

Aspects of Two Novels: E M Forster's *A Passage to India* and *Neem Dreams*

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Reading *A Passage to India*

Another kind of travel to or within India had begun long before I set foot in the country.

I first read E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* (*APTI*) sometime in my student years, my teens. I was then reading a novel by a living writer. Any memory of this first reading has long dissolved. It seems that certain moments have always been unforgettable – Mrs Moore meeting Aziz in the mosque, a crazed Adele tearing out of the caves, the courtroom scene, the crowds that... But I begin to cite unforgettable moments known from subsequent and recent readings. It is impossible now to tell exactly what effect or impression that first reading had.

What did remain was a sense of the India Forster depicts, and a sense of the possible attitudes to it. There are four main English characters in *APTI* and they might stand for the available attitudes of foreigners-abroad, especially of the English in India. They could be seen as examples of types it was possible to identify with, or types by which you could identify foreigners in India.

Adele is eager to embrace the experience of India, with a naïve passion to see the "real". Yes, they were already saying that, in the 1920s or earlier: "the real". The search for the *real* place in the place has become a predominant convention of travel.

It seems at first that Adele is the one who is going to form some kind of *real* relationship with the place or people, but her naivete and ignorance are quite a match for her goodwill. And, in spite of her Bloomsbury connections, her conventionality is a match for the implicit desire struggling for expression against the sexual repression some critics emphasise. At the caves, whatever happens or does not happen there, whatever the cause of her distress, Adele immediately runs to her "own kind", the imperial British.

Mrs Moore – she’s the one with the immediate natural sympathy towards India, instinctually behaving with sensitivity and respect in her first encounter with Aziz in the Mosque. Maybe she’ll have a real relationship there, find the real, but she leaves the place, does not appear to defend Aziz and disappears as a person in the narrative to become a mythical “Esmis Esmoor”.

Ralph is the imperialist Britisher to his bootstraps. He is squirmingly hateful, unflinching true to that role.

‘We’re not pleasant in India, and we don’t intend to be pleasant. We’ve something more important to do.’ (Forster 1954: 50)

This is the attitude inherited or re-invented by the transnational corporations that play their part in *neem dreams*. I suspect that Foster the writer enjoyed creating Forster the author (or implied narrator) who permits himself to comment:

One touch of regret – not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart – would have made him a different man, and the British Empire a different institution. (Forster 1954: 50)

Or is that Mrs Moore’s comment? Forster’s focalisation often implicates the implied narrator in the viewpoints of Mrs Moore and especially of Fielding.

Fielding, the English schoolteacher, has “gone native”, at least in the eyes of the other English. Fielding lives among Indians and makes clear his distance from the prejudices of The Club. He is open to a brotherly friendship with Aziz. Fielding’s basic decency, his unposturing naturalness, are established. If Fielding inevitably feels (as what outsider does not?) frustration, it is not due to xenophobia, but a more complex mismatch of temperament. And he does get frustrated:

There seemed no reserve of tranquillity to draw upon in India. Either none, or else tranquillity swallowed up everything, as it appeared to do for Professor Godbole. (Forster 1954: 77)

(Godbole is the Hindu sage in *APTI*.) Fielding becomes impatient with what he sees as the “exaggerated phrases” – and implicitly, the emotionality, the vehemence – expressed by Aziz:

‘Yes, but the scale, the scale. You always get the scale wrong, my dear fellow. A pity there is this rumour, but such a very small pity – so small that we may as well talk of something else.’ (Forster 1954: 266)

Fielding is essentially English, embarrassed by the wrong note, the wrong scale, universalising his sense of what scale is wrong. The author might be revealed in Fielding’s character, exploring his own responses to India.

Incidentally – or not – Forster biographer P.N. Furbank points to another character as identifiable with the author:

Forster's profoundest portrait of his young self is Ralph Moore in *A Passage to India* – Ralph, whose brief apparition at the end of the novel is so moving and central to the book's design. Aziz gets the impression, at first, that the timid, strange-looking Ralph is 'almost an imbecile'. But there is 'one thing he always knows' – he knows when people are being unkind; and with this sureness over spiritual and human matters he is the agent of such reconciliation as there is in the book. (Furbank 1977: 262)

Nirad Chaudhari dismissed the novel, saying, "Both the groups of characters in *A Passage to India* are insignificant and despicable" (Rutherford 71). Both Aziz and Fielding do have their silly side, but are not so easily dismissed, being complex characters, whose doomed struggle to attain an ultimately impossible friendship is conveyed with sympathy for both.

These types recur throughout English fiction of the Raj, for example in Paul Scott's quartet of novels, *The Raj Quartet*, which was made into a popular television drama series *The Jewel in the Crown* in the early 1980s, at which time its apparent debt to *APTI* was noted by critics (Spurling 274, 344).

But even Forster could not write outside certain lines that were firmly drawn. There is not even the suggestion of an idea of a more intimate long-term relationship between an Indian and an Englishman. Let alone an Englishwoman.

