

The Colonial Otherness in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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Abstract— *Classical conceptions of identity are permanence amid change or unity in diversity . The twentieth century proved to be the century of scientific advancement, industrialization, globalization and materialism. It created a need for migration and mobility, in search of better existence and more bright future. Of course, whether it is better existence or not in reality is one more debatable issue. But the fact is that human mobility, witnessed in the twentieth century brought with it several problems and the issue of identity-crisis is the major one of them. Migration and quality, in step with this belief might bring a amendment within the dress, language and method of living life, however the spirit remains a similar. The actual problem of identity-crisis emerges, when such a person finds himself nowhere on the alien shores. The foreign writers either extol India to heavenly heights or degrade it to a hell. While writers like E.M. Forster present a sympathetic image of India, E.M Forster's India confuses and confounds modern cognitive structure in A Passage to India.*

Keywords— *Globalization, migration, Identity- crisis, cognitive structure, materialism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Several of E.M. Forster's novels take as their subject 'The British Abroad', presenting characters WHO struggle to expertise a culture outside the compass of British social norms. *A Passage to Asian country*, however, takes this idea nevertheless any, as Forster describes not solely members of country dominion in Asian country, however members of Indian society below colonial rule. In his essay *Discourse on Colonisation*, Aimé Césaire finds that in a colonised nation, there will be 'no human contact, but relations in domination and submission.' (Césaire 177)(1), and while the characters conceive to build human contact through the barriers of ruler/subject, coloniser/colonised, the ghost of the 'Colonial Other' is continually present, ultimately proving stronger than personal relationships.

This essay examines the method during which this sense of 'otherness' informs the narrative of *A Passage to Asian country*. It explores the effect that a concept of 'Other' has upon identity: as 'British' becomes 'British in India/Imperialist', and 'Indian' becomes 'Colonised Indian/Subject'. Taking from Homi Bhabha, a concept of difference through resemblance can also be seen in Forster's novel, as the characters struggle to reconcile the difference between the identity 'English' and the identity 'Anglicised'.

By applying post-colonial concepts of 'otherness' to *A Passage to India*, the essay attempts to provide an insight into the complex web of human relationships described in this novel. In many ways, Forster is exploring this relationship in *A Passage to India*, writing characters who are attempting to find this human contact. The novel explores the ways in which imperialism informs the human value, or rather, human character under the British Raj, both its derogatory and unifying effects. The ghost of the Colonial Other comes to permeate all the relationships within *A Passage to India*, creating a gulf over which positive human contact tries, but ultimately fails, to jump. The Colonial Other has been described in various ways by post-colonial theorists, but most are agreed that such a construct serves to reinforce a system of subjugation by legitimising a social and political hierarchy of coloniser over colonised. The maintenance of a system of cultural imperialism within an enlightenment culture requires a subject who is in many ways the same, in order that they can be controlled and 'educated', but also different, and so justifiably subject. Césaire also writes of colonisation as a society reduced to officialdom, and for *A Passage to India* at least, this officialdom is the ultimate barrier to meaningful human contact; 'for where there is officialism every human relationship suffers.' (Césaire 200) (2) Here, the colonial encounter is stripped of cultural or personal interaction, reduced as it is to serve the economic and political propellers of colonial rule. In the officialdom of Forster's India, characters are forced interact not as

individuals, but as representatives of their 'role' within the colonial institution. For Forster, imperialism is an external, independent force to which the British in India are victim almost as the Indians are.

A Passage to India is set at the beginning of India's movement towards independence, in a time when 'Congress abandoned its policy of co-operation with the British Raj to follow Ghandi's revolutionary call for non-violent revolution.' (Wolpert 301) By 1921, Some 20,000 Indians were in prison (Wolpert 303). Interestingly, Forster's novel seems to a great extent to have little sense of this instability, and as much as several characters may provide a voice of dissent, the position of the British Raj in India is at no point challenged *per se*. This may be due to the fact that real though Forster's interest may have been in cultural India, the recognition of a Colonial Other, on which the narrative tensions are based, depends upon a perspective from one side of the divide. Novels such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, which describe the independence movement from the perspective of Indian villages, present the agents of the British Raj as Other. Indeed, there is very little personal presentation of the British at all, presented as they as a remote, power and from the bamboo cluster the voices of women are heard, and high up there, on the top of the hill, the Sahib is seen with his cane and his pipe, and his big heavy coat, bending down to look at this gutter and that. For Forster's novels, which are confined to a British perspective, the Other will inevitably remain the Indian.

