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***INDIAN FEMALE IDENTITIES,  
BETWEEN HINDU PATRIARCHY AND WESTERN  
MISSIONARY MODELS IN ANITA DESAI'S  
FASTING, FEASTING AND CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY***

**Keywords:** centrifugal; centripetal; gender; hybridity; migration; missionary; patriarchal

**Abstract:** *The paper compares and contrasts several of Anita Desai's female characters who experience the transcendent urge to restructure their familiar cultural models along Western parameters. Whether engaged in migration or experiencing a static existence in India, Uma (Fasting, Feasting), Bim and Tara (Clear Light of Day) are exposed to cultural difference and this process influences their strategies of identity negotiation. The most important instrument of their cultural change is represented by the world of the mission schools that involves different challenges for each character. The present analysis focuses on the manners in which the Indian women under scrutiny attempt to refashion their cultural norms in accordance with the Western values disseminated by the missionary schools in India. The discussion employs theories of hybridity and culturally specific gender conventions in order to account for the characters' need to modify their inherited gender roles. The present argument advances a novel approach to cultural hybridity, which goes beyond the idea of an identity label customarily applied to migrant identities. Starting from the assumptions that all cultures are inherently hybrid and that the notion of hybridity covers a dynamic process, the discussion demonstrates that the transformations experienced by these characters illustrate the emergence of different patterns of female hybrid identities within the same cultural sphere. Thus, the argument sets out to demonstrate that Anita Desai's Indian women, whether migrant or non-migrant, experience different speeds of cultural transformation, depending on their different positioning towards Hindu and Christian prescriptions. Their metamorphoses illustrate that cultural hybridity is not a necessarily a consequence of migration, but an ongoing cultural process that constantly reshapes cultural patterns.*

**Introduction**

Considering recent theoretical debates on cultural hybridity, the paper analyzes the cultural identities of three female characters from Anita Desai's novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Fasting Feasting* (1999). *Clear Light of Day* presents the evolution of four Indian siblings (two sisters - Bim and Tara and two brothers - Raja and Baba). The novel focuses on Tara's temporary return from the United States and its effects upon Bim, the eldest sister from Old Delhi who takes care of

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their disabled brother, Baba. The first part of *Fasting, Feasting* presents a comparative perspective on family models; the first part of the novel focuses on the patriarchal oppression experienced by the eldest daughter, Uma and the second part features the Indian son's (Arun's) student migration to America. In order to understand the mechanisms of each character's change, the present argument relies on recent theories regarding cultural hybridity, missionary traditions in India and Hindu patriarchal norms.

### **Theoretical framework**

A useful critique of non-strategic essentialism (M. Kraidy 80, Brah and Coombers 1, Pietersee 89, Bhabha 224), the discourse of cultural hybridity needs to offer a more refined understanding of cross-cultural dynamics (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnik 72, Brah and Coombes 12, Pieterse 101, Kraidy 46). S. P. Moslund (2010) argues for the necessity to signal the limits of celebratory readings of migration literature and hybridity that minimize the relevance of "cultural sameness, coherence, continuity and rootedness" (10). Moslund defines culture as a dialectic structure, maintained by the interplay of cultural sameness (centripetal forces) and difference (centrifugal forces). The notions of organic and intentional hybridity designate degrees of cultural changes triggered by cultural encounters. Organic hybridity entails long-term cultural transformations resulting in the predominance of cultural sameness/centripetal elements within a language/culture (59). Intentional hybridity proposes high-speed cultural transformations, generated by the predominance of cultural difference, little tamed by the centripetal forces of a certain culture.

In this paper, the centripetal cultural elements are associated with elements of Hindu tradition that prescribe specific set of female roles, while the centrifugal forces are represented by the ideals of Western missionary education. According to the Hindu Brahmanical ideology, the primary duties of a *pativratâ*, a Hindu faithful wife, involve cooking, becoming a mother and cultivating her passion for her husband (Hermann 81). A persistent idea about Hindu women foregrounds their need to be guarded and protected by a male figure, since they are "unfit for independence" (Bose 66-67). Women are also considered incompatible with the attributes of public life and therefore confined to the home sphere (Fuller 288). A. Desai's female characters are partially shaped by the above set of patriarchal conventions that limit their freedom. However, the effects of these centripetal factors blend with the centrifugal cultural influences introduced by the Western missionary institutions. Mission schools in India engulf multiple Christian trends, ranging from Catholic convent schools to British Protestant and American mission schools (Thoburn 145). An important part of the Western missionary activities was dedicated to female education, missionaries being considered "the pioneers and chief promoters of education for women in India." (Fuller 255) A significant layer of the Western missionary education in India was motivated by the ethic of "woman-to-woman care" (Burton 373), (Semple 6). Hayden J.A. Bellenoit argues that a comprehensive account of missionary education in India has to transgress the simplistic dichotomy that assumes an opposition between Western modernity and Indian tradition (18). He suggests that the interactions between Western missionaries

