

# Queer Werewolves in India: Hybridity, Sexuality and Monstrosity in Indra Das's *The Devourers*

*Deimantas Valančiūnas\**

## ABSTRACT

The emerging literary field of speculative and fantasy fiction in India has opened up possibilities for literature to address and rethink in new forms the issues of history, nationalism, and identity, as well as to engage critically with (often tabooed) topics of gender and sexuality. Many of these concerns are explored in the novel *The Devourers* (2015) by Indra Das. *The Devourers* is a Gothic horror story about shape-shifting monsters (werewolves), their lives and love-affairs in India through the span of several hundred years. While strategically situating the narrative in some of the most important historical periods of Indian history (the Mughal Empire, the British Raj, neoliberal contemporary India), the novel also carefully incorporates the notions of foreignness, monstrosity, sexual fluidity, colonial memory and hybridity in order to forge out a critical commentary on contemporary India. Therefore, taking into account novel's concerns and major topics I argue that *The Devourers* employs the imagery of a werewolf monster in order to comment on a current socio-political climate of India and its cultural anxieties concerning sexual and national identities, and to present an alternative version of Indian identity.

**KEYWORDS:** hybridity, Indian Gothic, werewolves, colonialism, sexuality

---

\* Received: March 1, 2022; Accepted: November 14, 2022

Deimantas Valančiūnas, Associate Professor, Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, Vilnius University, Lithuania ([deimantasval@gmail.com](mailto:deimantasval@gmail.com)).

The economic liberalization in India in 1991 has brought significant changes in the country's social and cultural life. These changes have been especially evident in the rapidly growing middle classes and their developed new tastes in lifestyle, since they have had "more leisure, more money, more enthusiasm for consuming and more opportunities to do so" (Dwyer 236). Bollywood cinema, the predominant form of Indian popular culture, has been supplemented with other forms of leisure and home entertainment, notably, literature in English. This rise of literature in English has also seen the development and popularization of new genres, from Rom-Com and chick-lit to Fantasy and Horror/Gothic. It may be argued, however, that this surge of new genres has emerged alongside particular political developments in India. For instance, even though Indian fantasy literature draws inspiration from western Heroic/Epic fantasy, the subject matter is uniquely Indian. E. Dawson Varughese termed it "Bharati" fantasy (11), because the narratives of Indian fantasy literature rely heavily on Indian mythology and usually interpret and even rewrite various Hindu scriptures (usually *puranas*, but also epic literature such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*). At the same time this literature promotes a certain revisionist version of Indian history: monolithic and culturally homogenous; conforming, in a way, to the recent political climate of India and the attempts by RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and other nationalistic Hindu organizations to reframe the past and to "Indianize" it (Jaffrelot 169-70).

However, the emergence of these genres of fiction in India has also opened up a space for conflicting and subversive narratives, where ghostly or monstrous imagery in speculative historical settings can serve as a platform to confront and rethink the dominant vision of India and to explore alternative versions of Indian identity. One of such works is *The Devourers*, a novel by Indra Das published in 2015. Even though the novel cannot be strictly confined to any one genre, as it incorporates elements of dark fantasy, speculative fiction and horror, we may consider *The Devourers* as Gothic, since it explores many familiar tropes found in the genre, such as transgression of the boundaries between human and monster, otherness, and moral ambiguity. The novel begins with Alok, a history professor, meeting a shapeshifter/werewolf in Kolkata who asks him to transcribe a text from an ancient parchment. What follows next are the stories from the parchment, presented within the different time frames and perspectives of its characters: the unfolding tale reaches back to the Mughal Empire and documents the arrival of three European werewolves (or

shapeshifters—the novel consciously *shifts* between different terminologies) into the Indian subcontinent, the rape of prostitute Cyrah, and her subsequent pursuit to find her rapist, the werewolf Fenrir. The novel's story also shifts forward to present-day Kolkata and follows the developing relationship between Alok and the half-werewolf creature, whose name, we learn by the end of the novel, is Izrail and who appears to be the son of Cyrah and Fenrir.

