

*The Irony of Colonial Humanism:
“A Passage to India”
and the Politics of Posthumanism*

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THE CONVENTIONAL READING of *A Passage to India* as a critique of British imperialism has undergone a series of challenges by such postcolonial critics as Benita Parry and Sara Suleri.¹ For these critics, the novel founders seriously either on its oscillation between denouncing the British occupation of India and resisting India's national independence at its best (Parry) or on its “subterranean desire to replay, in twentieth-century narrative, the . . . history of nineteenth-century domination” at its worst (Suleri 169).² But while these critics have been helpful in initiating a reassessment of Forster's politics, they have failed to extend their critique of Forster's colonial impulse to the limitations inherent in Forster's informing ideology—liberal humanism—and accordingly they have failed to suggest how, at least theoretically, these limitations may be overcome. This essay contends 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. Through an analysis of the encounter between the novel's major Anglo-Indian and native Indian characters, I argue that Forster's insistence on the incommensurability of Englishness and Indianness is ultimately motivated by the desire to subordinate the other into inferior categories so that the ruling of it can be properly justified. I suggest also that “posthumanism”—by this I mean a contemporary ideological constellation that aims at transforming “the [humanist] foundations of Western thought” (Brinker-Gabler 1) by restoring the

other into the process of identity formation — offers a theoretical as well as an ethical solution to the limitations of Forster's Western humanism.

Western humanism, which first flourished in the Renaissance, has characterized itself always as the struggle to place Man at the centre of the universe and to defend him against any second force, be it theological, natural, social, or cultural. One of the distinctive features of this struggle is the post-Renaissance project of constructing the independent and self-sufficient Man, a project that is historically institutionalized, with surprisingly little impediment, all the way from the Reformation through the Enlightenment to postmodernity. In constructing absolute subjectivity, many post-Renaissance Western thinkers have been concerned with fending off forces that impinge upon the subjectness and autonomy of the individual; such a concern is evident, for example, in Rousseau's lament over the ubiquitous social "chains" that confine the "freedom" of the individual citizen (131), in Freud's indictment of culture as being "responsible" for suppressing "the superior power of [human] nature" (33) and more recently in Derrida's attempt at setting free the writing subject from the object of writing so that "literality" becomes the sole "dwelling place" of meaning (11). Often, in limitlessly inflating the ego and inciting its desire for freedom, these thinkers have neglected the subjectness of the other and have said relatively little about its ego, desire, and freedom. Thus instilled in post-Renaissance self-consciousness is an aggressive impulse that finds a proper outlet in the colonial imagination, one that is rewarded by the expansion of Europe and the imposition of a new world geography on the overseas colonies.

Because of its in-depth insights into the human subject or "Spirit," Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* may be seen as the landmark work of the Western humanist tradition. In his metaphysics, Hegel shows that however circular a journey the abstract Spirit must take in becoming concrete substance, it will always find its way back to itself; that is, it will always return to identify with itself as an end, an ontological closure. As Hegel writes, the "activity of individuality, all that it does, is in itself an End; the employment of its powers, the play of these powers in action, is what gives

them life" (235). Although the dialectical principle allows Hegel to take into consideration the status of the other—the other in this case being either the family, the State, or culture—in the construction of the individual, one notes that Hegel is more interested in how the other may be made serviceable and useful for the actualization of the individual than in how the individual may be made to do the same to the other; in this sense, the other for Hegel is no more than a means by which the individual becomes substantiated, rationalized, and universalized.

Forster's idea of how a certain cultural identity is constituted as evidenced in *A Passage to India* is congruent with Hegel's theory of how an individual is constructed. 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. Using Englishness as a yardstick—thus almost exclusively attending to the uniqueness, singularity, and peculiarity of each culture—Forster tends to organize different cultural behaviors, habits, and values in terms of contrast and opposition. Even more important, Forster tends to hold on to the belief 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; they go deep into "character," and thus are absolutely irrevocable. The final implication is that a given culture can constitute its own system of signification, its own cultural autonomy, one that is independent of intercultural relations. It can be argued then that in demonstrating that England and India evidently will remain forever two separate and incomparable nations and cultural traditions, Forster is simply displacing the Hegelian closure from the individual to the collective cultural subject, a displacement that consolidates rather than disturbs the continuity of Western humanism.

