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A Hindu Interpretation of
A Passage to India

Vinod Cardoza

In E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the echoes that Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested hear in the Marabar caves reverberate throughout the novel. These echoes induce a chain reaction of events on both the micro and the macro levels. Exactly what happens (or does not happen) in the caves has been inconclusively debated over the years, but the description of the cave episode suggests to me that profound Hindu philosophy may lie at the core of events. It is certainly possible that Mrs. Moore and Adela experience *Cit* (the ultimate Hindu Consciousness) in the Marabar. Under these circumstances, then, it is not implausible to interpret the cave episode in the context of Hindu philosophy and symbolism.

Hindu Philosophy and Symbolism:

Cit transcends the deities of popular Hinduism; it is composed of their collective essence. It is a metaphysical rather than a mythological concept. *Cit* is analogous with *Brahman*, the Hindu Absolute. The philosophical *Brahman* is also not easy to comprehend—it simultaneously embodies everything, and nothing (Zimmer 123), it is “not good or evil, but good *and* evil” (emphasis added) (Zimmer 188). In Hinduism, the temple is a place where the devotee is most likely to ascend to a higher state of *citta* (consciousness) in his or her quest for unity with *Brahman*.

The sanctuary, the holiest part of a Hindu temple, resembles a cave structurally. Like the cave, it is small, dark, and possesses smooth, unadorned walls (Michell 69-70). In fact, a cave is virtually analogous to a temple. Caves served as the functional predecessors of temples, and caves were among the earliest sites of veneration in Hinduism. Divinity is understood to be occasionally manifested in caves. If we accept this, the cave episode represents the

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Englishwomen's first and only visit to a Hindu temple. The actual description of Mrs. Moore's experience in the cave further supports this view—she experiences the crowds, the “smell” of humanity, the motion associated with a temple, and of course the echo.

“Boum” or “ou-boum,” the sound of the echo in the cave that disorients Mrs. Moore, is compared by Glen O. Allen to the phonetically similar Hindu *mantra* “Om” (Shahane 129). “Om” (pronounced AUM) is a device used by those seeking unity of *atman*, the inner self, with *Brahman*. It is used to invoke and concentrate the presence of *Brahman*. According to the *Mandukya Upanishad* (ancient Hindu religious text), *Brahman* comprises four quarters: “A” includes the waking state, “U” includes sleep with dreams, and “M” includes dreamless sleep. The fourth quarter, the silence, comprises the state when duality ceases to exist, when *Brahman* is experienced as *atman*. The echoes in the Marabar facilitate the presence of *Brahman*, thus they serve as a *mantra*.

Mrs. Moore's Experience:

The two Englishwomen have very little in common. As a result, they not only experience different manifestations of *Brahman*, but they react to it very differently. Gertrude M. White says that the women's reactions are tempered by their “character, age, and situation” (Shahane 7). This is crucial in appreciating their response and subsequent transformation (or lack of it).

The elderly, religious widow, Mrs. Moore, is a by-product of nineteenth-century Europe. Prior to her visit to the Marabar, she is a humanist whose sole ambition is “to be one with the universe” (Forster 187). Naturally, the universe she envisions is one that reflects her fundamentally Christian belief in the supremacy of good over evil.

the experience of unity with *Brahman*. During the encounter, she becomes fully aware of her *atman*. She transcends from the *maya* (illusion) of her individual consciousness to merge with *Cit* (Zimmer 210), inheriting the entirety of its ageless, comprehensive wisdom. But she also discovers something that totally overwhelms her. Conditioned by age and molded by Christianity, her sensibilities cannot comprehend the annihilation of all difference between good and evil, humanity and inhumanity. Her value system crumbles, leaving her disoriented and confused.