As the novel's synopsis suggests, *The Devourers* draws on various historical and cultural influences and ventures into different mythological worldviews: not only does the text refer to vernacular traditions of the South Asian supernatural world (mentioning creatures from both Hindu and Muslim traditions, such as *djinn*, *rakshasa*, and the like), but it also consciously refers to the werewolves' monsters, locating them in and transferring them from different parts of Europe into the Indian subcontinent. And in doing this, *The Devourers* opens up a rather unique literary landscape in Indian horror and Gothic cultural production. It is not to say, however, that the werewolves' monsters do not appear in Indian horror—rather, a more accurate note would be that Indian horror stories mostly employ werebeasts of various kinds. The werebeasts, which abound mostly in the narratives of popular comics and films, would include transformations into animals such as snakes, tigers and gorillas (Dhusiya 92), rather than wolves. These man-to-animal transformation narratives in Indian cultural production suggest a close connection to local folkloric beliefs and mythological stories and typically involve the notions of curses and possession, in ways that are somewhat different from the classical western Gothic werewolves' stories. Therefore, even though some of the most famous and popular werebeast Indian films like *Jaani Dushman* (*Mortal Enemy*; 1979) and *Gumnaam* (*Obsession*; 1992) are unmistakably inspired by various western werewolf movies, their narratives and iconography remain recognizably Indian (Joshi 169-70). In this context, *The Devourers* consciously employs the concept of werewolves as both transcultural (the three werewolves travel to India from Europe) and culturally specific figures (werewolves as a type of vernacular supernatural shape shifting creatures of India). However, the novel also seems to deliberately defy strict categorization, and so Izrail calls himself a half-werewolf only because “the werewolf is more easily identifiable, iconic. Recognizable” (Das 253). In this way the depiction of a werewolf monster in the novel operates in close proximity to the traditional western perception of the werewolves disseminated through modern popular culture (for

example, characters in the novel several times refer to films like *An American Werewolf in London*). Therefore, it may be argued that similarly to how Rudyard Kipling was interpreting local beliefs in one of the first (colonial) werebeast narratives in South Asia, *The Mark of the Beast* (1890), Indra Das reverses the gaze and brings the European werewolves into the Indian subcontinent as part of a postcolonial writing strategy.

In fact, as Carys Crossen contends, “the werewolf is not an obscure monster, relegated to a particular country or time period” (2); the earliest references to the werewolf-like creatures can be found in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Stypczynski 1). However, the popularity of the werewolf narratives has been facilitated primarily through Victorian Gothic literature and later through horror cinema. Stepping into the twenty-first century, the werewolf still occupies a prominent position amongst the Gothic monsters (especially visible in the popular young adult fiction), which communicates the persistence and cultural importance of the werewolf monstrosity. As Kaja Franck and Sam George argue, “the werewolf is easily situated within themes of monstrosity, liminality and the divided self, showing it to be a decidedly Gothic creature” (144). Indeed, the werewolf monster is a versatile creature and embodies a variety of concerns and ideas in the western Gothic imagination. The werewolf monster has been variously studied: through the notions of sexuality and gender (Sibielski 115-29; Bernhardt-House 159-83), as a Jungian archetype from the collective unconscious (Stypczynski 9-16), and through the psychoanalytical investigation of the beast within (Du Coudray 65-90). These approaches are further explored by Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, who argues that the werewolf could be generally seen as a “hybrid” figure as it is part human, part wolf. This hybridity and transgression of “species boundaries” might be seen as a “natural signifier for queerness in its myriad forms” (159).

Taking these definitions and approaches as a starting point, in the following pages of this article I want to investigate and address several themes which stand out more prominently in Indra Das’s novel *The Devourers*: the dichotomy between being human and non-human (monster); hybridity; and sexuality. Moreover, the narrative structure of the novel, the historical setting, and the context of empire allow us to investigate *The Devourers* as an example of postcolonial fiction in which the Gothic backdrop provides a framing device for Das’s interpretation of the colonial past and the postcolonial present. Further, I argue that *The Devourers* employs the imagery of a werewolf monster

in order to comment on the current socio-political climate of India and its cultural anxieties concerning sexual and national identities, and to present an alternative version of Indian identity.

