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Objects, Subjects, Humanism, and the Marabar Caves in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

In *A Passage to India*, E. M. Forster creates one of the most fascinating mysteries in a work of literature, a moment of almost inscrutable ambiguity that has left scholars in a frenzy as they continue their attempts to decipher its meaning. The novel essentially hinges on a British woman accusing an Indian man of rape, which inevitably causes racial and sexual tension to explode in 1920s British-occupied India. But what is most fascinating about this story is not so much the content, but instead the way Forster frames the pivotal plot point. The purported rape of Adela Quested by Dr. Aziz in the enigmatic Marabar Caves is unforgettable largely because it takes place in between chapters. The reader only learns about Quested's accusations several pages later when the man known as the Collector informs Aziz's friend, Mr. Fielding, "Miss Quested has been insulted in one of the Marabar Caves" (Forster, *Passage* 180). At best, the reader can speculate as to what actually happened in the Caves because Forster chooses to never provide a satisfactory answer, even by the end of the novel. Robert Barratt, of the University of Alberta, points out, "It seems remarkable that an author with so omniscient and controlling a narrative voice as Forster's would craft, in *A Passage to India*, a novel the very heart of which remains so persistently indeterminate" (127). Yet this indeterminacy draws the reader's attention to the scene and invites further scholarly analysis and academic interpretation. Some scholars, like Barratt, apply deconstructionism to the Marabar Caves, arguing that the scene in the Caves is the moment in the novel when language and meaning become decoupled. In Barratt's own words, “The essence of the Marabar’s caves will not reveal itself in language” (129). Other scholars suggest that the Marabar Caves represent both chaos and unity and, of all the religions represented in the novel, Hinduism is the only one that can reconcile these two opposing forces. As English professor Frederick P. W. McDowell puts it, “Hinduism alone of the religions presented, has the comprehensiveness to absorb such realities” (138). Meanwhile, certain academics have argued for a psychoanalytic approach, which posits that Miss Quested’s sexual repression manifests itself in an imagined rape attempt during her confusion in the disorienting Caves. Filmmaker David Lean popularized this angle in his film adaptation by including a scene that English professor Constantine Santas describes as Quested “riding into the country on a bicycle and taking a path among the thickly sown elephant grass, where she comes across statues in erotic embraces” (132). Suffice it to say, the few theories mentioned here are only the tip of a vast academic iceberg, and while many theories are intriguing, most lack some crucial element and thus fail to fully convince readers of their position. To illustrate this point, consider again the psychoanalytic interpretation. In the scene preceding the “rape,” Dr. Aziz and Miss Quested, who are on a picnic with their friend Mrs. Moore, climb up to one of the Caves while Quested contemplates her engagement to Mrs. Moore’s son and the city magistrate, Ronny Heaslop. She wonders to herself, “What about love?” (Forster, *Passage* 168) and then looks up, notices Aziz, and thinks to herself, “What a handsome little Oriental he was” (Forster, *Passage* 169). The racial divide in India would make any attraction to Aziz on her part strictly taboo, thus psychoanalysts argue that her confusion about her own emotions leads her to insultingly ask Aziz, “Have you one wife or more than one?” (Forster, *Passage* 169). In turn, an understandably offended Aziz flees into one of the Caves, thus increasing Quested’s confusion as she wanders into a different Cave alone. Her internal struggle between rational thoughts and unconscious repressed desires gets the better of her and results in her delusion about being raped in the Caves. The problem with this interpretation is that it really only works when the scene is taken out of context. The rest of the novel does not provide evidence for the psychoanalytic approach nearly as readily. As a matter of fact, most of the other theories attempting to explain the function of the Marabar Caves have similar issues; they rely on selective evidence and otherwise interpret the scene in a manner not usually borne out by the text. One explanation for these shortcomings might be that many critical analyses of *A Passage to India* fail to properly emphasize Forster's humanist leanings and motives. A line from his previous novel, *Howards End*, reads, "Only connect!" (Forster, *Howards* 134), and the statement has practically been transformed into Forster's unofficial mantra. From this perspective, *A Passage to India* can perhaps best be read as a tale about the ultimate failure to connect due to what will henceforth be referred to as the object-subject dichotomy. This dichotomy is built on a principle of inequality and primarily manifests itself in modes of racism and sexism throughout the story, and it is, in fact, the cause of Quested's confusion in the Caves. Obviously the object-subject dichotomy ran contrary to Forster's beliefs regarding humanism and the need for connection, and thus, through the scene at the Marabar Caves, he attempts to break the chokehold of the object-subject dichotomy and allow human connection to reenter his story and once again play a crucial role in transcending the boundaries of race and gender.

