

## Forster's Vision of the Marabar Caves

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In E. M. Forster's fictional masterpiece *A Passage to India*, the Marabar Caves constitute the central symbol, which is at once the expression of an inherent duality within Forster's novel and a vision of potential unity. It seems clear that the caves are a contradictory representation of the mystery of the Universe, a mystery which is specifically expressed in "India" and all that she connotes. At the heart of India is Hinduism which makes her a seeming incongruity that both negates and affirms a valueless sameness within which is found a multiplicity of forms. This concept of the different and the same is, in the novel, coupled with the idea of an alternating absence and presence or emptiness (the vacuousness of the caves) and fulfillment (the reverberating echo). Of course, this alternation is illusory in the sense that each does not negate the other, but implies it: as Godbole states to Fielding, "Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence" (Forster 178).

The particular manner in which the caves are mentioned - in the first line of the novel - highlights this duality and underscores the sense of mystery within the Marabar. For, "the book opens with a description which negates even as it creates . . . . The whole opens with a phrase of exclusion - which is extended as absence" (Beer, G. 46). In this connection Forster's own statement is significant: "Except for the Marabar Caves - and they are twenty miles off - the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary."

In contrast, the city with its "excrescence" is described at length is opposed to the caves as "nothing extraordinary." This image of

absence of the caves is really a presence by implication and it alternates with the presence of the city which is characterized by a lack of signification, indeterminate and meaningless "like some low but indestructible form of life." This sense of the meaningful and the meaningless, the insubstantial and the substantial, the indefinable and the definable is the underlying current that pervades the entire novel. It fills the gaps between characters, countries, perceptions, and portends a potential unity. For, unlike the town, the Marabar Caves are cited, finally at the end of this same chapter, as "extraordinary." It is on them that the novel is focused and it is on them that the sense of negation or absence converges with a sense of singularity or extraordinariness.

The Marabar, however, is a source of confusion for critics when they attempt to denote what the caves signify. For some, purely and simply, the caves represent a sort of overweening "mystery" (Gowda 19). Others relate the caves solely to man, viewing the interaction of human and cave as a personification of man's unconscious (Stone 22), or as a confrontation with a "primitivism" normally kept separate or civilized out of man (Brown 155). Still others see the caves as a type of indifferent vessel: Levine calls them "neutral" (177) and Martin claims that they are "valueless when untenanted," because "their value depends on what one brings into them" (148). And finally, many critics see the caves as emblematic of the two cultures that can never unite, of two sides that cannot meet, of India's intrinsic "otherness" (Parry 35). Harry T. Moore seems content to let the whole confrontation between Adela and Mrs. Moore and the echo in the caves lie as a sort of mystical "religious manifestation," unconcerned with the specifics of the experience.

But John Beer clearly describes the caves as a contradictory duality because they "seem to be capable of generating vision as well as

nightmare: they are described as 'eggs' as well as 'holes' (143). Eggs as symbol - psychically or otherwise - are one of wholeness, completeness, and life. The Kawa Dol is such a symbol, rich in complexity, "emanating" a duality of both absence (hollowness) and presence (as boulder): "A bubble-shaped cave that has neither ceiling nor floor, and mirrors its own darkness in every direction infinitely. If the boulder falls and smashes, the cave will smash too - empty as an Easter egg." (125)

E. K. Brown discusses several "expanding symbols" in the novel such as the echo and the wasp. The Kawa Dol is such a symbol because the closer we look at it, alternately, the more specific and nebulous it becomes. It's fragility is emphasized by Forster's choice of words: "bubble," "egg," and its tremulous swaying when a crow lights on it; yet, it is perched on a "stupendous" pedestal and incongruently "mirrors" its own "darkness" - a seeming impossibility but still palpable image.

Externally, the caves are part of the Marabar Hills that exhibit themselves as "fists and fingers"; they are "primal" and they "rise abruptly, insanely, without the proportion that is kept by the wildest hills elsewhere, they bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen" (Forster 9). Thus these hills smack of the unearthly and the grotesque. They defy the order yet hold a mystery. Here again, Forster connects "extraordinary" with them and their internal caves. For Forster, India and its geographical endowments are constantly protruding and receding; in the very physical descriptions of the earth and the caves he affirms and negates, producing a philosophical outlook embedded in the very words of his novel.

