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When Structure Crumbles:

The Failures of Political and Social Institutions in *A Passage to India* and *Cassandra*

“The difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. And yet, absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence...” (Forster 198). So goes Professor Godbole’s cryptic observation on the nature of God in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. This necessary duality of absence and presence also applies to chaos and structure. The existence of order means there has to have been some sort of primordial disorder it was built to guard against. The primary concern of tragedy is the cycle between order and chaos, the struggle, and often the failure, to defend the constructed city against the wilderness outside its walls. Although *A Passage to India* defies categorization as tragedy, the genre’s principal elements are present in the novel. In both this work and Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra*, the central characters come to the realization that the constructed institutions in which they placed their faith are not as infallible as they had believed. Those institutions, whether they be the military state of Troy or the rationalist basis of British colonialism, prove incapable of accounting for circumstances eroding at them, and either collapse entirely, as in *Cassandra*, or appear to be headed for a societal reckoning, as in *A Passage to India*.

In Forster’s novel, the British colonial administration is presented as strong, but decaying at the edges, unable to quite reconcile itself with the nature of India, and its people. More broadly, however, the novel depicts the failings of the Western rationalism that underpins the occupation when confronted with the ambiguity that exists outside of its system. The colonial experience in India takes mainly the form of an imposition of an outside order, a phenomenon made most explicit

in what Kieran Dolin writes is “the most significant hegemonic discourse of Anglo-India, the law” (Dolin 329). There is an element of remarkable hubris at work under the assumption that English law is so inherently based in logical order that it can simply be transplanted onto a wholly different society, as if India is a blank canvas. This is exactly how Dolin characterizes the policy of Anglicization in Indian law, a practice “clearly consistent with the British interest in ensuring their rule that the autonomy and hegemony of Indian cultures be challenged” (Dolin 333). Dolin frames Forster’s criticism of imperial law by contrasting it with the writing of his cultural contemporaries, a group comprising ardent advocates for Anglicization such as Thomas Macaulay, who asserted a “cultural monism” of English superiority, and Utilitarian legalists, who “abhorred the notion” of Indian customs as “irrational and obscure” (Dolin 328, 333). Here, the notion of “rationality” is wielded like a cudgel, used simultaneously as a pretense for British domination and a tool to demean Indian culture.

This cultural imposition is part of a broader trend in which the English in India seek not to understand or appreciate that which is out of their grasp, but to wrestle it under their control. This applies not only to the political and social domination of the Indian people by the British Raj, but also to the attitudes of its more enlightened, liberal citizens. Adela Quested relies heavily on the doctrine of rationalism and the notion that all things can be reasonably explained. She imports this Western sensibility into a foreign setting, and in doing so, attempts to force definition on a world she does not understand. This is apparent in her and Mrs. Moore’s desire to see the “real India,” an inclination that Timothy Christensen describes as a wish to “reduce the essence of India to an object that will present itself to her senses as a self-apparent truth” (Christensen 161). Although both Adela and Mrs. Moore regard the typical Anglo-Indians with some level of contempt for their illiberal attitudes towards the native people, latent in this search for “authenticity” is the same

hubris that drives their compatriots' feelings of superiority. They take for granted the notion that the complexities and ambiguities of an entire nation can be reduced into a single easily digestible experience meant to impart some exotic truth onto visitors. This is what Christensen calls a "cultural misrecognition," but it could be further characterized not only as a lack of understanding, but as a lack of an attempt to understand.

The events that transpire in the cave violently undermine Adela's rationalist worldview, traumatizing her with an experience that defies any sort of rational explanation. The immediate invention of one, which conveniently reaffirms the moral superiority to the Indians that the British claim, is indicative of the lengths to which citizens will go rather than admit the possibility of any uncertainty. This is apparent when Adela first considers the possibility that she has made a mistake, only for Ronny to quickly stifle any such thought. Although he has no way of knowing what happened, he is gripped by "a shiver like impending death" at the thought that the structure over which he presides could have erred.

