

Raj as Romance/Raj as Parody: Lean's and Forster's Passage to India



Interviewer:

"Was Forster right about the British in India?"

Interviewee:

"Forster, oh dear, oh dear, I think he hated the English out there. And he was queer, and you can imagine how they must have disapproved of that. . . . The dislike was mutual, but I've toned down a lot of that. It's all very well to criticize the English, but just take a look at New Delhi . . . look at the postal system—which works. We've left them all sorts of bad things, I suppose, but they've also got some very good things." (Kennedy 31-32)

"As for Aziz, there's a hell of a lot of Indian in him. They're marvellous people but maddening sometimes. . . . He's a goose. . . . And Miss Quested . . . well, she's a bit of a prig and a bore in the book, you know. . . . Forster wasn't always very good with women. . . . I've got rid of that 'not yet, not yet' bit. . . . I thought that bit rather tacked on. Anyway, I see it as a personal, not a political story." (Rushdie 70)

The voice, Anglo-Indian to the point of parody (or well past it), is that of Sir David Lean, explaining his adaptation of *A Passage to India*. Reading Lean's comments, one is driven at the pace of Forster's Miss Derek to two conclusions: first, that his overriding purpose in adapting the novel was to correct what Forster got wrong about India; second, that what Forster got wrong is (to Lean) fundamentally related to his homosexuality. He was queer, therefore he hated the English, therefore Adela is "a stick," therefore he shows no proper respect for the Indian postal system. And so on. It is no surprise to find that, a few moments after the first comment above, Lean assures the interviewer of his own authority on Indians: "I married one. I was married to her for several years" (Kennedy 32). To be heterosexual, Lean thinks, is to have privileged access to the reality of women and of India. The resulting film aims, in at least two senses, to put Forster straight.

That Lean subverts the novel is not, as June Parry Levine has suggested, "unavoidable" (140), nor is it inadvertent. The film, widely regarded as homage (perhaps even by Lean), should rather be seen as criticism of a pervasive and sweeping kind. When

he was seeking the permission of Cambridge to film the book, Lean assured the dons that movies are ephemeral but that literature is permanent (Annan 5). Six years on, we can see that the most important thing which Lean's ephemeral revision of the permanent novel reveals about it has not been seen by its critics: the extent to which the novel operates as parody of the patterns of romantic fiction.

Not surprisingly, given Lean's objections to Miss Quested, the adaptation he both wrote and directed pervasively romanticizes Forster's relentlessly anti-romantic text. One could pick out any number of details to indicate the process: the fact that Turton has been awarded a parade he nowhere receives in the book; the fact that Ronny's red nose has been replaced by the more presentably Roman beak of Nigel Havers; or the notorious fact that Lean, finding the actual Barabar Caves insufficiently impressive, dynamited his own (Annan 5). In general, virtually everything and everyone associated with the Raj is larger, handsomer, younger and/or more highly polished than in the original; "grandified," as Annan (5) puts it. Of course the English remain brutal and stupid, but, while we are invited to share in the novel's verbal criticism of the Raj, we are also implicitly encouraged to enjoy it as a show. "They lived a tremendous life out there," Lean has said of the Anglo-Indians (Kennedy 32), and that is what he shows us.

The process of straightening Forster out begins, perhaps, with the excision of the novel's one explicitly "decadent" character, Nureddin, and the replacement of Forster's naked, young punkahwallah with an old and fully-clothed man. But it goes much deeper. In particular, Lean is intent on exorcising the stick Adela and conjuring the heroine Forster has cruelly denied him. Adela's is now the first and last face we see in the film, thanks to two extratextual scenes Lean has supplied as a frame. Since the first of these shows Adela booking her P&O passage to India, it effectively confines the reference of the title to her experience, in keeping with a general tendency to subordinate other major characters to her. The face is that of Judy Davis, who is far too handsome and physically graceful for Forster's Adela, and whose character has been rewritten to make her softer, warmer, dreamier, more emotional, and more sexually responsive than her original. Among other flirtatious mannerisms, Adela has acquired the habit of smiling sidelong at men she finds interesting (Fielding, Aziz, and Ronny, at a cautious estimate). If Mrs. Blakiston, whom Forster's Club members find so much more satisfying than Adela in the role of Britannia Violata, has disappeared, that is because she is no longer needed. If Fielding no longer expresses revulsion at Adela's looks and no longer calls her a prig, that is because the charges no longer apply.¹

