

**A Passage to India, Colonial Humanism  
and Recent Postcolonial Theory:  
A Response to Lidan Lin**  
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**1. Lin's Argument**

This essay is a response to Lidan Lin's "The Irony of Colonial Humanism: *A Passage to India* and the Politics of Posthumanism," published in *Ariel* in October 1997. Lin's founding premise, based on her analysis of the encounter between the novel's Anglo-Indian and native Indian characters, is that "Forster's ideological indeterminacy is primarily rooted in the humanist perception of cultural identity, a perception that tends to reinforce cultural distinctiveness, difference and distance in the arena of intercultural positioning and in so doing provides the epistemic basis for the historical emergence of colonial expansion" (133). Forster, that is to say, depicts Indians as inferior to the British so that he can justify imperial domination.

The next step in her argument aligns Forster with a Western humanism which purports to place Man at the centre of the universe as an "independent and self-sufficient" individual (134). According to Lin, thinkers from the Reformation through the Enlightenment to postmodernity contribute to this tradition; writers as diverse as Rousseau, Freud and Derrida have "limitlessly [inflated] the ego and [incited] its desire for freedom" (134). But in this process they "neglected the subjectness of the other, and have said relatively little about its ego, desire and freedom" (134).

Hegel, she says, also instrumentalizes the other, since he is interested in "how the other may be made serviceable . . . substantiated, rationalized, and universalised" (135). Forster's position is now "congruent" with Hegel's theory of how the individual is constructed. Maintaining that England and India will remain "two separate and incomparable nations and cultural traditions" Forster "consolidates rather than disturbs the continuity of Western humanism" (135).

For an interrogation of this position Lin turns to posthumanism, using Ponzio's phrase "the humanism of otherness." She believes that writers useful to postcolonial criticism like Bakhtin, Lacan and Kristeva fulfill Said's desideratum of thinking "concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others" and they thus avoid "trying to rule others . . . trying to put them in *hierarchies*" (136). For Lin, Forster's Ronny Heaslop is guilty of such a hierarchy-formation: his "imperial arrogance"—seeing his compatriots as 'gods'—echoes the Raj's belief that India cannot govern itself. Lin contends that Forster ultimately endorses Ronny's rationalism "which is utterly beyond any native Indian" (138) and that Forster's juxtapositioning of British rationality with Indian irrationality is thus "clearly meant to be a critique of the latter by the former" (139).

Lin draws on Weber to establish links between rationalism, imperialism and capitalism. Seeing this triple configuration as embodying the world-view represented in *A Passage to India*, she maintains that Forster never intends to ironize the proposition that England should rule India. Mrs. Moore's sympathetic identification with India and Indians cannot therefore be read as rejection of "the historical emergence of Empire" but is instead merely a "regret for Ronny's generation, which has virtually ruined the Empire with its ill-bred manners" (142). Mrs. Moore is to be seen as an apologist for a more enlightened, more civil Empire. In his depiction of Aziz's "slave mentality" (143) and "lack of the power to resist" (144), Forster reveals his conviction of the coloniser's superiority. Lin thinks that *A Passage to India* shows Indians to be cowardly and childish, in marked contrast to later novels by writers like Venkataramani and Bhattacharya, where Indians possess "bravery, poise and determination" (145). The "stereotyping and stratifying ideology" which deforms the novel's depiction of the English-Indian encounter is finally to be seen in the Marabar Caves incident. This drama reveals a racial binary in which Indian sexuality is "fallen" while English sexuality is governed by "culture and discipline" (147). So Forster's ethnocentrism in this novel echoes earlier novels (*Howards End*, *The Longest Journey*), which reflect his disdain for the English lower middle-class and poor. "Ensnared externally by ethnocentrism and internally by cultural elitism," Forster's

liberal humanism cannot be sustained within the structures of imperial domination (Lin 149).

## 2. My Counter-Argument

My disagreement with Lin starts with her title “The Irony of Colonial Humanism: *A Passage to India* and the Politics of Posthumanism.” This immediately sets up a dichotomy between Forster’s [conservative] “liberal humanism” and the [enlightened] “posthumanism” of Bakhtin, Lacan and Kristeva. Though much in the work of these writers is consonant with my own interpretation, I draw on another postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha, for whom *A Passage to India* is important. Lin presumably wants her title to highlight the mismatch between ideology and political practice in the British administration of India. But she fails to notice the novel’s most important narrative technique: irony itself.<sup>1</sup> Her account is weakened by her conflation of three narrative levels of Forster’s liberal humanism—the (implied) author’s,<sup>2</sup> the narrator’s, and the characters’. She thus attributes values and attitudes to Forster that are in fact generated by the unnamed omniscient narrator, or by individuals in the novel’s widely divergent cast of Indian and Anglo-Indian characters.