## I. Werewolves and sexual identity

*The Devourers* revolves around the shapeshifting monsters, referred to also as werewolves in the novel. While constructing this monstrous character, Indra Das both plays alongside the conventions of (popular) werewolf mythology but also departs from the classical depiction of werewolves. One of the most important aspects of the construction of werewolves' characters in the novel is their self-association with monstrosity, rather than with the humans. We may argue that in this way the werewolves in *The Devourers* reverse a classical definition of the werewolf, most usually defined as "a human being who changes into a wolf" (Du Coudray 1). Together, the creatures in the novel also differ from the canonical construction of the werewolf as "the quintessential Freudian monster, the 'beast within' who was at the mercy of his unconscious, the Id, and its dark, violent repressed desires" (Crossen 18). In *The Devourers* the werewolves are very much conscious of their monstrosity and are eager to point out their non-humanity. The werewolves in the novel are composed of two selves: the first, which is the human; and the second self, which is the pure beast, rarely disclosed to the outsiders. The werewolves accept their human form, but see it as merely a vessel, a vehicle of disguise for their true (monstrous) identity—the second self, which they embrace and cherish. However, the novel also reveals that some of the werewolves are curious about their human form and want to experience various aspects of humanity and human nature (Das 61). Fenrir, for instance, not only wishes to experience certain emotions and feelings of humans, like love, but also imitates the creative activities of people, like writing (Das 56). The dichotomy between human and animal is especially pronounced in the novel where werewolves are often presented displaying many animal-like behaviors, such as uncontrolled violence and discharge of urine to mark their territory or express excitement or anger (Das 75-76).

When revealing the animalistic side of the werewolves, Indra Das also invests the monsters with another aspect which is quite often found in many other (were)wolves' narratives: sexuality. While the association between the

werewolf and sexual instincts is often found in werewolf-related research, Phillip A. Bernhardt-House notes that the werewolf motif may also serve as a signifier of homoeroticism (as a constructed form of unnatural, bestial nature of homosexuals) (159). In a similar way, the werewolves in *The Devourers* are clearly identifiable men (even though they can, apparently, choose any form they want from the victims devoured) who engage in very straight-forward acts of sexual intercourse. Moreover, the sexual act itself between the werewolves is constructed in an extremely graphical and explicit way. As Fenrir describes it in his memoirs, “the last time Gévaudan and I fucked, it was upon the bed of the Indus, our second selves silted yellow, reddening the water as fang and claw pierced holes in hide and mud” (Das 55). It may thus be argued that *The Devourers* attempts to reconstruct a popular perception that the homosexual sex drive is purely animalistic, as suggested in the sexual scenes, and in the werewolves’ taboo regulation to avoid sexual contact with humans (which mirrors the taboo against heterosexuals getting involved in homosexual experiences). Moreover, the werewolves in the novel consider many emotions (such as love) to be an exclusive sign of humanity, and not a relevant part of themselves, as exemplified by Fenrir’s explanation to Cyrah that “we have our mates, who come and go. But we have no love.” Also the connection between the shapeshifters and homosexuality is reinforced by Fenrir’s reassurance that “we don’t bear children in our tribe” (Das 67). However, as the narrative reveals, *The Devourers* is as much a novel about love as it is about the sexual drive, and soon the story discloses that another werewolf (Gévaudan) might be in love with Fenrir and feels jealous about Fenrir’s sexual contact with a human woman.

Taking into consideration these associations between animalistic sexuality, monstrosity, and homosexuality in the larger contextual perspective of *The Devourers*, it becomes evident that Indra Das is commenting on the sexual politics in India and the conceptualization of homosexuality in its sociocultural and political contexts. The novel was published during the intensive period of homosexual rights activism revolving around the infamous section 377 of the Penal Code which criminalized homosexual sex.<sup>1</sup> The much-

---

<sup>1</sup> The section 377 holds: “Unnatural offences—Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with