and the Indian context should be discussed in terms of “constructive engagement” (63), “religious exchange” (66) and inter-faith discourse (68). By examining the cultural profile of Desai’s female characters, the discussion aims to check Bellenoit’s premise that missionaries acted as religious interpreters, generating a “culturally hybrid mentality” (86).

### **Body of the paper**

The first part of the corpus analysis examines instances of intentional hybridity, displayed by two non-migrant characters (Uma and Bim). The second part discusses Tara’s organic hybridity as an example of slow cultural change in the context of migration. Uma’s longing to escape her parents’ strict control dictates her attraction to the convent school, where she feels liberated:

There were those wretched weekends when she was plucked back into the trivialities of her home, which seemed a denial, a negation of life as it ought to be [...] She prickled with impatience for the fifteenth of July when school would re-open and a new term begin. (Desai, *Fasting* 21)

This transgressive urge springs from Uma’s perception that her background lacks the elements necessary for self-fulfillment, i.e. mobility, independence and self-assertion. Uma’s dilemma may be characterised as entrapment between “the power of patriarchal education and tradition, and the urge to get free of it” (Volna 5). Therefore, the centrifugal forces of missionary education are considered possible remedies against the patriarchal effects of the centripetal Hindu standards: “She would have confessed how the *order* pleased her, the *rationality* of the whole system, each element having its own function and existing for a *reason*” (Desai, *Fasting* 20; emphasis mine).

This quotation implies that order, rationality and reason are novel concepts, untraceable in Uma’s family’s sets of norms. Hence, Uma regards Western education as her way to salvation, “a pleasant escape from her claustrophobic conditions at home” (Ravichandran 82). Uma is attracted by the cultural values that stress the celebration of female individuality, which is downplayed by the centripetal cultural forces of the Hindu tradition. Uma’s loyalties to the world of the mission school, spring from her need to feel included, useful and appreciated. She collects Christmas cards because they are symbols of “goodwill and friendship” (Desai, *Fasting* 99). The Indian girl associates the idea of paradise with a Christmas bazaar where she can contribute to the Catholic and Baptist philanthropic work:

If Uma was asked to paint a picture of heaven, then heaven would have paper lanterns hanging from trees along the drive and around the school yard [...] And Uma would have her own place in that heaven, beside the Baptist missionary’s wife [...] not only permitted, but asked to handle the little packets of cards [...] She would collect money in a tin for the flushed and pleased lady who would smile and smile whenever anyone put some more money into it, and who would say, at the end of the day to Mother Agnes, ‘What a fortune we have made for the poor! Every card sold! This *dear* girl has been such a help’ (Desai, *Fasting* 128; italics in the original).

Uma's conception of heaven as a Christian site of missionary work reveals her strong attachment to the centrifugal forces of the mission schools. Uma's fantasy of joining the missionary efforts expresses her desire for being acknowledged as a distinct being. The thought that the missionary ladies might trust Uma strongly enough to assign her a task illustrates the character's need to be perceived as a capable individual. This suggests that the most appealing cultural value that boosts Uma's self-confidence is the individualist Western credo.

Although Uma tries to counterbalance the effects of Hindu patriarchal restrictions, her attempts to become an intentional hybrid are eventually undermined by elements of centripetality. The most relevant argument that supports this claim is provided by Uma's paradoxical relation with the universe of the convent school. Uma's inability to align with the values disseminated by the nuns illustrates her impossible struggle against the homogeneous forces of subordination:

There was not a thing Uma put her hand to that did not turn to failure. Uma rubbed and rubbed at her exercise books with an increasingly black and stumpy eraser, struggled to work out her sums, to remember dates, to spell 'Constantinople'; and over and over again she failed. Her record book was marked red for failure.[...]She wept with shame and frustration (Desai, *Fasting* 21).

