



THE IMPERIAL GOTHIC IN BRITISH INDIA: FEMALE DEMONIZATION IN ANITA DESAI'S *VOICES IN THE CITY* (1965) AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE* (1989)

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ABSTRACT: This article aims primarily to investigate how the British Empire, through its missionary activities, distorted the Hindu pantheon, narrative, and iconography in order to evangelize the indigenous population while entertaining the Anglo-Saxon public. The reverends and chroniclers sent to the East developed a comprehensive bestiary of Hindu deities, imbuing them with demonic and vampiric qualities to undermine the theological foundations of the subcontinent. The second part of this article applies these observations through an analysis of two Indo-Anglian novels that exemplify this colonial phenomenon by demonizing the goddess Kali through their female protagonists.

KEYWORDS: demons, gothic, imperialism, India, orientalism

El imperio gótico en la India británica: demonización femenina en *Voices in the City* (1965)
de Anita Desai y *Jasmine* (1989) de Bharati Mukherjee

RESUMEN: El presente artículo busca, en primer lugar, investigar cómo el Imperio británico a través de la actividad misionera distorsionó el panteón, la narrativa e iconografía hinduista con el fin de catequizar a la población indígena a la par que entretener al público anglosajón. Los reverendos y cronistas enviados a Oriente desarrollaron todo un bestiario de dioses hinduistas, dotándolos de una naturaleza demoníaca y vampírica con el fin de socavar los andamiajes teológicos del subcontinente. La segunda parte de este artículo pone en práctica las observaciones anteriores a través de dos novelas indoinglesas que ejemplifican este fenómeno colonial con la demonización de la diosa Kali por medio de sus protagonistas femeninas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: demonios, gótico, imperialismo, India, orientalismo

L'empire gothique en Inde britannique : la diabolisation des femmes dans *Voices in the City* (1965) d'Anita Desai et *Jasmine* (1989) de Bharati Mukherjee

RÉSUMÉ : Le présent article vise principalement à examiner comment l'Empire britannique, par le biais de ses activités missionnaires, a déformé le panthéon hindou, la narration et l'iconographie afin d'évangéliser la population indigène tout en divertissant le public anglo-saxon. Les révérends et chroniqueurs envoyés en Orient ont développé un bestiaire complet de divinités hindoues, leur attribuant des qualités démoniaques et vampiriques pour saper les fondements théologiques du sous-continent. La deuxième partie de cet article applique ces observations à travers une analyse de deux romans indo-anglais qui illustrent ce phénomène colonial en diabolisant la déesse Kali à travers leurs protagonistes féminines.

MOTS-CLÉS : démons, gothique, impérialisme, Inde, orientalisme

1. INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said references a term introduced by Mario Praz in his book *The Romantic Agony* (1933): *algolagnia*. The word derives from the Greek *algos* (pain) and *lagneia* (pleasure), meaning a degeneration of the mind, a fascination with the macabre (Said, 1978). If we look at the reference, the concepts of sadism and voyeurism frequently appear in this context (Praz, 1956), and Oriental fetishists have eagerly drawn parallels between these traditions. The Gothic genre, with its unfamiliar and amorphous fabrications, proved a brilliant instrument in the elaboration of the Other and the faraway lands. Eighteenth century essayist Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1773) observed that “the old Gothic romance and the Eastern tale, with their genii, giants, enchantments, and transformations ... will ever retain a most powerful influence on the mind thanks to their wildnesses of the imagination” (as cited in Saglia, 2020, p. 347). Aravamudan (2011) asserts that the Oriental tale should be regarded as “the major fictional mode of eighteenth century” (as cited in Kitson, 2013, p. 168). Supporting this view, Porter (2012) concurs with Barbauld, noting that the Gothic and the Oriental aesthetic imbricate because both feature interchangeable and similar “irregular” motifs (e. g.: architecture, landscapes, or mythologies); two traditions that operated against the balance, order, and harmony of European neoclassicism (as cited in Kitson, 2013).

Similarly, McInnis (2008) reconciles these impressions and concludes that these assumptions converge in the realm of the unrepresented, just as postcolonialism and the Gothic are both actively concerned in representing the Other(ized): the monster, the exotic, the irrational. Also, in words of Khair, “The Gothic has a troubled relationship with the normative in general, and the colonial or post-colonial context is only one of various such negotiations with the normative” (2009, p. 38). As other writers before colonial romancers, such as Voltaire or Gibbon, have also incorporated oriental mythology to illustrate the irrational, subservient, and unenlightened (Kelly, 1976). Some scholars (Sage, 1988, or

Schmitt, 1997) identify a crucial nexus between the Gothic and the Oriental as to be crucial in the construction of British nationality by comparison (Kitson, 2013). In essence, the Gothic character is irrepressibly emotional, whereas the British character is defined by apathy; if the first is fantastical in form, then the latter must be empirically constructed.