celebrated decriminalization of gay sex in a private space between two consenting adults by the Delhi High court in 2009 was overrun in 2013 by the Supreme Court declaring same sex relationships as “unnatural” (Lama).<sup>2</sup> The colonial legal system implemented in India had much to do with the social construction of homosexuality and despite the efforts of many NGOs and social organizations, homosexual people are still marginalized and face discrimination and rejection in many spheres of life, including the family (Bowling et al. 270). It is in this context that Indra Das places his novel *The Devourers*. The discourse of unnatural, monstrous and even “foreign” (Vanita 127) applied to homosexuality in India is applied to the shapeshifting monsters in *The Devourers*. The idea of two selves, as the werewolf monsters in the novel demonstrate, is often a reality in Indian social life where homosexuals have to hide their sexual identity. The novel emphasizes that the second self is always guarded with extreme measures and never revealed to other people (for example when Cyrah has to ride the back of Gévaudan in his second self, she needs to blindfold her eyes; Das 134). Moreover, the opposition of man (public attire, a camouflage) and beast (concealed identity) manifested in the novel’s werewolves could be also interpreted as the internalized self-perception of homosexuals in India. The novel also creates a parallel between the shapeshifting monsters, their homosexuality, and the human character Alok. *The Devourers* constructs Alok as a quiet man who spends much of his time in solitude: “I have very few friends, and I don’t much get along with my family anymore. No one I truly confide in” (Das 86). Even though we do not get much information about Alok’s private life, from several short references in the novel we may consider Alok as being confused about his sexual identity. The fragmented glimpses of Alok’s personal life scattered through the pages of the novel represent Alok’s careful attitude towards Izrail, and, subsequently, towards the readers, as he is reluctant to tell why his marriage with Shayani was called off. It is only towards the end of the novel that we actually learn that despite experiencing romantic feelings towards his fiancée Shayani, Alok is also attracted to men. It seems that once his fiancée finds out about his sexual involvement with other men, the marriage is cancelled and Alok is ostracised from his family and is forced to shunt himself off from society. Perhaps

---

imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall be liable to fine” (Gupta 4816).

<sup>2</sup> After an intensive activism campaign, the same section was finally declared as unconstitutional and homosexual activity was decriminalized by the Supreme Court in 2018.

severing ties with his family is the most traumatising event for Alok, as in the novel there are several instances when he nostalgically recalls time spent with parents, especially during the Durga Puja festival, which is one of the most important religious and cultural festivals in West Bengal and Kolkata.

The novel also revolves heavily around another traumatising aspect of the perception of homosexuality: the inability to procreate. One of the arguments on which section 377 of the Penal Code was based is the treatment of sexual intercourse between homosexual individuals as unnatural and going against nature. It seems that whenever section 377 is evoked, the emphasis is placed on the criminality of anal or oral sexual intercourse, as it does not lead to procreation (Gupta 4817). It appears that this conception of non-procreation happens to be especially traumatising in India and, in turn, results in homosexual men or women getting into heterosexual marriages but leading (secret) homosexual lives, as otherwise the homosexual relationships threaten to initiate the collapse of family lineages—a matter of great concern for many homosexual people (Mishra 360, 362). It appears that *The Devourers* draws heavily on these anxieties, as the major motivation for Fenrir is to have an ability to procreate. The inability to do so is perceived as something incomplete and wrong, as Cyrah reflects after being raped by Fenrir: “mostly, he made a big show of wanting to conceive a child, because his people couldn’t create. I thought he was a broken man” (Das 94). The fact of being “broken” results in Fenrir’s frustrated outburst: “*I created*, like the lowliest khriissal can, and we cannot” (Das 203).<sup>3</sup>

The transgressive sexuality of the werewolf monsters is evoked in order to discuss one of the major themes of *The Devourers*: the socio-cultural and political construction of homosexuality and the fears and anxieties associated with it. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the British imperial values represented in section 377 of the Penal Code are evoked in the novel, because in addition to sexuality, *The Devourers* also references the imperial past of India and imperialism in general. In the next sections of the article I will investigate how the novel employs the imperial past and imperial setting to address the postcolonial condition of contemporary neo-liberal India.

---

<sup>3</sup> The term *khriissal* referring to human beings is used by the werewolves in the novel.