However, such a continuity has been challenged by posthumanism—"the humanism of otherness" (Ponzio 108), which

can be located in the works of a number of contemporary thinkers such as Bakhtin, Lacan, and Kristeva.³ One of the themes uniting their writings is the argument that the individual is an incomplete and insufficient constituent who always will depend on the other for enriching and invigorating selfhood. With this new dimension of otherness these thinkers transform Hegel's self-transparent subjectivity into inter-subjectivity by relocating the subject in the connection, communication, and interaction between the self and the other. Bakhtin, for example, argues for the ontological necessity of the other by showing that the inner self, incapable of evoking "sensational-volitional reaction" (31) from the other, exists only in ontological "emptiness and solitariness" (30). Bakhtin also argues for the epistemological necessity of the other by showing that only with the help of the other may one "encompass and consummate" (35) the entirety of one's "outward appearance" (27). It is only natural that Bakhtin's articulation of the self/other dialectic should prove useful for postcolonial critics who wish to reconsider the status of the other. Edward Said's important work *Culture and Imperialism*, for instance, persuades us to deal with the other not just as a dictionary definition, an ivory tower abstraction, but as a concrete and living human being. Central to this teaching is a strong appeal for sympathy for the other, which means, as Said puts it, "to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others [rather] than only about us" and to avoid "trying to rule others . . . trying to put them into *hierarchies*" (336; emphasis added). Implicit in Said's remarks is a reservation about nationalism and nativism, an issue that centrally occupies Kwame Appiah, for whom insistence on a distinctive national identity such as Forster's on Englishness in *A Passage to India* is grounded in an appeal to a limited indigenous ethic rather than to what Appiah calls "an ethic universal" (353); it therefore must be rejected and replaced by an urge for what Terry Eagleton calls "sameness and universal identity" (31). Clearly, then, in questioning "the autonomy and stability of any particular identity as it claims to define . . . a subject's existence" (Scott 8), postcolonial critics offer a solution to the problem that Forster was unable to solve during his lifetime: the problem of positioning Englishness in relation to Indianness.⁴ It is this problem that I analyze in this essay.

Writing about India from the perspective of humanism, Forster is eager to expose the British pretentious claim of superiority over the Indians. In the novel, such exposure is clearly dramatized in the confrontation between Mrs. Moore and her son, Ronny, the city Magistrate. For Ronny, to keep India under British control is necessary; India needs to be ruled, because, as he puts it: "India likes [British] Gods" to be there "to do justice and keep peace" (51). In elevating the British to the image of "Gods," an image evocative of positive qualities such as justice, 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. Seen as a "baby" country, India thus needs a mature adult to take care of her, to make decisions for her, and above all, to claim sovereignty over her. In turn, Ronny's remarks suggest the Indians' flattering attitude toward the British. The novel humanistically shows how self-deluding Ronny's assumption is. Many of the Indians hate the "Gods" and struggle to drive them out or at least bring them down. For instance, Aziz, the Indian doctor, speaks his doubt about the possibility of making friends with the British very early in the novel: "Why talk about the English? . . . Why be either friends with the fellows or not friends? Let us shut them out and be jolly. Queen Victoria and Mrs. Bannister were the only exceptions, and they're dead" (9). Even though we are not sure whether Ronny's attempt to ignore signs of Indian animosity results from ignorance or from deliberate distortion, we are sure that such an attempt attributes to the Indians such pejorative qualities as obsequiousness and servility. In other words, the British role of "Gods" is putatively not so much a result of colonization as of Indian obedience—the Indians have collaborated in promoting the British to the superior role of "Gods." Here, Ronny's imperial arrogance not only displays his personal attitude toward India, but it also echoes a general British belief in India's incapacity for self-government. A brief chronology of British rule in India exhibits a remarkable consistency in the British perception of India: whether it is the Evangelists' and the Utilitarians' ambition to "reform" India using certain European

models, or the Victorian gentlemen's attempt to "transform" India by means of "good [Victorian] examples" (Hutchins 28), or the duty of Ronny's generation "to hold this wretched country by force" (52), the British perception of India as an inferior other remains largely unaltered.