In recent years, the evolution of postcolonial theory has intersected with various literary genres, including the Gothic, to explore themes of identity, power, and resistance in increasingly complex ways. Early postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon (1967, 1986) and Edward Said (1978, 1993) focused on colonial domination and the subjugation of indigenous voices, but contemporary scholars have expanded this framework to examine the lingering psychological and cultural effects of colonization. The Gothic, traditionally a European genre that deals with fear, haunting, and the supernatural, has been appropriated in postcolonial literature as a tool to express the traumas of colonization and the uncanny sense of being trapped between two worlds—colonizer and colonized. As suggested, both genres share a preoccupation with portraying the unfamiliar and the exotic, serving as an exemplum to every son of the Empire “portraying the dark, irrational and monstrous at the heart of British society” (Kitson, 2013, p. 168). This is confirmed by the words of Charles Grant, Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, who, in his efforts to demonize Hindus, presents a grotesque version of this philosophy, as opposed to the compassionate and kindhearted Christians:

Challenging the idea that Hindus were a moral and benevolent people, Grant declared that, on the contrary, under the influence of Hinduism, they had sunk into a state extreme depravity. Dishonesty, perjury, selfishness, social divisions, the low position of women, sexual vice and cruelty to animals were all evils which were widespread and a result of the Hindu religion. (Oddie, 1994, p. 32)

Patrick supports this notion by asserting that the Imperial Gothic, as he calls it, “combines the seemingly scientific, progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with antithetical interest in the occult” (1988, p. 227). From that interest in the occult a series of writers felt compelled to picture these bizarre and strange lands in their novels (Madame Blavatsky, 1877; Wilkie Collins, 1868; E. Arnold, 1879, or A. P. Sinnett, 1883, are only some examples). Europeans were captivated by oriental obscurantism and sought to fulfill this curiosity. Yet, instead of providing substantiated commentaries on religious experiences, Indologists focused on images of the decline and fall of Oriental civilizations, contrasting them with Christian Europe. They interpreted Oriental religions through deliberately historicized “scientific events” (Brantlinger, 1988, p. 234).

This article aims to investigate how the vitiated depiction of Indian demons by British chroniclers obscured a paradigm that used to be discursively fluid. Fluid in the sense that demons were not necessarily evil and the boundaries between good and bad, demonic and celestial deities were more ambiguous than the British portrayal suggested. To address this issue, we will first provide a commentary on the Orientalist depiction of Hindu practices as

terrifying phenomena, drawing on the works of Reverend Samuel Mateer, an Irish missionary in Kerala during the nineteenth century, specifically his booklets *The Land of Charity* (1870) and *Native Life in Travancore* (1883). Secondly, we will examine the extent to which this theological imbroglio has disrupted the connections between locals and their philosophical and social structures. This will be demonstrated through a analysis of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* (1965) and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), which exemplify the continuation of these issues in postcolonial India.

2. THE IMPERIAL GOTHIC

In the same note, Tabish Khair contends that the Gothic genre in English literature emerged as a counterbalance to the coldness of the Era of Reason, characterized by its engineering machinery and cultivated rationality. The Gothic provided a realm for irrational fantasies and emotions, offering an escape from the confines of enlightened empiricism, thus ghosts, castles, and other exotic sceneries from former times were commonly found in these stories (2009). Building on this assertion, we propose that the mythmaking of the Orient was similarly constructed as a remote and static setting, rooted in a glorified past. This past was, in turn, embedded in narratives filled with bizarre imaginings and romanticized artifacts which were undoubtedly instrumental in disseminating adulterated representations of Asian cultures throughout Europe. As Edward Said notes, these depictions served specific ideological purposes in the context of Orientalism: "What the European took from the classical Oriental past was a vision (and thousands of facts and artifacts) which only he could employ to the best advantage; to the modern Oriental he gave facilitation and amelioration—and, too, the benefit of his judgment as to what was best for the modern Orient" (1978, p. 79).

A significant contributor to the encyclopedia of Gothic Orientalism in India was the phenomenon of serpent adoration, particularly due to its resonances within Christian cultural signification. The parable of the garden of Eden is indisputably evoked here. All these *naaga*, or snake deities, representations catapulted the distribution of Gothic material in Europe, especially because, unlike snakes in Christian mythology, these deities are not animal personifications of snakes but human deities in a reptilian form. Yet, these representations were also enmeshed in a narrative of colonial sexualization. Indian art and architecture provided the European mind with a series of erotic scenes, where snake deities appear as bare-breasted women, entwined in their own tails in an almost phallocentric display. As will be further explored with demonesses, this strategy is not unique to *naagas*. The gothicized colonial body was frequently sexualized. It illustrates a physiognomic difference, a bizarre anomaly to the Western audience. This positioned these representations in direct confrontation to the European canon through oriental fetishism. From this premise, racialized women were framed in opposition to Western constructions around femininity, that is, pudor, chastity, virtue, subservience, or modesty. In other words, they were pictured as lascivious, extroverts, vulgar, and indecent, "in the missionaries' underlying philosophy and the reasons they had for wanting to construct 'the other' in particular ways" (Oddie, 1994, p. 29).

Sir James George Frazer (1963) noted that no country has ever been as prolific in producing human gods as India. However, it is the demons, in their proximity to the mundane, who represent human impulses (as cited in O'Flaherty, 1982). The academic argues that much of the mythology surrounding demons in the Vedas serves as a reminder and metaphor for human banalities. Another significant remark is that the concept of "evil" diverges from its Christian connotation. Only after Manichean rewriting did European chroniclers adopt the assumption that demons are perpetrators of destruction and death, while gods embody the powers of good. Contrary to such expectations, Vedic literature often employs these attributes indiscriminately, with the primary conflict between these entities being moral opposition (O'Flaherty, 1982).