This failure to register competing narrative levels occurs at the crux points in Lin’s argument. Most striking is her interpretation of Ronny Heaslop’s opinion that the British are “gods.” Lin claims:

In elevating the British to the image of wisdom, perfection, and power, Ronny is creating a hierarchy for the two cultures; that is, this elevation simultaneously debases India for its incapacity for self-government, an incapacity often associated with infantility and immaturity. (137)

Because Lin aligns Forster’s with Ronny’s perspectives, she can confidently claim that “one thing [Forster] never doubts is that the English are superior to the Indians; therefore, they should be allowed to rule the Indians” (146–147). But attention to the language of the text itself would quickly undermine this claim. In the densely-structured dia-

logues of “Mosque,” Ronny’s reference to the British as “gods” is challenged by Mrs. Moore in an understated exchange:

[Ronny] “We’re out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them’s my sentiments. India isn’t a drawing-room.”

[Mrs. Moore] “Your sentiments are those of a god,” she said quietly, but it was his manner rather than his sentiments that annoyed her.

Trying to recover his temper, he said, “India likes gods.”

“And Englishmen like posing as gods.” (49)

Mrs. Moore, who speaks the true language of godliness in her references to the love that is enjoined by First Corinthians but which is nowhere exemplified in the Raj, perceives the play-acting and inauthenticity of her countrymen “posing as gods.” Her gentle irony is preceded by the narrator’s much more damaging analysis of the xenophobia, parochialism and mediocrity of the colonial administration:

A community that bows the knee to a Viceroy and believes that the divinity that hedges a King can be transplanted, must feel some reverence for any vice regal substitute. At Chandrapore the Turtons were little gods; soon they would retire to some suburban villa, and die exiled from glory. (29)

Amidst the viciousness of the race-war created by the Marabar incident, there is another “gods” reference many pages later. It is directed not to a member of the ruling Anglo-Indians, but to the lowest of the low: the Indian punkah-wallah who pulls the rope that moves the fan in the stifling court-room. Silent, instrumentalized, utterly unaware of the judicial and racial issues swirling around him, he is all the same seen as a “god” by Forster’s omniscient narrator. In these instances the novel’s narrative strategies, modulating between authorial pronouncements and the perspectives of characters carried by dialogue, set up a series of echoes which are as bewildering and contradictory as the Marabar echo itself. They deconstruct the certainties of an ideologically-driven reading.

The analysis in Sections 3–5 of this paper is devoted to the proposition that Forster *problematizes* the ideology of liberal humanism. He

does this both in his deployment of irony as a narrative technique, and in the way he dramatizes the connections between *seeing* and *knowing* so as to challenge the Raj's hegemonic discourse. Far from "constructing the independent and self-sufficient Man" or "plac[ing] Man at the centre of the universe . . . defend[ing] him against any second force, be it theological, natural, social or cultural" (Lin 134), *A Passage to India* reveals in my view that the West is *not* the "dwelling place of meaning." The first words of the first chapter show the novel's subversive project to decentre Western thinking by illustrating the materiality of language as culturally constructed and institutionally produced.

I agree with the critics who write about the complexity and ambiguity apparent in *A Passage to India*,<sup>3</sup> when they suggest that Forster's use of language is unlike anything in his previous fiction. Bette London characterizes this view when she remarks:

Read in the context of Forster's earlier novels, what is striking about *Passage* is the absence of the distinctly discernible Forsterian voice: urbane, ironic, assured. What we have in its stead is a narrative gone mad—a shifting, slippery, unplaceable voice that seems to take its timbre from whatever voice it happens to be near. The resulting disturbances to the novel's surface articulate what might be called narrative hysteria: the breakdown or fragmentation of the narrative voice. The voice does not disappear, as several critics have claimed, but it persists, like the novel's celebrated echo, in distorted refractions of an original utterance that can never be reclaimed. (86)

The central weakness of Lin's argument stems from a failure to consider these complexities of representation in *A Passage's* narrative structure. There are also problems to do with cultural and historical positioning. In an otherwise painstaking account of the evolution of Western humanism it is surely not legitimate to compare a novel published in 1924 by a British author with novels written in 1932 and 1947 by Indian authors; to do so begs too many questions. And it is inaccurate to conflate *A Passage* with earlier novels—*Howards End* and *The Longest Journey*—in terms of Forster's different use of language in these novels and be-

cause neither is set in India at the time of the Raj. Finally, the contrast between English “rationality” and Indian “irrationality,” like that between an English sexuality restrained by “culture and discipline” and an Indian sexuality which exemplifies “fallenness,” though crucial to Lin’s argument, is contradicted by the narrator’s frequent interventions and perspectives.

As the areas of narrative design that Lin omits are significant to an understanding of Forster, I shall give them detailed attention. Section 3 deals mainly with ironies, linking them to “focalization” (which will be explained later), and to Homi Bhabha’s insights into cultural alterity. Section 4 looks at the notion of the reversed imperial gaze and the processes of *seeing* and *speaking* as they relate to colonizer and colonized. Section 5 attempts to address Forster’s use of omniscient narration in *A Passage*, and I look at the novel’s elusive implied author.

### 3. Irony, Focalization, and Cultural Difference

Registering the novel’s ironies depends on perceiving multiple narrative layers and analyzing the processes of focalization<sup>4</sup> given to the omniscient narrator and the characters. To discuss these strategies I will draw on Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*. Saturated with Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” and Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Bhabha articulates postcolonial theory by using modernist fiction. Charlie Marlow and Adela Quested return from their respective encounters with alien cultures disoriented and demoralized, signalling their authors’ awareness of the consequences for Western “civilization” of engaging with other histories and other geographies. In this respect fiction leads theory, since Bhabha’s 1994 formulations develop and formalise what Forster clearly understood in 1924. Several of Bhabha’s concepts, particularly those of *difference*, *colonial ambivalence*, and *stereotyping in colonial discourse*, can yield insights into the ironies of *A Passage to India*. I will limit my argument to Bhabha’s discussion of cultural difference, since for Bhabha as for Lin, although in opposing ways, the notion of difference is central.