Several critics have examined the language of the novel and found negation and absence (gaps) to be operating on linguistic and

thematic levels. Gillian Beer identifies the fact that “negative sentence structures, together with the words ‘no,’ ‘not,’ ‘never,’ and in particular ‘nothing,’ predominate in the linguistic ordering” (45). Herz implies that Forster shows language to be insufficient to its task and that it is silence that denotes meaning, because language is full of “noise” (63). Interestingly, when Godbole is asked to describe the famous caves, he “foregoes the pleasure” – only able to indicate what they are by describing what they are not (Forster 75). And Tinsley in “Muddle et cetera” demonstrates that the syntax of the novel undermines the Western idea of precision and logic: “sentence . . . muddled and lumpy as an Indian landscape, seem to have relinquished two conventions of Western form – climax and closure. In so doing, they enforce stylistically the issues at the heart of Forster’s theme” (72).

Thus, after describing the Marabar Hills as both “extraordinary” and “renunciation,” Forster anticlimactically states: “The caves are readily described” (124). Ironically, Godbole (the most transcendent and mystical figure) was incapable of the task of describing the caves. Forster consistently builds and then undercuts himself; the caves appear to have both significance and nullity. As physically, the caves extend both out to the world with their openings, and also remain extended inwardly, it seems, infinitely, locked within the earth’s womb. These latter sealed chambers “exceed in number those that can be visited, as the dead exceed the living,” incongruently implying a presence – yet, Forster insists, if they were excavated “nothing would be added to the sum of good or evil” (125). Once again the caves’ meaning is undercut, their significance flattened out, much as the “ou-boum” flattens out all sound.

But the caves that are visited have a unique quality; they reflect light and seem to impel unity despite the apparent impossibility of such unity:

There is little to see and no eye to see it, until the visitor arrives for his five minutes, and strikes a match. Immediately another flame rises in the depths of the rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned spirit: the walls of the circular chamber have been most marvelously polished. The two flames approach and strive to unite, but cannot, because one of them breathes air, the other stone. (125)

The two parts of a reflecting duality seem destined never to “connect”; they are perhaps the duality of the spiritual and the physical, the East and the West, India and Britain, Aziz and Fielding. In the novel, the two conflicting philosophical standpoints are seen as both antinimous to one another and yet could be viewed (if the British widened their perspective) as complementary. Stone writes of Forster’s intentions: “this is not to say that Forster is a Hindu or that he is propagating Hindu values . . . but he is making the point that Hinduism is more open to certain kinds of experience than is Christianity or Islam, and that we in the West in particular are impoverished by our repression of the irrational and the unseen” (18). He also quotes Forster at length (from “The Gods of India, *New Weekly*, 30 May 1914) where the latter epitomizes Protestant religion as proving a mode of conduct rather than a vision (as does Hinduism): “To realize what God is seems more important [in Hinduism] than to do what God wants. [The Hindu] feels that this tangible world, with its chatter of right and wrong, subserves the intangible” (18-19). The caves become the central image for this possible melding or union of two approaches to life

and to mystery. Because, after a poetic section that continues the description of the interior of the caves where Forster shows the light of the match bonding with the cave wall in a sort of trading of color and granite that he compares to celestial bodies (“nebulae,” “comet,” “moon”) and in which he opposes the very physicality of the caves (“here at last is their skin”), he indicates the coalescing of the two disparate and separate entities: “The radiance increases, the flames touch one another, kiss, expire. The cave is dark again, like all the caves” (125). Thus, amidst absence and negation, unity is possible. It may be ephemeral, it may even be illusory (as shadows on cave walls are), but the possibility is depicted.

The caves also provide a strange, dull, meaningless “bou-oum” sound or echo that flattens all sounds even as it unifies them. The two senses of sight and sound are both enthralled and baffled by the effects of the interior of the caves. For this echo is:

. . . entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof . . . . Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce “boum.” . . . And if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently. (147-148)

What is important about this multi-layered description of the echo is not only its monotonous flatness that integrates and unifies all sounds, obliterating the distinctions between levels of sounds, or values of sounds, and the resulting message that “pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is filth; everything exists, nothing has value” (Forster 149) but also that within this pool

of indistinct interminglings is a multiplicity of form and, perhaps, intent. The monotonous echo is taken by Mrs. Moore to be a devaluation of life and her own beliefs in Christianity. In India, her relationship to her Christian God has altered in a manner that has traded presence for absence. Although she has called on God more often since she entered the country, the naming of the deity has not fulfilled her, instead, this naming has "satisfied her less . . . . Outside the arch there seemed always an arch, beyond the remotest echo a silence" (52). In India, Mrs. Moore experiences a vacuum into which this country with its mysticism, its alien perspectives, its conglomeration of values rushes in. And, though she is spiritually open to India, she is incapable of assimilating it. Instead she falls into a deck chair, exhausted, pained, and she withdraws from active participation in the muddle that Adela initiates.