Mrs. Moore's notion of divinity as beautiful and sublime is destroyed by her newly discovered knowledge that in the final reckoning, bad equals good, inhumanity equals humanity. Her humanism amounts to *nothing* since the sum of good and evil is immutable; she experiences a humanist's ultimate nightmare (Forster xxiv). Little wonder that Mrs. Moore, the epitome of kindness, undergoes an attitudinal metamorphosis. Hugh Maclean attributes this to her "soul [which] grasps 'reality,' but is still shackled to physical personality" (Shahane 21). Her irritability and dejection are symptoms of the struggle between her enlightened spirit and the withered body it has outgrown. Mrs. Moore's consequential decline and demise during her journey back to England results from the dichotomy between her *atman* and her western physical reality. The latter necessitates her continuance in the role of "Mrs. Moore," a person she no longer identifies with.

Mrs. Moore, in fact, is capable of remarkable insight into an event that she has not even witnessed: Adela's alleged rape by Aziz. She is positive of his innocence, which is not surprising given their instinctive friendship. What is astounding is that she believes that even "if it [happened], there are worse evils than love" (Forster

188). She who has traveled all the way from England to arrange Ronny's marriage, finds little difference between "love in a church, [or] love in a cave" (Forster 182). Acknowledging the magnitude of her "inverted" spirituality, Mrs. Moore labels herself "a bad old woman, bad, bad, detestable" (Forster 185). This admission reveals her acceptance of Hindu non-duality as opposed to Ronny's—and Europe's—"either-or" reality. "There are different ways of evil," she says, "and I prefer mine to yours" (Forster 185).

While Mrs. Moore insists on returning to England, she is spiritually united with India. In death, she is forever linked with India through the Indian Ocean. Her "ghost" symbolically abandons the ship at the entrance to the Mediterranean, which stands for Christian Europe and all that she has rejected. Mrs. Moore's burial is similar to that of the Hindus whose bodies are immersed in the holy Ganges at Benares (Forster 24). She gets "gentle creeps," which suggests a premonition of her own end as well as a preexisting spiritual connection with India.

In retrospect, Mrs. Moore possesses qualities which might explain her transformation. According to the text, she "had always inclined to resignation" (Forster 187), which may be interpreted as fatalism. Her advanced years and her search for "oneness" might also be significant. All of these factors might explain her willing suspension of disbelief (or belief).

It is ironic that on attaining *moksha* (liberation), this obscure, insignificant Englishwoman mutates into "Esmoor . . . Hindu goddess" (Forster 203), a demigod who "contribute[s] to the great gods, and they to the philosophic Brahm" (Forster 232). This is symbolic of her presence throughout the remainder of the novel, although she is physically absent.

From the very first time they are mentioned in the novel, to the very last, the “fists and fingers of the Marabar” are enduring symbols of the corporeal. At the “bridge” party, the Marabar “creeps” towards Chandrapore, and towards Adela, as if attempting to establish contact with her. Adela actually finds the Marabar romantic (Forster 111), which, ironically, is a stronger emotion than Ronny generates in her.

The Marabar caves are described in sexually explicit vocabulary—they might well be part of the female reproductive system. The image of the rough-sided tunnel that leads to the circular chamber is evocative. Forster adds, “An entrance was necessary, so mankind made one,” suggesting the end of virginity. The mounds at the base of the Marabar are alluded to as “breasts of goddess Parvati” (Forster 125). The caves themselves can be seen to represent the *yoni* (womb) of Parvati, while the “fists and fingers” could represent Shiva’s *linga* (phallus). The cave is the structural ancestor of the *garbhagriha* (“womb-chamber” or sanctuary) of a temple, just as the temple’s *shikhara* (spire) is symbolically evocative of the hills. The Marabar hills may be associated with the *axis mundi*—“the main pin of the universe” (Zimmer 52)—link between the worldly and the divine.

In this context, Adela’s encounter occurs in the “love temple” of the Marabar, since the Marabar embodies the sexual tension between Shiva-Parvati (Shiva-Shakti), the male and female aspects. This duality of the sexes, it should be noted, is among the oldest and most common ways of representing *Brahman* (Zimmer 137).