Simply put, when Lean calls the story "personal" he means sexual and when he calls Forster's Adela "not believable" (Kennedy 30) he means not sexy. At the point where the novel's Adela and Ronny take their unfortunate ride in the Nawab's car, the film's Adela takes a solitary bicycle ride, in the course of which she comes upon a temple covered with erotic statuary—the only temple, by the way, left in this *Passage*. As she surveys the figures with appropriately silent—bar the throbbing soundtrack—fascination, she is attacked and driven off by a tribe of monkeys who emerge from the ruin. Arriving back at the Civil Lines, she throws herself into Ronny's arms and renews their engagement. This sequence, obviously, needs little explication. One should note, however, that Lean has just "solved," with all the crudity of Santha Rama Rau's stage version of the novel, the mystery of what will happen at the Caves. At the same time, a sequence in the novel which emphasizes the alienness and indefinability of India through the mystery of what hits the car has been replaced by one which equates India with a complex of Nature, antiquity, eros, and monkeys. In the process, a book about the universe has been turned into a movie about sex, one whose central line of development is the erotic awakening of a high-minded, attractive young woman under the influence of the exotic East, whose "tragedy" now lies in being prevented from finding True Fulfillment by the barriers of prejudice and fear, and

who will last be seen, swathed for once in the conventions of Hollywood glamour photography, in soft focus, hair loose, reading a letter at a rain-streaked window. We are offered, in other words, a familiar parable of English ego encountering Indian id: imperialist condescension glossed as Freudian insight of the kind Forster tried to frustrate by insisting that neither Adela nor Aziz finds the other attractive.

The Lean version may sound like the veriest M.M. Kaye, but it's not. It's the veriest Maud Diver or Alice Perrin or Flora Annie Steel. In the name of correcting Forster's version of Indian reality, Lean has reconstructed the conventions of the kind of Anglo-Indian romantic novel which Forster set out to subvert: the India of those "Anglo-Indian ladies . . . their theme the disaster of intermarriage" whose dominance he lamented in a 1915 review.² In converting *A Passage to India* back into the romance from which it came, Lean quite inadvertently reveals what its critics have not previously seen: just how dependent it is on a series of parodic displacements and just how systematically it is written to the reverse of a formula. If Adela is the one character in the novel for whom it is difficult to find a source in Forster's Indian experience—save, of course, for Forster himself—that, I would suggest, is because her source is to be found not in India or Bloomsbury, but in sentimental fiction: "an English girl fresh from England," as Collector Turton says, hitting the cliché on the head (174). You have merely to supply the negatives. Adela will thus be a heroine who is unbeautiful, unromantic, and breath-takingly uncharming, who comes to a thoroughly unexotic Chandrapore, where she will have the illusion of an erotic experience, which will lead not to sexual awakening but to the realization of incurable frigidity. Reversing the usual pattern, the heroine will start out nearly married but wind up an old maid (and be quite relieved at the change). The dreaded miscegenation will not take place in large part because the natives, far from being aroused, find this particular English rose repulsive. Her non-rape will, in turn, lead to a trial which produces a kind of non-verdict: we know who didn't do it, but not who did or even whether there was an it. (Adela's memory of the event stops abruptly at the discovery of Aziz's absence.) After the trial she will be rescued—from a crowd which winds up garlanding her in mistake for Mrs. Moore—by a "hero" who only wants to get rid of her so that he can be alone with another man. "He didn't want to die for her, he wanted to be rejoicing with Aziz" (235).

From his mysteriously unsuccessful earlier engagement through his reluctant rescue of Adela to his "not quite happy" (312) marriage, Fielding, too, consistently fails or refuses the role of hero. He botches his resignation from the Club in Ch. XX; he sits through the trial as a passive spectator; he cannot do his masculine duty to Adela without "deserting" Aziz (236). As John Beer and Millicent Bell have noted, Fielding is positioned as the hero of a failed detective story" (Beer in Herz and Martin 124). "Fair-minded, intelligent, and no coward. . . . Like the classic private eye . . . an outsider, critical of the prejudices around him," Fielding nonetheless "never takes up the detective role and is of no practical help to Aziz" (Bell 104). His career as a romantic hero builds to two anticlimaxes. In the first, his sheltering of Adela leads not to romantic embrace, but to "a friendliness, as of dwarfs shaking hands" (262). In the second, he ends up married to the nebulous Stella, who exists in the novel only as the displaced form of Adela (who introduced them and has been Fielding's rumored bride), of Ronny (whom she links to Fielding), of her mother (whom she reincarnates), and of her brother Ralph (the only one of the siblings to have a speaking part).