Before anything else, it is necessary to examine the scene at the Caves itself and understand its ambiguity in order to comprehend what Forster's intentions might be. To begin with, it is worth noting that Forster had initially not meant for that ambiguity to even exist. The novel's original manuscript does actually depict Adela's time in the Caves and confirms that someone did physically attack her. An earlier draft reads, "At first she thought that she was being robbed, he was taking her hand as before to help her out, then she realised, and shrieked at the top of her voice. ‘Boum’” (The Manuscript 243). But Forster eventually decided to remove this sense of certainty in the final novel and even wrote about his decision to G. L. Dickinson: “In the cave it is *either* a man, or the supernatural, *or* an illusion. If I say, it becomes whatever the answer a different book. And even if I know!” (Sarker 1001). This commentary clarifies that the absence of an explanation in the final novel was likely designed to create a search for meaning. Interestingly enough, some scholars will argue that the whole point of the Marabar Caves is that they destroy meaning or are, at the very least, a void bereft of meaning. Per English professor Wilfred Stone, “It offers no solutions to the human muddle” (26). But this consensus does not represent the commonly held view, seeing as how most scholars would beg to differ with Stone. English professor Debrah Raschke, for instance, compares the Marabar Caves to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic* and she posits that the fundamental difference between the two is that one must escape Plato’s Cave to find the truth, whereas it is the exact opposite in Forster’s novel. She writes, “Marabar may be the site of illusions and trickery, but it fosters insight as well, which means that the dream-world of the cave, as producing truths of its own, cannot be denied” (Raschke 12). In fact, Frederick P. W. McDowell even argues that the truths found in the Caves are universal and spiritual, thereby imbuing the story with greater meaning. He writes, “[I]n the Caves one may have perceptions which reach ‘straight back into the universal, to the blackness and sadness’” (McDowell 135). Establishing that the Caves are a source of mysterious but universal truth cements their importance relative to the rest of the novel; they are the thematic crux of the story. So, now it is simply up to the reader to learn what the universal truth is and how it relates to the thematic context provided by both the novel and its author.

In order to understand the cryptic truth that Raschke and McDowell refer to, one must first examine Forster's worldview. His humanist beliefs have led many scholars to argue that an obsession with personal relationships is the theme that defines his oeuvre. Iftikhar Hussain Lone and Syed Amir Syeed believe that first and foremost "E. M. Forster is interested in the study of personal human relationships" (Lone 1). English professor Shun Yin Kiang agrees and further suggests that "[i]n real life as in fiction, Forster's insistence on placing friendship ahead of political concerns or historical events reflects a strategic refusal…to belittle, romanticize, or negate the lives of others" (125). Therefore, it is no surprise that *A Passage to India*, a story set in British-occupied India, is an examination of the failure of human connection. What is of more importance is that Forster not only observes this failure but also seeks a solution, despite the assertion of academics like Nadir Ali Mugheri, who argue that "E.M. Forster shows that there is no hope of rapprochement between the colonizers and the colonized" (181). While the novel does absolutely show how fraught and damaged the relationships between various factions India had become at the time, to argue that *A Passage to India* deems re-connection an impossible goal is to fundamentally misunderstand E. M. Forster as an author. Forster took the title for *A Passage to India* from an 1870 poem by Walt Whitman, also called "Passage to India," and this choice of title was clearly designed to make a statement about the content of his novel. The poem was written in response to the completion of the Suez Canal, amongst other great technical accomplishments of the time, and in it Whitman speaks of his hopes for a more united world thanks to the progress brought about by technology and engineering. He writes, "Passage to India!...The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,/ The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,/ The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,/ The lands to be welded together" (Whitman 429). Whitman paints an image of confidence in a future where the Western world will now have far better access to places like India; he imagines more open connection between different cultures as a glorious opportunity. But Forster has seen the outcome of that connection and he understands how over the years it went sour, breeding racial and social resentment. So, Forster uses the Marabar Caves, a location seemingly possessed by unexplained mystical forces, as a catalyst for change in the story. The aftermath of Miss Quested's time in the Caves may be messy, but it is also the first time in the novel that there is any real hope for proper human connection to reassert itself. Frankly, Debrah Raschke is quite right to believe that the Caves are a source of truth in the novel; in their mysterious yet potent way, they begin the challenging but necessary work of repairing the severed human connections that Forster sees as the fundamental flaw of British-occupied India.