Yet, while Forster's humanistic sentiment appears to put him in opposition to Ronny's officialism and aligns him temporarily with the colonized Indians, his belief in the superiority of Englishness over non-Englishness ultimately has him gravitating back to Ronny. Forster's pride in and affection for the English middle class are clearly registered in his collection of essays, *Abinger Harvest* (1936):

The character of the English is essentially middle-class. . . . Only in England have the middle classes been in power for one hundred and fifty years. . . . Of course there are other classes: there is an aristocracy, there are the poor. But it is on the middle classes that the eye of the critic rests. (3)

Gauged by these criteria, Ronny's character, however annoying it may be to many Indians, is bound to retain some essential reasonableness, which is dramatized in two scenes in Part I, "Mosque." First, in the incident in which Ronny and Adela settle their love relationship, Adela decides to terminate their relationship and although the news "hurts Ronny very much" he nonetheless controls himself and decently placates her: "You never said we should marry, my dear girl; you never bound either yourself or me. . . . Don't let this upset you" (89). As a result of Ronny's decency and manly self-control, the two lovers are spared emotional embarrassment; they even agree to be "friends" (90). For Forster, though, this scene offers a perfect example of British rational behavior, which is utterly beyond any native Indian: "The Bhil who was holding an officer's polo, the Eurasian who drove the Nawab Bahadar's car, the Nawab Bahadar himself, the Nawab Bahadar's debauched grandson—none would have examined a difficulty so frankly and coolly" (91). Forster goes to great length to dramatize the different attitude with which Ronny and Adela deal with the Indians, yet he tries to convince the reader that the two possess certain essential commonalities as far as English character goes: "Experi-

ences, not character, divided them; they were not dissimilar, as humans go; indeed, when compared with the people who stood nearest to them in point of space they became practically *identical*" (91; emphasis added).

If the disengagement scene dramatizes temperance as part of English character, then the subsequent car accident focuses on rendering the allied British "calm" and courage (97)—another aspect of the formidable English character. On the way back to Mrs. Moore's bungalow, the car that contains Ronny, Adela, and two Indians breaks down. Facing the unexpected accident, Nawab Bahadar starts shedding "useless . . . tears" (95), while the Eurasian driver, without bothering to examine the cause of the accident, boasts that he can take them "any dam anywhere" in "five minutes' time" (94). It is, however, Ronny and Adela who, "not upset by the accident" (95), calmly examine the accident and establish what caused it. Compared with British composure, the Indians' alleged "fluster" (94) and childishness stand out all the more strikingly.

Forster's reluctance here to give up ethnocentrism—a condition that, as Said points out, "licenses a culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over *others*" (*The World* 53; emphasis added)—has no doubt limited his thinking about English-Indian relations. Both Ronny and Adela in these incidents are presented as rational heroes capable of handling both physical and emotional dilemmas with adroitness and sobriety. The juxtaposition of British rationality and Indian irrationality is clearly meant to be a critique of the latter by the former. In doing so, Ronny in his former role as the repellent imperial servant who revels in humbling the native Indians is now transformed; indeed here he—along with Adela—becomes the agent of the critique. For Forster, both Ronny's rationality and bravery reflect the best part of the English national character. Forster writes in *Abinger Harvest*:

When a disaster comes, the English instinct is to do what can be done first, and to postpone the feeling as long as possible. Hence, they are splendid at emergencies. No doubt they are brave—no one will deny that—but bravery is partly an affair of the nerves, and the English nerve system is well equipped for meeting a physical emergency.

(7)

Yet, it is partly due to this kind of uncritical lauding of English character that Forster's critique of imperialism loses its steadiness and coherence, because Forster fails to interrogate the rationalism that, as the cornerstone of English character, has served to germinate and nourish imperialism in the course of history.

In making this assessment, I am of course suggesting a continuity between rationalism and imperialism. However, to perceive this crucial connection we must first recognize the link between rationalism and the emergence of capitalism, which is often seen a bedfellow of empire. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber attempts to establish a relationship between rationalism and the birth of capitalism. By widely comparing Eastern and Western cultures, he is able to show that rationalism or the systematic method is unique to the West and that it is this rationalist mode of thought that enabled the West to supersede the East in both natural and social sciences. Printing, for instance, was originally invented in China, but a systematic use of printing—the press and periodicals—only occurred in the West. Having designated rationalism as characteristic of Western culture, he then is able to demonstrate that capitalism as an economic system is made possible in the West only by means of “rational organization” (21).

