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Editor  
Santwana Haldar

Associate Editor  
Rabi Narayan Dash

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## AMBIVALENT REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIA IN E.M. FORSTER'S *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

Pier Paolo Piciucco

In the texts produced by Western (and colonizing) cultures, the Orient has often emerged as the peculiar locus of ambiguities and reticence, of self and image, of desire and knowledge. Its ambiguities are indeed the result of a number of varied and inter-related causes, but Said's theory that its creation was ideologically functional to the making and the keeping of an empire, if not to alternative forms of power-control, has often exerted a commanding influence on commentators and readers. In that sense, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*<sup>1</sup> may be considered as an illuminating example of a literary product that, working under the aegis of colonial domination, contributed to reproducing many of those psychological mechanisms that colonialism created in order to exploit and justify its ways.

However, before focussing my attention on the possible ambivalent aspects in *A Passage to India*, it seems fair to me to stress that even Edward Said's *Orientalism* displays several relevant contradictions, some of them particularly significant to my argument. If, for instance, the Orient is generally debated in terms of an area under Western dominion, only in a single case does Said refer to Africa, while for the rest his theory discusses examples of Asian countries, with a good majority of instances taken from the encounters between the Western colonizers and the Muslim or Middle-Eastern world. Said's Orient also possesses a centre and a margin, therefore. More important than this for us, however, is a discussion about what Yeğenoğlu appropriately terms the "sexualised nature of Orientalism," [Yeğenoğlu, 1998: 2] that is the exclusively male-centred and heterosexual bias that Said's theoretical approach displays while demonstrating the well-known desire to sexually dominate the East on the part of the Western colonizers. According to Said, this drive satisfies the wishes of heterosexual craving, with the fixed equation of a male

conqueror and a female colonized subject, totally neglecting different cases, i.e. a female explorer and a local man, or homosexual dynamics, both of them essential for a correct understanding of *A Passage to India*. Far from thinking of belittling the consequences of Said's theories, this clarification gains weight as we consider that the debate over the allegedly colonial(ist) role played by *A Passage to India* was indeed originated by Said himself, who inscribed Forster's masterpiece in a list of texts which were responsible for having "strengthened the divisions established by Orientalists between the various geographical, temporal, and racial departments of the Orient" with his "contribution of imaginative and travel literature." [Said, (1978) 2003: 99]

Said's classification of Forster's narrative as supporting the imperialist ideology, although hardly explained in his ground-breaking text, has had a substantial influence on the consequent creation of a critical mainstream concerning the possibility of interpreting *A Passage to India* as a book ringing an Orientalist jingle, and my effort in this essay will be to try and demonstrate that, while Forster was doubtlessly part of a cultural (hegemonic) apparatus that he himself contributed to, for his sexual inclinations, sensibility and inner dispositions, he also belonged to an intellectual minority that was marginalized and therefore in conflict with that same cultural (hegemonic) apparatus: his fictional creation reveals that both these contrasting impulses were contemporaneously at work. Indeed, Forster's ideological position regarding his approach to the East may not be as clear-cut as some observers think. This may also be the consequence of the fact that for the British society at the break of the 20th century, Edward Morgan Foster was in fact both a prime cultural referent as a writer and a marginalized man as a homosexual: both these aspects of his self, however, concurrently drove him to India and made his approach and relationship to that country particularly multifaceted. I will shortly try to exemplify my point with reference to a tangible case in Said's methodology, because in my view the predominantly heterosexual perspective that *Orientalism* celebrates and homologizes has the same effect of excluding Forster's view from the cultural arena as that accomplished by British society in its embargo on homosexuals at the beginning of the 20th century. Any reader of Forster would in fact find that the following contention, crucial in Said's theory, makes little sense if applied to Forster's India:

Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an *exclusively male* province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travellers and novelists: women are usually

the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express *unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing*. [Said, (1978) 2003: 207] (emphasis added)