Adela is predisposed towards rationalism and honesty. This emotionally (and perhaps sexually) frigid young woman enters the Marabar cave believing that love is not essential for a successful

marriage with Ronny. The face that she has “passed on the
sides of his character” (Forster 68) but still considers union,
demonstrates her commitment to intellectualism. Adela also does
not acknowledge her sexuality. The Marabar by its very nature
then, is antithetical to Adela’s *maya*, her (mis)conception of reality.

According to Maclean, the three things on Adela’s mind
when she enters the cave are “love, marriage, and sensuality”
(Shahane 27). Until now, she has not considered love and sensuali-
ty relevant to marriage. If the cave represents a *yoni*, Adela’s
innocuous entrance may be viewed as sexual penetration—she
essentially follows the path of Surya (the Sun god) in his daily
“intercourse” with Bhumi (the Earth goddess).

Like Mrs. Moore, she is exposed to the ultimate non-duality
in the cave. Unlike her, however, Adela is exposed to the symbiotic
Shiva-Shakti aspect of *Brahman*. Shiva is *shava* (a corpse) without
Shakti (Zimmer 206). In this manifestation, *Brahman* serves as a
metaphor for Adela’s relationship (or lack of it) with Ronny. Shakti
is necessary to “legitimize” Shiva—to make him complete—just as
romantic love is a social precondition for “desirable” physical union.
Sexual intercourse devoid of love, even within marriage, is little
more than rape.

When confronted with this terrible reality, Adela’s intellectu-
al defenses crumble. Her “frantically groping senses and reason”
(Shahane 27) are overwhelmed by the horror of the situation to
which she had condemned herself, just a short while before. She
“succumbs to hysteria” and either believes outright that she was
attacked, or easily agrees with Miss Derek who suggests this to her
later. She flees from the cave, stumbles down the hill, and impales
herself on cactus thorns. The physical pain exacerbates her delu-
sion.

Adela's youth and resilience prevent her from succumbing to a fundamental revision of values, unlike Mrs. Moore. *Maya*—a mental barrier—obscures the experience. Ironically, her encounter with *Brahman*, though traumatic, saves her from the misery of a loveless marriage. And in the courtroom, the *punka wallah* (court-fanner), that “beautiful naked god” (Forster 209) who may represent Shiva, helps Adela put the Marabar incident in proper perspective. The human manifestation of divinity as “Untouchable,” the *punka wallah's* caste, is quite common in Hindu mythology, again illustrating the duality of *Brahman*. Leaving the trial in Fielding's carriage, Adela is mistaken for Mrs. Moore by the Indians, but is “half god” (Forster 211) at the very best.

Conclusion:

To qualify this reading of the novel, it must be admitted that Forster did not intend the Marabar episode to be explicit, saying “In the cave, is *either* a man, the supernatural, *or* an illusion. And even if I know!” (Forster xxii, emphasis added). As James McConkey points out, it is easy to overemphasize Hinduism in the novel (Shahane 87) due to the blatant imagery. However, we are aware that Forster himself mainly knew the superficial “idols whose flesh was scarlet or blue” (Forster 38) which he successfully exploited to spice the narrative. Yet, despite this, the “*Brahman* hypothesis” is valid by Forster's own admission.

When read in these terms, however, Mrs. Moore's and Adela's experience in the Marabar provides the perfect metaphor for the British presence in India. Adela's reaction to divinity of “the Other” is typical of the British reaction to Indian culture: overly rational and closed-minded, while Mrs. Moore's death represents the fate of those that dare—or are foolish enough—to let down

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their defenses in this “alien” land. Mrs. Moore, apparently, is the
exception that proves the rule. The British cannot govern India
effectively because they cannot identify with the Indian psyche.
Consequently, this reading supports interpretations of the novel
that see it as a critique of the Raj: the odds are against Britain
retaining India—”Jewel in the Crown”—and Empire, indefinitely.

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