

The three phases of a journey



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Forster's story in *A Passage to India* exists outside the physical experiences of his characters. The novel is less a tale about Indian life under British rule than an endeavor to map religious and interpersonal journeys of people. British colonial rule over India is, literally, the reason why the British and Indians interact, but their interactions with each other create personal changes. The structure of the novel demands attention to some characters more than others, particularly those whose thoughts concerning God and religion are most manipulated. Furthermore, the pertinent passages for these changes are not necessarily found in the most outstanding events, such as Aziz's trial. The changes to be studied affect how the characters respect each other, the land, and God. The tripartite structure chronicles the transformative process when everything, particularly religious outlooks, are questioned and then reformed. In Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, the author calls on his readers to appreciate "hour-glass" (134) novels. *A Passage to India* is one such book, and we pay particular attention to the middle section; Part II disrupts the characters until they are released into Part III—the bottom of the hourglass. "Caves," contains both the climax of the actions in the story as well as the climatic strain of spiritual confusion. The Marabar Caves symbolize this confusion, for "Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation—for they have one—does not depend upon human speech" (137). Much will be said about Hinduism and its influence on the confusion of the caves, but "Hinduism...like Islam and Christianity, seems powerless before the nihilistic message of the Marabar Caves" (Crews 176-177). The nothingness is a perpetual backdrop for the story. It is difficult to look at how an author manages the subject of religion without first understanding his own religious viewpoints and reasons for writing. According to Frederick C.

Crews, “ Forster is not asserting a religious belief of his own, but is simply trying to be open-minded” (176). Much will be said about Hinduism, and it must be understood that Forster does not favor Hinduism as a religion. He merely appreciates the aspect of the religion that caters to “ His disbelief in Providence, his sense of man’s ignorance of divine truth, [and] his rejection of the idea of a man-centered universe” (176). The great undercurrent of the final stage of the novel is the Hindu celebration in Part III. This commemoration shows the readers how to bridge the gap between the British and Indians, something the Bridge parties could never do. Few of the main characters are Hindu and none openly convert to Hinduism, but people like the atheist Fielding and Muslim Aziz embrace friendship and peace amongst people. They both, particularly Fielding, exhibit the desire to treat everyone with mutual respect at all times. Part III’s title, “ Temple,” foreshadows a break from Muslim and Christian God-to-man relationships in favor of the universal harmony that Hinduism promotes. With the celebration, Forster revels in Hinduism by showing its participants in jubilation, making it a happy belief system in which many have found hope. Forster’s implied solution to the wrongs within society is not without its flaws, and he often alludes to this. For instance, the festivities include such blatant errors as “ God is love” on banners rather than “ God is love.” Ironically, the Indians put the words in English in order to show the universality of God and, therefore, possible peace amongst men (320). Even the beautiful courtyard in which part of the ceremony takes place can “ scarcely be seen behind coloured rags, iridescent balls, chandeliers of opaque pink glass, and murky photographs framed crookedly” (318). The most compelling images are those of gods being blatantly noticeable and

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other times masked. One of them is constantly being “entirely obscured, when the wind blew, by the tattered foliage of a banana” (319). In this case, it is nature in the form of wind that keeps the viewers from seeing God. This is precisely what happened with Mrs. Moore in the caves—she experienced nature, understood harmony, but it scared her because she couldn’t see God in any of it. Forster realizes that the idea of harmony is a confusing notion, and he highlights this when Mrs. Moore misinterprets Godbole’s song and leads herself into despair. Forster’s use of Mrs. Moore exemplifies the fact that universal harmony can be a difficult concept, especially for those who are used to much simpler interpretations of God. The British assign labels and seek order in everything to not only understand, but to maintain control. Essentially, what they can define, they can control. There is no order in India and there is no label to be placed on individuals’ relationships with the universe. The Westerners “had not the apparatus for judging” (293), but Forster will find some Westerners, besides Fielding, who are capable of assessing India and its people properly. Adela also has trouble with labeling, as we see with the green bird in the tree. Ironically, she was horribly fearful of being labeled an Anglo-Indian wife because of the immediate associations she would imbibe. Adela felt the weakness that comes from being on the opposite end of a label, for becoming an English wife in India would restrict her words and actions. She came to India in Part I to meet her mate as well as to find the “real India,” but Adela found much more as she entered the caves of Part II. The point when she was most unsure about marriage was while in the caves. She knew that what she felt could not be named. It was not until she was with Ronny and the innate physical instinct kicked in—being something she could define—that she decided she wanted to marry him. At