The Vedic mythology and religion present us with a situation which is at first sight paradoxical. On the one hand there is a distinction, opposition and conflict between the Devas and the Asuras, the gods and the "demons," the powers of Light and Darkness... But on the other hand, numerous myths bring out the consubstantiality or brotherhood of the Devas and the Asuras. One has the impression that Vedic doctrine is at pains to establish a double perspective: although, as an immediate reality, and as the world appears to our eyes, the Devas and the gods [sic] are irreconcilably different by nature and condemned to fight one another, at the beginning of time, on the other hand, that is to say before the Creation or before the world took its present form, they were consubstantial...In man's immediate experience, in his concrete, historical existence, the Devas and Asuras are opposed, and he must pursue virtue and combat evil. (O'Flaherty, 1982, p. 59)

In other words, demons and gods are alike in nature or, at least, much more imbricated than initially imagined. When considering this dualistic paradox, the Samudra Manthana myth (churning of the ocean of milk) comes irremediably into mind.¹ What particularly interests us in this analysis is how such theodicy was reformulated by European romancers. *Naaga* adoration and other demonic themes provided European theologians with the opportunity to construct an extensive dictionary of mysterious and grotesque literature aimed at discrediting Hinduism as a mere superstition. This hermeneutic endeavor is also in line with the investigation of other academics. Horace Wilson (1906), for instance, notes that the purpose of academic inquiry was to refute the inaccuracies of Hinduism while affirming the truths of Christianity through preliminary religious readings (as cited in Sugirtharajah, 1999). Missionaries, either instructed or inspired by such recommendation, produced numerous

¹ O'Flaherty (1982) presents a compelling Tamil myth related to this parable that subscribes the abovementioned. According to this story, the Asuras and Devas initially agreed to share the nectar (*soma*), but their mutual suspicion led them to renege on this agreement. Shiva ultimately intervened, declaring that anyone infected with pride would not benefit from nectar's blessings. Later the story will be perverted and ethicized with this antithetical equation. In line with other Indologists, O'Flaherty observes that there is neither a qualitative nor hierarchical difference between demons and gods. Instead, these symbolic denominations correspond to a dimension of symmetry in the creation of the myth.

volumes on the genealogy and vicissitudes of Hindu philosophies and their innumerable schools across India. Their intention was, after becoming thoroughly acquainted with these doctrines, to elaborate on a series of instructions to prevent their influence or, in short, “in the background, to be utilized only when absolutely necessary, it will be an invaluable weapon not only to bring to attention the Hindus’ own ignorance and misrepresentation of their tradition but also to make way to woo them to the Christian gospel” (Farquhar, 1920, as cited in Sugirtharajah, 1999, p. 74).

The preoccupation of missionaries with this “fetish-worship” was not merely theological but also theocratic. Such superstitions were perceived as barriers to the expansion of Christianity in Asia, much like other Western pagan idolatry (fairies, ghosts, trolls, luck, fortune...) (Mateer, 1871). Missionaries thus weaponized “pagan” practices to diminish and trivialize local philosophies. Rev. W.J. Richards, for example, recounted the story of Talanani, a priest who venerated a hill demon. Talanani is described as a drunkard, dancing in a “convulsive horrid fashion” before his idols. “Our hero,” says the reverend on a humorous note, was ultimately murdered by rivals and buried in the depths of the jungle. The tale continues with tigers, elephants, and other animals rescuing the body, which unleashed a smallpox pandemic in the village until the murderers constructed an image of the dead priest and worshipped it. A shrine, “no bigger than a small dog kennel” was erected in his name and venerated by the locals (Mateer, 1883, pp. 75-77). It is clear that Rev. W.J. Richards’ intention was to caricature Hinduism, and the sarcasm in his words makes this evident. As expressed by Kabani in the following quote, the narrative serves to ridicule and undermine the legitimacy of Hindu practices.

These themes had their significance in medieval thought, and would continue to be voiced with varying degrees of forcefulness up to the present time. But it was in the nineteenth century that they found their most deliberate expression since that period saw a new confrontation between the East and the West—an imperial confrontation. If it could be suggested that Eastern peoples were slothful, preoccupied with sex, violent and incapable of self-government, then the imperialist would feel himself justified in stepping in and ruling. (Kabani, 1994, p. 6)

In Rev. Mateer’s examination of the macabre, he provides a bestiary that contributes to the Gothic narrative. Unlike Vaishnavas, demon and snake worshippers in the south are more inclined to revere Shiva, the lord destruction, and all demons (Mateer, 1871). To elucidate this demonologist conference, we can consider some examples provided by the reverend.

Cows are portrayed in the Puranas and some Vedas as sacred, and this dogma has proliferated throughout the subcontinent, establishing a widespread consensus within various Hindu traditions. Vaidehi (2015) argues that, precisely because of their sacredness of cows, there is a belief that demons and evil spirits steal the cattle and milk from farmers. Reverend Mateer, however, challenges this virtuous Indian symbol. Madans, or “he who is like a cow,” are black-colored demons covered in cow’s hair, taking various forms and avatars, being perhaps one of the most important Chudala Madan. This demon inhabits places where bodies

have been either buried or burned. It makes a “silly” (Mateer, 1871, p. 194) appearance dancing in a flame with a turban, a short loincloth, trident, and bracelets. The description could not be any more of a cliché, especially considering that the revered later undermines his own account by stating that “images of Madan are never made” (Mateer, 1871, p. 194). In a footnote, he suggests that the cloven foot reveals its analogousness to Satan (Mateer, 1871). The missionary is thus not only affronted by this demonological iconoclasm but also by its assimilation through Christian satanism. Rev. Mateer’s clarification is far from coincidental, as Oddie indicates “In those accounts where the missionary comments are most disparaging, the reader is left with the impression that the ‘heathen’ Indian in particular was not only different, but abnormal” (1994, p. 37).