Bhabha insists in *The Location of Culture* that “critical theory rests. . . on the notion of cultural difference, not cultural diversity” (34). “Cultural difference” for Bhabha has to be enunciated, and in this pro-

cess a split necessarily occurs between “a stable system of reference, and . . . the articulation of new demands, meanings, strategies . . . as a practice of domination, or resistance” (35). In other words, cultural difference is immediately caught up in issues of power: who governs and who is governed?<sup>5</sup> But for Lin “cultural difference” has very different resonances; its representation in the novel is conservative rather than seditious. I will argue that Bhabha’s notion of cultural difference is everywhere anticipated in *A Passage to India*.

The disruption of Western metaphysical categories begins with the ostensibly value-free omniscient panoramic perspective of the opening chapter, which is itself a strategy to undermine authorial control.<sup>6</sup> Chandrapore’s formlessness described by the omniscient narrator defeats the spectator’s gaze: “the very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving” (9). The nature/culture dichotomy central to European thought is destabilized as we move from Chandrapore to the carefully constructed verdure of the Civil Station, centre of British control: “viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city but a forest sparsely scattered with huts” (10). The Raj finds psychological reassurance in this imposition of the tranquillity and order of English gardens on India. Yet their verdure is composed of non-English exotic vegetation: toddy palms, neem trees, mangoes and peepul. And the narrator makes it clear that no aspect of human agency like the creation of gardens can compete with the power of an Indian nature that is outside human control: “The sky settles everything—not only climates and seasons but when the earth shall be beautiful. By herself she can do little—only feeble outbursts of flowers. But when the sky chooses, glory can rain in to the Chandrapore bazaars or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon”(10).

The novel thus opens with a challenge to the prevailing faith (held by the British) in human agency to impose culture on nature. It closes with an insight that preempts Bhabha: the representation of cultural difference foregrounds issues of power:

“Why can’t we be friends now?” said [Fielding] holding [Aziz] affectionately.

“It’s what I want. It’s what you want.”

But the horses didn’t want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn’t want it, they said in their hundred voices, “No, not yet”, and the sky said “No, not there.” (317)

The whole novel can be read as structurally enacting cultural difference, hence the asymmetry of its three parts—Mosque, Caves, Temple. A crucial colonial ruling strategy—the nature/culture dichotomy—is overturned. “Temple” is both culture and nature, and neither culture nor nature; the world is differently constructed from our habitual Western perspectives. This section does not balance the other two parts of the novel, and is in no sense the final resolution of a triad or trinity. Cultural differences are negatively conveyed in the Raj’s racist stereotypes whose insane malignancy builds to a race war. But cultural difference is also presented in Fielding’s world-view, whose enlightened liberal humanism cannot rescue the Raj. Built on courtesy, kindness and balance, the schoolmaster’s philosophy relies on empiricist values, sees “mystery” and “muddle” as indistinguishable, and cannot cope with the apparent formlessness of India, her “idol temples and lumpy hills.” The Fielding perspective, advanced as it is in relation to other Anglo-Indians, is fundamentally Eurocentric. The narrator comments: “To regard an Indian as if he were an Italian is not, for instance, a common error, nor perhaps a fatal one, and Fielding often attempted analogies between this peninsula and that other, smaller and more exquisitely shaped, that stretches into the classic waters of the Mediterranean” (61). Aware of racial and gender disparities in colonial India,<sup>7</sup> the schoolmaster is insightful but helpless. He turns for relief to an Italy that embodies “the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form” (275). Neither Fielding as enlightened Anglo-Indian nor Aziz as Muslim Indian can be part of Hindu India, from which the implied author is also excluded.



The Indian landscape does not convey to European protagonists the uplifting emotions they associate with the Alps or the Lake District. Exit the Romantic Sublime. Enter its dark double, the Freudian Uncanny or *Unheimlich*.<sup>8</sup> Of the Westerners, only Mrs. Moore enjoys this confusingly double vision (“What a terrible river! What a wonderful river!” 32) although her initial fearlessness is overtaken in the Caves section by a demoralization from which she is unable to recover. The Indian landscape is not as the English landscape; the Marabar has nothing in common with Grasmere. “No Indian animal,” we read, “has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside a house as out; it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces trees, houses, trees” (35). Even the gentle evangelism of old Mr. Graysford and young Mr. Sorley (“In our Father’s house are many mansions, they taught, and there alone will the incompatible multitudes of mankind be welcomed and soothed” 38) rests on legislating difference. Monkeys may conceivably “have their collateral share of bliss” as may jackals and other mammals. But wasps? And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? And the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing” (38). The perspectives of the implied author, as deduced by the reader of the text’s multiple narrative levels, thus continually foreground *difference* between the Raj and Anglo-India as a political principle that will eventually erupt in the violence precipitated by the Marabar.

