spate of postcolonial novels that use the format of the mystery or detective story but tweak it or turn it inside out in what becomes a narrative of ‘social detection,’ to borrow a phrase from Fredric Jameson, a ‘vehicle for judgments on society and revelations of its hidden nature’” (176). In the more than two decades since Siddiqi made this claim, this trend of postcolonial detective novels has only grown and many of these novels feature a historical setting. Rosemary Erickson Johnsen asserts that “[p]ostcolonial themes have found a productive home in the historical model” (“Historical” 7) and even that in “current critical approaches to the historical subgenre, it appears that postcolonial work predominates” (8). Numerous postcolonial authors use the detective genre to explore issues around colonization and postcolonial emancipation while setting their novels at times of historical significance, such as during wars or independence movements.

A significant number of these novels are detective narratives centered around female

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