However, to understand how the Marabar Caves facilitate this change and reparation, one must discern the nature of the aforementioned object-subject dichotomy, the root cause of connection failure in Forster's vision of India. Just as the name suggests, the object-subject dichotomy involves "subjects," who imagines themselves as more important than others, and "objects," who are objectified by the "subjects." In *A Passage to India*, this dichotomy primarily concerns race and gender. Racial tensions that exemplify the dichotomy are constantly on display, such as when Dr. Aziz is called away from a dinner engagement by his superior, Major Callendar, near the beginning of the story. When Aziz finally arrives at Callendar's compound, a servant reveals to him that the Major left without providing any instructions. As Aziz is baffled by this mistreatment, a pair of English ladies emerge from the house. "The first, who was in an evening dress, glanced at the Indian and turned instinctively away" (Forster, *Passage* 14). This dismissive attitude shown by both Callendar and the lady is the ultimate embodiment of the object-subject dichotomy; they see Aziz not just as inferior but also as merely a means to an end.

He is a tool - an object - to be used and discarded when convenient. This idea is somewhat in accordance with poet Hunt Hawkin's understanding of Forster; he suggests that the author's "[c]hief argument against imperialism…is that it prevents personal relationships" (Hawkins 54) because "every human act in the East is tainted with officialism" (Forster, *Passage* 208). Certainly, the overly official colonial nature of British and Indian interactions might explain some of the story's racial tension, but, frankly, the object-subject dichotomy is a deeper and more intrinsic problem. After all, it extends beyond racism and includes sexism, as can be frequently seen by the way women are regularly objectified by men. When Mr. Fielding, an Englishman, discusses Aziz's dilemma with Miss Quested, he says, "It's not an easy one, she being a prig" (Forster, *Passage* 280). And yet Aziz is no less guilty of objectifying Quested; after the trial his primary annoyance is that he was accused of raping a woman whom he finds distinctly unattractive. "It disgraces me to have been mentioned in connection with such a hag" (Forster, *Passage* 268). It is also noticeable that Fielding and Aziz first solidify the bonds of their friendship by symbolically exchanging a woman. When Fielding visits Aziz's bungalow to attend the sick doctor, Aziz asks Fielding to look at a picture of his deceased wife, saying, "She was my wife. You are the first Englishman she has ever come before" (Forster, *Passage* 125). Just as Fielding and Aziz treat the living Quested as an object, so too do they treat the dead wife. All these examples are specific ways that Forster attempts to demonstrate to the audience how ingrained the object-subject dichotomy is in the culture he is writing about.