#### 4. The Imperial Gaze

*Difference* is an essential component of Anglo-Indian/Indian identity, and the difference between ruler and ruled is marked by processes of *seeing* and *speaking*.<sup>9</sup> Here Forster anticipates the quite recent postcolonial theory that is interested in the correlations between looking behaviour and political power. E. Ann Kaplan writes:

The gaze of the colonialist . . . refuses to acknowledge its own power and privilege: it unconsciously represses knowledge of power hierarchies and its need to dominate, to control. Like

the male gaze, it's an objectifying gaze, one that refuses mutual gazing, mutual subject-to-subject recognition. It refuses what I am calling a 'looking relation.' (79)

At the heart of *A Passage to India* is the desire of Adela Quested "to see the real India" (25).<sup>10</sup> Her story dramatizes the transition from Kaplan's "objectifying gaze" that refuses mutual gazing to a "looking relation" that acknowledges equivalent subjectivity. In the Courtroom Adela, questioned by McBride, is about to reconstruct the events that led to her alleged assault in the Marabar Caves. Suddenly she has radical doubts about the legitimacy of the judicial process through which India stands accused by Anglo-India:

In virtue of what had she collected this roomful of people together? Her particular brand of opinions, and the suburban Jehovah who sanctified them—by what right did they claim so much importance in the world, and assume the title of civilisation? (221)

At the crucial moment, Adela cannot bring together the procedures of the court with the fate of Aziz: "the court, the place of question, awaited her reply. But she could not give it until Aziz entered the place of answer" (222). Surely this fraught moment in fiction gives rise to Bhabha's formulations of what he describes as the *third space of enunciation*, where "the place of utterance is crossed by the *différance* of writing" (36). Bhabha remarks:

The intervention of the third space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys [the] mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. (37)

In her mind's eye, Adela has failed to locate Aziz entering "the place of answer," the notorious Marabar Caves. Because she cannot *see* him, she cannot speak for him. This significant association of the gaze with the process of self-reflection undermines racial superiority, and has already been signalled by Adela's encounter in the courtroom with the Punkah Wallah. An instrumentalized individual of Untouchable caste he happens to embody physical perfection:

The Court was crowded and of course very hot, and the first person Adela noticed in it was the humblest of all who were present, a person who had no bearing officially upon the trial: the man who pulled the punkah. Almost naked, and splendidly formed, he sat on a raised platform near the back, in middle of the central gangway, and he caught her attention as she came in, and he seemed to control the proceedings. He had the strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race nears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god—not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impress her. (212)

The existence of an individual like the Punkah Wallah in a courtroom representing imperial justice is doubly seditious. He clearly connects with no "originary Past" and speaks for no "national tradition of the People" (Bhabha 37). In fact, he does not speak at all. His presence cannot authorize the legal transactions that already seem farcical to Adela. To recognize his beauty is to start a process of deconstructing imperial privilege that will lead inevitably to Adela's retraction of the accusation against Aziz and to the proclamation of his innocence. Her whole identity as an Anglo-Indian female engaged to Ronny Heaslop, labelled by an oppressive system of genteel female subordination and disempowerment, begins to unravel. In Bhabha's terms, what is at stake here is an interrogation "not simply of the image of the person, but the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed," that is to say *the position from which judge-*

*ments are made* (47). Rey Chow has this to say about the significance of the colonial gaze in situations where traditional hierarchies of subject and object are subverted:

Contrary to the model of Western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as a primary, active “gaze” subjugating the native as passive “object,” I want to argue that it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native’s gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer “conscious” of himself, henceforth “reflected” in the native-object. (139)

So Adela begins to become conscious of herself because for the first time she “sees” herself through Indian eyes. Coping with India involves learning to see anew, in processes of celebratory focalization like those practised by Mrs. Moore. New ways of seeing lead inevitably to new ways of speaking, signalled by her quotation of First Corinthians Chapter Thirteen: “good will and more good will and more good will. Though I speak with the tongues of . . .” (51). Mrs. Moore’s ability to see India and Indians in ways which distinguish her from the other Anglo-Indians at Chandrapore undermines Lin’s claim that

In the novel, Forster frequently shows that “Englishness” is absolutely incompatible with and accordingly superior to “Indianness.” As a member of the English middle class who deeply cherished Victorian middle-class values throughout his life, Forster’s concept of Englishness is best understood as “English middle-classness,” which, according to Forster, represents the quintessence of England. (135)

What I call Mrs. Moore’s “celebratory focalization” of India in the pre-Marabar part of the novel enables her to connect with “Indianness,” but at the price of her identification with “Englishness.” It is significant for example that the visionary sequence in the Mosque when Mrs. Moore meets Aziz takes place because she has wandered away from the performance of “Cousin Kate” staged at the Club for an exclusively Anglo-Indian audience.