## II. Colonialism and monstrosity

The story within a story narrative technique employed in *The Devourers* places an emphasis on the importance of stories and, to be more precise, history in conceptualising and understanding personal and national identities. Therefore, it is no coincidence that one of the main characters in the novel, Alok, is a history professor with “specialization of late modern, colonial India” (Das 33). Since *The Devourers* is set in different historical periods, it is important to investigate what role these time frames perform in the novel. The first parchment transcribed by Alok reveals the migration of three European shapeshifters (werewolves) into the Indian subcontinent. They arrive at Mumtazabad (Tajganj area in the present-day Agra) at the moment of the erection of Taj Mahal, in the middle of the seventeenth century and the heyday of the Mughal Empire. And as the werewolves enter deeper into the country, they meet and travel together with the official from the East India Company, Edward Courten. Therefore, the novel also documents the expansion of the British Empire (as its officers make their way towards Kolkata) and foresees the growth of colonial Calcutta—a major hub of the East India Company and the colonial enterprise, the place where the other main character of the novel, Izrail, will settle subsequently. The reference to the two empires positions the reader at the heart of colonial encounter, and Indra Das mirrors the colonial experience in the subcontinent and recreates the colonial power relations within the werewolves and their attitudes towards human beings. This mirroring of colonial ideologies is reflected in several scenes of the novel, most notably through the exchange of words between Fenrir and the older werewolf, Makedon. While inscribing his thoughts and encounters with people of the Indus valley on a parchment, Fenrir fashions himself as a kind of descendant of Columbus, “writing with curiosity of the new worlds” (Das 47). In this way he represents the persistent obsession of the empire to document insights, observations and curiosities of the colonised lands. Makedon, on the other hand, represents the remorseless justification of imperial attitudes towards the colonised lands and the exercise of colonial power, especially when he replies to Fenrir about Columbus, who, according to Makedon, treated the people he and “his empire” encountered “as cattle and fowl for the cooking fire” (Das 47). Makedon compares human beings to “wombed, cock-slung spiders” and declares that the shapeshifters’ purpose is “to keep *them* in check” and prevent

them from destroying the surrounding world (Das 48). This missionary attitude towards the natives and the ultimate, godlike power which Makedon demonstrates are in many ways reminiscent of colonial discourses of power, which depicted the natives as being in need of control and constant observation. The ultimate, arrogant power is also visible when Makedon exclaims that if he wished, it would be no trouble for him to bring the head of the emperor Shahjahan (Das 51), suggesting that the local means of defence are inferior compared to the power exercised by the werewolves. The further connection between the shapeshifting monstrosity and colonialism is evident in Fenrir's description of his own kind to Cyrah: "perhaps we only steal your history to make of it ours, just as we steal your lives to extend our own. We call ourselves hunters, but we are scavengers" (Das 69). Here again, the apologetic self-awareness of the colonial mission and imperative seems to verge on colonial arrogance and condescension.

However, the most prominent exploration and discussion of the colonial experience in the novel is presented through the discourse of rape. The ultimate encounter between Fenrir and Cyrah results in the exercise of power by Fenrir on Cyrah and her ultimate submission to him. Even though the act is depicted devoid of graphical violence, it is always treated by Cyrah as an assault on her body and as a rape (Das 93). Rape has been frequently and in different ways featured in colonial narratives and has been evoked in postcolonial criticism. As Bill Ashcroft et al. suggest, "the idea of colonization itself is grounded in a sexualized discourse of rape, penetration and impregnation, whilst the subsequent relationship of the colonizer and colonized is often presented in a discourse that is redolent of a sexualized exoticism" (36). This "colonial desire" (Young 1) is visible in Fenrir who finds Cyrah exotic in terms of his own monstrous inability to procreate and, therefore, chooses to extend his own "empire" through the implantation of his seed into Cyrah.

Therefore, as in many postcolonial works, *The Devourers* evokes the colonial experience and dwells on the dismantlement of the colonial encounter. In this way, colonialism is not presented in the novel as a persistent traumatic experience, but a process to be transcended. Cyrah manages to overcome the stigma of rape and, in a way, subdues the colonial presence. Cyrah's quest to find her rapist Fenrir becomes her quest to come to terms with the inevitability of the incident. This is especially evident when Gévaudan slowly allows Cyrah not only to ride on his back, but also to tie a rope around his neck to steady her

(Das 151). In this way an inevitable bond is formed between the former enemies: the coloniser and the colonised. It is, therefore, no coincidence that towards the end of the novel Cyrah is presented as riding Gévaudan and being in total control of him (Das 388). The power relations have changed: the former colonised is in full command of the former enemy and has established agency over colonial violence and colonial memory. It is also important to note that in this scene Cyrah is constructed as a goddess, riding her “European vahana” (Das 388). It is not only a reference to Durga, the most important female goddess in Kolkata, but also a popular envisioning of the nation in nationalist discourses. In her excellent and thorough research on the visual depiction of Mother India in Indian calendar art, Sumathi Ramaswamy notes that Durga is often depicted riding a lion, which, in turn, is also associated with Britannia and the British Empire. As Ramaswamy explains: “there is arguably an element of mockery and subversion in *painting back* in response to the colonizing power when her artists incorporate the lion into Bharat Mata’s visual appearance” (63). Perhaps Indra Das employs a similar strategy by depicting Cyrah riding the European werewolf to represent the change in power relations, the subjugation of the former colonial power, and the exorcism of colonial trauma. But it is through the character of Izrail, a half werewolf, that the major ideas relating to this new postcolonial India and Indian identity are explored.