The real problem, I would argue, is that while the British novelist has often been analysed as being part of that Western hemisphere responsible for the process of colonizing the Orient, and therefore sharing the advantages of those in a privileged position, less care has been devoted to understanding that his emotional and cultural interest in India did not originate from his will to make a career as a trader of the empire, unlike Conrad, for instance, but from his well-known feelings for Masood. In other words, whereas major emphasis is being bestowed on depicting Forster as a part of those othering the Orientals, little (or no) weight is granted to questioning the real reason for his interest in India: his being othered in his own motherland because a homosexual. My intention here is to demonstrate that Forster's literary vision of the Orient as he became busy with the writing of this novel was also shaped by his conflictual and ambivalent relationship with his native culture, and while Said's *Orientalism* gives us precious tools to interpret a number of invisible mechanisms at work in the process, with Forster it fails to hold the whole system under scrutiny all of the time, because it steadily focuses on the relationship between India and Forster the Briton, fatally overlooking the relationship between India and Forster the homosexual. All those familiar with the genesis of *A Passage to India* are however aware that Forster's interest in (or should we say love for?) India was due to his being a homosexual Briton, these two aspects of his identity having always been deeply interrelated. I, for one, admit I often find it difficult to separate them from each other and ascribe to one or another the original cause shaping the events in the relationship between the British novelist and his fictional product.

A rich and intricate blending of individual and national fictions, *A Passage to India* indeed reflects this intense fabric of subjects, particularly in the depiction of India, the grand setting of the story. Alternatively described by scholars as "abrupt, unpredictable and impassive," [Price, 1975: 618] "too big, too diverse, too elusive, to possess what we call 'character'" [Enright, 1957: 183], "a land reflecting admirably all the world and its peoples" [Thomson, 1961: 52] or "an icon of the metaphysical," [Parry, 1998: 176] India is the fatal arrival point of a dense symbology underlying the plot, a real country, an exotic land, a disorienting and empty space, a locus of the mind, an ideal character – possibly the protagonist – of the novel, "a common predicament" [Price, 1975: 610] in this masterpiece of English literature. If *A Passage to India* can be said to be the literary outcome of so many concurrent aesthetic, ideological,

sentimental, cultural, philosophical cues from the point of view of its author, India probably appears as the product that most evidently displays Forster's terrific creative effort. Not only in fact has India seemed so multi-faceted in terms of the representation of a real or invented country, but also its ideological implications on the agenda of the colonial encounter have originated an extremely varied critical feedback. If on the one hand Edward Said claims that Forster should be considered part of that group of writers who contributed to the spread of Orientalist orthodoxy, Peter Morey,<sup>2</sup> on the other, seems to approach the topic from an opposite perspective, arguing that "Forster unmasks the artifice involved in English representations of India." [Morey, 2000: 65] Whereas Lionel Trilling, after analysing a couple of episodes in the plot, perceptively demonstrates that "the novel proceeds on an imperialistic premise," [Trilling, 1971: 150] Benita Perry, in her accurate survey of the author's political positioning, focuses her attention on Forster's "anti-colonialism in an age of residual imperial enthusiasm." [Parry, 1998: 190]

The famous *ouvre* of the novel has often been used as a starting point for a number of studies regarding the real and/or symbolical attributes of the Indian landscape, metaphorically represented by the small town of Chandrapore, when in particular the narrating voice makes an extensive use of negatives to describe the locale while gradually zooming in to make the reader more and more familiar with the local environment. In the opening paragraph of the novel, I have counted eight negatives, which of course do not include "The streets are mean, the temples ineffective," "So abased, so monotonous is everything" and "Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting." [Forster, (1924) 2005: 5] Of those included in the count, particular relevance should be bestowed on the incipit, with its famous "Except for the Marabar Caves, and they are twenty miles off, the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary" [5] soon establishing a steady connection between the thematic icon of the Marabar Caves and the nucleus of the novel, the whole articulated in a flat tone deflating easy expectations. All this has been the subject of discussion in the works of Forster's critics, with the theory focussing on the narrating voice's nihilism gaining a central role as, say, a mainstream interpretation. While it seems indisputable to me that the narrator's voice often rings a nihilistic tone, I would disagree with the general association of the Indian landscape with a nihilistic approach to the matter.