The “liberal humanist” characters—Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore, Cyril Fielding—apprehend cultural difference through altered processes of focalization. I equate this with the perception that Western civilisation is unable to deal with the racial, social and historical complexities of India. I have already sketched the ways in which Adela’s momentous retraction of the charges against Aziz turns on altered processes of seeing. Similarly, Mrs. Moore’s conceptual and ideological focalization of Aziz following the meeting in the Mosque diverges from the typical stereotypes of Anglo-India, as is evident in the following passage:

. . . he had alternatively whined over his grievances and patronised her, had run a dozen ways in a single sentence, had been unreliable, inquisitive, vain. *Yes, it was all true, but how false as a summary of the man; the essential life of him had been slain.* (34–35; my emphasis)

Cyril Fielding also has moments of epiphany. These recall Mrs. Moore’s faith that the truth of emotion rather than the truth of reason can build bridges between India and Anglo-India. When Aziz shows him a photograph of his dead wife Fielding “sees” his Indian friend as though for the first time: “He was astonished, as a traveller who suddenly sees, between the stones of the desert, flowers. The flowers have been there all the time, but suddenly he sees them” (113).

Altered seeing leads to altered speech. After Aziz has been arrested following the Marabar incident, Fielding pleads with McBryde, the District Superintendent of Police, to speak to Adela in the hope of clearing Aziz:

“I only wanted to ask her whether she is certain, dead certain, that it was Aziz who followed her into the cave.”

“Possibly my wife might ask her that much.”

“But *I* wanted to ask her. I wanted someone who believes in him to ask her.”

“What difference does that make?”

“She is among people who disbelieve in Indians.”

“Well, she tells her own story, doesn’t she?”

“I know, but she tells it to you.” (167)

Fielding, acutely conscious of the racism of the Raj, knows that Aziz will not be fairly tried by Anglo-India. Yet despite the schoolmaster’s enlightened values the narrator makes the limitations of this ideological position clear.<sup>11</sup> In an imperial context no member of the ruling class can see India steadily or whole, to borrow Matthew Arnold’s categories, because there can be no true reciprocity between governors and governed:

At the moment when he was throwing in his lot with Indians, he realized the profundity of the gulf that divided him from them. They always do something disappointing. Aziz had tried to run away from the police, Mohammed Latif had not checked the pilfering. And now Hamidullah!—instead of raging and denouncing, he temporised. Are Indians cowards? No, but they are bad starters and occasionally jib. *Fear is everywhere; the British Raj rests on it; the respect and courtesy Fielding himself enjoyed were unconscious acts of propitiation.* (170; my emphasis)

In the examples I have discussed, altered ways of seeing differentiate the perspectives of the “liberal humanist” protagonists (Adela, Mrs. Moore, Fielding) from the racist and xenophobic perspectives of the Raj. Yet the insights of these somewhat unusual characters are impotent. They are not part of the power structure of the British administration of India and they cannot implement any lasting change. All three will end up leaving India; like the “omniscient” narrator and the implied author, they are unable to apprehend Hindu India.

### 5. Omniscient Narrator and Implied Author

My final concern has to do with the ambiguities generated by Forster’s omniscient narrator. The use Forster makes of narration is politically significant. The perspectives of the implied author—elusive, complex, difficult to pin down, “inferred and assembled by the reader from all the components of the text” (Rimmon-Kenan 87)—emerge from the many passages controlled by the narrator. Readers trained to trust the voice of the author in a traditional text may at first be bewildered by a discourse

of multiple contradictions, evasions and ambivalences. Forster's interrogation of liberal humanism in the context of the Raj is revealed by his deployment of the "omniscient" narrator. Take the Prologue to the "Caves" section of the novel for instance, where the authorial voice describes from a panoramic and omniscient perspective the Marabar outposts "which bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen." Placed in "a relation of dominant specularity," to borrow Colin MacCabe's phrase, the reader is invited to look through a transparent window at a world unproblematically out there (McCabe 39). But Forster uses the authoritative metalanguage, characterized by MacCabe as essential to the classic realist text, to obscure rather than reveal what is described, (as I argue more fully elsewhere). We are forced to take note of what we can *look at but not understand*. Western power and knowledge, embodied in the panoptic gaze, is undermined by such a strategy. In the context of the Marabar Caves, looking is not necessarily knowing, and it is certainly not controlling.

The narrator, whose liberal humanism I align with that of Mrs. Moore, Adela Quested and Cyril Fielding, swings between feats of sympathetic identification with Indians, and complicity with the most damaging and potentially dangerous stereotypes of Anglo-Indian thinking. Scathing about the xenophobia, insularity and complacency of the petty officials whom we meet at work and play in Chandrapore, he is nevertheless as excluded from the discourse of Hindu India as any of the Anglo-Indians, and he is strikingly inconsistent in his attitudes towards Aziz. Here is an example of the sympathetic stance in which Aziz's thoughts are rendered in consonant psycho-narration:<sup>12</sup>

His memory was good, and for so young a man he had read largely; the themes he preferred were the decay of Islam and the brevity of love. They listened delighted, for they took the public view of poetry, not the private which obtains in England. It never bored them to hear words, words; they breathed them with the cool night air, never stopping to analyse; the name of the poet, Hafiz, Hali, Iqbal, was sufficient guarantee. India—a hundred Indias—whispered outside beneath the indifferent

moon, but for the time India seemed one and their own, and they regained their departed greatness by hearing its departure lamented. (16–17)

In the above passage the reader is swept into the narrator's delight in Indian logophilia, and the implication that the love of poetry should transform the lives of individuals, as it seldom does in England. The point at which this celebration of culture becomes sentimental nostalgia is blurred and softened by the affectionate humour of the Indians' interactions.