The deconstructive process can be extended down to the smallest narrative byways of the text: to Ronny's peon Krishna who lives up to his name by neglecting to come (thus provoking a sham crisis), or to the mob who storm the hospital under the confused impression that Nureddin is being held prisoner and who are deflected from violence by Dr. Panna Lal, whose heroism consists in humiliating himself (237-38). It certainly includes the fact that the Indian hero is not a prince but a village doctor who dreams of being one. It can probably be extended right down to the anticlimactic transposition

of two letters: "God si love" (283: the possible "final message of India").³

It is a customary distinction to talk of *A Passage to India* in terms of the interaction between a lesser or political novel, the one about India, and a greater or metaphysical novel, the one about "more than India." That, after all, is the way Forster himself tended to talk about it.⁴ In fact, he has at least three projects going, since this is also a novel about novels and the ways in which they falsify experience. Novels, especially for him those of heterosexual romance, simplify experience. First, they over-focus it: "if you think of a novel in the vague," he writes in *Aspects of the Novel*, "you think of a love interest. . . . If you think of your own life . . . you are left with a very different and more complex impression" (61). Second, they oversimplify by imposing form and closure: "love is convenient to a novelist because it ends a book conveniently" (62). But India persistently defeats that impulse to reduce and tidy. India for Forster, whether in music, art, architecture, landscape, anecdote, tends to equal anticlimax, the frustration of our desire both for closure and conventional fulfillment. Godbole's song, the Nawab's apologies, the date with the Bhattacharyas, the temple decorations, the activities of Gokul Ashtami, or the street plan of Chandrapore: all are irresolute and without closure; they deny Western ideas of form, proportion, emphasis. Thus, the Temple ceremonies die out in "unsatisfactory and undramatic tangles. . . . Looking back at the great blur of the last twenty-four hours, no man could say where was the emotional centre of it, any more than he could locate the heart of a cloud" (310). Come, says the English mind, come to a point. India neglects to come. As the subject for a novel, it intransigently refuses to be the subject for a novel. "The city of Chandrapore," as we all know, "presents nothing extraordinary" (31).

India inherently tends to defeat discourse, from the mock-guidebook prose of the first paragraphs to Aziz's and Fielding's inability to state their positions clearly, consistently, or quite accurately on their last ride together. Notoriously, the most famous episodes in the novel—what hit the Nawab's car? what happened in the Caves? was the god born or not?—involve questions which cannot be resolved, versions of the "not yet bit" that Lean regards as tacked on. At the crisis of the trial, Adela has a vision of what *didn't* happen: "she failed to locate" Aziz (231). Her anti-vision omits what it is ostensibly about: the crime itself.⁵ Her response, of course, must be a negative: "I withdraw everything" (231). What happens in the trial is in fact a breakdown of narrative at the point where Adela's memory of what has happened departs into incompleteness from the script MacBryde has constructed. The reality neglects to come to the point the English mind has tried to impose on it, just as it has previously refused to surface in Godbole's non-account of the Caves during Fielding's tea, despite Aziz's efforts to "help the narrative" (92) by offering stalactites as a possible point. The most central objects of the book resist narration. It becomes a virtual law of this novel that no story can be finished, no question answered, no expectation fulfilled.

The natural mode for narrating the unnarratable is parody, as Samuel Beckett figured out long ago, since it allows you to surround the subject with versions of what it might be but isn't. Parody is, after all, an account of false accounts of something whose reality is usually left implied, as the real India in the novel is implied by innumerable false statements about it. Moreover, Forster's Anglo-Indians are themselves experts at self-parody, caricaturing their Englishness, right down to their memorably awful meals, culinary parodies, in the act of asserting it. D. J. Enright was correct when he observed that the Anglo-Indians react to the rape in "the worst traditions of melodrama" (181).⁶ His mistake was in assuming that Forster didn't intend them to do so. The reality of Anglo-India is parody. Its history is a history of false consciousness. Its reaction to Aziz depends on confusing him with the Mutiny, as MacBryde does (178) and the Club members do (194).