The link between capitalism and imperialism, on the other hand, is one upon which Weber does not directly comment; yet many other historians have designated imperialism as an inevitable offspring of the late stage of capitalism. J. A. Hobson, for example, sees imperialism as primarily an economic extension of advanced capitalism. As he writes, “Imperialism is the endeavor of the great controllers of industry to broaden the channel for the flow of their surplus wealth by seeking foreign markets and foreign investments to take off the goods and capital they cannot sell or use at home” (85). It is no wonder that in giving credit to the Socialist/Marxist analysis of imperialism Eric Hobsbawm should caution us that “[a]ll attempts to divorce the explanation of imperialism from the specific developments of capitalism in the late nineteenth century must be regarded as intellectual exercises, though often learned and acute” (73). An even more

cautious historian than Hobsbawm, Arif Dirlik recently has announced a warning reminding us of the ideological alliance of postcolonialism and capitalism by pointing out that "the post-colonialist argument . . . distracts from the problems presented by a Global Capitalism, and even reinforces the ideology of the latter" (10). Finally, the link between rationalism, capitalism, and imperialism illuminates another crucial complicity between rationalism and humanism. As H. J. Blackham's study of humanism shows, humanism is fundamentally "anchored in reason," which is "the final standard for the humanist" (30), who "puts reason first" (27) and "navigates" by nothing but "reason" (29). Thomas A. Spragens, Jr.'s critical study of liberalism/humanism also reveals how rationalism, as one of the fundamental tenets of liberal thoughts, has "eroded" (viii) the lofty aspirations of "humaneness" (vii) that liberals originally purported to espouse. The final implication is that one will concur, at least theoretically, that a humanist like Forster can hardly be a thorough anti-imperialist, if one takes seriously these complex historical complications.

Hunt Hawkins has usefully noted two limitations of Forster's critique of imperialism. The first is that while opposing imperialism on the grounds of friendship, Forster has neglected "much larger if less personal reasons for opposing imperialism," reasons such as "economic exploitation" (60). The second is relevant to Forster's insistence on "cultural differences which cannot be bridged" (61). While I concede to Hawkins's two local observations, I must point out that Hawkins has failed to recognize that these two limitations are finally imputable to the fundamental beliefs of humanism. Such failure further leads Hawkins to the highly problematic conclusion that despite "several important drawbacks, Forster's anti-imperial argument has the advantage of being . . . presumably persuasive" (54). A similar line of argument is made by Philippa Moody who describes Forster's non-committal attitude as a gesture of liberal irony. While Moody insinuates that the "danger" (58) of liberalism lies in the possible "inactivity" (58) on the part of the ironist, she also makes clear that despite this "danger," liberalism still embodies the undeniable "virtues" of "inclusiveness and clarity of insights" (63). Most

obviously, Moody's argument concerning irony falls short of persuasiveness precisely because she has overlooked the important fact that there is one premise that Forster never intends to ironize: England should rule India.

Forster's wavering stance toward Ronny is equally manifest in his handling of Mrs. Moore, who appears to have all good intentions of showering India with love and understanding. Yet, a closer look at her thoughts about Ronny's "God" image suggests that what really dismays her upon her arrival in India is not so much the consequences of official imperialism to the Indians as to the fate of the Empire. There can be no doubt that Mrs. Moore is deeply upset by the British officials' contempt for and mistreatment of the Indians—for example, she is saddened by the club members' exclusion of the Indians from their circle to prevent their identity from being sullied by the local Indian "squalor." But the kind of regret Ronny evokes in her, one notes, is not really the regret for the historical emergence of the Empire; rather, it is the regret for Ronny's generation, which has virtually ruined the Empire with its ill-bred manners. Knowing that the Empire, being served by Ronny and the like, has incurred among the Indians much hatred and revulsion, both of which are inimical to the permanence of the British rule in India, she concludes that the last chance to salvage the Empire is to rectify this mishandling, and, more important, to replace it with a different mode of rule—a more pleasant one. Thus, from the depth of her heart springs her deepest regret for Ronny's lack of self-regret: "One touch of regret . . . would have made him [Ronny] a different man, and the British Empire a different institution" (53). Clearly, then, it is a different institution of the Empire that she desires, a different mode of colonization that she dreams of and tries to initiate by means of her own exemplary behavior, such as in the mosque scenes.