In places the narrator participates in the double vision exhibited by Mrs. Moore, registering the mismatch between actions and the motives that have prompted them. An example is the Bridge Party, where Ronny has just remarked: "The great point to remember is that no one who's here matters; those who matter don't come" (39). Distancing himself from such ungenerous parochialism, the narrator recounts that

Some kites hovered overhead, impartial; over the kites passed the mass of a vulture, and with an impartiality exceeding all, the sky, not deeply coloured but translucent, poured light from its whole circumference. It seemed unlikely that the series stopped here. Beyond the sky must not there be something that overarches all the skies, more impartial even than they? Beyond which again . . . (40).

This is very like the thoughts attributed to Mrs. Moore as she ponders her need to speak of God: "She must needs pronounce his name frequently, as the greatest she knew, yet she had never found it less efficacious. Outside the arch there seemed always an arch, beyond the remotest echo a silence" (51–2). Capable of such epiphanies, the narrator nevertheless degenerates into Chandrapore's mindless generalisations in remarks that patronise Aziz. Consider the following:

Like most Orientals, Aziz overrated hospitality, mistaking it for intimacy, and not seeing that it is tainted with the sense of possession. It was only when Mrs. Moore or Fielding was near him



that he saw further, and knew that it is more blessed to receive than to give. (141)

The arguments I have put forward are intended to interrogate Lin's interpretation of *A Passage to India*. I fully agree with her that the novel is about cultural difference. But I have tried to show how the narrator's discourse (which we also agree is key to the implied author's perspectives), demonstrates Forster's insight into the contradictions of liberal humanism as a philosophy adequate to govern India. In my view the novel does not, as Lin maintains, demonstrate "the incommensurability of Englishness and Indianness" *in order* "to subordinate the other into inferior categories so that the ruling of it can be properly justified" (Lin 133). But it does at every juncture dramatize ideas of cultural difference between India and Anglo-India and between Hindu and Islamic India.

Where I further disagree with Lin is in her contention that "the differences between Englishness and Indianness are not just temporary, not just time-and-space specific; rather they are transcendental insofar as they are culturally and racially determined" (135). This conclusion is undermined by the novel's closing lines, with their insistence on the *temporary* ("No, not yet") impossibility of Anglo-Indian/Indian entente. Indeed, the end of the novel has frequently been read as an anti-imperial manifesto: not until the Raj is ended can a friendship like that between Aziz and Fielding take firm root. By no coincidence, this final insight is given to the narrator, who is now speaking for the "hundred voices" of India.

Analyzing "the problem of positioning Englishness in relation to Indianness" (136) Lin remarks that "Aziz's lack of the power to resist is scarcely meant to suggest the causal relation between the presence of the sovereign masters and the slave mentality of the colonized subject" (144). But this asymmetrical relation between governors and the governed is precisely what is at stake. Here again the narrator holds the key to Forster's perspective on the self-abasement of the colonial subject, showing (as postcolonial writers as dissimilar as Frantz Fanon and V.S. Naipaul have insisted) that mimicry is a direct result of the unequal power relations inevitable in the colonial encounter.

Lin's reading of the novel as valorizing English reasonableness, particularly in the "rationality and bravery" of Ronny Heaslop, is at odds with the narrator's interventions (139). Consider the following passage:

Ronny's religion was of the sterilized Public School brand, which never goes bad, even in the tropics. Wherever he entered, mosque, cave, or temple, he retained the spiritual outlook of the Fifth Form, and condemned as "weakening" any attempt to understand them. (250)

This account of inflexibility and xenophobia could hardly be more damaging as a description of a colonial administrator responsible for the welfare of subject peoples.

Finally, Lin's interpretation of the crucial Marabar catastrophe turns on the binary she believes the novel constructs between Indian sexuality as "fallenness" and English sexuality as "culture and discipline":

The Indians' wantonness, wildness, and the practice of polygamy are set against the English highly civilized practice of sex in the form of "love" "engagement" "marriage" and monogamy. (148)

This contention seems to be based on the narrator's pathologically ambivalent attitude towards Aziz, which I have already sketched. At times empathetic, it is also capable of sexual smuttiness. But as I have suggested, the narrator's perspectives are ironized by the implied author. Thus Lin's reference to "the English's highly civilized practice of sex" is difficult to reconcile with the Marabar crisis at the heart of the novel, which springs from the aridity of Adela's engagement to Ronny Heaslop. On entering the Caves, she is assailed by the momentous realisation that despite their shared "common sense and good will" she and Ronny do not love each other. These thoughts—immediately repressed—re-emerge in the Court Room epiphany when she speaks "across a sort of darkness to Mr. McBryde" (221). The Court Room sequence confers a new identity upon Adela and culminates in her giving up her controlling desire to "see the real India." The narrator remarks: "Although her schoolmistressy manner remained, she was no longer examining life, but being

examined by it; she had become a real person” (238). Adela’s traumatic Court Room immersion in her unconscious is simultaneously personal and social. Detaching herself from a loveless commitment to Ronny Heaslop she is also disengaging from the race and class constraints of colonial marriage.