Chudala Madan is not the only animist demon; other theriocephalic creatures are also prevalent in India’s folklore. For instance, Mallan, an elephant-like giant revered by the hill tribes, acts like a genie, fulfilling the wishes of its devotees (Mateer, 1871). The number of demons in the south India is innumerable: Brahmarakshasa (a Brahmin spirit), Tātākā (a female demon who harasses sages during rituals), Muyalakan (a dwarf personifying ignorance), or Daruka (a forest demoness) are just a few examples. The insistence of missionaries in remarking demon adoration is deliberate. Walter Clifford, a missionary in north India described Hindus as “demon possessed”, asserting that “you can see the devil shining out of their eyes” (Anderson, 2002, p. 9). He aimed to criminalize not only the doctrine but also its followers. Eradicate the former required the erection of intricate technologies of acculturation, while prosecuting the latter was more straightforward for the colonial purposes through the insertion of eugenic politics. Zaehner elucidates that missionary methods sought to discredit non-theistic religions as lacking moral foundation “since they do not believe in a *benevolent* deity in which the notion of a moral goodness can be grounded” (1969, p. 164; emphasis on purpose).

Although Kitson interest centers on the figure of the vampire as a literary device that catapulted the dissemination of Oriental and Gothic material, his conclusions can be readily extrapolated to our study. The academic poses that vampires were the “ultimate other” for nineteenth-century Britons: “exotic, Eastern and supernatural, a demonic inversion of Protestant modernity, with its seductive mixture of forbidden desires and sinful excess” (2013, p. 177). Similarly, the construction of female demons in India have been susceptible to the sexualizing gaze of Oriental fetishists. Among all evil creatures, Rev. Mateer emphasizes that female demons are of all the cruelest (Mateer, 1883). Although this will be discussed in greater detail in the following section, it is undeniable that attributes such as domesticity and modesty were valued in both nineteenth-century Victorian England and India, especially after the colonial episode.

It is therefore unsurprising that missionaries and other colonial moralists were shocked by empowered female figures. Reverend William Ward encapsulates this sentiment, describing Hinduism as “the most puerile, impure and bloody of any system of idolatry that was ever established on earth”, a religion of “idle, effeminate and dissolute people” with “disordered imaginations who frequent their temples for the satisfaction of their licentious

appetites” (2010, p. 45). Similarly, Kabani in *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of the Orient* (1994) argues that sexualizing the Other was a manufactured discourse in order to position the East in confrontation to the West.

In the European narration of the deliberate stress on those qualities that made the East different from the West, exiled it into an irretrievable state of “otherness.” Among the many themes that emerge from the European narration of the Other, two appear most strikingly. The first is the insistent claim that *the East was a place* of lascivious sensuality and the second that it was a realm characterized by inherent violence. (1994, p. 5; emphasis added)

In a similar vein, Kosambi (1960) devotes one chapter to mother goddesses. They come to personify attributes such as creation, motherhood, fertility and, perhaps most interestingly, destruction; if these are creators of life, they are also in possession of destroying it. They are often depicted with terrifyingly sharp teeth and nails, yet simultaneously as beautiful young women. Banerji (2013), in her study of the Bhagavathy festival, offers a compelling analysis of this Keralite performance; which features a dance between two confronted female deities: the goddess Bhagavathy and the demoness Darika. The author observes that these two deities are both portrayed as provocative characters:

She has a grotesque appearance. Her face is pock-marked and she carries a sword in her hand. Her breasts are bared and they are prominent and red. Devotees, some of them, rather drunk, hurl abuse after abuse at the goddess. Her companion enters the performance space. She does not have the prominent headdress of the goddess but she has larger and more prominent breasts. The crowd is ecstatic to see her. More obscene exchanges follow as this divine companion grabs the nearest man from the audience and thrusts her breast into his mouth. (2013, n. p.)

Brubaker, who also examines the Bhagavathy festival, provides significant considerations into the portrayal of female demons in South India, particularly regarding their reputed inclination to possess men to satisfy their sexual appetites. This phenomenon parallels Kitson’s earlier analysis of the vampire paradox. According to Brubaker, the festival can be interpreted as a reflection of the societal reality of women in Kerala: “an enclosed, domesticated, sacred space personified by a divine female attracts and is penetrated and violated by a wilderness-roaming horde driven by distinctly masculine forms of lust and aggression” (Brubaker, 1979, as cited in Banerji, 2013, p. 244). While this interpretation might seem anecdotal to some, Gross (2000) corroborates that “Hindu goddesses can promote the humanity of Hindu women by providing the psychological well-being that positive female imagery brings” (as cited in Banerji, 2013, p. 246).