It is a fundamental tactic of the book that the impression of realism is created by parodic inversion of the unrealistic, by the deconstruction of what Benita Parry calls "the fictional India compounded of banal guesses and clichés . . . which the romancers

fashioned" (98). If a Maud Diver heroine is unreal, her opposite will automatically seem real. You conjure by saying the spell backwards. Thus, the element of literary parody does not conflict with the novel's function as historical record, it reinforces it, since Forster cannot establish his India without at the same time subverting the popular mythologies which obscure it. To discredit the Asia of sex fiends and fakirs is to discredit the mythology that asserts the inherent normality of Europe, what Lawrence recognized in the novel as "our white bunk" (quoted in Bradbury 47). It is not Forster who sexualized relations between England and India; that is abundantly present in Diver's sagas of intermarriage and Steel's rape and revenge fantasies about the Mutiny.⁷ In *Desmond's Daughter* (1916), for example, Diver describes India as "a woman-country, 'loved of male lands' . . . alluring, like one of her own purdah princesses" (quoted by Parry 97). Forster need only subject that mythology to displacement. In this case, "the lady" (now English) is, after all, "so [much] uglier than the gentleman" (222).

The novel's most important parodic displacement—and the one most disconcerting to Lean—is that its "love story" is not between hero and heroine, but between "hero" and "hero." Adela's role is not to be the love interest—irresistible white womanhood—but the blocking agent who comes between the two men by creating an illusion of heterosexual desire: first by an imaginary (or whatever) rape; then by a still more imaginary marriage; and finally perhaps by supplying Fielding with Stella, his hostage to fortune, who makes him part of the uxorious herd of married Englishmen and closes him off, to some crucial extent, from his openness to Indian experience, specifically to Aziz. By the end of the novel, "he had thrown in his lot with Anglo-India by marrying a countrywoman, and he was acquiring some of its limitations" (313). Significantly, the only positive bonding that crosses both racial and sexual lines, that between Aziz and Mrs. Moore, involves a woman who provokes neither sexual feeling nor possessiveness.

Heterosexual feeling, I would argue, is presented throughout the novel as a divisive force, something that prevents men from connecting with other men. "It's our women who make everything more difficult," Turton realizes on the way to the trial, just after realizing that he, unlike his wife, doesn't hate Indians (217). Like the medieval Church, Forster believes that marriage restricts the full flowering of human sympathy. Fielding can serve as a good priest so long as he remains a celibate priest. Both his marriage and Aziz's mark their partial retreat into tribalism, for from the beginning of the novel heterosexual possessiveness—the white racist's fear of the darkies attacking his women—has been presented as one of the root fictions of imperialism and (perhaps) as the root of racism. That's why the political level of the novel is about the reaction to a nonexistent sexual crime.

The Empire, for Forster, is an Empire of husbands egged on by the wives they imagine they are protecting. It is a trade-union of the married: a political expression of the defensive aggressiveness and tribalism of the uxorious herd, dramatized in the book by the chivalrous hysteria which infects the British before, during, and after the trial. To marry is to join forces with the Raj, as Fielding does and Adela nearly does. Forster may, in fact, be the first to argue that the root cause of imperialism is marriage, though Marx would certainly have recognized the connection and Edward Carpenter may have suggested it.⁸ Thus, the bonding of single men—Aziz and Fielding, but also Aziz and the Subaltern—is subversive to it. When the Subaltern bonds to Aziz (during their impromptu polo practice) he's good; when he bonds to the herd surrounding Mrs. Blakiston and her dribbling baby, he's bad.

But each bonding of individual men is poisoned somewhere near the root. When Fielding has thrown in his lot with the English by marrying Heaslop's sister, he wonders how he could ever have risked so much for "a stray Indian" (313). Aziz, having thrown his married lot in with the Indians, tries to conflate Fielding with his tribe, "the Turtons and Burtons" (314). If India doesn't want Lean's happy ending,

neither does marriage. Marriage, like race and empire, is a bungalow: we stand at our parlor windows and imagine burglars outside. Indeed, the novel's final subversion is not of the formulas of sentimental fiction, but of Forster's own ideals. As his characters shrink in stature, each shrinks into himself. They make connection first, as Aziz does with both Fielding and Mrs. Moore, and lose it later. "I am an Indian at last, [Aziz] thought, standing motionless in the rain" (290). The novel's central narratives are all about the unmaking of friendships.

A Passage to India is, in a fundamental way, a novel about mythologies, about the ways we falsify each other, about the ways we falsify our stories as soon as we begin to tell them, supplying the fictitious comforts of closure and explanation: a rape to account for Adela's hysterics, a guide to perform the rape in the absence of Aziz, a hyena to hit the Nawab's car. That's why Lean's innocent, explanatory re-mythologizing of Forster's material is so useful a passage to the novel. Forster, standing at an angle to India, to the Raj, to the heterosexual establishment, and subverting the myths of all parties, describes both the infidelity and the inevitability of fiction. In the logic of the novel his two most often stated reasons for ceasing to write fiction are joined: a frustration with the faking of love stories (see Furbank, v. 2, 132) and a larger frustration with the pretensions of the novel to tell the truth. Unlike Lean, Forster knows that India stands for reality *because* it's what cannot be narrated. In bearing witness to history, he bore witness to the falsity of history. When you see that, you can either smile and go on narrating or you can stop. Forster stopped.