### Conclusion

Lin sets out to expose what she takes to be the limitations of Forster’s informing ideology—liberal humanism. She believes that Forster’s indeterminacy, and his representation of cultural difference, provide the historical and epistemic justification for colonial expansion. In her reading, *A Passage to India* seeks to legitimate the British administration of India. My response points out the ways in which Forster’s novel problematizes the ideology of humanism in his investigation of cultural difference between rulers and ruled. As Brian May argues:

Forsterian liberalism is neither old-fashioned nor contemptible: it is not the silly relic many critics have taken it to be. Rather, Forster’s liberalism is chastened and concentrated, and yet made provisional, by the presence of an ironist attitude towards language, the self, and the community. Which is to say, Forster’s liberal anticipates in remarkable ways [the late twentieth century philosopher] Rorty’s neoliberal, the “liberal ironist.” (187)

*A Passage to India* anticipates the work of Homi Bhabha, for whom this novel is a seminal text in understanding colonialism. For him the concepts of indeterminacy and difference are politically subversive, enabling the formation of a subaltern subjectivity. As Shaobo Xie notes, “the emergence of the split colonial subject not only threatens to defeat the Western enlightenment historical representation of the non-Western, but deconstructs the unity of the Western nation itself” (158). The novel’s often surprising deployment of the visual also links *A Passage to India* to contemporary film theory in the way it investigates connections between political power and the imperial gaze. Finally, the ironies that pervade *A Passage to India* can be seen, in Armstrong’s terms, to edu-

cate the reader into sustaining “the contradictory attitude of suspecting ideals one believes in and believing ideals one suspects” (382). Forster’s “omniscient” narrator shows how Western modes of perception, based on a paradigm of *vision* or *rationality*, fail to comprehend India. Yet the same narrator sometimes colludes with the racially discriminatory stereotyping of India and Indians in ways that entrench the power of the Raj. Forster’s ambivalence towards the colonial project stands revealed on every page.

## Notes

1 Here I find Paul Armstrong’s notion of “liberal irony”—derived from the work of the contemporary pragmatist Richard Rorty—persuasive. Armstrong argues that “*A Passage to India* attempts to stage for the reader the contradictions of liberal irony. Both Forster and Rorty desire a politics which would enable us to act with a sophisticated, sceptical awareness that all norms are provisional and contestable and that any consensus is potentially deceptive and hegemonic, but also with a defensible faith in ideals of justice and community as necessary guides for social change” (367).

2 Rimmon-Kenan defines this elusive concept:

the implied author is the governing consciousness of the work as a whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work. Its relation to the real author is admitted to be of great psychological complexity . . . while the flesh-and-blood author is subject to the vicissitudes of real life, the implied author of a particular work is conceived as a stable entity, ideally consistent with itself within the work. (86–87)

For Seymour Chatman the implied author “is a way of naming and analysing the textual intent of narrative fictions under a single term but without recourse to biographism” (75). Chatman’s formulation allows for a less stable self-identity than Rimmon-Kenan’s.

3 On this topic, see Benita Parry: “to interpret the fiction as an act of recolonisation which reproduces the dominant colonial discourse would be to ignore—egregiously—the text’s heterogeneous modes and its complex dialogic structure” (28), Judith Scherer Herz: “Language is at once the subject of *A Passage to India*, its intractable medium, its clarifying agency, and its astounding, if finally hapless, accomplishment” (59) and Molly Tinsley: “If . . . orderly hypotaxis is a correlative for European civilisation, it is not surprising to find the Forster of *A Passage to India* exploring ways to discard or at least disrupt it” (71). Leland Monk maintains that “the last section of *A Passage to India* departs from the standard practices of literary modernism, but it does so only to re-formulate under the guise of Hindu mysticism a regressive providentialism wherein a tran-

scendental Being presides over narrative events and Nothing is left to chance” (401). Wendy Moffat relates the novel’s ambiguity to Forster’s homosexuality: “Ambiguity is a protective stance for Forster, not so much because he is afraid of certainty . . . but because he recognises how much experience one person’s certainty excludes. . . . Like many of his not overtly homosexual fictions, *A Passage to India* figures Forster’s unity in essentially androcentric terms: the desperate embrace between Aziz and Fielding at the end demonstrates their most passionate, and most unattainable, love. That the reader’s comfortable experience of centrality be continually displaced is the object of his fiction: the method in *A Passage to India* embodies its moral message” (Moffat 339). Barbara Rosecrance explores Forster’s combined use of authorial omniscience with his rhythmic use of image and symbol, concluding that language in *A Passage to India* “moves between polarities of exclusion and inclusion, separation and unity, discord and harmony, negation and affirmation . . . the novel’s burden is the demonstration of discord, the search for unity its motive power” (242). Michael Orange shows how the language of *A Passage* contrasts Western and Indian ways of knowing: “In this novel the language of cognition, as the expression of thought and feeling in hierarchy subject to ordering by time, is avowedly insufficient as a means of incarnating mystical experience which exists outside time and is subversive of hierarchical order” (143). Finally, John Beer relates the novel’s complexity to Forster’s claim “I tried to indicate the human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds,” commenting that “it is not perhaps surprising to discover that the use of the past definite tense, and of strict chronological definition, is sometimes violated, that the plot though more or less linear leads not to a conclusion but to an uncertainty, and that the picture of the universe is . . . incoherent, discontinuous, multivocal (‘India in her thousand voices’) and largely undecipherable” (126).

