

**TROPE OF APPROPRIATION -
COLONIAL AMBIVALENCE IN FORSTER'S
*A PASSAGE TO INDIA***

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Of the substantial body of fiction that captures the intricacies of the east-west encounter in the colonial era, famously called the Raj novels, one of the most elaborate, sensitive and consequently discussed novels is E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* published in 1924. The novel continues to be listed twenty-fifth on the Modern Library's list of 100 Best English language novels of the twentieth century. The 1984 film version of the novel directed by David Lean, starring Judy Davis, Victor Banerjee, James Fox, Peggy Ashcroft and Alec Guinness won two Oscars and numerous other awards. Forster's attempt, in this novel, is to understand the difference in India by means of a western vocabulary of liberal tolerance and has gained much critical acclaim in India and abroad.

The novel exhibits a certain transcultural modernism that examines the habits of thought that are fundamental to a European sense of superiority- a motive accomplished in the characterization of the open minded Fielding versus the narrow political snobbery of the larger ruling class British in India represented by the McBrydes and the Turtons. Much of the enduring interest in the novel comes from the metropolitan modernism in it, which Forster constructs as consciously transnational, and the novel thereby becomes a progressive move in the nineteenth and twentieth century colonial discourse. In this, Forster seems to take on the moral complacency of the imperial British and, with his "only connect" motto he underscores the importance of seeing people through experience

rather than as expressions of as a set of predetermined concepts. A critique of the emotional and spiritual limitations of the English, trapped by convention, is seen in the characterization of a considerable number of British officials and their wives who even verge on caricature in the novel. Thus, the philosophic and poetic import of the novel accounts for its classic status, even as it is explicitly concerned with presenting the socio-political case of colonial India under the British rule. The purpose of this reading of the novel is, however, to re-examine Forster's critique of the British, against the perception of India as a formless civilization, positioning his colonial narrative as a site of ambivalence in the history of colonial constructions. It explores the corroboration of European points of view through the introduction of the mystical, the monstrous and the extra-ordinary as an inevitable interpolation in the meeting ground between the east and the west. Forster's novel has no visible demon or monster but engages with the idea of the demonic or the monstrous in the incident of the Marabar caves which unleashes the catastrophe in the plot of the novel.

The incident that rocks Chandrapore occurs when Dr. Aziz, the Indian protagonist of Forster's novel invites his English guests namely, Mrs. Moore and Miss. Quested on an expedition of the Marabar hills. After a train journey, followed by an elephant ride, Aziz and his guests, with a procession of servants and local villagers, make their way to the cave, when an oppressive soundsurrounds them. When they visit the first cave, Mrs. Moore feels faint and stumbles out of the cave in distress. It is not the smell and crush of the crowd that distress her, rather, it is the contrast between the silence of the journey and her awareness of the terrifying echo inside the cave which reduces every single sound to the same monotonous noise. The echo of the sound(s) in the cave is described in Mrs. Moore's words,

“Boum is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or 'bou-oum', or 'ou-boum'- utterly dull” (137). She further explicates the nature of the echo: “If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same- 'ou-boum’”(139). A distressed Mrs. Moore interprets the ominous message of the echo as one that negates the value of everything. The echo stands for a cosmic meaninglessness that has left her disoriented in her effort to know “the real India.” Once out of the first cave, Mrs. Moore decides to stay behind and suggests that fewer people should be allowed to the next cave. The exploration of the cave ends up in the cataclysmic disaster of Adela accusing Aziz of having assaulted her in one of the caves. Adela's story appears to suggest guilt but Forster's plot has cautiously pointed at a mutual lack of attraction between the characters of Aziz and Adela. Fielding is convinced of Aziz's innocence but the frustrations of other Anglo-Indians manifest in support of Adela with such emotive phrases as “lady, a young lady”(169) and “an English girl fresh from England” (170) and the readers are left puzzled as to what happened in the cave. The rest of the novel dwells elaborately on the aftermath of Aziz's trial and the complicated Indo-English relations that surface therein.

Cyril Fielding, Forster's most sympathetic English character in the novel, and widely regarded as Forster's own mouthpiece of liberal humaneness, moderation and concern for justice, comes up with the theory that the guide has assaulted Adela. Forster has prepared the readers to accept a parallel psychological breakdown in Adela's step by step recollection of the events of the cavelerin McBryde's bungalow. She remembers particularly how she scratched the wall of the cave with her fingernail to start the echo. Mrs. Moore too is thrown out of gear completely from her earlier stands of fortitude, charity and equanimity by the terrifying echo.

The echo in the cave has affected her psychologically, consequent to which she has a mystic experience, akin to a nervous breakdown and loses her faith in Christianity. She turns uncharacteristically querulous and more cynical thereafter. What is constructed in the nature of the echo is not only a mystic aura that is indefinable, but a force that negates everything, and throws all action into uncertainty. The caves are attributed with a character as they are described to have “fingers and fists” (117) and the echo in the caves lend the overwhelming voice to this figure. To quote from the novel, “Fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil—here at last is their skin, finer than any covering acquired by animals, smooth rather than windless water, more voluptuous than love. Their radiance increases, the flames touch one another kiss, expire. The cave is dark again, like all caves (117). At this point, Forster oversteps the realms of the real and the rational that had secured the bond of friendship between Fielding and Aziz earlier.