Statistically speaking, the second paragraph of *A Passage to India* has certainly received less emphasis than the previous section on the part of the scholars, maybe because the so-called nihilistic approach vanishes. Indeed, I do find it equally interesting and crucial for the general view of

this Oriental country. In a way, it is also possible to imagine why it failed to magnetize the critics' attention: salient about it, in fact, is a drastic change in the perspective of the narrator's tone and point of view, which may also lead to the reader's disorientation. A brief and concise statement soon warns the reader that the point of view has been modified: "Inland, the prospect alters." [5] Negatives have not actually disappeared from the text, but their use clearly indicates that their purpose is not to flatten everything to anonymity but rather to create emotional ups and downs, or pretend to level things out only to surprisingly arouse the reader's attention a moment later: "It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical pleasance washed by a noble river." [6] The city of Chandrapore comes to life all of a sudden, in such a way that the reader may wonder whether the focus of narration in the first paragraph is the same as that in the second one. If he/she may vaguely picture it as dominated by yellow-brownish tones in the first paragraph, since "[t]he very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving," [5] the following section describes it as a vivid green luxuriant garden: "It is a tropical pleasance washed by a noble river." [6] Also the Ganges changes connotations: while it previously happened "not to be holy here" [5] it has now become "a noble river." [6] It is at this juncture that Forster, after having ingeniously disseminated disorientation and disbelief, works in order to clarify the matter and magisterially suspends incredulity. Notably, he achieves his goal by again making an allusion to one of the most important topics in the novel, the British visitors in India: "newcomers cannot believe it to be as meagre as it is described and have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment." [6] What in particular seems to be so impressive to me is that the ambiguity of meaning is also perfectly mirrored by that of form: the reader may in fact wonder whether the narrator is describing two possible different points of view regarding the city of Chandrapore or whether this fictional account is the result of a blend of two opposite voices alternating in the narration. The novel has only reached page 2, but the cautious reader has already understood that one of the themes discussed will be that of the representation(s) of India. Or, alternatively, the representation(s) of India(s). Among the scholars who have worked on this dissonant view/powerful picture is John Dixon Hunt, who has discussed the matter in terms of two different points of view: "Chandrapore could be both pleasance and chaos, beauty and filth, depending upon whether you were concerned with India as Frieze (uncomplicated surface) or India as Spirit (difficult essence)." [Dixon Hunt, 1966: 506] The topic is not exactly unequivocal to him either, because, always insisting on the duplicity of



vision, he also correctly maintains that *A Passage to India* celebrates “India as travelogue, or India as maddening formlessness and meagre rewards” [Dixon Hunt, 1966: 503].

The opening of the novel is not the only section in which Forster plays to create the crucial equivocation point around which the whole novel pivots. Although there may be a few other meaningful instances, I will focus my attention on a particular passage that – exactly as was the case of the beginning of the novel – aptly figures in the top list of quotations of critical assessments on *A Passage to India*. I am referring here to the description of the Marabar Caves, a central metaphor in the tale and in the opinion of Virginia Woolf “the soul of India,” [Woolf, 1942: 168] whose first paragraph resembles in mood and point of view the opening of the novel. Here too negatives proliferate, and a tone deflating all possible expectations dominates:

Having seen one such cave, having seen two, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty-four, the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all. He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind, for the pattern never varies and no carving, not even a bees’ nest or a bat distinguishes one from another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them and their reputation – for they have one – does not depend upon human speech. [116]

After this account, every sane visitor or reader may reasonably wonder what all the fuss about the caves is. As one reads on, however, the narrator’s tone switches: the voice, somewhat remindful of a detached guidebook phrasing up to this point, acquires a poetic ring. Stone walls and rocks cease to be the issue any more and they are replaced by those minor incidents and phenomena that the eye cannot see, the ear cannot hear. The route of this tale is no longer linear but follows a circular motion from darkness to light, back to darkness again. The cold lifelessness of the previous section disappears and a warm, sensual feeling, as if vaguely alluding to an amorous exchange, makes its way.