### **III. Hybridity, fluidity and postcolonial identity**

Izrail, the offspring of Cyrah’s rape, represents the confluence of two different timeframes and value systems. Together, it may be argued that Izrail in the novel also embodies a certain shift in the representation of werewolves in the global production, namely, as Kaja Franck and Sam George suggest, the movement “from liminality to hybridity” (149). The hybridity is observed throughout the novel and can be interpreted through the two thematic angles of the novel: sexuality and colonial encounter.

The discussion on monstrosity, sexuality and homosexuality in the previous sections of this article demonstrates that homosexuality in *The Devourers* is presented as a rigid practice, driven by the binary logic of popular heterosexual discourses. The novel, however, attempts to break this binary approach to sexuality by introducing the character of Izrail. As Bernhardt-House argues, the werewolf may not only signify homosexuality, but may also

exemplify the concept of queerness, as it “actively disrupts normativity, transgresses the boundaries of propriety, and interferes with the status quo in closed social and sexual systems” (159). Izrail, as half man and half werewolf, defies the binary logic as he consciously identifies with his hybridity and does not limit himself with taboos and regulations followed by either monstrous (homosexual) or human (heterosexual) communities. In this way the novel celebrates this kind of sexual identity—queer, fluid and undefined. The werewolf’s monstrous act of devouring is represented as an internalization of the identities, and gender of the victims, to the point that the werewolf can be both and neither. As the *imakhr* (or the maker of the werewolf monsters) appears before Izrail, “it has chosen to bear male and female genitals both” (Das 276). It seems that Izrail is able to transcend the rigid gender binaries, even in his first self, as seen by Alok on one of the first of their sexual encounters: “I see man and woman both. I see a being so human that it becomes inhuman, an animal perfection” (Das 242). The fluid, queer, non-binary sexuality is seen to encompass different sexual identities, including transsexuality and bisexuality,<sup>4</sup> as in the case of Alok. The inability to acknowledge and accept one’s sexuality, however, results in repression of sexual identity, glimpses of which may resurface, as Alok admits that in dreams “I often find that I am a woman” (Das 166). It is only through the encounter with Izrail that Alok finally accepts his own fluid sexuality as part of his identity:

looking at myself in that saree without my glasses, my thankfully still-healthy hair, and clean-shaven face, I pass in my eyes for someone who is not a man, is not merely Alok. No, in those moments, I am not merely Alok. Not a second self, but a self, my self, one I’ve been afraid to let breathe for so long. (Das 301)

However, this establishment of fluid and queer sexual identity in the novel is achieved at the expense of first constructing sexual identities as rigid and monolithic, which is an exploitation of the same binary regime the novel is eager to dismantle.

The idea of fluid and queer sexuality may also be investigated in its intersection with Indian identity which is also discussed in the novel through

---

<sup>4</sup> The term bisexuality refers to a sexual identity which is often looked upon with suspicion from both heterosexual and homosexual communities (McLean 67-69; Armstrong and Reissing 259).