The caves, which begin as a goal, as part of the quest to "see the real India," instead extend outward, affecting those who enter them: "They were sucked in like water down a drain" (Forster 146) and pulling the peripheral characters into their void. In her visit to first cave we only hear of Mrs. Moore's negative response, her feeling of being suffocated and, more importantly, of being out of control. Boundaries, previously impenetrable, are broken down; the compartmentalizing tendency of the West is in conflict with the all-encompassing solubility of the East. Mrs. Moore succumbs momentarily to a primitive, perhaps even Dionysian, insanity/anarchy: "for an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic" (147). In fact, the word originates from the Latin *fanaticus* meaning "inspired by a deity, frenzied." Thus is her encounter with the Absolute - the mystery. The "pad" Mrs. Moore felt over her mouth (which turns out to be a mere baby pressed against her) is symbolic of the silencing power of the cave's effect

and in thematic terms, illustrates the inefficacy of words, labels, and language.

Consequently, the Marabar Caves compose both the main focus and conflict in the novel; that is, they are image and enactment of a separateness and of a unity – tenuously expressed but also momentarily achieved, and as if by default, by Adela. For though Adela’s experience in the caves results in a muddle, it exhibits the eternal mystery that is India (and by an extension, the Universe) and sets up a reverberating pattern that asks for the assimilation of this mystery within each of the character’s souls. Of course, not all are capable of even confronting the mystery or the echo. As Stone states, “there are mysteries in this novel that cannot be solved . . . and the characters are tested by whether they can deal with those mysteries or cannot. Not all of the characters enter the caves, but we can nevertheless say that some characters can enter them and some cannot” (17).

If Mrs. Moore internalizes her experience in the caves, Adela externalizes hers, projecting her disorientation, her dislocation outward onto Aziz, and in a larger sense, onto India. For it is her muddle that highlights the fundamental issues of the book, uniting the two thematic areas: combining the substantial (the physical and political) India and its conflicts with the British rule, with the insubstantial (the mysterious, non-rational) India and its opposition to the order-seeking, defining, delimited worldview that permeates the West. Thus Adela brings into relief the actual and the philosophical; and she emphasizes the proposed: that which should be, that which, tentatively implied, could be.

Adela is also a figure around which the union of the definable and indefinable centers: the cobra outside the caves that is a stick – but



isn't; the animal that she and Ronny attempt to identify but which is unidentifiable; the inconclusiveness regarding the animal that caused the motorcar accident. Adela, however, does not comprehend the mystery (and clear up the muddle) without the intercession of a "spiritual" and interestingly, Western echo – the chant heard outside the courtroom that makes a "goddess out of her departed friend – "Esmiss Esmoor." The West is, for that moment, united with the East, transcendently perhaps, but in the only way it ever could be in the Forster scheme of things. For although both women obviously experienced in the caves an event of dramatic proportions, their final reactions are anticlimatical: Mrs. Moore leaves India and dies enroute to England; Adela withdraws the charges against Aziz while she is seemingly in a dazed and dreamlike state. It is a state of sublime transcendence and sublime indifference:

But as soon as she rose to reply, and heard the sound of her own voice, she feared not even that [her lovelessness towards Ronny]. A new and unknown sensation protected her, like magnificent armour . . . . The fatal day recurred, in every detail, but now she was of it and not of it at the same time, and this double relation gave it indescribable splendour. (227)

Finally, when Adela does deny that Aziz followed her into the cave, she says it "in a flat, unattractive voice" (229). Adela has had the vision, and she has become the echo of the Marabar Caves. Adela has achieved unity – of being and of meaning. Ironically, the result of her quiet denial plunges the courtroom into chaos: "people screamed and cursed, kissed one another, wept passionately . . . hundreds of things went on at once, so that afterwards each person gave a different account of the catastrophe" (231). This latter

sentence again confirms the concept of multiplicity within one universe, one country, one day, one event, and irrevocably ties the events of the world (the courtroom) to the experience of the echo in the Marabar Caves. The union of the insubstantial with the substantial, the unseen with the seen, the incomprehensible with the interpretable is thematically united. Forster's great power in this novel is this vision of potential unity.

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