According to Ted Boyle's analysis, "the subconscious, the irrational, the emotional... wins out over the conscious, the rational, the intellectual" (Boyle 479) inside the Marabar Caves, as the shortcomings of rationalism are exposed when faced with an inscrutable void. While this is an accurate assessment, his contention that this subconscious experience is the "real India" that Adela was searching for is a flawed conclusion. There is no single "real India," a realization Mrs. Moore comes to only as she is leaving the subcontinent, imagining that the country around her is mocking her for believing that "an echo was India" or that "the Marabar caves are final" (Forster 233). The caves are no more or less emblematic of the "real India" than any of the people or towns Adela dismissed as not sufficiently authentic; indeed, the "real India" is simply India and all it comprises. Wendy Moffat's understanding of the events of the cave as a larger allegory for the inability of

institutions to grapple with ambiguity is more consistent with the broader trends in the novel. There is no political order that can be forced upon India that will ever fully satisfy all its contradictions, just as there is no rationality that can explain away all of what Moffat calls “a greater incomprehensibility” (Moffat 337).

In *Cassandra*, the Trojan military and political establishment make up the institution whose decay frames the events of the novel. An intense nationalism and faith in the strength of Trojan arms drives the escalation of conflict with the Greeks, a conflict that soon consumes every aspect of Trojan life, both public and private. As the society is enveloped by war, the establishment devolves further into authoritarianism, based in the hope that sinking deeper into militarism will lead Troy to victory. It is this hope that drives King Priam to allow increasingly more power to be handed to Eumelos and his palace guard, who develop a sort of paramilitary security state within Troy. Eumelos begins by dictating the use of words, which then grows into the suppression of dissent. He creates what comes to be known as a “security net,” casting suspicion on anyone deemed to be less than fully devoted to war against Greece-- including Cassandra, whose own father at one point accuses of dissent that is tantamount to “providing aid and comfort to the enemy” (Wolf 126).

This devolution into a militaristic state is accompanied by what the narrator views as a debasement of what it had once meant to be Trojan, along what Elise Marks describes as a totalitarian centering of the state above all else. Before the fighting even begins, Cassandra notes that through the palace guard’s policing of thought, the Trojans “were letting the enemy govern [their] behavior” (Wolf 64). Even referring to the Greeks as “the enemy” becomes common “before a single Greek had boarded ship (Wolf 63). The machinery of war is already in full operation well before the events that supposedly set off the conflict, the abduction of Helen, ever

occurs. Helen, of course, does not even belong to the Trojans. Her presence in Troy is a fabrication, a false rallying point for a war that had already been planned for economic and political reasons: namely, over “gold and free access to the Dardanelles” (Wolf 70). By now, Priam has already become “blind and deaf” to any reasoning against what he readily admits is a “war waged for a phantom,” having been convinced by “the declarations of the military leader” of the prospects of Trojan victory (Wolf 69-70). Even Cassandra struggles to avoid being swept up by the paranoia that accompanies the buildup to conflict, rendered unable at times to speak out by the “Eumelos in [her]” (Wolf 67). Marks attributes this to the identity Troy has created in all its citizens by now, one “socialized to accept violence and the sacrifices demanded by a culture at war” (Marks 78). This can be seen as part of a broader dehumanization that is forced upon the Trojan people, evident in both Hector and Polyxena’s reduction to objects in service of the war effort.

The whole character of Troy becomes warped, changing from what had been a fairly liberal society into one that more and more resembles the enemies it claims superiority to. Eumelos, for one, is adamant that to “save [themselves, they] had to become like the Greeks” (Wolf 102). The internal order of Priam’s court becomes dominated by aggressive young men, “who continually felt they were under attack, [and] believed they had to defend themselves against reproaches that had never been voiced” (Wolf 94). This belligerent, repressive attitude, Cassandra admits, “was already inside the stronghold before the enemy came,” having “penetrated through every crack” (Wolf 76) in the walls and foundation of Trojan society. This is dismissed by Priam who claims that “in war, everything that would apply in peace is rescinded” (Wolf 84). By this point, however, Troy is in a constant state of war, one that began long before the first sword was drawn. Filled with dread, Cassandra realizes that the ideal Troy of her youth, with its liberal principles and way of life, no longer exists.