this point, she thinks that she had full control of her thoughts and emotions because she previously knew her instincts, whereas she has never known the caves. Adela and Mrs. Moore visit the Marabar Caves soon after they hear Godbole's song. They both see the surrounding landscape on the way to the caves. They both see the void present in their surroundings. Adela finds mystery without answers in everything at the caves, including a stick she mistakes for a snake as well as the identity of her presumed ravager. Although she truly knows the identity of the assailant all along, the mystery of the caves leaves her aloof and unable to process the happenings. Mrs. Moore, accordingly, finds nothing but "boum," that monotonous sound that every utterance becomes, whether it is a word whispered in an ear or a prayer to the Almighty. Their emptiness significantly troubles the women and we know this because it pervades their dearest thoughts: Mrs. Moore to her religion and Adela to marriage. By Part III, Mrs. Moore's and Adela's presences in the story are minimal. What they leave, though, is a lesson that helps readers through Part III. Parts I and II show, with Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested, examples of British individuals attempting to find the romanticized "real India." Adela and Mrs. Moore stumble because they begin to understand India, but they become wayward when they find out that nothing can be identified in India. They learn that one cannot label India or understand it in the concrete and absolute sense to which the West is accustomed. Because of what they have discovered—or what little they have actually unearthed—Mrs. Moore finds hopelessness and, for Adela, it all becomes too much to handle. Whether it is the first, second, or third section, very little excitement actually occurs—the events that do take place are given strength because of the implications. For instance, the incident in the caves

did not really happen as stated, yet it seems significant because of the Indian-to-English tensions it stirred up. Forster clearly wants the focus of the novel to be drawn toward the events happening in the minds of his characters. By adding a third section to *A Passage to India*, the author shows that the novel is about the spiritual journeys of a group of individuals and not merely about an Indian overcoming a British woman's accusations. When addressing Part I, according to W. H. Mason, "It is...the title ' Mosque' that should guide our thinking about the place of Part I in the composition of the novel" (Mason 25). Amidst all the discord between Indians and the British, Mrs. Moore has the only positive experience with an Indian in Part I, and it takes place on common, holy ground. For Christians, there is eternal hope in salvation and heaven. Even with these factors, Mrs. Moore cannot overcome her new religious feelings. She realizes that the only hope for the earth lies in harmony, but she becomes dejected as she contemplates "[rob] infinity and eternity of their vastness" (165). All that her religion has promised in the afterlife is swallowed up and echoed back as " boum." Her actions mean nothing. Accordingly, her words to God produce the same, monotonous echo as her actions. The meeting in the mosque is, arguably, the most compelling incident in the novel. Alone, the meeting between the Muslim and the Christian is paramount because of how much we see Dr. Aziz and Mrs. Moore change by the end of the novel. Undoubtedly, seeing a genuine friendship forming between an Indian and an Englishwoman motivates readers; this is particularly unique since the English women are consistently more racist than the men. Looking at the confrontation more deeply, the relationship has haunting implications because it is Aziz who leads Mrs. Moore to the caves in Part II, and it is in these caves that the old woman hears the foreboding

echo. The meeting at the mosque, though, cannot be looked at as an isolated occurrence. It becomes inextricably linked with Aziz's discussion with Mrs. Moore's son, Ralph Moore in the last of the three sections. Forster clearly indicates the link between mother and son as Aziz also calls Ralph an "Oriental." The difference in the mother and son are simple: Mrs. Moore found death because her deeply-rooted convictions were questioned, whereas it is quite reasonable that Ralph, as a young man, can more securely adopt, enact, and better understand that philosophy which killed his mother. Aziz, a native Indian, cannot be a proper guide on either the caves expedition or the boating trip with Ralph. The young man is the one who Aziz gives control, because he symbolically unravels the mystery of India more adroitly than Aziz. Forster's optimism in the end is not pinned solely on Aziz and Fielding, for most of it is directed at Ralph and Stella Moore. Ralph and Stella seem most susceptible to the influence of universal harmony. All four characters, though, seem to understand the importance of this harmony that Forster holds ideal. The Hindu notion of faith is set on a basic premise: birth, death, and rebirth. In Part I, Forster gives birth to his characters, with all of their existing beliefs and perceptions included. The caves of Part II kill those perceptions, particularly those of Mrs. Moore and Adela. Part III represents rebirth, but there is an odd twist to this rebirth. The rebirth is that of the fresh souls of Mrs. Moore's children. We are introduced to them just as we are introduced to the rest of the characters in Part I—with their existing beliefs and perceptions. New characters bring new hope. Forster, with his scathing depictions of both the British (in "Mosque" and "Caves") and the Indians (primarily in "Caves"), closes the novel with a fundamentally Hindu notion. Part III, "Temple" (in reference to Hindu worship), is where the

disturbances of the first two sections are somewhat relieved—or, at least, there is relief in sight. Forster uses a Hindu celebration to make sure the idea of harmony—oneness with the universe—is not forgotten as the novel closes. The notion of universal harmony that Hinduism puts forth pervades the thoughts of Aziz and Fielding as they continue past “ No, not yet” (362), and into the future when they can find friendship. Forster wants the British to treat the Indians with respect. He exemplifies this with the three-part structure of *A Passage to India*. Part I shows characters with relatively firm ideas about life and spirituality. Part II is when mysteries become muddled and confusion becomes typical. Part III is when the characters shine, and they shine in the light of a Hindu celebration. Although the mystery remains, the muddle of India and the British intervention is clearing. Man has stood in the way of man by establishing social orders wherein one can degrade another by labeling inferiors. The labels hindered relations from beginning to end of *A Passage to India*. Even the final paragraph exhibits the divide. If it were to take “ fifty-five hundred years” (361), Forster’s hope is that the souls of men will eventually harmonize, disintegrating social order.