Arthur Lindley
National University of Singapore

Notes

¹ The film fudges the question of how we are supposed to regard Davis's appearance, since two insults by Indians (the famous one during the trial and Aziz's comment that Adela has "practically no breasts") are left in, while English insults are removed. Kael assumes that Lean's point is that what one race regards as beautiful may be ugly to another. I assume that Adela is being inscribed with an ancient Hollywood code: repressed young woman (first seen in grey with hair tightly drawn back and blotchy, brick-red lipstick) who becomes attractive as she begins to relax. The original Adela, of course, provides no dispute.

² "The Indian Boom." *Daily News and Leader*. 2 February 1915, 7; cited in Das, 1.

³ Gillian Beer suggests that this process operates at the level of the individual sentence, pointing out how often Forster tells us what is not happening, what his characters are *not* feeling. Shahane 9-23.

⁴ For example: "the book is not really about politics, though it is the political aspect of it that caught the general public . . . It is—or rather desires to be—philosophical and poetic": "Three Countries" in Forster, *Indian Journals*, 182.

⁵ Lean's version makes a small but critical change in the original by locating Aziz at or just outside the entrance to the cave. One suspects that Lean found the Freudian suggestions of the shot of Aziz framed in the slot-like opening irresistible.

⁶ Compare Leonard Woolf's remark about his time in Ceylon that "the white people were also in many ways like characters in a Kipling story. I could never make up my mind whether Kipling had moulded his characters accurately in the image of Anglo-Indian society or whether we were moulding our characters accurately in the image of a Kipling story." *Growing: An Autobiography of the Years 1904-1911* (London, 1961) 46; cited by Greenburger, 3.

⁷ The sexual mythologies of Anglo-Indian popular fiction before Forster are explored at length by Parry. See especially chapter two (on the minor romancers: Perrin, Croker, Diver, et al.) and chapter three (on Flora Annie Steel).

⁸ When I gave an earlier version of this paper at the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies in 1986, Craig Tapping suggested that Forster may have gotten the connection from Carpenter. Since Carpenter's "Uranian" writings are currently in the Carpenter Collection at Sheffield University, I have not been able to check Tapping's suggestion. For Forster's relations with Carpenter, see Furbank, vol. 1, 159 n. 256-58. For a convenient summary of Carpenter's theories, see Colmer, 130-35.

Works Cited

- Annan, Noel. "The Unmysterious East." *New York Review of Books* 31 (1985), nos. 21-22: 5-6.
- Beer, Gillian. "But Nothing in India is Identifiable: Negation and Identification in *A Passage to India*," *Approaches to E.M. Forster: A Centenary Volume*. Ed. V.A. Shahane. New Delhi: Longman, 1981. 9-23.
- Bell, Millicent. "What Happened in the Cave." *Partisan Review* 53 (1986): 103-10.
- Bradbury, Malcolm, ed. *E.M. Forster: A Passage to India*. London: Macmillan, 1970.
- Colmer, John. *Coleridge to Catch-22: Images of Society*. London: Macmillan, 1978.
- Das, G.K. *E.M. Forster's India*. London: Macmillan, 1977.
- Enright, D.J. *The Apothecary's Shop: Essays on Literature*. Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1957.
- Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. ed. Oliver Stallybrass. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1978.
- _____. Forster, E.M. *Indian Journals and Essays*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heineman, 1981.
- _____. *Aspects of the Novel*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.
- Furbank, P.N. *E.M. Forster: A Life*. 2 vols. London: Secker and Warburg, 1977, 1978.
- Greenberger, Allen J. *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880-1960*. London: Oxford, 1969.
- Herz, Judith S. and Robert K. Martin, eds. *E.M. Forster: Centenary Revaluations*. Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1982.
- Kael, Pauline. "Unloos'd Dreams." *The New Yorker* 14 January 1985: 112-15.
- Kennedy, Harlan. "I'm a Picture Chap." *Film Comment* 21 (1985): 28-32.
- Levine, June Perry. "Passage to the Odeon: Too Lean." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 14 (1986): 139-50.
- Parry, Benita. *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination 1880-1930*. London: Allan Lane/The Penguin Press, 1972.
- Rushdie, Salman. "Outside the Whale." *American Film* 10 (1985): 16, 70-73.