They are dark caves. Even when they open towards the sun, very little light penetrates down the entrance tunnel into the circular chamber. There is little to see and no eye to see it, until the visitor arrives for his five minutes and strikes a match. Immediately another flame rises in the depths of the rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned spirit: the walls of the circular chamber have been most marvellously polished. The two flames approach and strive to unite, but cannot, because one of them breathes air, the other stone. A mirror inlaid with lovely colours divides the lovers, delicate stars

of pink and grey interpose, exquisite nebulae, shadings fainter than the tail of a comet or the midday moon, all the evanescent life of the granite, only here visible. Fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil here at last is their skin, finer than any covering acquired by the animals, smoother than windless water, more voluptuous than love. The radiance increases, the flames touch one another, kiss, expire. The cave is dark again, like all the caves. [116-7]

Of course, this is the kind of description which may possibly arouse curiosity in any visitor and convince him or her to make a journey to the caves, if not for other reasons, at least to go, strike a match and see whether this uncommon place communicates profound emotions to him/her or not. Possibly, the reader may even wonder what the real focus is here: the caves or a sexual intercourse. Again the two voices alternate, the flat making room for the moving one, the sound swaps to its echo, reality to its representation, truth to illusion. We may even argue that while the first paragraph seems to be the possible unemotional and matter-of-fact account of the caves by Prof. Godbole, “the most inscrutable character in the novel,” [Mitra, 2008: 47] because of his constant flattening tone, the second part seems to be more in keeping with Dr. Aziz’s poetic mood, also in consideration of the fact that the Indian doctor is possibly the character who best invites sexual allusions in the novel, significantly both on Adela’s and on Fielding’s part.

The most challenging aspect and complex riddle to solve in my opinion at this juncture seems to be how to reach a conclusive definition of what India is in the novel: the reader may be left to wonder whether India is to be found in the “abased” [5] and “monotonous” [5] initial description of Chandrapore or whether in the “tropical pleasance” [6] that follows shortly. Similarly, he/she may be in trouble when trying to imagine the caves, described as “any experience at all” [116] first, and “more voluptuous than love” [117] a little later. What we may arguably find confusing here is whether we should consider these two opposing perspectives as two real and complementary aspects of the country or whether one is the real face and the other simply an illusion. In this sense Forster has his readers sense the same mood of tortured uncertainty that Adela also experiences after the visit to the caves until the end of the trial. In a way, the reader is also facing a more disorienting situation because while the fictional character had to decide which of the two possible views of the fact was true and which was the fruit of a hallucination, the reader has these doubts, in addition to the one that maybe both the views may be right at the same time (or, for the same reason, both of them may be misleading).

If an assessment of the country according to the descriptions of the places appears to be quite complicated a matter, the situation becomes a little more straightforward if we analyse the characters who most clearly happen to evoke its spirit: Dr Aziz and Prof. Godbole, in fact, appear as the two personifications of India according to the critics. If the relationship between the former and Mr Fielding in fact also displays clear allusions to the ideological situation between India and England, many voices have insistently remarked that Godbole possesses the same mystifying quality of his own country. For different reasons, therefore, and in completely different contexts, both of them alternatively represent their own country. If evaluated under this perspective, India is not therefore the choice of either Godbole or Aziz but a combination of the two, or the result of a basic sum: India = Godbole + Aziz. The plot seems to indicate that it is in fact both a puzzling place, a philosophical, mystical, existential enigma but also a poetic, alluring, sensual construction and an irritable, easily-offended persona at the same time. As perceived by a Western visitor, the idea of India is both inside and outside Orientalist thought, and it is at the same time both an aloof, emotionless country and a place which is able to abruptly turn its love and devotion into spite and resentment. In this sense, one cannot but agree with Shusterman that

Forster is using the word India on at least two levels of thought: the literal earthly reality and the transcendental reality. In no other book has his double-visioned interest in these two divided and distinguished worlds been more paramount. [Shusterman, 1961: 428]