After all, we need only call to mind our Trojan tradition. But what was that tradition? What did it consist in? Then I understood: in the Helen we had invented, we were defending everything we no longer had. And the more it faded, the more real we had to say it was. Thus, out of the words, gestures, ceremonies, and silence there arose a second Troy, a ghostly city, in which we were supposed to feel at home and live at ease. (Wolf 85)

The foundation upon which Troy's institutions were built has been eroded away, leaving a crumbling city mired in a war fought for a ghost.

The two works diverge in their treatment of this common theme in that while *A Passage to India* focuses on the recognition of the fallibility of its central institutions by a handful of characters, *Cassandra* depicts the tragic movement in full, from the realization of the fragility of Troy's constructs to their ultimate collapse. The lack of a societal reckoning in *Passage* is perhaps due to the fact that Forster published his novel in 1924, at a time when the British Raj was still outwardly robust and the post-World War I challenge to the idea of a rational moral order was in the early stages of taking root.

The titular character of *Cassandra*, however, bears full witness to the destruction of her society, brought low not only by Grecian arms and fire, but by its own hubris, by its refusal to understand the frailty of its defenses against the same destructive impulses that visit ruin on so many nations. Troy is not merely attacked and beaten; it actively courts its own demise, collectively deceived by a rationale that is seductive in its arrogant simplicity: "We will win" (Wolf 70). Armies win, of course, until they don't. The pages of history are filled with empires that believed in their own inevitability until they were swept into ash and rubble. "Destruction, rebuilding, then destruction again" make up the cycle of Troy's history, a "chain of events ruinous to [their] city [that] stretched back into farthest antiquity" (Wolf 37). Cassandra condemns what

she views as a collective “forgetting” of this history, a willful delusion that drove the Trojan people to cheer as they marched headfirst into obliteration.

As Troy lurches towards its fate, its social hierarchy becomes more entrenched and regressive, first alienating any Greeks or suspected Greek sympathizers, then pushing aside their own women. The Trojan social order was already patriarchal in nature, as evidenced by the “deflowering ceremony” in which young girls were chosen for sex by men as if in a market, but the relative social privileges women enjoy before the war rapidly degrade as bellicose, masculine impulses take control of the city. Queen Hecuba, who had long been her husband’s equal partner, is banned by the palace guard from meetings of the royal council; as her son, Hector, tries to explain, they have decided that the discussions of the council “now in wartime are no longer the concern of women” (Wolf 92). The behavior of Troy’s soldiers towards its women becomes cause for fear; from the women’s perspective, it seems that “the men of both sides” have “joined forces” in their torment (Wolf 104). The “last extremity,” the last debasement of Trojan ideals that makes the impending ruin of Troy clear is when Priam forces Cassandra into marriage in exchange for foreign reinforcements; all the women of the city are “seized by [the] ambivalence” of hating what Troy has become “even while they wished it victory” (Wolf 79). Linda Pickle ties this to the inherently masculine “heroic tradition” of both Greece and Troy, which Wolf subverts with her critical reinterpretations of the military heroes on both sides of the war (Pickle 45). This is the heavily gendered basis of Trojan militarism and as Troy blindly places all of its hope in the concept of heroes, it marginalizes those who do not or cannot serve its ends.

The walls of Troy eventually become so suffocating to those marginalized by its wartime order that they seek refuge outside of them, creating a society in the caves on the banks of the Scamander that is the antithesis of what they fled in the city. This cave society is a direct response

to the hyper-nationalism that drives Troy to destruction. As Karin Eysel notes in her analysis, it is a “transnational identity forged from a diverse community... beyond national, gender, and class divisions” (Eysel 176). The new society is not rigid, or convinced of its own permanence; in fact, every moment of its existence is imbued with the knowledge of its transience. More than anything, the people in the cave “talk about those who would come after,” wondering whether future generations will learn from the mistakes of this one. This recognition of impermanence is significant, however, because it is what makes the society possible in the first place. This is not a vision for future societies that transcend the nation, as Eysel posits, as much as it is a temporary refuge from the confines of structure.