Forster's canon of works draw often on an analysis of the English abroad, such as *A Room with a View*, and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Just as Lucy despairs of an Italy disguised by a re-creation of English norms in *A Room with a View*, the narrative confines itself ultimately to an investigation of the English micro-society contained within Italy. In **A Passage to India**, Forster ostensibly attempts to extend this investigation to examine not only the English, but also the Indian Other which informs their identity as the British Abroad. However, as much as Forster challenges English convention, the narrative, along with the characters (both British and Indian), are trapped within it. Indeed, as a micro-society, the British actively attempt to recreate their home society in India, for instance with the performance of *Cousin Kate*; They had tried to reproduce their own attitude to life upon the stage, and to dress up as the middle-class English people that they actually were. (Forster *Cousin Kate* 36)(3).

While this essay will later discuss the ways in which Forster's characters fail to make human contact and bridge the gulf of the Other, it is interesting to consider whether

this failure may also stem from Forster's own inability to himself dismantle this colonial construct. While the characters of **A Passage to India** are constricted by their roles within the colonial construct, Forster is himself is constricted to the role of an Englishman writing about India, and the perspective which this entails.

In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Said argues that the Orientalist approach amounts to a set of essentialist characteristics applied to the 'Orient' from a perspective which universalises Western, or European values. While Forster challenges the way in which these values are applied within the imperialist construct, he does not challenge these values *per se*. Rather, the English (imperialist?) values become corrupted through the corruption of the imperialist agents.

They come out intending to be gentlemen, and are told it will not do...I give any Englishman two years, be he Turton or Burton. It is only the difference of a letter. And I give any Englishwoman six months. (Forster, *Passage to India* 9)(4)

Aziz, for instance, Forster's Indian hero, is so because he fits these universal values, indeed, the perceived reader's expectations. During the hysterical meeting after the arrest of Aziz, a subaltern shares his ideas; The native's all right if you let him alone. Lesley! Lesley! You remember the one I had a knock with on your maidan last month. Well, he was all right. Any native who plays polo is all right. What you've got to stamp on is these educated classes, and, mind, I do know what I'm talking about this time. (Forster *Passage* 173)(5)

The irony, of course, is that Aziz was that polo player (while at once being, as a doctor, 'these educated classes'). Forster has challenged the subaltern's prejudices about Indians, however, he has not challenged the values on which those prejudices are placed. As such, Aziz becomes a 'sympathetic' character because he resists attempts to categorise him as Other. Essentially, the less Aziz presents himself as Other, the more he can be presented as a hero within the novel.

Ultimately, this very sense of the Indian 'mimic' reinforces the gulf between these cultures just as it seeks to close it. Aziz's attempts to bridge this gap are realised through his attempts to 'be more English'. Unable to make human contact with Adela Quested (through his inability to conform to Adela's expectations of a picturesque India) as he did with the more 'open' character of Mrs. Moore, his attempts at mimicry are reduced to caricature; 'Goodbye, Miss Quested.' He pumped her hand up and down to show that he felt at ease. 'You'll jolly jolly well not forget those

caves, won't you? I'll fix the whole show up in a jiffy.' (Forster *Passage* 72)(6)

Perhaps Forster has also recognised here Rao's claim that 'one has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. (Rao v, foreword) While Aziz feels that he revealed 'the spirit that is his own' to Mrs. Moore, his attempts here to adopt the role of mimic eclipse his spirit beneath a performance of his own and Adela's (different) stereotypes of the colonial Indian. This failure to assimilate however, and Aziz's ultimate rejection of the desire to assimilate at all, has a complex role in the web of colonial structure and oppression. In **A Passage to India**, for instance, not only do Aziz's attempts at 'Englishness' provide their own barrier to real human contact, but the concept of an Anglo-Indian is refused by the English community. Bhabha describes this refusal as necessary to the maintenance of the colonial position; Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. (Bhabha, *Mimicry*, 381)(7)

In this way Bhabha describes the difference between being anglicised and being English. Such an unstable and ambivalent identity construct threatens the colonial power structure, by problematising the role of subject. The fear that Indians would succeed in this Anglo-Indian role, thus collapsing the hierarchy of 'ruler/subject', is demonstrated at the strained garden party: 'Please tell these ladies that I wish we have a tendency to might speak their language, however we've scarcely come back to their country.' 'Perhaps we have a tendency to speak yours a bit,' one in every of the women same. 'Why, fancy, she understands! said Mrs Turton.

Her manner had grown more distant since she had discovered that some of the group was westernized, *and might apply her own standards to her*. [my emphasis] (Forster *Passage* 38) (8)

At the same time, new arrivals to India are unable to accept anything other than a picturesque, 'civilised' version of India. Adela Quested claims that she wants to see the 'real' India, detesting the false constructs of English garden parties and elephant rides. We quickly find however, that Adela's image of India is itself restricted.