We conclude this section with a revealing proselytizing event that encapsulates the cultural violations that we have been discussing. Rev. Mateer recounts sending his followers to destroy demon idols from a shrine, retaining one for himself. This act was far from innocent, missionaries often syncretized demons into Christian iconography. The reverend

describes the story of a wicked spirit that inhabited a tree. It was so powerful that it controlled and ruled over the mountains and all creatures living in there. The tree eventually became a pilgrimage site for thousands of demon worshippers. Even the native government refrained from cutting down this tree due to its religious significance. Christian workmen eventually did destroy the tree but, once it fell, a group of missionaries gathered around to purge the tree from any spirit. Instead, they reutilized its wood for the construction of a chapel. Demon worshipers were then expected to pilgrimage to this chapel due to the wood's origin, thereby being compelled to listen to Christian services. In Mateer's words, "so that what had formerly been used in the service of the devil now became subservient to the worship of the one true and living god" (1871, pp. 201-207)

Our study reveals that Europeans deliberately perverted the Hindu pantheon in its effort to firstly demonize Oriental philosophies and to later catechize the subaltern doctrines. Deities such as Kali, along with other demons and gods, were instrumentalized in the Christianization of a doctrine that was never Manichean in its design. The fluidity and disparity of Hinduism diverge from the saturated and binary mind of the Christians. Demons, once neutral symbols in Sanskrit literature, were redefined within the colonizing narrative as malevolent forces. This was not merely a matter of conversion and domestication but also one of dissociation and dispossession. One could argue that castigating demonic codes and knowledge of lower castes was a subtle proselytizing strategy employed by missionaries. Unlike the violent and passionate acculturation processes imposed by the British towards lower-caste Hindus, churchmen exercised caution when interfering with the higher classes and their orthodoxy. Converting Brahmins was presumed a significant triumph, a message from the "respectable" classes to the poor heathens in the hope that this would draw many others into Christianity (Sebastian, 2003).

3. KALI EATS THE HEART OF BRITISH MISSIONARIES: THEOLOGICAL GOTHICIZATION IN ANITA DESAI'S *VOICES IN THE CITY* (1965) AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE* (1989)

In the previous section substantial evidence has been provided to support the assertion that missionaries problematized Hinduism through a repertoire of Orientalist lexicon, picturing gods in a Gothic light. These macabre illustrations were designed to unsettle impressionable British readers, who were horrified terrified by the depiction of Hindu gods. In contrast, Indians, having centuries of contact with such "morbid" folklore, would have initially shown great indifference towards this gothicized paraphernalia. Missionary literature also indicates that some Indian communities were frequent devotees of these so-called evil forces. However, demonizing the Hindu pantheon diversified into a series of colonial constructions that intended to supervise the human experience through the categorization of endemic anthropological and ethnographical codes. This section aims to investigate the missionary semiotics surrounding the colonial construction of the goddess Kali and the reverberations of such narratives in contemporary literature.

One of primary ambitions of missionaries working in South India was to regulate the female experience, not so much in its bureaucratic dimension, as colonial administrators did, but in its moral aspects. Proselytizing the colonial subject was not as simple as changing the book one is reading; it required a complex renewal of cultural technologies. For indigenous women, this process entailed both Western acculturation and patriarchal impositions. From that premise, missionaries perceived goddess Kali as a site of epistemological resistance. Thus, they established a series of literary mechanisms in the hope of minimizing the goddess's influence over her female devotees. These appreciations first demonized the goddess as an insurgent figure against the colonial model of femininity and, at a second level, they sexualized her figure for the fetishist eye of Orientalist readers. Rev. Mateer, in line with other colleagues of him, pictured the goddess in a dramatically negative way:

Some of these are forms of Kali, a goddess worshipped under various names and representations throughout the whole of India. She is fabled to be the wife of Siva, the god of destruction and lord of demons. She delights in blood, cruelty and lust. Human as well as animal sacrifices were offered to her. It is in honour of Kali that Hindu ascetics cut, pierce, and torture their bodies, or are swung on hooks attached to a lofty rotating beam. She is represented as being pleased for a thousand years with the blood of a human being. (1871, p. 197)

Allow to briefly trace our analysis back to ancient literature to demonstrate that this portrayal is nothing but a parodic or hyperbolic version of Kali. Known as “she who is black” or “she who is death,” Kali presents herself a puzzling figure for Hindu theologians, and her symbolism today can be understood as an amalgamation of myths and folklore resulting after centuries of textual encounters. O’Flaherty, for example, affirms that the first mention of the goddess is found at the *Devi Mahatmya* (6th century CE), where she gained her frightening look after emanating from the anger of the goddess Durga. Kingsley (1988), however, points out that she has originally appeared at the *Atharva Veda* (1200 BCE), a collection of poems and mantras, not as a goddess, but as an extension of Agni’s, the god of fire, seven black tongues, hence her color. While it is true that, since the very beginning, she is surrounded by an aura of death and the obscure, this circumstance must be cautiously considered. The *Puranic Encyclopedia* concurs with this destructive force and summons the goddess as an “incarnation of sin” (43.65). Other Sanskrit volumes, however, like the *Matsya-purāṇa*, describe Kali as a “terrible creature” but also a “divine mother” (179.35) whose existence obeys the purpose of drinking blood from demons (179.8), aligning with Mookerjee’s hypothesis of Kali as an annihilator of male demonic power (8). Similarly, the *Shiva Purana* refers to the multifaceted nature of Kali who, depending on the name given, might bestow pleasures and salvation (2.1.16), as well as destruction (2.2.33).

Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel laureate born in British Kolkata, seems particularly interested in the figure of Kali, which becomes a recurring motif in his fiction. Tagore’s words are fundamental to our study not only because of his exhaustive depictions of Kali but also because they demystify any saturated constructions ever written by missionaries. His view

helps us illuminate the syncretic encounter between colonial moralists and the goddess. *Gora* (1949) is concerned with denouncing the oppression exerted by the British as well as with raising numerous endemic controversies around caste, women, education, amongst other issues. In the novel, Gora (the main character), whose vision of Hinduism is rather orthodox, inserts at times some catechizing monologues, like the following one clearly dedicated to the goddess Kali:

Brother, the goddess of my worship does not come to me enshrined in beauty. I see her where there is poverty and famine, pain and insult. Not where worship is offered with song and flower, but where life's blood is sacrificed. To me, however, it is the greatest joy that no element of mere pleasantness is there to seduce one; there one must rouse himself with his full strength and be prepared to give up his all. No sweetness cloy such manifestation; it is an irresistible, unbearable awakening, cruel and terrible, in which the strings of being are struck so harshly that all the tone of the gamut cry out as they are snapped asunder. (Tagore, 1949, p. 71)

This paragraph astutely captures the fluctuating sentiments of Hindus towards Kali, a deity of apparent contradictions, as noted by Dalmiya (2000). Kali is simultaneously “terrible” and venerated with devotion. Dalmiya emphasizes Gora’s introspective soliloquy as a challenge to the exemplary nature of missionary iconography. While the iconography behind Christianity orbits around the heavenly and virtuous (song and flower), Hindu mythology often represents the mundane (poverty, famine, pain, cruel), even if this includes worshiping destructive forces inherent to the human condition. From this contradiction arises Kali, whose morbid attributes render her an epitome of the diabolic. Despite being herself a goddess, some missionaries went so far as to purposely mistranslate the *Kālikā Purāṇa* and transcribe her as a demoness (Humes, 2003). Although much effort has been done by missionaries to universalize Kali as evil, the kaleidoscopic nature of the goddess remains indisputable.

To exemplify this conflict, we refer to Anita Desai’s *Voices in the City* (1965). The story takes place in Kolkata, a city described by one of the characters as Kali herself: restless, chaotic, destructive, evil (Desai, 1965). The author introduces the character of Otima, a mother of three children. Her daughter engages in a schizophrenic narrative of love and hatred towards her mother, primarily because Otima’s relationship with another man breaks traditional expectations of female behavior. This is particularly infuriating because, unlike her mother, Monisha will later assume the role of a devoted and submissive wife. Otima is thus portrayed as both a Mother (in capital letters) and an evil figure:

She [Otima] is our consciousness and our unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest—and all that is unmanifest [...]. No, Amla, no—there is no all in what you see—it spreads and spreads far beyond, it encompasses not just this one earth but all the planets, all the centuries, night and day, light and dark. She is not merely good, she is not merely evil—she is good and she is evil. She is our knowledge and our ignorance. She is everything to which we are attached, she is everything from which we will always be detached. She is reality and illusion,

she is the world and she is maya. Don't you see, in her face, in her beauty, Amla, don't you see the amalgamation of death and life? Isn't it a perfect and inevitable that she should pour blood into our veins when we are born and drain it from us when we die? (Desai, 1965, p. 264)

In this context, Chanda observes that within the Hindu pantheon, Parvati embodies the archetypal traits of patriarchal domesticity, serving as “the upholder of societal norms” (Desai, 1965, p. 74), much like Monisha. Conversely, Kinsley (1986) notes that Kali's autonomy and macabre physical appearance, traits more commonly associated with male gods, “threatens stability and order” (as cited in Chanda, 2002, p. 74). These two avatars, despite being aspects of the same goddess, are deliberately confronted. If Parvati is part of the patriarchal structure, the demoness then “threatens that structure and with that the whole moral code. The dichotomy between structure and anti-structure revolves around Woman's sexuality seen as the central balance of kinship relations in a society” (Chanda, 2002, p. 75). It is fundamental to recognize that the unruly nature of Kali, just like Otimá's, is both addressed and dialectically constructed from a male viewpoint. In the case of Kali, this perspective is provided first by indigenous men and later by missionaries, and, in Otimá's case, by her daughter who is similarly influenced by patriarchy and colonialism.

Anita Desai has, perhaps inadvertently, succeeded in portraying this conflicting paradox. Motherhood is, at multiple levels and in many contexts, imbedded in a narrative of patriarchal and colonial oppression and regulations. In that vein, the model for Christian motherhood, exported by missionaries through female education, encourages qualities such as submissiveness, decorum, prudence, and obedience. It is thus unsurprising that Otimá is reprimanded by a patriarchal agent, her daughter, for not meeting the demands expected as a [Christian] mother. This confrontation is further accentuated by Monisha's apparent sterility, which hampers her ability to fulfill her mothering duties. In contrast, Otimá personifies Kali, not a simple mother but the “terrible,” “crazy,” or “mad” mother, who exceeds the traditional construction of motherhood (Dalmiya, 2000). She finds agency and emancipation in motherhood, and, from that space, she is demonized. As previously suggested, her figure challenges patriarchal dominance and power by positioning the protagonist/goddess in confrontation against misogynist and colonial principals regarding the female experience, including those of her daughter. Otimá is a challenging archetype who, in “her destructive dance she creates her own reality” (Gupta, 1991, as cited in Dalmiya, 2000, p. 129).

