

A Passage To India
Robert Drexler
Coe College

A Passage to India, some seventy-five years after its publication, remains a controversial book. Is it the best novel in English about India? I am sure I thought—and probably said—that once. Is it a great novel in the English Tradition? I once taught it that way, and it is probably still taught that way. Is it about India at all? This last question is the one, after my long relationship with the novel, which most occupies me.

Forster had visited India twice before he finished *A Passage to India*, and those two trips—the first from 22 October, 1912, to April 1913 with G. L. Dickinson and three other Cambridge friends, and the second from April 1921 to January 1922 to serve as the personal secretary for the Maharajah of Dewas Senior, a small native state west and north of Bombay¹—tell us a great deal about how Forster saw India. The other trip that had a profound effect on the sensibility that he brought to the novel was the visit he made to Egypt in 1915-1916 between the two trips to India. It was on this visit that the latent homosexuality that had bedeviled him in England and on his first trip to India found a suitable outlet in the relationship he developed with Mohammed el Adl.

I introduce Forster's homosexuality because it now seems to me that a good case can be made not only about *A Passage to India* but also about the earlier novels as well that Forster's theme is homosexual relations, more specifically homosexual relations between men from strikingly different class backgrounds. Except in *Maurice*—and in *The Longest Journey*—Forster disguises himself as a woman—that is, he creates a female character whom he involves in a love situation with a lower class man—and attempts to work out the complications of his theme in a way that is—on the surface at least—acceptable to the conventional morality. In *A Passage to India*, if this theory holds true, Miss Quested is the Forster-in-disguise character and Aziz is the character that creates sexual tension in his life.

There is some biographical basis for this theory. Forster's first trip to India was driven in part by the unrequited passion he held for an Indian friend he had met in England, Syed Ross Masood². During his second trip, after he had begun to think of homosexuality as something one acted on

rather than thought about, he arranged in Dewas to have his carnal lusts slaked. He first approached a Hindu coolie³ and arranged to meet him in the evening, only to overhear, to his horror, the coolie announce the assignation. After four days of agony he confessed the debacle to the Maharaja, thinking that the Maharaja had already heard only to learn that he had not. The Maharaja, after hearing Forster confess that he had "no feeling for women," took on the role of the reassuring counselor and arranged for Forster to be visited by K, the palace barber and, by reputation, a male prostitute. Then began a series of sexual encounters played against a background of comic mismanagement—Forster's servant trying to prove his suspicions about K and his master true and, finally, K bragging about the new relationship.

What I think is important about Forster's sexual relationships is not what they tell us psychologically about him but the fact that they are a form of orientalism. Many homosexuals discovered in Asia that the dangers inherent in conducting a homosexual liaison in England, or in the United States, simply did not exist. This was partly due to the more tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality in these Asian countries, but also due to the fact that these countries had a standard of living much lower than England. This combination of toleration and economics created for the wealthy men who came as visitors a kind of paradise they could only dream about back in the grey, treacherous moral climate they had left. Orientalist writings about the pleasures of the East make it look on the surface as if these men had discovered something important about the Asian cultures in which they were living, that they have been able to circumvent the racism that so marred the views of their heterosexual compatriots. In fact the life they led was both exploitive and romanticized. (The picture of Northern Italy created by Norman Douglas, a contemporary of Forster's, incorporated this same sort of romanticism.) They see their adopted paradise as an extension of their desire and not as a culture with an independent life of its own.

The opening of *A Passage to India* establishes a tone that I think is often overlooked and which in fact goes a long way toward illustrating the point I would like to make about the novel:

Except for the Marabar Caves . . . the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There are no bathing-steps on the riverfront, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no riverfront and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest. Chandrapore was never large or beautiful,

but two hundred years ago it lay on the road between Upper India, then imperial, and the sea, and the fine houses date from that period. The zest for decoration stopped in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever democratic. The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving.

On the second rise is laid out the little civil station, and 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. It is a tropical paradise washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and pekul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in turn hide the bazaars⁴

This is the eye of the tourist, the eye of a writer of guidebooks, not the eye of a novelist of India. Notice that the speaker is looking for things "extraordinary." But what he finds is that "there is no river front," "the temples [are] ineffective," and the tourist is deterred from visiting the "fine houses" by the "filth." The "little civil station," on the other hand, is a "totally different place," because the India of the first paragraph is hidden, in the second, by the exotic trees.