Two different approaches lead us towards two different results. The whole picture becomes complex and seems to escape the application of a general criterion: somewhat whimsically, on a semantic level Forster's India seems to evoke power by its ability to resist Western understanding. In *Two Cheers for Democracy* Forster directly tackles the matter and demonstrates that such elusiveness is an intentional strategic approach aimed at destabilizing the reader's point of view: "I like that idea [...] of muddling up the actual and the impossible until the reader isn't sure which is which, and I have sometimes tried to do it when writing myself." [Forster, 1951: 222] The "muddling up" tactic is therefore not accidental in *A Passage to India*, a work defined by Brenda Silver as "E. M. Forster's most enigmatic novel," [Silver, 1988: 86] but is part of a major design whose intention is to have the reader experience the same state of disorientation as the (Western) characters in the plot. The matter becomes further problematic as we try to evaluate whether such dominant confusional status describing the Westerners in the Orient is/should be directly related to a peculiar use of

the rhetoric of exploitation and power discussed by Said's *Orientalism*. This approach has indeed the merit of establishing the theory for the unveiling of a major principle influencing the culture and the ideological positioning of an entire people under the same specific historical context that Forster's *A Passage to India* brings to life. It seems obvious that Forster himself, educated in that particular cultural background, inherited and also manifested the fruits of that upbringing. In the novel, this becomes evident even in the character of Fielding who, after starting a personal war against the dominating ideology at the English club, may seem to be the figure least inclined to disclose such an attitude. However, if the visit to the caves indirectly kills Mrs. Moore, it also manages to indirectly kill the friendship between Fielding and Aziz, although the effects of this breakdown become noticeable only later in time. Fielding does remain a very open-minded person throughout the plot, but it is evident that the colonial clash between the British and the Indians particularly manifest during the trial has effects on him, as well. The Fielding of the first two sections of the novel is no longer the Fielding of the final part: his idealistic attitude seems to have been mitigated by a forced submission to external factors that, comprehensibly or not, have brought his frame of mind closer to the mainstream: "[t]he new school inspector has shifted toward the Raj," [Hawkins, 1983: 58] pertinently underscores Hunt Hawkins. When in the last page of the novel he counters Aziz's assertion of freedom by mocking him,

India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last corner to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps! [306]

it seems manifest that his famous idealism has undergone modifications, and possibly compromises. In this sense Forster's view demonstrates complicity with an Orientalist view, mild as it may be.

However, even if fascinated by India Forster sharply recognised the need to offer plausible representations of the country in his works. In 1923, while completing the revision of his fictional masterpiece, Forster wrote the essay *Salute to the Orient!* revealing the picture of an artist engaged in a struggle to liberate himself from cultural stereotypes. Although his free considerations anticipate the well-known theories of Edward Said by some 55 years, it is interesting to note nonetheless that Forster's ideas do not exactly place him on the opposite side to Said's ideology. On the contrary, an uninformed scholar may even be so deceived as to think that this is a passage from *Orientalism*, at least in the first part:

The East isn't palm-trees and sunsets, or friendly rogues, or the harem, or the cynical or discontented people, though it contains all these things. It is a spirit also, and though that spirit may not be the finest, we must attempt to define it. [Forster, 1936: 288]

*A Passage to India* and *Salute to the Orient!*, although obviously different in weight, are interesting to compare because, written at the same time, they discuss many of the challenging issues that are at stake in the controversial ideological relationship between the East and the West. In particular, this comparison is fruitful because it contributes to clarifying what is and what is not fictional about India in *A Passage to India*. As is evident in the novel as well, here Forster also focuses his attention on the problem of the (correct) representation of the Orient, and how crucial it is for him to be independent from the dictates of his own culture. In this perspective the oft-quoted and somewhat naïve comment by Adela Quested who wants to know “*the real India*” [21] in its candid innocence reflects a basic need that she shares with her creator, too. This is what Forster declares in *Salute to the Orient!* but this time we may think that, at least for first lines, it was written under Adela's warm solicitation:

[W]e shall learn the difference between the real East, however quiet in its tone, and the faked East, which is often sumptuous and skilful, but which exists to be the background of some European adultery. The faking began long ago. Cleopatra was the original excuse, and the Emperor Augustus (wanting to keep the Egyptian corn-trade in his hands) pretended that the country would corrupt his pure-hearted Romans, and forbade them to land without a permit [...] Adultery in the East is no more universal than the mummies with which writers of the *dehabyeh* entwine it. [Forster, 1936; 278]

The possibility – should one say, the temptation? – for the Westener to have an equivocal vision of India was a concrete fact for Forster. This is the backbone of Said's theory but this is also one of the main topics in *A Passage to India*, where the metaphor of the caves, among many others, is exploited to set into perspective the problematic relationship of a (real) subject and its (correct) representation, as well as to create a vague allusion to a sexual rhetoric. For most of the plot, in fact, the notorious caves function as a suitable metaphor for an India which is (mainly) observed from the colonizer's point of view. This is soon clear, as the narrating voice describes the train journey back to Chandrapore after the group of excursionists has made the well-known visit and stresses in a tone which is at the same time ironic and upsetting that the caves were, “seen from a distance, finite and rather romantic.” [150] The same fact is also emphasised later in a similar situation when Fielding has just resigned

from the Club as a result of his divergence with the Anglo-Indians. The school-master walks to the Club verandah and from there the caves, responsible for all the recent troubling episodes, appear magnificent:

However, there it was, done, muddled through and to cool himself and regain mental balance he went on to the upper verandah for a moment, where the first object he saw was the Marabar Hills. At this distance and hour they leapt into beauty; they were Monsalvat, Walhalla and the towers of a cathedral, peopled with saints and heroes and covered with flowers. [178]

From far-away, the Marabar Caves – India, on a metaphorical level – appear very attractive, possibly because idealised or shaped by expectations: when directly approached, however, they are quite different. Yet, not only does the narrator describe them in ambivalent terms, but also the characters' reactions to them appear to be poles apart. Possibly, in such a baffling milieu, we may claim that, according to their description(s) in the novel, the caves seem to be the reflections of their visitors' state of mind and the product of their imagination or fears more than a real site. As a confirmation of this, it is worth noting here that while the caves had a devastating effect on Adela and a lethal one on Mrs. Moore, Fielding "wasn't impressed" [148] by them.

As becomes evident, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is a happy hunting-ground for images and stereotypical pictures of the Orient in a typical colonial context. There is still one more consideration that I deem particularly worthy of note in this regard here, also because it has largely remained unnoticed in many works by literary critics who have so far tackled this issue. I am referring to the quite thought-provoking use of animals, in particular those easily evoking awe, terror or hostile feelings in Westerners, which appear to be strictly connected to conventional creations of the Orient in terms of an intimidating and scaring mindscape. Cartographical illustrations of India in the colonial age invariably represented the huge Asian triangular sub-continent as surrounded by seas and oceans where all sorts of marine monsters, sea snakes and horrifying whales used to dwell and hide. Of course, the fact that Western adventurers, colonizers and traders often approached India from the sea is not at all an irrelevant fact in this peculiarly bizarre depiction of the Asiatic country, and indeed, it also unequivocally maps the emblematic Western fear of the Orient in documents of strategic importance. Such maps had the evident function of alerting Western travellers to the fact that India was a dangerous country, its dangers symbolically epitomized as frightening and shocking (imaginary) beasts.

E. M. Forster was apparently aware that a psychological mechanism of this kind may be at work in the collective imagination of the Western traveller to the East, and made a very subtle representation of both its use and manipulation of the mind of the interested subject.