the questions of colonialism and postcolonial identity. The references to two major empires, the Mughal and the British, even if discussed only fleetingly in the novel, serve as a backdrop for the main idea of *The Devourers*, that of fluidity and hybridity. The Indian subcontinent at the time of the arrival of the werewolves' monsters is constructed as already a multifaceted vibrant place of high linguistic diversity, where people of different ethnicities and cultural practices coexist, even if in (sometimes) asymmetrical and uneven relationships. The main character Izrail, becomes the embodiment of this diversity and, to be more precise, hybridity. The figure of a werewolf is especially potent for this task, as the werewolf is often seen as a hybrid. Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, drawing on the posthumanist theories of Donna Haraway, contends that the monster is able to hybridize nature and culture and embodies the incorporation of Other as well as Self (131). In a similar way the incorporation of Otherness through hybridization is also discussed in many postcolonial approaches. For instance, Homi K. Bhabha creates a conceptual framework identifying hybridity within the liminal spaces of "in-between" and "the beyond." For Bhabha, hybridity commences where "space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" and which "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity" (1). Therefore, hybridity refers to the "creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft et al. 135). This space of the "in-between" or hybridity allows one to move away from fixed identities and simple binary oppositions which may be transferred into the terrain of unexpected difference. When Izrail refers to himself, he states that "I live in the twilight between worlds. . . . I was born to be an exile. It was decided from the moment Fenrir raped Cyrah" (Das 263). In this way we may consider Izrail to be occupying the "in-between" space and being the embodiment of this postcolonial hybridity: living in the present-day neo-liberal India but born from a colonial encounter, since he is a child of rape, perpetrated by the foreign invader Fenrir upon Cyrah. And when Cyrah drives away Gévaudan from the subcontinent and willingly requests to be devoured by her son, it may signify the need for the nation to renew itself. Here Izrail, part human, part monster, the offspring of different cultural confluences (East and West), obtains individuality and freedom, but retains "the past" (embodied in his mother) within himself through the process of devouring. The process of

devouring is also the process of internalization, and so together with the physical bodies, the identities and histories of the victims are consumed. In the end, all narratives become one: “I am Cyrah of Lahore. I am Fenrir of the far Norse Lands. I am Izrail of Sundarbans, son of Cyrah and Fenrir, bastard khriissal-werewolf-rakshasa. I am Alok of Kolkata” (Das 302). Therefore, the postcolonial subject accepts different variations of the past, with its contradictions, violence, deviations and cultural fluidity. This emphasis on hybridity in the novel questions the role and legitimacy of history, as seen when Izrail calls it “tales, the weaving of words” (Das 6); as well as when he comments to Alok: “You’re not a professor of literature, but you are a professor of history. History has all the stories. Make it up” (Das 12). Here it seems that the novel is challenging and confronting the construction and spread of a monolithic and singular version of the past, emphasising a more individualised retelling of history, which may deviate from the more accepted and widespread national narratives. In this way the novel also critiques stable and fixed identities and prioritises a cultural identity which belongs as much to the past as to the future; or, in other words, which is a matter of “becoming” as much as of “being,” as Stuart Hall has discussed (394), thus emphasising a constantly changing and, indeed, shifting identity.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

“Families are complicated. History is complicated”—these are the words Alok, a human, says to Izrail, a half-werewolf in *The Devourers* (Das 158). These sentences encapsulate the essence of the novel: the persistent relationship between the past and the present, the personal and the national. *The Devourers*, a cross-over novel of dark fantasy, horror and Gothic by Indian writer Indra Das, is a story about three European werewolves arriving into the Indian subcontinent at the heyday of the Mughal Empire and whose offspring lives through the years to approach a present-day history professor from Kolkata to relate his story. *The Devourers* is an example of postcolonial writing which goes beyond defined generic boundaries and embraces hybridity in both its narrative structure and themes. In this hybrid literary world created by Indra Das, seventeenth century India is a site of cultural crossovers—the three European werewolves, coming together from different time frames and different European mythologies, penetrate the landscape already populated with

various creatures of different cultures (Slavic *vurdalaks*, Muslim *djinn*, and Hindu *rakshasa*). The novel carefully employs the figure of a shapeshifting monster (werewolf), drawing on its classical Gothic form but altering it where necessary in order to address and discuss cultural anxieties of contemporary India, primarily related to sexuality and colonial memory.