The suggestion of a supernatural force, or the spirit of irrationality, begins symbolically at the point where the echoless silence culminates into the meaningless echo in the caves. The caves repeat each other almost to infinity, each the echo and pattern of the one before: an eight foot long tunnel that leads to a circular room twenty feet in diameter. Inside it, it is dark but an alighted match reveals that the inner walls of the caves are highly polished and reflect beautiful natural shades and shapes. The novel prepares its readers for a catastrophe that is bound to deviate from its realistic setting at this spatial point. Mrs. Moore's uncanny experience in the first cave, followed by the memory of the echo gradually destroys her hold on life. A similar frightening moment in the cave leads young Adela to spin a tale of physical attack from a mental meltdown. Adela's rationality and Mrs. Moore's liberal outlook diffuse upon coming into

contact with the echo. The overpowering hollow of the caves is a discovery made by its English visitors inside the caves only after Forster makes the invitation to speculate the Marabar in great detail from the outside before the expedition. The enticing magnetism of the caves is but a cover for the empty and the hollow, a power inimical to man, rejecting individuality and negating all life that enter them. The resounding “boum” of this frightening spirit cancels all voices that speak to or approach it. It is a monstrous, supernatural force that destroys all who seek it.

It is interesting to note the way in which Forster uses the “supernatural” in the cave to epitomize the Indian encounter? One of the reasons for this is perhaps his conscious avoidance of certain otherforms of cultural stereotyping that occurs in colonial literature. For instance, no Indian is shown to be uncivilized in the way perceived by the average Anglo- Indian in the novel. Even the symbols of snakes and kites do not convey ideas of fear and destruction as might be imagined by the Anglo-Indian. The reader, therefore, notices the distancing of a range of stereotypes that find its place in the vast body of colonial literature-the ignorance of the natives, their effeminacy and indolence, their oversexed nature, their essential unworthiness and so on .Of the many definitions of “monster” offered by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, two are useful in the validation of the invisible monster of Forster's novel, namely, “something extraordinary or unnatural: a prodigy, a marvel” and “a person of inhuman and horrible cruelty or wickedness, a monstrous example of some particular vice.” Though neither a visible thing nor a person, the “boum” of the echo are spatial metaphors of the unnatural and nihilistic. When, for Forster, the broad vocabulary is one of western liberal tolerance and many of the stereotypical notions of native ignorance are contradicted throughout the narrative, the text

employs tropes that are supernatural to admit a native opacity that is further endorsed in the transformed views of a mature and objective Fielding at the end of the novel.

The novel carries out its obvious narrative function of rejecting the seemingly stubborn opposition between British overlordship and the increasingly defensive Indian resistance to it, but also mystifies the mongrelized and disruptive aspect of the encounter in the process. The monster or supernatural, then attains the purpose of essentialising what is not possible for Forster's just exercise of social realism. In rendering the supernatural as the symbol of native opacity, Forster also expatiates the mystic ground of European bafflement. If in D.H. Lawrence's autobiographical novel about Australia, *Kangaroo*, written around the same time, otherness is recognized as disrupted and unrepresentable, Forster does attempt to represent otherness, only to find it mystifying and obstructed by spiritual monsters. As Elleke Boehmer notes in her study of Forster in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, "Forster by contrast does not try to signify India, and to do so in conjunction with the West, as a mystifying- if also a self-regulating confusion opposed to the West's control. The panoply of imagery of the Orient is seemingly so accessible as to be irresistible. India is a moral obfuscation, a vast and tenebrous chaos" (143). If the caves stand for the India that is irresistible, the monstrous echo stands for the moral obfuscation and infinite chaos, the inevitable outcome of encountering the irresistible.

The contradictory assortment offered by Forster's novel finds its quintessential expression in the aporia, the dark spot of the caves with its marauding echo, suggestive of everything that is mongrelized and disruptive. At the level of social realism, however, Forster's novel attempts largely to reject the intractable opposition between British supremacy and Indian resistance. Forster offers the liberal option of

an “aristocracy of the sensitive” (Boehmer 142) in the form of friendship between Fielding and Aziz. British dishonesty is to be condemned even as India is chaotic, but individual Britons and Indians, like Fielding and Aziz, are occasionally able to rise above the divide in order to affirm human value. However, the point of divergence remains unsettled till the very end and the monstrous echo in the cave is an ominous reminder of the very deep and unimaginable (at least in a provisional time frame) structural integration needed in bridging the divide between the East and the West. As Elleke Boehmer has remarked in her essay, “Metropolitans and Mimics”, “Suspended between the polarities of social naturalism and mystic symbolism, *A Passage to India* is a collection of dissonances” (143).

The caves and the echo as cultural tropes, represent what fascinates and appalls at the same time, thus becoming the site of ambivalence in a colonial discourse. Forster's interest in the obliquities and misrepresentations of English-Indian relation is real, but the writer is unable to release himself from a Euro-typical representation of India as an impenetrable “muddle” (43). To the questioning westerner, this even effects a warning that India can offer nothing more than moral confusion. The experience of the infinitely recurring nothingness in the Marabar caves plays out this suspicion.

The tropes of negation that Forster presents declare the entire land of India as unknowable and formless much like Conrad's Africa. So, while Forster gives vent to liberal discomforts honestly, he does lean on colonialist preconceptions to represent those discomforts. While avoiding several stereotypical conceptions of race and nationality, the novel succumbs to the construction of the Orient as strange, fantastic and bizarre. Edward Said's theory of the construction of binary opposites in the history of Orientalism stands

disrupted in some ways in *The Passage to India* considering that the West is not assumed to be a seat of knowledge and learning as against the Orient as a place of ignorance and naiveté. Yet, the exploration of India as a land of spiritual options ends up in the western perception of the East as indefinable and bizarre against the rational spirit. Unequal dichotomies, as critiqued by Said, do get constructed here, adding to the substantial power and influence of colonial literature in westerners' views of other peoples. Thus, *A Passage to India* continues to be a historically important novel for its scathing exposition of social and ethical presumptions under the Raj and ends up reiterating yet another specific and well-worn cultural opposition, where the West is described as the cradle of the humane values, contrary to the “monstrous and extraordinary” in the East.

Works Cited

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