What exists in these caves can best be explained through the lens of what Victor Turner first described as the relationship between structure and anti-structure. While his work initially focused on anthropology and religious ritual behavior, these concepts have been applied more broadly to larger scale social experiences. As Troy passes from the structure of its society through destruction and into subjugation under the Greeks, it goes through a period in which the social hierarchy of its old conventions ceases to matter. Turner refers to this experience as a liminal phase, in which “the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating unlimited series of social arrangement” (“Dramas” 13-14). It is when Cassandra sheds her status and identity as the king’s daughter, and the investment in the Trojan structure that comes with it, that she is able to fully join the cave society. The social interactions in the caves are an “unstructured communion of equal individuals,” characterized by “a generalized social bond that has ceased to be... fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (“Ritual”), a concept Turner calls *communitas*. Together, liminality and

communitas constitute anti-structure, a transient state devoid of hierarchy and organization that both exists in opposition to and depends on the structure.

The British occupation in *A Passage to India* is also dependent on a hierarchy, but in this case, it is a racialized one, justified by rationalistic thought that posits that it is only sensible that the British, with their advanced technology, military strength, and the moral convictions of their enlightened Victorian sensibilities, should be the ruling class over an Indian underclass. Hawkins' analysis is correct in its opening argument that Forster uses the context of interpersonal relationships to criticize imperialism. It is this hierarchy that makes Aziz and Fielding's friendship impossible; if there is no room for ambiguities or for contradictions in this order, people are reduced to their places in the hierarchy and nothing else. They are defined then, by the differentiation of their statuses, destroying the possibility of friendship that transcends that division.

However, Hawkins' dismissal of the echoes in the Marabar caves as a nihilistic barrier to relationships, indicating "the meaninglessness of the universe" (Hawkins 61), runs the risk of losing the thread of the novel. While a critique of imperialist attitudes is present throughout the novel and interpersonal relationships do figure heavily into the story, the experience of the caves and what it signifies is the center around which the rest of the book gravitates. Rather than a pessimistic side consideration, the incomprehensibility of the caves is a central concern. It is an illustration of the disorder that will always persist despite the constant revision of institutions; an unknowability that cannot be explained, but must be acknowledged. Godbole's Hinduism is not necessarily an embrace with "equal mindless affirmation" (Hawkins 62) of all things, as in Hawkins' less-than-charitable estimation, but an acknowledgment and an appreciation of the existence of the abyss, in contrast to attempts to rationalize it away.

The introduction of this disorder into the walls of the structure can have catastrophic consequences, as shown by Mrs. Moore's descent into nihilism. Unprepared for the possibility of encountering this sort of void, she has a visceral reaction to the caves similar to Hawkins' consideration of them. She finds no shelter in "poor little talkative Christianity" or in "the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect" (Forster 166). However, Forster does not present this as proof that human connection is futile. Mrs. Moore pulls away from all of her interpersonal bonds, but her children, the "ones who come after" whom Cassandra wondered so much about, begin to form new bonds, open to a spirituality that leaves room for ambiguity. Although old structures may prove outdated and insufficient, new revised ones inevitably arise, shaped by the circumstances to which the previous ones were not adequately suited. Where pure rationalism failed, it is suggested by the final section of the novel that a worldview inspired by Hindu appreciation for the unknown may not. As for explicit institutions, Forster's prediction that a new Indian nation would arise from the weakened Raj after "the next European war" (Forster 360) was remarkably prescient.

Despite their failings, the structures we build are necessary for our survival. Cities must defend themselves, societies must be governed, and we must seek to explain and understand the world around us. The erosion of the institutions in these two novels does not convey some nihilistic truth that all human accomplishment amounts to nothing, but rather, illustrates the hubris that so often infects our achievements and blinds us to the fragility of our constructs. To believe mistakenly in the inevitability and the infallibility of institutions is to "cling to chimeras," as James Baldwin once famously wrote, and this is what leads to decay and regression. The only way to avoid falling into the abyss, of course, is to be constantly aware that it exists.

Works Cited

Boyle, Ted E. "Adela Quested's Delusion: The Failure of Rationalism in *A Passage to India*." *College English*, vol. 26, no. 6, 1965, pp. 478–480., www.jstor.org/stable/373458.

This article explores how Adela Quested's reliance on a solely rationalistic worldview is unable to contend with her experiences in India, which defy rational explanation. This pure rationalism, I argue, is still constructed on a West-centric base, as proven by her ignorance of India and belief in a "real India" to experience as a tourist. Although it is expressed in a different form than the British colonial administration, this is still a constructed institution upon which she relies that fails her when confronted with its shortcomings.