Uma's struggle to belong to the world of the convent school illustrates her envisaged metamorphosis as an intentional hybrid. However, Uma's inability to join the ranks of successful students illustrates her weak resistance to the centripetal cultural forces that minimize the role of female education. Uma is the only student one who keeps failing "every single test" (Desai, *Fasting* 21). Her sense of 'shame' and 'frustration' reveals the character's understanding that she cannot belong to the world of reason and order that she admires. As Neb also remarks, "Uma, in spite of her liking for the life represented by the nuns, remains an outsider" (111).

The triumph of patriarchal Hindu forces is marked by Uma's imposed withdrawal from the convent school. After Arun's birth, her mother decides that Uma should give up school in order to take care of him. Through the character of Mama, Desai unmasks women's complicity with the male structures of oppression, conceptualized as "patriarchal bargains" (Kandiyoti qtd. in Jackson 111). In a desperate attempt to remain in the convent school, Uma proves she can uphold standards of self-assertion, as she begs Mother Agnes to allow her to continue her studies. To her surprise, the nun invokes the symbol of Virgin Mary, the Christian ideal of motherhood that justifies Uma's withdrawal to the home sphere:

Uma was thunderstruck. It was the last thing she ever expected Mother Agnes to say. Now Mother Agnes was talking about the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus - but surely she did not think the Virgin Mary was a mother like Mama was a mother? Surely she did not think baby Jesus ever lay squalling in his crib with his hair growing down his forehead and over his ears, with dribble running out of the corner of his mouth like a sick cat? That he had to have his nappies changed and that they smelt? Uma stared at Mother Agnes in dismay. It was what Mother was saying. And if she wound up by giving Uma a holy picture out of the drawer in her desk - a

small, giltedged card with a waxily pink Jesus on a waxily white Virgin Mary's blue lap, and advising her to pray for strength, pray to the Virgin Mary for strength, never forget to pray, she was nevertheless dismissing her, not only from her presence, her protection, but even from her school ( Desai, *Fasting* 28-29).

At this point, Anita Desai foregrounds the intersection between the Christian and Hindu religious discourses. Mother Agnes' argument reveals the patriarchal dimension of Christianity, referring to an ideal of womanhood defined exclusively through motherhood. The "fatherhood of God" (Tekcan 12), underscores the domination of male authority within Christian discourses. The presence of Virgin Mary is not a proof of female empowerment, since it enhances the aura of the male symbol without creating a female counterpart (Johnson quoted Tekcan 12). Moreover, the veneration of Virgin Mary as a badge of sacred motherhood involves the circulation of an incomplete version of femininity, devoid of sexuality (Buitelaar 10) as a "basic female experience." (Tekcan 14) As Mother Agnes employs the symbol of Christian motherhood, she prescribes an ideal of womanhood that restricts a woman's attributes to the family sphere. At this point, the centripetal and centrifugal cultural forces overlap in a patriarchal core that shapes a model of female identity as a cluster of obligations. After failed attempts to contract a successful arranged marriage, Uma accepts her spinsterhood and a life of subordination to her parents. Uma's wavering between the centripetal forces of Hindu social conventions and the centrifugal elements of Western education render her an intentional hybrid, whose envisaged cultural change is slowed down by the cultural parameters of her Hindu background.

The main character of *Clear Light of Day*, Bim, is an example of intentional hybrid who defines herself along centrifugal norms of self-assertion. As a little girl, Bim is attracted to the organized world of the mission school, where she develops leadership abilities:

At school Bim became a *different* person - active, involved, purposeful. A born organiser, she was patrol *leader* of the Bluebirds when still a small pig-tailed junior, later of the Girl Guides, then *captain* of the netball team, class prefect, even - gloriously, in her final year at school - Head Girl ( Desai , *Clear* 122; emphasis mine).

Bim's change is clearly associated with her access to missionary education, a container of different cultural norms. Bim's attraction to leader positions available at different stages of her education illustrates her search for empowerment from an early age. As a child, Bim expresses her intention to pursue an academic career and never get married. When she becomes an adult, Bim remains faithful to her convictions, striving to overcome her imprisoning female condition. One of the debates between Bim and Tara concerns the choice between marriage and education. Bim considers that marriage does not cover a woman's set of needs. On the contrary, Tara cannot think of other things that might fulfill a woman outside marriage:

'What else could there be?' countered Tara. 'What else?' asked Bim. 'Can't you think? I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I won't marry,' she added,

very firmly. 'I won't,' repeated Him, adding 'I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira-masi' [...] 'I shall work -I shall do things,' she went on, 'I shall earn my own living and look after Mira-masi and Baba and - and be independent' (Desai, *Clear* 140).