The novel was released in 2015 at a time of intense political changes in India, marked with populism, Hindu nationalism, increased violence towards different minorities, and reconstruction of India's past as monolithic and culturally homogenous. This political climate is especially evident in the popular literature—bookstores are loaded with epic fantasy books, which construct and promote a heroic version of the Indian past, where muscular Indian gods and goddesses fight foreign invaders. The novel functions as a response to this socio-political climate of India by presenting a different version of India through the notions of “hybridity” and “queerness.” The novel explores and applies these notions in its discussion of homosexuality and colonial memory. Hybridity in the novel appears through different narrative and aesthetic means, but primarily is encapsulated in the figure of the werewolf monster. Through the figure of the werewolf, which appears to embody homosexuality and colonial memory, Indra Das rethinks the persistence of “Apollonian and the Dionysian” (156) dualities and binaries so prevalent in contemporary culture, and suggests going beyond them. This form of new, postcolonial identity is reminiscent of the “border lives,” defined by Homi K. Bhabha (1), where one enters the new territory of the beyond—which neither unites nor separates; the site of the hybridity. As John McLeod puts it: “at the border, past and present, inside and outside no longer remain separated as binary opposites but instead commingle and conflict. From this emerge new, shifting complex forms of representation that deny binary patterning” (147). And so *The Devourers* functions as a possible way to explore such border lives, going beyond the colonial past and postcolonial present into a new horizon, posing a critique of a fixed and stable identity and promoting fluid and non-binary postcolonial cultural, sexual and national identity.

## Works Cited

- Armstrong, Heather L., and Elke D. Reissing. "Attitudes toward Casual Sex, Dating, and Committed Relationships with Bisexual Partners." *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 236-64. *PsycNet*, doi: 10.1080/15299716.2014.902784.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2013.
- Bernhardt-House, Phillip A. "The Werewolf as Queer, the Queer as Werewolf, and Queer Werewolves." *Queering the Non/Human*, edited by Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, Ashgate, 2008, pp. 159-83.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bowling, Jessamyn, et al. "The Influences of Stigma on Sexuality among Sexual and Gender Minoritized Individuals in Urban India." *International Journal of Sexual Health*, vol. 31, no. 3, July 2019, pp. 269-82. *PsycNet*, doi: 10.1080/19317611.2019.1625994.
- Crossen, Carys. *The Nature of the Beast: Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century*. U of Wales P, 2019.
- Das, Indra. *The Devourers*. Del Rey, 2017.
- Dawson Varughese, E. *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-Millennial Receptions of "Weird" Narratives*. Routledge, 2017.
- Dhusiya, Mithuraaj. *Indian Horror Cinema: (En)Gendering the Monstrous*. Routledge, 2018.
- Du Coudray, Chantal Bourgault. *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror and the Beast within*. Tauris, 2006.
- Dwyer, Rachel. *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India*. Reaktion Books, 2014.
- Franck, Kaja, and Sam George. "Contemporary Werewolves." *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Maisha L. Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes, Edinburgh UP, 2019, pp. 144-57.
- Gupta, Alok. "Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 46, Nov. 2006, pp. 4815-23.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, pp. 392-401.



- Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Princeton UP, 2021.
- Joshi, Sara. "Monsters of Every Stripe: Navigating the Werebeasts of Indian Horror Cinema." *South Asian Gothic. Haunted Cultures, History and Media*, edited by Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančiūnas, U of Wales P, 2021, pp. 167-83.
- Lama, Bhaskar. "Homosexuality and Indian Civil Society: Reading Mahesh Dattani after Decriminalization of Section-377." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, Oct. 2020, pp. 349-68. *Sage Journals*, doi:10.1177/0971521520938978.
- McLean, Kirsten. "Inside, Outside, Nowhere: Bisexual Men and Women in the Gay and Lesbian Community." *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 8, no. 1-2, Sept. 2008, pp. 63-80. *PsycNet*, doi: 10.1080/15299710802143174.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester UP, 2000.
- Mishra, Jayaprakash. "Queering Emotion in South Asia: Biographical Narratives of Gay Men in Odisha, India." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 48, no. 3-4, Sept. 2020, pp. 353-74. *Brill*, doi: 10.1163/15685314-04803009.
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Sibielski, Rosalind. "Gendering the Monster Within: Biological Essentialism, Sexual Difference, and Changing Symbolic Functions of the Monster in Popular Werewolf Texts." *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 115-29.
- Stypczynski, Brent A. *The Modern Literary Werewolf: A Critical Study of the Mutable Motif*. McFarland, 2013.
- Vanita, Ruth. "Homophobic Fiction/Homoerotic Advertising: The Pleasures and Perils of Twentieth-Century Indianness." *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, edited by Ruth Vanita, Routledge, 2002, pp. 127-48.
- Young, Robert. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. Routledge, 1995.