Christensen, Timothy. "Bearing the White Man's Burden: Misrecognition and Cultural Difference in E. M. Forster's 'A Passage to India.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2006, pp. 155–178., www.jstor.org/stable/40267651.

Christensen discusses the disconnect between the British colonizers and the Indians as the result of a fundamental cultural misrecognition, a lack of understanding that is never quite bridged throughout the novel or the actual occupation. I would go even further, though, and describe it as a willful lack of an attempt to understand India and the Indians, based on a complacent reliance on Western thought.

Dolin, Kieran. "Freedom, Uncertainty, and Diversity: *A Passage to India* as a Critique of Imperialist Law." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1994, pp. 328–352., www.jstor.org/stable/40755046.

I use Dolin's analysis and contextualization of British imperial law in India in the debate between Orientalists like Forster, Utilitarians, and those who argued for Anglicization to frame the British imposition of their law on India as part of the hubristic confidence that the imperialists placed in the strength of their political institutions.

Eysel, Karin. "Christa Wolf's *Kassandra*: Refashioning National Imagination Beyond the Nation." *Women in German Yearbook*, vol. 9, 1993, pp. 163–181., www.jstor.org/stable/20688783.

Eysel argues that the cave society on the banks of the Scamander that the women establish to escape from Troy's oppressiveness is a society that transcends nationality, gender and class. While I agree with this analysis, I disagree with Eysel's suggestion that this society is a vision for a sustained transnational society in the future. I argue that the cave society is necessarily impermanent, and it is this impermanence that allows to exist in a form as structure-less as it does.

Hawkins, Hunt. "Forster's Critique of Imperialism in 'A Passage to India.'" *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1983, pp. 54–65., www.jstor.org/stable/3199513.

Hawkins argues that Forster criticizes British imperialism primarily through the lens of interpersonal relationships. I agree that the racial hierarchy of imperial society is reductive and destroys relationships, but I disagree with Hawkins' analysis of the caves as a nihilistic suggestion of a meaninglessness that obstructs human connection.

Marks, Elise. "The Alienation of 'I': Christa Wolf and Militarism." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1990, pp. 73–85., www.jstor.org/stable/24780439.

This article documents how Cassandra struggles to maintain a sense of identity in an increasingly militaristic society that demands the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the state. I tie this conditioning of the self to accommodate war to a broader dehumanization that plagues Troy as it crumbles.

Moffat, Wendy. "'A Passage to India' and the Limits of Certainty." *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1990, pp. 331–341., www.jstor.org/stable/30225304.

This article discusses how Forster uses India and the events of the cave as symbols to represent uncertainty and impermanence. It establishes that the questions raised by the novel are not always given satisfactory answers. The existence of ambiguity and often incomprehensibility in the world of the novel contrast with the structures on which the characters rely, structures that are often unable to account for those uncertainties.

Pickle, Linda Schelbitzki, and Christa Wolf. "'Scratching Away the Male Tradition': Christa Wolf's 'Kassandra.'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1986, pp. 32–47., www.jstor.org/stable/1208596.

Pickle looks at how Troy's patriarchal society both feeds into its militarism and grows as a result of it. Of particular relevance to my paper is the investment Troy has in the myth of heroes, and how that is subverted in *Cassandra* to illustrate how the reliance on that masculine mythology contributes to the city's downfall.

Turner, Victor Witter. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell U Press, 2007. Print.

I use Turner's concepts of liminal experiences and *communitas*, described in both *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* and *The Ritual Process*, to describe the cave society that is established at the end of the Trojan War in *Cassandra*. I show how these two concepts combine to manifest in an antistructure that transcends hierarchy and structure, but can only last for short amounts of time in between the end of one structure and the establishment of another.

Turner, Victor Witter. "Liminality and Communitas." *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub., 1970. 94-113. Print.

I use Turner's concepts of liminal experiences and communitas, described in both *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* and *The Ritual Process*, to describe the cave society that is established at the end of the Trojan War in *Cassandra*. I show how these two concepts combine to manifest in an antistructure that transcends hierarchy and structure, but can only last for short amounts of time in between the end of one structure and the establishment of another.