According to Wickramagamage, the above statement expresses Bim's will to power, the desire to maintain a dominant position in the family where she has gained a status of unquestioned authority (94). However, I argue that Bim's commitment to family does not express a selfish motivation to be in charge, but her ability to feel compassion and care. Jackson shares a similar view, considering that Bim "is shown to care for others out of choice and genuine duty" (128). Hence, Bim's desire to be independent cannot be reduced to a mere urge for power, since she includes the altruistic norms of care and responsibility in her ideal of an autonomous woman. Thus, Bim's adherence to forces of difference is punctuated by an advent of homogeneity, obvious in her loyalty to family values. Bim portrays her own world (Old Delhi) as a space of death and stagnation contrasted with the energy and action of New Delhi. Her willing retreat into this stationary space denotes a surge of centripetal forces that isolates her from New Delhi.

In this context, Bim's career as a professor of Indian history illustrates her past-oriented perspective, albeit combined with an openness to ideals of female assertiveness. Bim's access to Western missionary education involves her interaction with independent female teachers, whose examples she follows in adulthood, along a centrifugal trajectory. Thus, she is a promoter of transformation, attempting to teach her students about a new kind of woman (Boyers 55).

Bim's profession can be related with her intentional hybridization, since she blends centripetal and centrifugal values in her struggle against patriarchal oppression. While taking over norms of self-assertion, she also embraces the nurturing role, albeit on her own terms (Jackson 129). The harmonization of difference and sameness within Bim's profile eventually helps Bim transgress her resentment towards Raja and Tara and accept their decisions to live far from their native city and country, respectively. Thus, she can be defined as an intentional hybrid who eventually reaches a balance between elements of sameness and difference.

Tara's cultural profile is an example of organic hybridity in which the forces of sameness and difference successively gain priority. While Bim loves the school universe, Tara is terrified by the necessity to leave the home space: "school to Tara was a terror, a blight, a gathering of large, loud, malicious forces that threatened and mocked her fragility." (Desai, *Clear* 123) Her aversion to school is expressed by her apathy and lack of interest in knitting, painting and the popular games promoted at school (e.g. netball). Her incompatibility with the school environment causes Tara's (self) isolation and her utter rejection of the values promoted by the mission teachers: dynamism, leadership and initiative. In a symmetrical fashion, while the missionary ladies consider Tara's passive attitude "deplorable" (Desai, *Clear* 124), Tara looks down upon their standards of femininity. As she witnesses the missionary ladies' passionate involvement in the coordination of teaching activities, cultural and sport events, Tara can only respond with "a baleful look" (Desai, *Clear* 124). She is

equally disappointed by the Indian Christian converts whom she considers “bitter and ill-tempered” (Desai, *Clear* 125). Tara strongly believes that this category of Indian students is characterized by “a bank of frustration” (Desai, *Clear* 125) that accounts for their perceived maliciousness. Tara’s hostile approach to the heterogeneous forces of the mission school erects a barrier between herself and the mission teachers and students, which makes her adjustment impossible. Being considered “snobbish and conceited” (Desai, *Clear* 125), she is marked as an outsider to the world of Western education. Tara’s attitude suggests the discrepancy between her need for motherly protection and the values disseminated by the convent school—female dynamism, briskness, and management skills. Tara’s wish to never step out of the home universe suggests her adherence to a version of femininity associated with the private space and the idea of passivity:

she hoped *never to have to do anything in the world*, that she wanted only *to hide* under Aunt Mira’s quilt or behind the shrubs in the garden and never be asked to come *out and do anything, prove herself to be anything* ( Desai, *Clear* 127; emphasis mine).