It would not be speculative to assert that the attributes of both Monisha and her mother are part of a colonial legacy. As shown in quote from the *The Land of Charity* inserted above, missionaries found the figure of Kali theologically and experimentally distressing. As Chanda deftly comments upon, Kali did not only sabotage Christian morality, her figure, unlike Parvati's, resisted proselytization (2000). Missionaries sought to domesticate the female experience by introducing a series of regulatory codes around motherhood and family, often erroneously assumed to be traditional values in the subcontinent. Monisha, therefore, represents, in words of Chanda, Parvati's domestic submissiveness, which accommodates the colonial agenda without resistance. Kali, or Otimá, on the other hand, is a defiant figure that

challenges colonialism by embracing her indigenous “depravity.” Urban (2003) confirms this, arguing that paintings of Kali from the eighteenth and nineteenth century aimed to depict the goddess, and thus women alike, not only in a horrid way, but as an epitome of a bad wife and mother.

These paintings often depicted Kali dominating Shiva, her husband, in the sexual intercourse (Urban, 2003). Due to this dramatic representation, missionaries did not only demonize any sign of female resistance but also minimized other models of motherhood, like Kali’s or Otima’s.

Related to this illustration, British missionaries emphasized and circulated exuberant depictions of Kali as a demoness of sorcery, polytheism, and licentiousness (Humes, 2003). This is clearly illustrated in *The Land of Charity* quoted earlier, where Rev. Mateer elaborates on a depiction of Kali that evokes an almost vampiresque image. The description evokes not only evilness but also sensuality, or quoting Kitson again, a “seductive mixture of forbidden desires and sinful excess” (2013, p. 177). Missionaries often portrayed Kali as reveling in blood, flesh, and lust, as noted in the earlier citation. The choice of words is deliberate and significant. The etymological journey of “delight” supports this hypothesis. Originating from the Latin *delectare*, to please, it later evolved into Old French *delite*, pleasure or sexual desire. The English likely borrowed this term at this stage. Consequently, the goddess is not merely adored or worshipped, but “pleased,” also a word with a tremendously sensual connotation in its French meaning, that is *plaisir*, to satisfy or to give pleasure. This erotic and bizarre glossary complements the numerous metaphors linking the Gothic and the East. Through Orientalist filtering, these metaphors contributed to patriarchal narrative that sought to justify sexual and corrective violence towards indigenous women.

Urban also explores the intersection between the Imperial Gothic and the hypersexualization of the othered body, noting that Kali existed in conflict with the puritanical and repressive sexual culture of Victorian England. He observes that Kali captured the British imagination of British readers “with her combination of lasciviousness and bloody violence, Kālī appears throughout Victorian novels as the quintessential symbol of dark and terrifying—yet also strangely seductive and alluring— powers of the Orient” (Urban, 2003, p. 170). This portrayal of Kali as a sexual figure was later challenged by national authors such as Bengali writer Bharati Mukherjee. In her acclaimed novel *Jasmine* (1989), the protagonist, Jyoti, escapes to America after her fiancé is murdered. There, the Indian woman faces multiple sexual assaults due to her exoticized appearance and origin. Bernstein (2009), expanding on the argument of patriarchal dominance over racialized women and their continued fetishization, concludes:

Just as the colonizing country was deemed superior to the colonized in military strength, wealth, and power [...] so was the Western sexual adventurer in Asia the superior man, the kind of man to whom any sensible native woman would pledge fidelity and devotion. (35)

Oddie deepens this hypothesis, concluding that the missionary representation of the Orient was also influenced by “some of the same blind spots and cultural prejudices which affected many other Europeans” (1994, p. 37). In short, missionaries, like other colonial moralists, shared the European vision of a cultural superiority.

We are particularly interested in bringing forward a particularly aggressive episode. Upon her arrival, Jyoti is brutally raped by a local man, whom she subsequently kills. After the incident, with her hands still bloody, Jyoti incarnates in Kali “naked...with my mouth open, pouring blood, my red tongue out” (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 106). She later reflects “I was walking death. Death incarnate” (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 106). Mukherjee’s intention is patently clear at this point, she resignifies womanhood through the transmutation of power, even if supernatural. This transformation is not coincidental, particularly given the author’s Bengali heritage, a place deeply devoted to the goddess. As argued earlier, Kali’s destructive force is not whimsical; but rather, she was born to drink the blood of male demons. What interests us from this incident is that the main character (now possessed by or reincarnated in Kālī) becomes a disruptive agent in the natural course of patriarchy and colonialism. After all, Jyoti, far from victimizing herself, overturns the dynamics of power “she transforms from the role of Sita—compliant, dutiful and obedient wife—to that of Kale [*sic*]*—messenger of death, source of destructive energy, provider of renewal and re-birth*” (Burton, 2007, as cited in Sharma, 2016, p. 33).

Mukherjee recuperates Kali’s agency beyond her missionary fetishization, which is no more than “a creation of phallocentric fear of female sexuality gone wild.” (Dalmiya, 2000, p. 128). She invokes the unsettling Kali, not the sensualized one, but the man-eater. She becomes a disruptive figure that undermines colonialism and white patriarchy from the representational realm. Kali’s abominable physicality and destructive nature, as presented in *Jasmine*, is a testament against established colonial categories, yet it is also a reappropriation of her demonized interpretation within a postcolonial discourse. In a recent study carried out by Radhakrishnan and Sivakumar, the scholars conclude that this gradual transition is the product of the occasional “tension between Jasmine’s two personalities, one of which adheres to traditional Indian ideals of life and the other of which is an adventurer in a capitalistic world” (2021, p. 2962). This hypothesis, while seemingly contradictory, compliments our central point by highlighting her journey as a form of female emancipation contrary to traditional Indian patriarchy.