Speaking to the women of the Club, Adela makes her complaint; 'As if one could avoid seeing them,' sighed Mrs Lesley. 'I've avoided,' said Miss Quested. 'Excepting my own servant, I've scarcely spoken to an Indian since landing.' 'Oh, lucky you.' 'But I want to see them.' (Forster *Passage* 23)(9)

This short exchange provides several insights into Adela's expectations of 'The Indian'. By rejecting her servant as a

representative of the Indian character, Adela has recognised that the act of colonial subjugation disrupts the human relationship. However, she nonetheless maintains a psychological distance from the Colonial Other, 'But I want to *see* them'. Notably, Adela does not want to *meet* them. There are passages in the novel however, in which Forster attempts to present this 'real' India. This India is remote, ancient and unknowable, a Himalayan India becoming covered by the 'newer lands' (Forster, *Passage* 115).(10)

There is something unspeakable in these outposts. They are like nothing else within the world, and a glimpse of them makes the breath catch. They rise curiously, insanely, while not the proportion that is unbroken by the wildest hills or elsewhere, they bear no regard to something dreamt or seen. To decision them 'uncanny' suggests ghosts, and they are older than all spirit. (Forster *Passage* 115-116)(11)

Inside these ancient hills, disguised now by the veneer of colonial India, lie the Marabar caves, which will confront Mrs Moore and Adela on their trip to see the 'real' India. This uncanny India is not restricted to the landscape, but is personified in characters such as the Hindu Professor Godbole. Godbole brings this mysticism to the narrative, at once present at major events, and yet distant, refusing the identity of 'Indian the mimic'; 'His whole appearance suggested harmony, as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed.' (Forster *Passage* 66) It can be suggested, indeed, that as a Hindu, Godbole is to Forster more 'Other' than his Muslim Hero Aziz. There is evidence from Forster's further writing around this time that he saw this religion as an embodiment of the confusion and elusive nature of 'real' India: I do like Islam, tho I actually have to come through Hinduism to get it. After all the mess and profusion and confusion of Gokul Ashtami, where nothing ever stopped or need ever have begun, it was like standing on a mountain. (Forster, *Hill*, 193)(12)

Aziz, through both his behaviour and his religion, provides Forster and his characters with a *recognisable* Other. Forster is unable to place Godbole within the Other construct of coloniser/subject, English/Anglicised, and as such he becomes yet more Other. At once present, but not fitting into the narrative of social pantomime which is **A Passage to India**. Speaking to Fielding after the trip to the caves, we see the uncanny atmosphere that 'unfitting' brings to the interaction: 'I hope the expedition was a successful one.' 'The news has not reached you however, I can see.' 'Oh yes.'

'No; there has been a terrible catastrophe regarding Aziz.'

'Oh yes. That is all around the college.'

'Well, the expedition wherever that happens will scarcely be referred to as a

successful one,' said Fielding, with an amazed stare.

'I cannot say, I was not present.' (Forster *Passage* 164-165)(20)

Again, this difference between the Muslim Indian and Hindu Indian is perhaps not a coincidence; 'I have passed abruptly from Hinduism to Islam and the change is a relief. I have come too into a world whose troubles and problems are intelligible to me.' (Forster, *Hill*, 235)(13)

If Forster makes the distinction then, between the recognisable Other (as representative of colonial India) and the unknowable Other (as representative of the 'real' India), Forster's characters ultimately refuse to experience this 'real' India, 5 From a letter of 26th September 1921 attempting to confine it to a picturesque vision. Only a page after Forster's description of the sublime landscape, Adela Quested sees those same hills through the need for something picturesque, reducing their power and 'Otherness'; These hills look romantic in certain lights and at a suitable distance, and seen of an evening from the upper veranda of the Club they caused Miss Quested to say conversationally to Derek that she should like to have gone. (Forster *Passage* 118)(14)

On her arrival at the Marabar caves, and in her agitated emotional state, Adela is no longer able to contain this 'real' India, and the overwhelming of her senses leads to an abandonment of her wish to 'see' India, replaced with a fear of something threatening, something which has attacked her.

The veneer of civilisation which the characters place over the British in India is however in many ways equally thin. As mentioned, the British Raj, when presented themselves as the Other in Indian novels such as *Kanthapura*, are reduced to a brutal oppressive force, stripped of Forster's characterisation of 'misguided' figures. Each confrontation of this Indian village with the British Raj takes the form of increasing violence. The premature birth and subsequent loss of an Indian woman's child after such a confrontation is a chilling symbol of a community's loss under the imperialist hand. The failure to make human contact, which while presented from the English perspective was something close to a social comedy, is from an Indian perspective entirely removed, leaving little more than physical, sexual and social violation. To Forster, imperialism is also a dehumanising force, although unlike Rao, Forster seems to make a distinction between imperialism and imperialists.