Yet Mrs. Moore's espousal of a new empire as an alternative to the old one poses a problem. If, as she claims, India is "part of the earth" (53), then India and England are but two equal nations and should respect each other's sovereignty and independence. But to grant the presence of Empire—to allow its territorial occupation of another nation—even by means of "a different

institution," as she craves, is to create a master/slave relationship, one that proves later in the novel to supersede any other relations between the colonizer and the colonized. This should be so understood because whether the master is pleasant or tyrannical, he is still the master, and will continue to project the same negative or even destructive psychological effects upon the natives. Aziz's encounter with Major Callendar's circle early in the novel and his subsequent meeting with Fielding attest to this. Upon receiving Major Callendar's summoning note, Aziz visits the Major's bungalow, the approach to which occasions his fear of "a gross snub" (14). To avoid being scorned, he compromises the Indian habit by having the driver stop the tonga outside "the flood of light that fell across the veranda" (14). But as if to prove his fearful premonition, Aziz is received by the English ladies with the exact "gross snub" he has dreaded. This feeling of inferiority hurts him so deeply that he must visit the mosque to regain his lost dignity by immersing himself in his own Islamic attitude toward life and in the soothing rhythms of the Persian poem. What Aziz longs for, after all, is, as the Persian poet desires, "the secret understanding of the heart," a longing that even arouses him to "tears" (17).

Ironically, however, the same sense of inferiority keeps plaguing Aziz even when he consorts with the amiable and friendly Fielding with whom he is no less conscious of his Indian secondariness, be it caused by his own "detestable" (73) bungalow, the alleged Indian "unpunctuality" (140), or Indian untidiness. Although Aziz does find in Fielding friendship and affection, he still cannot free himself from the same grip of the slave mentality that takes hold of him when dealing with the insidious and insulting officials. The only difference is that, with Fielding, Aziz's enmity is tempered by their mutual friendship; but, as we have seen, friendship here is far from enough to alleviate his sense of inferiority—the deepest sense of self-negation—which is also far more psychologically damaging and self-destructive than the sense of enmity. This sense of inferiority is preconditioned by none other than the subject/object division Mrs. Moore longs to perpetuate, and one that has effectively subjugated Aziz to the category of the "subordinate" (15), a category

that has utterly murdered his sense of dignity, pride, and self-confidence. It is then safe to suggest that what Mrs. Moore, and Forster too, finally seek to investigate is not whether or not India should be colonized but how it should be colonized *by the British*.

Amplly dramatized as it is, 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. More often than not, such mentality is explained away by the evocation of local Indian sensitivity or rather oversensitivity to foreign habits and manners, a quality that often leads Aziz to the habitual playing down of Indianness on the one hand and slavish mimicking of English conventions on the other. The reader is reminded that Aziz's fear of being snubbed when approaching Major Callendar's bungalow precisely grows out of "the sensitive edges of him," which also prompt him to act "courteously" (sensitivity also makes him "terribly worried" when preparing for the "expedition" [139] to the Marabar Caves, and the fear "to acquit himself dishonorably" [140] scares him to death). Held up as a target for ridicule and slight, the silliness, buffoonery, and undue deference of Aziz's actions can just as well be made to match the politics he asserts at the end of the novel:

Down with the British anyway. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty-five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea. (361)

Apparently, Aziz's image as a nationalist is seriously damaged by two deliberate Forsterian put-downs. First, the language that brings out the manner in which Aziz declares his politics falls short of portraying a serious and capable nationalist. Enraged by Fielding's mockery of Indian nationalism, Aziz is shown to have no better way of responding than to "dance this way and that, not knowing what to do" (361) but to "cr[y]" out a series of anti-British slogans. Second, the actual wording of this statement lays bare Aziz's deferential habit of playing down Indianness in order to sound English by mimicking bona fide English idioms such as "you fellows, double quick, I say," even in his most anti-British moment.