Animals in *A Passage to India* largely contribute to the extremely vivid picture of India as an exotic land, in exactly the same way as noises, colours, smells do in the novel or, even, intensifying their effect. One of the very first examples I would like to focus my attention on in this strategic approach to the East operated by Westerners occurs quite early in the plot, when Ronny, Adela and Mrs. Moore observe the view from the banks of the river Ganges around Chandrapore: interestingly enough, of all the hundreds of different species of animals – fish, insects, rodents, birds, amphibians among many others – inhabiting or simply visiting that specific ecosystem, they concentrate their attention on crocodiles only, totally ignoring the rest. The following excerpt testifies that not only do they appear to be magnetically attracted by the impressive presence of the huge reptiles but also, and most importantly, that their presence marks such an iconic symbol of India as the river Ganges appears described with a mixture of dread, admiration and excitement:

He told them that it was where the new sand-bank was forming and that the dark ravelled bit at the top was the sand and that the dead bodies floated down that way from Banaras, or would if the crocodiles let them. "It's not much of a dead body that gets down to Chandrapore."

"Crocodiles down in it too, how terrible!" his mother murmured. The young people glanced at each other and smiled; it amused them when the old lady got these gentle creeps and harmony was restored between them consequently. She continued: "What a terrible river! What a wonderful river!" and sighed. [28]

In this case, crocodiles on the banks of the river Ganges seem to be a modern replica of the marine monsters off the coasts of India in 18th century colonial maps. The emotional rapture that the three British visitors draw on to describe the scene may leave us the feeling that the crocodiles are not entirely real animals but tools that Forster employed to create imaginary – and maybe exoticised – representations of India.

However, this is not the only situation in the novel in which animals become metaphors for the colonizers' fear of the Orient. Certainly, the episode of the mysterious night incident of Nawab Bahadur's car with the hyena alone offers more than a simple allusion to the fact that the impact with the Orient is a hallucinatory collision. This example seems to stress that the danger represented by Indian animals may also be the product

of a contorted frame of mind and a prejudiced culture rather than a real threat that Westerners are forced to face. Forster made this issue very clear in the plot because he claimed that the same Britons who wanted to see the *real* India – and emancipate themselves from common places – were the first ones to suffer from hallucinations.

The whole of *A Passage to India* abounds with descriptions of animals that have a significant symbolic meaning, as well as a realistic interpretation. I have selected two more examples that are particularly singular because they seem to be constructed and structured in a very similar way, even though apparently the events they refer to do not seem to share many evident analogies. The first of these two key episodes appears as an immediate consequence of the celebrated meeting of Mrs. Moore and Dr Aziz in the mosque. After the impulsive Indian doctor has risked compromising the lucky outcome of a cross-cultural encounter, the two characters start discussing freely and amiably, happy to notice that strange coincidences seem to bring them closer together. Pricked by his sense of guilt for his ill-mannered conduct to the motherly lady, however, Dr Aziz seems to want to wish to remedy his previous blunder and therefore insists on accompanying the old lady back to the club, offering the curious justification that India is a dangerous jungle for a Westerner.

“I think you ought not to walk at night alone, Mrs. Moore. There are bad characters about and leopards may come across from the Marabar Hills. Snakes also.”

She exclaimed; she had forgotten the snakes.

“For example, a six-spot beetle,” he continued. “You pick it up, it bites, you die.”

“But you walk about yourself.”

“Oh, I am used to it.”

“Used to snakes?”

They both laughed. “I’m a doctor,” he said. “Snakes don’t dare bite me.” [18]

What is ironic here is that while the British tourist has for a while completely removed the fear of the Orient from her mind, the Indian doctor himself kindly reminds her of the lurking dangers. Mammals (leopards), reptiles (snakes), insects (beetles), all kinds of animals concur to make a peaceful Indian town a wild jungle. The focus of this provocative and amusing exchange is that, even if Dr Aziz’s message is conveyed in the form of a joke, nature is nonetheless intimidating to the Westerners only, because this hostile fauna does not ‘dare’ attack Indians.

There is also a second episode that shares a number of affinities with this one. Again we have a confirmation that nature instinctively



responds with aggressiveness to British subjects while leaving Indians in peaceful neglect. This is the case of the final meeting of Fielding and Aziz, which occurs this time in a Hindu temple. If in the previous case the danger for Westerners was theoretical, because Aziz was simply presuming what risks were threatening a lonely elderly woman in India, in this situation the threat turns real. It is interesting here to stress that the 'State bees', that happen to stay in the shrine, do not seem to be affected by the presence of Aziz and his children at all, but as soon as two Britons make their way into the saint's tomb the swarm responds with a wild reaction.