Tara’s self-protective stance is also suggested by her reluctance to complete charity work at the mission hospital. The very sight of the patients and their poor food makes Tara sick and triggers her decision not to return. Her abandonment is interpreted as an expression of weakness by Bim: “Oh, you poor little thing, you’d better get a bit tougher, hadn’t you - auntie’s baby?” (Desai, *Clear* 126). Bim’s identification with the Western model of charity strengthens her capacity to face the tough reality of hospitals, while Tara’s rejection of this practice illustrates her inability to face hardship in order to help others. Tara’s need for protection translates as a search for self-preservation that eventually dictates her departure from India. While Bim expresses her determination to never leave her aunt and brothers, Tara realises that she cannot match her sister’s altruism: “she, closely attached as she was to home and family, would leave them instantly if the opportunity arose” (Desai, *Clear* 140). Tara considers marriage as a means to avoid these responsibilities and she regards her future husband (Bakul) as an instrument of her “completest escape [...] right out of the country” (Desai, *Clear* 57). Her emigration is an effect of the centripetal forces that dictate her “willing enactment of the hegemonic narrative for the adult Hindu women—marriage and motherhood.” (Wickramagamage 90)

During Tara’s temporary return, Bim notices that the conditions of motherhood and wifedom increase Tara’s level of self-esteem. Tara’s behaviour uncovers her vacillation between gratifying Bim and obeying the standards imposed by her daughters and husband. For example, Tara represses her impulse of tasting a fallen guava, the familiar fruit of her childhood:

Her mouth tingled with longing to bite into that hard astringent flesh under the green rind. She wondered if her girls would do it when they arrived to spend their holidays here. No, they would not. Much travelled, brought up in embassies, fluent in several languages, they were far too sophisticated for such rustic pleasures, she knew and felt guilty over her own lack of that desirable quality. She had fooled Bakul into

believing that she had acquired it, that he had shown her how to acquire it. But it was all just dust thrown into his eyes, dust (Desai, *Clear* 12).

This passage illustrates the prevalence of centripetal elements within Tara's organic hybridisation. Tara defines her American experience as a peripheral upholding of sophistication, which means that her cultural core has basically remained unaffected. Bakul and Tara's daughters are presented as guardians of the different values that Tara has unsuccessfully tried to adopt. Applying her daughters' norms of refinement to her "rustic" desire for a familiar fruit, Tara considers her behaviour provincial, therefore clashing with her family's expectations. Tara associates her daughters' urbanity with their mobility across multiple cultural borders. Her yearning for a guava suggests her urge to surrender to the forces of sameness by reintegrating herself into the Indian background. The fact that she represses her desire involves a momentarily prevail of difference, undermined by Tara's longing for sameness.

Although Tara finds comfort in a familiar world, she is also bored by its predictability, which entails her attraction to a different cultural sphere. Comparing her Indian and American homes, Tara appreciates the latter, which marks another surge of centripetality. Thus, her house in Old Delhi is perceived as an "uninviting provincial museum" (Desai, *Clear* 21) emanating boredom and dullness. Trapped by its sameness and insipidity, Tara struggles for an imaginary escape into her "neat, china-white flat in in Washington" (Desai, *Clear* 21). Another proof of Tara's change along centrifugal lines is her ability to mediate the conflict between Bim and Raja, which illustrates the emergence of an assertive dimension.

## **Conclusions**

The characters' evolution illustrates their transformation along culturally hybrid, yet different lines, as they blend centrifugal and centripetal cultural values in different proportions. While Uma's transformation is significantly impeded by centripetal cultural forces, Bim's change stands for a balanced ratio of cultural sameness and difference. Hence, we are dealing with two versions of intentional hybridity, shaped by the different degree of centrifugality that survives in each transformation. Thus, Uma cannot live up to the standards of the mission school, despite her intense desire to do so. Consequently, she cannot relinquish the submissive role assigned by traditional Hindu standards to women. At the same time, Bim defines herself along centrifugal values of female assertion and autonomy, while keeping the centripetal standard of altruism and family care. If Bim and Uma stand for dissimilar patterns of intentional hybridity, Tara illustrates the dynamics of organic hybridity. As a teenager, Tara rejects the centrifugal cultural values of dynamism and leadership disseminated by the mission school. Notwithstanding her youth rejection of Western standards, Tara's exposure to America results in a gradual change that shapes a more assertive perspective without relinquishing a traditional model of female identity. The emergence of different types and degrees of intentional and organic hybridity in the case of non-migrant and migrant Indian women suggests that cultural hybridity is a multifaceted, dynamic process inherent to all cultures. This finding supports a transgressive approach to cultural hybridity as



a transformation that affects both rooted/settled and uprooted/migrant individuals. An interpretation of this kind evaluates the results of cultural encounters through a more flexible grid that transcends the rigidity of binary structures (the migratory vs. the settled, rooted vs. uprooted, being vs. becoming).

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