This sense of Forster as tourist comes as a kind of shock, when we look closely at this opening paragraph, because he has so many hard things to say about the Anglo-Indian community in the novel, the very people who live in the "little civil station." Indeed a case can be made that what Forster knows best and what he feels most strongly and most clearly about in the novel is the Anglo-Indian community.

But here too I think that these feelings threaten to mislead us. While it is certainly true that the stupid racism of the Turtons and the Burtons is maddening—and while it is clear that Forster does an excellent job of dissecting it for our gaze—it is not clear that Forster does so because he himself is untouched by racism, or what would be a more accurate term in his case, orientalism.

Toward the end of the novel, for example, Forster is capable of writing a sentence of this sort:

Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumor, a mental malady, that invites him self-conscious and unfriendly suddenly; he trusts and mistrusts at the same time in a way the Westerner cannot comprehend. (279-80)

In fact, I think Forster's criticism of the Turtons and Burtons has more to do with his sense of class divisions than it has to do with his understanding of Indians as humans who have been badly treated because of race. Forster makes clear that the sort of Indians he is primarily concerned with have been to University, and in most cases Cambridge or Oxford—he is careful to note when this is so. The Turtons and Burtons have not. They are—as much of the Anglo-Indian community was—middle class people living a life of privilege that they could never have lived in England.

But what of the central event in the novel? This

does not seem to be about class at all. In fact, when we look at it closely, it becomes difficult to understand what it is about. The central event comes about because Miss Quedsted, who has come to India with Mrs. Moore to marry Mrs. Moore's son Ronny wants to "see India." Aziz, a medical doctor in the employ of the British, meets Miss Quedsted and Mrs. Moore at the home of Fielding, the head of a local school, and promises, as a way of getting out of an invitation he has given them to visit him in his home—a squalid room in the bazaar quarter—to guide them to the Malabar caves. Aziz himself has never visited the caves, and we learn from the outset that Aziz is not attracted, in the least, by Miss Quedsted. When he first sees her, he thinks, rather ungenerously, that her "angular body and the freckles on her face were terrible defects." He wonders how "God could have been so unkind to any female form." (68)

Just before the "incident" in the cave Miss Quedsted thinks:

What a handsome little Oriental he was, and no doubt his wife and children were beautiful too, for people usually get what they already possess. She did not admire him with any personal warmth, for there was nothing of the vagrant in her blood, but she guessed he might attract women of his own race and rank, and she regretted that neither she nor Ronny had physical charm. It does make a difference in a relationship—beauty, thick hair, a fine skin. (152-3)

This really is all we are given before we are told that "something" happened to Miss Quedsted in one of the Malabar caves. We know what happened did not involve Aziz. He had been angered by her asking him whether he had more than one wife and had found it necessary to get away from her. Miss Quedsted speculates that perhaps her question about his wives "had roused evil in him," (227) and we wonder whether Forster is using this sentence to indicate that Miss Quedsted had indeed been thinking about Aziz in sexual terms.

Later when Fielding finally confronts her about the incident in the cave and asks her point blank who was with her, she simply answers (really refuses to answer) by saying: "Let us call it the guide. . . It will never be known." (263)

This is, I think, both maddening and unfair to the reader. Something happened in the cave. Whatever it was does not seem to have been seriously threatening since the injuries Miss Quedsted sustains all come about because of her headlong plunge down the granite rock face through cactus. Is Miss Quedsted a candidate for a Freudian case study of "The Hysterical Woman?" Or perhaps she has seen overcome by the heat and culture shock?

Forster gets a lot of mileage out of talk about the difference between a mystery and a muddle. Miss Quedsted announces that she "hate[s] mysteries," (69) but she seems to be happy to create one, in fact to create a muddle.