The initial, perhaps most subtle dehumanising effect is a generalisation which comes from both groups, and reinforces the sense of 'Other'. Throughout the novel, positive traits are received as individual, even suspect, whereas negative traits, or even misunderstandings are extended to qualify an 'Other' Indian character. This enables the British characters to reconcile the Indian's position as subject. Interestingly, however, from a letter of 12th November 1921 the Indian characters also apply this generalisation; 'He too generalised from his disappointments – it is difficult for members of a subject race to do otherwise.' (Forster *Passage* 11) Ultimately then, these acts of generalisation prohibit any meaningful human connections. Nationality was returning, but before it could exert its poison they parted, saluting each other. "If solely they were all like that," every thought. (Forster *Passage* 52)(15)

In this way *A Passage to India* joins a modernist tradition which explores the dehumanising and enveloping effect of imperialism on the British sent to perpetuate it. When they [the trappings of European lifestyle] are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. Of course you'll be an excessive amount of a fool to travel wrong – too boring even to understand you're being maltreated by the power of darkness. (Conrad 70)(16)

The effect of this assault is seen in *A Passage to India*. The 'crisis' brought about by the 'attack' on Adela strips the small Anglo community of its veneer, and what has been an uncomfortable social performance descends into base cruelty. 'Swine, I should think so,' the major echoed. 'And what's more, I'll tell you what. What's happened is a damn good thing really, barring of course its application to present company [Adela]. It'll make them squeal and it's time they did squeal. I've placed the worry of God into them at the hospital anyhow. You should see the grandson of our so-called leading loyalist.' He tittered brutally as he described poor Nureddin's present appearance. 'His beauty's gone, five upper teeth, two lower and a nostril...I laughed, I tell you, and so would you'... 'There's no such thing as cruelty after a thing like this.' (Forster *Passage* 203-204)(17)

Once social norms have collapsed, it is not long before the moral constructs which should represent 'European values' have also collapsed. This passage alone, above the shocking demonstration of how easily the veneer of civility has been shattered, shows also how quickly the 'enlightenment' values of the British Raj have been corrupted. The trial of Aziz is not longer a means of

justice, but of retribution and control, and the role of doctor as healer has been replaced by cruelty.

Increasingly, each character is forced to retreat to within their 'own' cultural groups. While Adela and Fielding have sought to escape the pack mentality of the Anglo community, the events around the 'attack' draw both back within the group. For Adela, her experience of the Other sends her seeking refuge within the 'safety' of that which she knows. For Fielding, his affiliation with Aziz brings pressure from the group, and a 'them or us' mentality:

I solely detected a rumour that a precise member here gift has been seeing the unfortunate person this afternoon. You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, at least not in this country. (Forster *Passage* 176)(18) Likewise Aziz, having failed to escape his position as Other, replaces his attempts at integration with contempt and bitterness. This rejection (both the British rejection of him, and his own of them), reinforces the barrier to human contact, and Aziz is unable to have the relationship with Mrs Moore's children that he had with her. Where his human contact with Mr Moore had been trusting, the same contact with her son is clouded in resistance and suspicion.

'Then you're an Oriental.' He unclasped as he spoke, with a bit shudder. Those words – he had said them to Mrs Moore in the mosque at the beginning of the cycle, from which, after so much suffering, he had got free. Never be friends with the English! (Forster *Passage* 296)(19)

Fielding, as prophesized by Aziz, has replaced the search for human contact with officialdom, and in their row in the final pages of the novel, good naturedly though it is approached, each has once again reduced the other to a set of essentialist stereotypes. 'Look at you', attacks Fielding, 'forgetting your medicine and going back to charms.' (305) Aziz retorts with an equally reductionist attack, which nonetheless expresses the disappointment of a failed attempt at human contact; 'Clear out, all you Turtons and Burtons. We wanted to know you ten years back – now it's too late.' (Forster *Passage* 305)(20)

Ultimately then, the Colonial Other permeates every attempt at human contact in **A Passage to India**, both between the English in India and Indians, and within groups. Despite the veneer of civilised interaction, the characters, and perhaps Forster himself, are unable to reconcile the uneasy construct of coloniser/subject with personal human contact. To Forster, the Colonial Other is a barrier to meaningful relationships, and in **A Passage to India** he shows a pessimism in which attempts to bridge the cultural gulf only serve to reinforce it. How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders

have tried, but they remain in exile. The necessary cities they build area unit solely retreats, their quarrels the uncomfortableness of men United Nations agency cannot realize their way home. (Forster, *Passage* 127)(21).

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