Forster's interpretation of Indianness as the embodiment of inferior categories becomes more evident when we compare his Indian characters with those frequently found in such later Indian novels as K. S. Venkataramani's *Kandan*, *The Patriot* and Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*. Unlike *A Passage to India*, these two novels portray Indian characters not as bearers of negative qualities such as cowardice, panic, and childishness but as sensible nationalists actively engaged in the "Quit India" movement through whom the other side of Indianness, absent from *A Passage to India*, is revealed: bravery, poise, and determination. In *Kandan*, *the Patriot*, for example, the Indians display the same superb courage and composure Forster attributes to Ronny and Fielding; the only difference is that the situation facing the Indians is graver: it is neither the termination of an engagement (Ronny) nor one's friend's unexpected arrest (Fielding). It is a matter of life or death. The following passage illustrates how Kandan, the protagonist, and his friends react to a life-threatening moment in a bloody confrontation with the imperial police:

Ponnan received a shot at the calf-muscle, but still moved on limping to where Kandan was standing, *calm and collected*. Still the bullets were flying about, everyone rushing hither and thither. But Rangan and Pajeswari, Kandan and Sarasvati stood their ground with wonderful *calm and presence of mind*. (278; emphasis added)

Another example of Indian bravery is found in *So Many Hungers*: Rahoul, the protagonist, rushes out of his university laboratory to challenge the police force. Seeing from his laboratory window his countrymen marching down the street with the national flag in their hands and the police force attacking them and trampling down the national flag, Rahoul forgets himself and the danger enfolding him, dashes down to the street "through the jostle of the crowd, purposive, possessed by one thought: Hold up the flag! Nothing else seemed to matter" (92). The revelation of this other side of Indianness apparently resists Forster's often neat, rigid, and simplified binary division of cultural differences, a resistance that supports what Homi Bhabha calls "'the gap' or 'emptiness' of the signifier that punctuates . . . difference" (*Nation and Narration* 299).

Like Mrs. Moore, Fielding, though resentful of officialism, shows his inability to envision a non-colonized cultural location for India. The humanist in Fielding can be best seen in the sincerity with which he tries to befriend Aziz, an attempt which is both unconventional and challenging during this historical period. Their friendship is further developed when Fielding flouts conventions to visit Aziz during the latter's ailment and culminates in their allied defense of Aziz's innocence in the trial scene. But while letting Fielding go out of his way to be genial to Aziz, Forster also has him perpetuate the divide between the public and the private, a divide that ultimately scorns the former in favor of the latter. For example, faced with Hamidullah's poignant question, "How is England justified in holding India?" (120), Fielding first mocks the political texture of the question, only to admit: "It's a question I can't get my mind on to. . . . I'm out here personally because I needed a job. I cannot tell you why England is here or whether she ought to be here" (121). However, as the narrator tells us, Fielding does have an answer: "England holds India for her own good" (121), but that is an answer he cannot express. And when further confronted with Hamidullah's question of how an English worker is justified when Indians also need work, Fielding is forced to come up with his own logic of fairness, which goes something like this: there is no such thing as fairness; for example, it might not have been fair that Fielding should have been born, because in coming into life he takes other people's air. Thus, he concludes that if one is happy in consequence, that is enough justification. Following Fielding's logic, then, the British occupation of India is finally justified: England is there just as a new-born baby is there to take some of India's air, and no one should blame the new-born for breathing other people's air. Like Mrs. Moore, then, Fielding simply desires to replace the hostile official rule with the more friendly personal rule, a replacement that does not call for the dissolution of the Empire *per se*.

As we have seen, however ambivalent and troubling Forster's handling of English-Indian relations may seem to be, one thing that he never doubts is that the English are superior to the

Indians; therefore, they should be allowed to rule the Indians. Here, my conclusion inevitably questions Paul Armstrong's depoliticized reading of the novel, a reading that aligns Forster with deconstructionists on the issue of truth. Using the concept of the "double turn," Armstrong explains Forster's wavering stance as demonstrating the "deconstructive sense that the last word must always be displaced and deferred lest its promise of truth be believed" (366). Conceived this way, Forster's refusal to grant truth value to any of the contrary claims he makes is further seen as evidence of resistance to the "synthesis" or "totalization" (377) of a static truth. Like Moody, then, Armstrong has failed to see the one final truth that Forster never intends to deconstruct: the English should stay in India.