What makes Adela Quested so unique, and what ultimately proves to be the object-subject dichotomy's undoing, is that she is positioned at an awkward social and cultural crossroad based on the rules of the dichotomy. As a British national, Quested is granted the right by the dichotomy to objectify the Indian people. As Mrs. McBryde tells her, "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India" (Forster, *Passage* 42). But, as has already been demonstrated, Quested's status as a woman means that she is also often the victim of male objectification. Her roles as both object and subject conflict throughout the entire story up until her time in the Marabar Caves. While in the Caves, she imagines that she falls victim to the ultimate form of objectification, which is rape. After this traumatizing event, she radically attempts to regain her autonomy by accusing an Indian man of the rape. This pushes British objectification of the Indian people to an extreme, as can be seen in the reactions of her fellow countrymen. Before having even heard any evidence, police superintendent Mr. McBryde declares, "Everyone knows the man [Aziz] is guilty, and I'm obliged to say so in public" (Forster, *Passage* 242). Once again, an Indian man is imagined by the British here as a tool, this time a dangerous tool of rape and degeneration, who has become too unwieldy and difficult to handle and so must be locked away. Earlier in this essay it was indicated that the Marabar Caves are a catalyst for positive change, yet this assertion seems absurd if their effect on Miss Quested pushes the object-subject dichotomy to such extremes. However, by pushing the dichotomy to these extremes, the Caves demonstrate to many of the characters just how damaging and dangerous the dichotomy really is, as is best seen in the catastrophe of a trial. The trial of Dr. Aziz forces racial, social, and gender tensions out into the open so that when Quested admits that Aziz never attacked her, there is simply no turning back, nor a way to hide from the ugly truths that underlie this society. Forster describes the end of the trial as follows: "Victory on this side, defeat on that - complete for one moment was the antithesis" (Forster, *Passage* 257). Indeed, the trial, as a direct result of the Marabar Caves, does create a sort of antithesis, a chance for the "objects" to recognize and fight back against their own objectification by the "subjects." Thus, the rest of the story is about several of the characters attempting the undo the damage of the dichotomy, a process that English professor Frances B. Singh alludes to while discussing Aziz's political transition. Singh believes that Aziz begins as an Indian Nationalist in opposition to the British and in support of Mohammed Ali, yet by the end of the story his thinking is more in line with the teachings of Gandhi - supportive of community, harmony, and peaceful coexistence. "Aziz' orientation has shifted toward Gandhi and away from Ali. The fact that the violent language of Aziz' speech to Fielding, which is rhetorically in keeping with some remarks reportedly made by Ali, gives way to a Gandhian vocabulary of affection and friendship corroborates this point." (Singh 268). This transition away from the tension caused by the rigid object-subject dichotomy of the novel's first half and towards empathetic human connection is perhaps best seen in the final section, "Temples," when Mr. Fielding and his new family visit Aziz in Mau despite the two men's previous estrangement. During their reconnection, Aziz first begins to heal some of the gender divide by finally writing to Miss Quested and acknowledging her bravery in dealing with the fiasco in the Caves; "He wanted to thank his old enemy for her fine behavior two years back" (Forster, *Passage* 356). The racial divide is also slowly bridged in the final scene in which Fielding and Aziz go horse-back riding together. Fielding begs Aziz to rekindle their friendship, but Aziz is rather unwilling. He tells Fielding, "We shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then…you and I shall be friends" (Forster, *Passage* 361-362). Forster seems to indicate that until all remnants of the object-subject dichotomy are obliterated, human connection cannot thrive; additionally, his humanist instincts probably told him that society can only function properly *when* human connections thrive. English and Film Studies professor June Perry Levine once commented, "Adela Quested…has also sought a life based on connections with other human beings. But the Marabar unsettles her world" (188). In many respects, she is absolutely right. While in India, Quested searches for human connection, but due to the object-subject dichotomy, cannot find any until after her experiences in the Caves. The Caves do not just unsettle her world; they unsettle everyone's world by forcing the characters out of their apathy and demanding that they acknowledge the harm that is being done by the object-subject dichotomy. And so, perhaps at long last the true function of the Marabar Caves as a synergist for human connection has finally been uncovered.

Despite Forster's seemingly admirable crusade against the object-subject dichotomy as it manifested itself in India, there is certainly some fear that he failed to adhere to the moral demands that he set before his readers. It is hard not to read *A Passage to India* and ignore the many moments where he appears to unduly generalize about the Indian people, a group whom he depicts as "Orientals," all with similar characteristic and trademark quirks. Even if his intentions are not malicious, this is still a conspicuous example of colonial racism. For example, in an opening scene, Aziz and some friends plan to dine together. One of Aziz's friends, Hamidullah, calls out to the servants and asks if the meal is ready. "Servants shouted back that it was ready. They meant that they wished it was ready, and were so understood, for nobody moved" (Forster, *Passage* 8). Forster writes as if Indian people's inability to prepare a meal on time is a well-known stereotype, or perhaps even a verifiable fact. Yet in comparison to many of the novel's other highly dubious moments, this scene actually seems fairly harmless and inoffensive. As a point of contrast, consider the following assessment: "Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumor" (Forster, *Passage* 311). To classify all "Orientals" as prone to suspicion is not simply on the spectrum racism; it is pure, unadulterated, unmistakable racism. More importantly, it is a prime example of objectification, the sort of objectification that Forster seems to argue so vehemently against in *A Passage to India.* Shun Yin Kiang notes that critics have condemned Forster's work as an example of "Orientalist fantasies" and criticize him for "manufacturing the

India he encountered in 1912-1913" (129). And this may not always be a far cry from the truth. But how is it that a man who critiqued the object-subject dichotomy so harshly managed to become a part of it himself? And, more importantly, can Forster's internal contradictions be reconciled in an academic sense? To answer that question, it might be best to return, once again, to the Marabar Caves and remember that before any form of progress or improvement could be made, first Adela Quested had to push the object-subject dichotomy to its limits. Before racial and sexual tensions could get better, they had to get distinctly worse. Before unity, there had to be chaos. Forster was the type of humanist who appeared sympathetic to the notion that man could always improve, that human connections could always be strengthened. Perhaps Forster himself did improve over his lifetime; after all, he had plenty of opportunity seeing as how he lived for 46 years after *A Passage to India's* publication. If the Marabar Caves are a reminder of nothing else, it is that human beings are unusual creatures, prone to getting lost but also prone to eventually finding the light.

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