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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 Englishwomen’s first and only visit to a description of Mrs. Moore’s experience this view—she experiences the crowds, motion associated with a temple, and o “Boum” or “ou-boum,” the sound that disorients Mrs. Moore, is compare phonetically similar Hindu mantra “Oa (pronounced AUM) is a device used by atman, the inner self, with Brahman. to concentrate the presence of Brahman. Acc Upishad (ancient Hindu religious texts) quarters: “A” includes the waking state dreams, and “M” includes dreamless sl silence, comprises the state when dualit Brahman is experienced as atman. Th facilitate the presence of Brahman, thu

**Mrs. Moore’s Experience:**

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A Passage to India, the echoes that Mrs. Moore and Adela hear in the Marabar caves reverberate on several levels. These echoes induce a chain reaction of micro and macro levels. Exactly what happened in the caves has been inconclusively analyzed, but the description of the cave episode suggests that Hindu philosophy may lie at the core of Mrs. Moore and Adela experiencing Hindu Consciousness (Cardoza '96: Symbolism).

In Hinduism, the temple is a place analogous with Brahma, the Hindu deities of popular Hinduism; it is composed of essence. It is a metaphysical rather than a physical entity. Citta is analogous with Brahma, the Hindu Absolute. Brahma is also not easy to comprehend, as it embodies everything, and nothing is good or evil, but good and evil (emphasis added). In Hinduism, the temple is a place most likely to ascend to a higher state of citta for her quest for unity with Brahma.

The holiest part of a Hindu temple, resembling a cave, is small, dark, and possesses small cells (Michell 69-70). In fact, a cave is virtually identical. Caves served as the functional predeces-sors among the earliest sites of veneration; it is understood to be occasionally manifest-ect this, the cave episode represents the

Mrs. Moore's Experience:

The two Englishwomen have very little in common. As a result, they not only experience different manifestations of Brahma, 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.
Mrs. Moore's experience in the cave can certainly be read as 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 kindess, 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 to India through the Indian Ocean, finds little difference [or] love in a cave” (Forster 182). Acknowledging her “inverted” spirituality, Mrs. Moore’s woman, bad, bad, detestable” (Forster 21) and her acceptance of Hindu non-duality as Europe’s—“either-or” reality. “There are,” she says, “and I prefer mine to yours” (Forster 21).

While Mrs. Moore insists on retaining her humanist spirituality united with India. In death, she buries herself in the holy Ganges at Benares (Forster 24), which suggests a premonition of her own spiritual connection with India.

In retrospect, Mrs. Moore possesses the ability to explain her transformation. According to Hugh Maclean, she was “inclined to resignation” (Forster 187), which suggests a suspension of disbelief (or belief).

It is ironic that on attaining the status of an obscure, insignificant Englishwoman named Elmoor . . . Hindu goddess” (Forster 232). This is symbolic of her personal transformation in India through the Indian Ocean. Her primary identification is with India, and she dons the ship at the entrance to the Mediterranean, but she has no roots in Christian Europe and all that she has lived for. She is, as she says, “and I prefer mine to yours” (Forster 24).
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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 aban­

dons 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 preexist­

ing 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 “Esmoo Esmoor . . . Hindu goddess” (Forster 203), a demigod who “con­

tribute[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.
Adela Quested's Experience:

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 fact that sides of his character” (Forster 68) but demonstrates her commitment to into not acknowledge her sexuality. The then, is antithetical to Adela’s maya.

According to Maclean, the time when she enters the cave are “love, marriage (Shahane 27). Until now, she has not been relevant to marriage. If the cave represents an innocuous entrance may be viewed as essentially follows the path of Surya (“intercourse” with Bhumi (the Earth)

Like Mrs. Moore, she is exposed in the cave. Unlike her, however, Adela, the Shiva-Shakti aspect of Brahman. Shiva-Shakti (Zimmer 206). In this manifestation in the cave. Adela’s relationship with Shiva—romantic love is a social precondition. Sexual intercourse devoid of love, even more than rape.

When confronted with this Adela’s defenses crumble. Her “frantically (Shahane 27) are overwhelmed by the which she had condemned herself, ju “succumbs to hysteria” and either be attacked, or easily agrees with Miss I later. She flees from the cave, stumbles herself on cactus thorns. The physi...
In the novel, the Marabar caves are first mentioned in the 'bridge' party, where the Marabar andrapore, and towards Adela, as if attempting to touch her. Adela actually finds the Marabar mounds, which, ironically, is a stronger emotion in her.

The caves are described in sexually explicit vocabulary, part of the female reproductive system. The high-sided tunnel that leads to the circular womb-chamber or sanctuary of a temple, which may be associated with the axis mundi—universe (Zimmer 52)—link between the diverse (Zimmer 137). 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 intellectual 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 delusion.

The fact that she has “never admired... 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 sensuality 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).

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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 their defenses in this "alien" land. Mrs. Moore's exception that proves the rule. The Brit effectively because they cannot identify with it. Consequently, this reading supports interpretations that see it as a critique of the Raj: the oc retaining India—"Jewel in the Crown"—
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