When the cross-cultural encounter becomes more intimate and personal, especially between English women and Indian men, Forster's humanist conception of cultural identity is translated into a humanist conception of sexuality, one that culminates in Aziz's and Adela's alleged sexual encounter in the Marabar Caves. Informed by a stereotyping and stratifying ideology, Forster's representation of the English-Indian encounter constructs a deeper stratum of racial difference by relegating Indian sexuality into the category of nature and fallenness on the one hand and promoting English sexuality to the domain of culture and discipline on the other. Forster's descriptions of the Marabar Caves, evocative of sensuality and unruliness, sustain this difference by providing an erotic and irregular Indian natural world. The caves, Forster tells us, are the "flesh of the sun's flesh," "unspeakable," "uncanny" (136) and "dark" (137); they "rise . . . insanely, without the proportion that is kept by the wildest hills elsewhere" (136). Against this typical Indian background, Forster offers a cluster of narrative codes with which we can establish several key contrasts. Struck by Aziz's "physical charm" (169) on several occasions during the expedition, Adela in telling diction calls him a "nice creature" (152) and "a handsome little Oriental," capable of "attract[ing] women of his own race and rank" (169). A little later it is revealed that in his youth Aziz used to visit a "brothel" and "was fixing up to see women in

Calcutta" (187). Moreover, polygamy was fairly common among Indian families at this time, as "Mohammedans always insist on their full four [wives]" (169). The Indians' wantonness, wildness, and the practice of polygamy are set against the English's highly civilized practice of sex in the form of "love" (168), "engagement" (89), "marriage" (167), and monogamy. But Forster goes further to suggest, by evoking racial origin, that these differences are not just a matter of degree but a matter of kind; they are deeply inscribed in the "blood." In explaining why Adela can resist Aziz's charisma, Forster tells us that Adela has "nothing of the vagrant in her [English] blood" (169). Seen in this light, the truth of what really happened in the cave becomes less important than the suggestion that the incident confirms the categorical division in which one significant reversal can never happen: the attacker can never be English.

However, several readings of the rape episode have failed to situate it in a colonial context and thus have failed to see the politics of race and ethnocentricity intertwined with rape. Wendy Moffat's deconstructive reading, for example, explains the enigma of the rape as Forster's attempt to invite the reader to "participate" in solving the "puzzle" of the novel and to "displace the reader in interesting ways" (332). Even such a more politically engaged feminist reading as Brenda Silver's does not fully understand that in *A Passage to India* Forster will never let the racial boundary be superseded by the gender boundary. Identifying the issue of rape as purely an issue of gender, Silver reads Aziz's and Fielding's alliance as "a discourse in which their shared gender mediates . . . racial difference" (96) and accuses the two men of being sexists who join hands in "objectifying and silencing women" (91).⁵

The ironies identified so far should not be regarded as unique to *A Passage to India*, because Forster's ethnocentric bias against Indians parallels his disdain for England's lower middle class and the poor. This disdain can be detected in two earlier novels, *Howards End* and *The Longest Journey*, which clearly reflect Forster's preference for the cultured English middle class. Moreover, he divides the middle class into three sub-categories. In

Howards End, for example, Forster, through Margaret Schlegel, deems the upper middle-class Wilcoxes as the "second [cultural] rank" (126). From this classification we infer that the first rank must be the middle-class Schlegels, and the third rank must be the lower middle-class Bastis. As to the poor, we find a significant statement made by the narrator in the opening of Chapter VI of *Howards End*:

We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable and only to be approached by the statisticians or the poet. This story deals with gentefolk, or with those who are obliged to pretend that they are gentefolk. (43)

Peter Widdowson finds this statement troublesome and considers its "dismissal" of the poor people "very revealing" of Forster's "liberal dilemma" (64).⁶ Whereas the narrative tension in *Howards End* is created by contending values among diverse cultural groups, that in *The Longest Journey* springs from the competing ethical values within a homogeneous cultural group: the English middle class. But even in a novel primarily concerned with "truth" (200) in personal relations and in "spiritual union" (198) in marriages, there are passages strongly resonant of *Howards End*'s disdain for the needy, a resonance created by Forster's consistent use of "squalor" to describe the poor in both novels. When Mrs. Failing, a middle-class gentlewoman, responds to the destitute folks in the church by labelling them using Forster's favorite expression "squalor" (142)—the same term (328) with which Margaret Schlegel labels Leonard Bast in *Howards End*—one wonders if Mrs. Failing's attitude and Margaret's alike are not attributable to the author. If we compare British "squalor" with Indian "filth" (3), we note little difference between the two. Driven excessively by the quest for a life of culture, which is also a life of decency, Forster is forced to be selective and even exclusive in valorizing cultural values both internally and externally. But this selectiveness and exclusiveness upon closer examination are not very far from cultural insularity and provincialism, both of which beget the danger of privileging commonality over difference.