I think the explanation for the muddle about what happened in the cave has nothing to do with any novelistic quibble about the difference between a mystery and a muddle, but rather everything to do with Forster's theme. In spite of Miss Quested's assertion that "there was nothing of the vagrant in her blood" there was a great deal of the vagrant in Forster's blood. The pattern that he established in Egypt, which reasserted itself with K in Dewas Senior, became the pattern he followed the rest of his life—that is, sexual feelings for men far below him in class. But of much greater interest to me is the fact that this is also the pattern that he struggled with in his fiction before his experience in Egypt. The relationship between Leonard Bast and the Schlegels in *Howards End* (1910) and the relationship between Lucy Honeychurch and George Emerson in *A Room with a View* (1908) prefigure the Miss Quested/Aziz relationship in *A Passage to India* (1924). It is the relationship that is spelled out in *Maurice* (written in 1913 but not published until after his death in 1970).

What I find so interesting about these relationships is that they become, as Forster matures as a novelist, more unconventional. In *A Room with a View*, George Emerson only appears to be unsuitable for Lucy because he is an American; he in fact is well suited to her as their marriage, which becomes the denouement of the novel, recognizes. Leonard Bast, on the other hand, is not suitable for the Schlegels because he is already married and, more importantly, because he is from the lower class. Helen Schlegel champions him, and this relationship turns out disastrously with his death at the hands of Charles Wilcox, the son of the man Margaret Schlegel eventually marries.

In *A Passage to India* Forster returns to this relationship but casts it in even more impossible terms. Aziz is of another race. Miss Quested is engaged to marry Ronny who is part of the Anglo-Indian establishment that bedevils Aziz. And Miss Quested appears, on the surface at least, to be without sexual feelings. The most passionate she is toward Ronny is when she accidentally touches his hand, and then holds it, in Miss Derek's car after the car they had been riding in hits some kind of animal. The fact is that as Forster brings this central relationship between an upper class woman and a lower class man closer to the sexual reality in his own life, in his fiction he creates two characters that seem to deny the possibility of sexual relations in the first place. I think this way of looking at what Forster is about explains why Forster refuses to either explain—or hint at an explanation—of what occurred in the Malabar cave. To allow the reader to read the "incident" as fundamentally sexual in nature, would pose too great a threat to the public camouflage that Forster seemed to have felt he needed. This explains why he would not let *Maurice* be published during his lifetime and, more importantly, explains why he never again wrote in the novel form after *A Passage to India*.

Perhaps the clearest sign of Forster's orientalism is that he has Fielding stamp Miss Quested with his approval before Forster allows her to disappear from the novel and return to England. Fielding has every reason to dislike and

disapprove of her. She caused his friend terrible torment. In court it turns out that she simply cannot "see" the events in the cave occurring even though what she has said up until that point has caused Aziz to be arrested, humiliated and brought to the brink of being found guilty. Yet after Miss Quested is unable to give Fielding any real answer to his question about what did happen in the cave, he tells her: "And I do like you so very much, if I may say so," (265) and promises to meet her when he returns to England on home leave. After she departs from India and the novel, Fielding, still acting as her friend and supporter, convinces Aziz not to ask for damages from her in court. In the end Forster has the British understand each other when they have failed to understand India or Indians. Forster recognizes as much in the final paragraph of the book where Fielding and Aziz realize that, although they want to be friends, "The horses didn't want it . . . the earth didn't want it" and finally even the sky says: "No, not yet." (322)

Miss Quested has come to India wanting to "see India," but she has been all along merely a tourist, that is, she wants to see what is "extraordinary" about India but not meet either the country—or her own sexuality—head on. Like any good tourist, she withdraws after her story has been played out to the safety of what she knows, protected against life by the money that the good Englishman, Fielding, has managed to retain for her.

I think, then, that *A Passage to India* remains an interesting novel, not because it realizes itself as a novel and not because it has anything important to say about India. Rather I think it remains interesting because it is Forster's final attempt to work out his sexual life in novel form and because it allows the reader to contemplate the perils of orientalism.

¹ For biographical material about Forster I have relied on P. N. Furbank, *E. M. Forster: A Life*, 2 vols., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1978. Hereafter referred to as Furbank.

² On 29 December, 1910, Forster declared his passion for Masood at a meeting in London to which declaration Masood merely responded: "I know." See Furbank, 194.

³ See Furbank, II, 81-86.

⁴ All quotations are taken from E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.: New York, 1952. The page numbers are included in the text.