This metamorphosis, nevertheless, occurs only through performing Western expectations of the Indian experience. Jyoti is not simply an immigrant who kills her rapist; she takes agency from the uncanny, the bizarre, and the alien. Indian women are simultaneously depicted under a traditional light (submissive, domestic, mothers), but also under a dangerous one (irreverent, public, promiscuous). Paradoxically, both are part of a colonial legacy. The first meaning the ambitions of missionaries for domesticating females, and the latter the necessary opposition towards everything that escaped from that model. These last categories, assumed now as a badge for female Western emancipation, were once weaponized in the construction of Kali and the female aborigine. The goddess is a bad mother and wife,

the ugly and sexy looking, the lascivious, the rebellious, as opposed to the obedient, modest, beautiful, and compliant Christian archetype, later implanted in the colonies. Jyoti is not navigating capitalist waters through this apparent confrontation against Hindu traditionalism, but rather she is ratifying these gothicized tunes as a mechanism against the very same institution that built upon them. She is trapped in an erratic dance between colonial and precolonial expectations around the female experience. Otherwise, she would have been painted under a glorifying feminist light who succeeds in assassinating patriarchy, and not as a demoness who takes revenge from a dark place.

Concluding with our analysis, we return briefly to South India. In the case of Southern Kali, Māriyamman, the proselytizing paradigm is even more problematic. Although she is also bloodthirst and malevolent in nature, she, unlike Kali, is traditionally invoked as benevolent. Rev. Robert Caldwell describes her as a “semidivine and semi-diabolical being” (1849, p. 91). Paul Younger provides insights into this divine perception. The goddess, says the author, is young and fair skinned, tucked with jewels and garlands. Natives even point out at the resemblance with a young bride (Caldwell, 1849). In her symbolical opposition against Kali, she occupies a place that is not of destruction, but of regeneration. She is also known for being the goddess of fertility and healer of diseases, especially smallpox, appearing before the sick to cure their conditions if needed. Perverting Māriyamman’s image, however, becomes even more controversial because she played a democratizing part in some southern communities.

The story tells, as gathered in Szczepanik (2012), that the goddess was the mother of Parasurāmā (Vishnu’s incarnations). One day, while carrying a ball of water over her head, she was distracted by a group of attractive minstrels, and lust drove her into losing her powers. Then the ball fell, soaking her clothes and body. Her husband, recognizing the transgression, told his son to decapitate his own mother. Parasurāmā complied the task but later, out of repentance, tried to bring his mother back by transplanting her head into some dead body he found in the forest (Szczepanik, 2012). The spell worked and Māriyamman resuscitated, but in the body of a low caste washerwoman: “The woman with the Brahman head and Pariah body was afterwards worshipped as Māriyamman” (Rajagopal, 2008, as cited in Szczepanik, 2012, p. 187). This fusion of caste identities within a compartmentalized society challenged fixed hierarchies. In their efforts to criminalize and syncretize indigenous knowledge, missionaries sought to universalize any religious symbolism that threatened their agenda, further complicating the portrayal and reception of figures like Māriyamman. Thus, Māriyamman’s story illustrates the tension between traditional hierarchies and the transformative power of syncretism in society.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the transformation of oriental religions into a Gothic narrative by missionaries highlights the ideological and cultural manipulations employed during the colonial period. The Gothic genre, as Tabish Khair notes, emerged as a counterbalance to Enlightenment rationality, providing a space for irrational fantasies and exotic sceneries.

Missionaries leveraged these gothicized depictions to discredit Hinduism, framing it as a religion of superstitions and moral deficiencies. By portraying Hindu gods and demons within a Gothic framework, they sought to undermine the legitimacy of Hindu practices and assert the moral and spiritual superiority of Christianity. This narrative construction reinforced Orientalist stereotypes and facilitated the cultural and religious domination of the East by the West. The deliberate manipulation of the Hindu pantheon, as well as the strategic use of Gothic imagery, underscores the complex interplay between religion, culture, and imperialism in the colonial enterprise.

Based on the aforesaid, this analysis emphasizes the complex portrayal of the goddess Kali and her influence on contemporary literature, particularly focusing on Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Desai's narrative intricately depicts the character Otima, who embodies the conflicting attributes of Kali—a nurturing mother and a rebellious, defiant figure. This duality challenges the colonial missionary portrayal of Kali as a malevolent, hypersexualized deity designed to unsettle British readers and regulate the indigenous female experience. Desai's portrayal of Otima underscores the internalized conflict between traditional expectations and the subversive potential inherent in female agency. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* further complicates the representation of Kali through the protagonist Jyoti, who transforms into a figure of resistance after enduring sexual violence. Jyoti's embodiment of Kali signifies a reclamation of power and agency, subverting the colonial and patriarchal narratives that sought to demonize and control female sexuality. This transformation is not merely an act of personal vengeance but a broader commentary on the intersection of colonialism, patriarchy, and the exoticization of Indian women. Moreover, this issue is closely associated with the concept of double marginalization of women within the Indian context.

Both Desai and Mukherjee's works highlight the enduring impact of colonial constructions of Hindu goddesses on contemporary literature. They reveal the persistent struggle against the missionary-imposed dichotomy of submissive versus rebellious femininity. These narratives challenge the simplistic, monolithic portrayals of Kali, presenting her instead as a complex, multifaceted symbol of both destruction and regeneration. Through their characters, Desai and Mukherjee underscore the ongoing negotiation of identity, power, and resistance in postcolonial contexts, illustrating how literature can serve as a space for reimagining and reclaiming indigenous narratives from colonial legacies.

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