4 Rimmon-Kenan, following Genette, offers the following definition of focalization:

The story is presented in the text through the mediation of some “prism,” “perspective,” “angle of vision,” verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his. (71)

She shows that narration (who speaks) and focalization (who sees) need not coincide in a given text, and believes that focalization should be broadened from its optical-photographic connotations “to include cognitive, emotive and ideological orientation” (71). Jahn et al suggest the following test to determine who the focalizer in a given text is: “Since s/he is the grammatical subject that belongs to the verbs that express thought, feeling and perception, one has only to ask: Who thinks, feels, sees, hears, remembers, etc. whatever is being narrated in a given passage?” (16).

5 Shaobo Xie is illuminating on how the notion of cultural difference is politically empowering for Bhabha:

What happens at the point of contact between the colonizer and the colonized is the emergence of the Third Space of enunciation, the hybrid, ambivalent, indeterminate space of signification . . . Bhabha constructs a third space, an interstitial locus of meaning, between the indigenous and the European, the colonizer and the colonized. This newly emergent cultural space proves subversive to both the indigenous and the Western, allowing neither of them cultural and discursive continuity. (157)

6 See my “Arches and Echoes” (52–67), where I argue that Forster in this novel employs an alternation of commentary and dialogue in which commentary abdicates its usual ordering function and reveals far less than dialogue.

7 Fielding’s thoughts are communicated by the narrator: “he who would keep in with Englishwomen must drop the Indians. The two wouldn’t combine. Useless to blame either party, useless to blame them for blaming one another” (62).

8 Commenting on Freud’s “The Uncanny” Martin Jay remarks:

[Freud] came to believe that the very desire to know (*Wisstrieb*), rather than being innocent, was itself ultimately derived from an infantile desire to see, which had sexual origins. . . . Freud also explored the powerful symbolism of the eyes. Blindness, for example, could imply castration, as in the Oedipus legend or in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story, “The Sandman.” Freud’s discussion of the latter appeared in his celebrated essay of 1919 on “The Uncanny,” which he followed Friedrich Schelling in defining as “the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (332).

Julia Kristeva is illuminating on the *unheimlich*: “Explicitly given limited scope, as it was at first connected with esthetic problems and emphasized texts by E.T.A. Hoffmann, Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (1919) surreptitiously goes beyond that framework and the psychological phenomenon of ‘uncanny strangeness’ as well, in order to acknowledge itself as an investigation into *anguish* generally speaking and, in a fashion that is even more universal, into the *dynamics of the unconscious*” (182).

9 The significance of *voice* and *gaze* in reassembling personal and political power structures is explored in recent work by Elizabeth Walls and A.A. Markley. Walls maintains that “the crux of Forster’s effort is an interrogation of hegemonic rhetoric; *Passage* is an attempt both to criticize and, more covertly, to stifle the authoritative voice of British rule” (57). She argues that Adela’s voice at the Trial, doubly seditious because orchestrated within “a subordinate position inside the dominant legal structure engendered by the Raj” (72) succeeds in disengaging her from Victorian social constraints governing gender, race and class in imperial India. A.A. Markley draws attention to Forster’s creation of a homoerotic subjectivity in his preoccupation with the male gaze. Switching the gendered object of the male gaze from female to male, Forster reconfigures the male gaze as

Jacques Lacan defined it: “by disrupting the progress of his narratives at important moments during which the reader is invited to gaze on a tableau in which the male body is the central focal point, Forster invented a kind of narration that powerfully expresses male homoerotic desire while shrewdly maintaining the veneer of heterosexual conventionality” (268). Markley concentrates on Forster’s earlier novels and does not deal with *A Passage to India* at all. But I would suggest that *A Passage* is similarly reliant on significant tableaux in which the (female) gaze reverses cultural categories. Adela’s perception of the beauty of the Punkah Wallah is one such moment. It precipitates a whole chain of altered seeing which culminates in Adela’s exculpation of Aziz.

- 10 Forster inscribes Adela’s difference from Anglo-India in her very name, *Quested*. Writing about travel literature written by women, Sidonie Smith remarks:
- “Woman” cannot quest precisely because . . . the “law of the home” . . . organizes a set of gender determinations in the economy of travel. That is, “woman” is always already “domesticated.” Discourses of travel, including those informed by primitive tropes, constitute the traveller as “male” and the one allied with home as “female.” Or they constitute the exotic woman as a menace to the traveller, a threat to his sovereignty and to the profit of his travels. (300)
- 11 As Andrew Drew remarks, “*A Passage to India* is not a humanistic novel. It reveals that the very best sort of humanism (“goodwill plus culture and intelligence”) is incapable of sustaining a single friendship, let alone the whole world” (87).
- 12 Psycho-narration is a blend between the author’s perspective and the character’s own words. Jeremy Hawthorn explains, following Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires, that psycho-narration can “either be *consonant* (following a character’s own self-apprehension) or *dissonant* (moving back from a character’s own perspective)” (130).

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