Ensnared externally by ethnocentrism and internally by cultural elitism, Forster's treatment of Indians and the English

lower middle classes alike goes against some of the basic human values bourgeois humanists once struggled to defend.⁷ Refusing to tolerate the tyranny of the feudal monarchy, the bourgeois humanists once set as their goals: liberty, freedom, and democracy. But no sooner did the bourgeoisie free itself from the yoke of the monarchy than it placed the same yoke on the overseas natives. In so doing, the bourgeoisie seems to have forgotten an important fact: the natives too are human beings, who deserve no less liberty, freedom, and democracy. In his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre criticizes Western humanism by showing that upon hearing the enraged natives say your "humanism claims we are at one with the rest of humanity but your racist methods set us apart" (8), the Europeans "listened to them all" but without any sense of guilt, with "much ease" (8). In an insightful commentary on Fanon's psychoanalytical critique of colonial oppression in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Bhabha notes that Fanon advances a similar criticism of the colonizers' practice of a "Manichean delirium" in which the perversion of humanism within the colonial social space takes the form of the containment of "interpositions, indeed collaborations, of political and psychic violence within civic virtue, alienation within identity" (119). On the one hand, Bhabha finds problematic Fanon's staging of a critique of the colonial subject without historicizing the colonial experience; on the other hand, though, Bhabha understands well that Fanon's psychoanalytical explanation radically questions "the colonizers' avowed ambition to civilize or modernize the native" on behalf of "civil virtue" (119). For Fanon, as Bhabha notes, "the politics of race will not be entirely contained within the humanist myth of man or economic necessity or social progress, for its psychic effects question such forms of determinism" (121). Indeed, the Forsterian mirage of practising humanism within the social structure of colonial domination betrays fatal limitations that can be overcome only by the non-ethnocentric postcolonial humanism whose goal is, as Mohanty puts it, "to define a discursive and epistemic relationship that will be 'noncolonizing,' that will make possible 'a mutual exploration of difference'" (109).⁸

NOTES

- 1 Trilling, for example, regards Forster's inability to transcend the lure of imperialism as "the rigor of . . . [the novel's liberal] objectivity" (124). Similarly, Das identifies the "theme" of the novel as a pure "[p]rotest against the evils of a colonial society" (3).
- 2 For observations of Forster's ideological oscillation, see Parry 31-35 and Said's *Culture and Imperialism* 200-09.
- 3 Like Bakhtin, Lacan and Kristeva hold that the other plays a constitutive part in the constitution of the subject. Whereas for Lacan the subject "can only just prove to the other that he exists" (317) the other for Kristeva is the "foreigner" who is "the hidden face of our identity," who "lives within us," and who "disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unnameable to bonds and communities" (1).
- 4 For a recent pragmatic/aesthetic critique of postcolonial approaches to *A Passage to India*, see May 115-48.
- 5 Sharpe's "The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency" usefully exemplifies how we can "address the historical production of the category of rape within a system of colonial relations" (27).
- 6 Savage notes also Forster's tendency to divide people into hierarchies according to their economic status: "*Howards End* is in one of its aspects a justification of economic privilege; but the recognition of the individual's dependency upon social circumstances destroys the possibility of the drama of personal salvation, and substitutes the drama of social relationships" (64).
- 7 For a summary of the bourgeois liberal and humanist tradition, see Sidorsky 1-25.
- 8 I would like to thank Brian May for his valuable comments on several drafts of this essay. I would also like to thank *ARIEL*'s helpful anonymous reader. Thomas Preston commented on an early draft with wit and sympathy. A colleague and friend, Jim Elston also read several earlier versions.

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