The two visitors entered the octagon, but rushed out at once pursued by some bees. Hither and thither they ran, beating their heads; the children shrieked with derision and out of heaven, as if a plug had been pulled, fell a jolly dollop of rain. Aziz had not meant to greet his former friend, but the incident put him into an excellent temper. He felt compact and strong. He shouted out, "Hello, gentlemen are you in trouble?"

The brother-in-law exclaimed; a bee had got him.

"Lie down in a pool of water, my dear sir here are plenty. Don't come near me....I cannot control them, they are State bees; complain to His Highness of their behaviour." There was no real danger, for the rain was increasing. The swarm retired to the shrine. [285]

This seems an evident confirmation that Forster was well aware of the psychological frame within which the interaction between Westerners and Indians was clearly placed: fear. The delicate examination over the novelist's positioning regarding this cultural-inherited phobia gathers momentous importance at this stage because while the narrator at various points stresses that all visitors seem to be affected by it, he also demonstrates to have achieved a deeper level of consciousness that has (possibly?) liberated him from that kind of apprehension. Since, however, the narrator's cultural perspective is the same as that of the visitors to India – although with remarkable divergences – we may wonder if Forster's positioning is definitively in favour or against his cultural background. Arguably, the undertaking of the writing of *A Passage to India* may also have been for Forster a very real step towards the personal erasing of a feeling that especially in his own time was a recognisable sign of affiliation to a cultural group and hierarchical elite. Yet, I contend that his position does not seem to be so clear-cut or totally unequivocal, at least throughout the work.

Certainly, his having detected the effects of this fear in the interplay between Westerners and Indians places him on a totally different plane in relation to that occupied by his compatriots. In addition, also his

use of irony in the 'animal' episodes seems to distance him further from the real point. Yet, it is not inconsiderable that, as the plot progresses, Orientalphobia switches from an imaginary and abstract level to a real and concrete one, if only because the bees' stings suffered by Ralph have become real. If in fact in the previous case intimidating Mrs Moore was a half-excuse on Dr Aziz's part in order to wash his conscience from the disappointment of having hurt the British lady, in the second example it becomes a secret tool of revenge that the Indian doctor derives satisfaction from against his past enemies.

My personal interpretation of Forster's changing strategy in the possible use of Indian animals as symbolic referents of Western fear of the Orient is that the novelist's feelings regarding this issue come in for a slow but gradual re-adjustment during the unfolding of the novel, a process that is also in keeping with Fielding's measured modification. The collapse of Fielding's ideals seems to determine the switch of the narrator's tone from a calculated optimism to a sad, albeit controlled pessimism: along with this, we witness Forster's tender re-alignment to the cultural position that his egalitarian ideals had previously prompted him to challenge.

Although being the vast background against which the characters of *A Passage to India* weave a plot of disappointed/-ing friendship, India seems at times too large to be properly observed or too ephemeral to be effectively represented. Approaches to the matter may vary, tackling the subject from different perspectives but the results do not necessarily converge, reinforcing the global image of a country that appears to be baffling, ambiguous, remote, indefinite, disorienting. The resulting state of confusion, fittingly termed "muddledom" by John Dixon Hunt [John Dixon Hunt, 1966: 503], emerges as a field of conflict between the East and the West, with two distinct narrating voices overlapping and somewhat contradicting themselves in the course of the plot. To me, this appears as further evidence of the inner conflict Forster was subject to, as well as a dramatic representation of the tensions of a man marginalized by a society and a culture that also exerted a magnetic influence on him.

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<sup>1</sup>Edward M. Forster. *A Passage to India*, (1924) 2005, London, Penguin, p. 5. Subsequent references to *A Passage to India* are to this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.

<sup>2</sup>See Peter Morey's *Fictions of India*, for instance, discussing "the nihilistic grain of the novel as a whole." (p. 68)