Forster's own homosexual experiences in India inevitably formed part of his knowledge but would have been unthinkable as subject matter. Even in 2001, V.S. Naipaul, the Caribbean-born writer who has published extensively on his own travels in India, on the eve of being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, derided Forster's writing on India, employing homophobic language to do so:

[Naipaul said:] 'Forster, of course, has his own purposes in India. He is a homosexual and he had time in India, exploiting poor people, which his friend Keynes also did.'...

Asked whether Forster had contributed anything to the understanding of India, Naipaul was withering. 'He encouraged people to lie. He was somebody who didn't know Indian people. He just knew the court and a few middle class Indians and the garden boys whom he wished to seduce.' (Kelso 2001; see also Advani and H.S. Rao)

These comments were widely discussed at the time; well-known Delhi publisher and author Rukun Advani commented on the irony of Naipual's prize coinciding with the 75th anniversary of the publication of *A Passage to India*: Naipual, of

Indian origins, “stands for...elite, White, European heterosexual civilisation” and his vision of India is “excoriating, condescending, snide and mercilessly fault-finding” (Advani 2001). The Englishman Foster, on the other hand, offered a vision that was “world-tolerant, humane, sympathetic, androgynous, eclectic and genuinely cosmopolitan” (Advani). (I will return to Forster the writer in section 3 below.)

The central question of *APTI* is not “What really happened in the caves?” The central question, broached in its first pages, is “Can an Englishman (a Westerner, we would say now) and an Indian be friends?”.

It takes the whole long complex novel to come to the mournful conclusion: “Not yet”. The possibility of such a friendship, Forster thought, could only be entertained when Indians were citizens of their own independent nation, a view emotively expressed in the novel’s last page by Aziz:

Aziz...cried: ‘Down with the English anyhow. That’s certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most...we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then’ – he rode against [Fielding] furiously – ‘and then...you and I shall be friends.’ (Forster 1954: 317)

Independence was not achieved until nearly twenty-five years after *Passage* was published.

Edward Said, who says:

I have always felt that the most interesting thing about *A Passage to India* is Forster’s using India to represent material that according to the canons of the novel form cannot in fact be represented – vastness, incomprehensible creeds, secret motions, histories and social forms... (Said 1993: 241)

also says that Forster’s treatment of the political reality is evasive and somewhat patronizing; while *APTI* is an imaginative triumph,

it is also true that Forster’s India is so affectionately personal and so remorselessly metaphysical that his view of Indians as a nation contending for sovereignty with Britain is not politically very serious, or even respectful. (Said 1993: 246)

Aziz is the young Indian doctor whom Adele accuses. He is politicised, as we would say now, by his arrest. He comes into the novel already bitter about the English and after the trial goes to live in an Indian-ruled state and proclaims the “Quit India” movement. (Independence would not necessarily have seemed imminent then.) The struggle for Indian Independence has become one of the

twentieth century's most resonant stories; at its centre is the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the century's outstanding personages.

Forster chose not to mention Gandhi and the many events of his *Satyagraha* movement in *APTI*, an omission that places the novel curiously not quite in its time. Quite likely the thought of bringing in Gandhi and the Gandhians would have threatened to turn Forster's novel into something else, something that could not be contained in the novel. Forster was not an unpolitical writer; his sympathies are very clear in *APTI*, as they are in his other novels. Although he made a few false starts between his first trip to India in 1912 and beginning to write *APTI* in 1922, Forster was looking for the sculpture in the stone, not for the stone. Gandhi might have been part of the stone that must be chipped away.

In *neem dreams* Jade gazes at a statue of Gandhi, for her a landmark for finding an air-conditioned coffee shop:

The traffic circles a high pedestal set in the centre of a large intersection. On it rest the feet of the statue of a man. Wearing his simple loincloth, leaning on his staff, barefoot and penniless, commanding the hearts of millions of Indians and millions of others, shaming into retreat the imperial battalions that rule his country in their supremacist dreams. Look him up in the book.

Jade stops a moment, shades her eyes and squints up through the cacophony of blaring horns and blasts of petrol-laden exhaust fumes. She knows who that is, he's really famous, the famous great soul, she once saw the movie, and the statue is the landmark and right over there, thank heaven, is the Indian Coffee House.

They mocked him as a half-naked fakir; his body is now a sacred text. He ensures the world's headlines can not resist these brilliantly succinct gestures – a handful of salt gathered from the sea at the end of a long march, the spinning wheel that makes the simple cloth which is all he wears to Buckingham Palace. Indian salt belongs to Indians. Indians won't be made to buy foreign cloth. The spinning wheel is the icon of Indian pride and resilience and self-sufficiency, of *swadeshi*. He is the icon of a universal philosopher saint. He is the icon of unassailable defiance and *ahimsa*, the way of non-violence. He looks down the length of the road, its saviour, its guardian angel, its compassion and tenacity, presiding at the intersection.

Still he is argued about. It was a Hindu extremist who shot him dead, and he is still not Hindu enough for some. For others his so-called simplicity is a display of antique quaintness that creates an image of India that is never going to help the project of an internationally respected modern state. His non-violence is naïve in a world where nothing is won without armed struggle. His schemes were never going to solve the nation's problems. His voluntary poverty makes a mockery of real poverty

– remember how they said it costs a lot of money to keep the mahatma in poverty. And really, he isn't really a saint. (Baranay 2002: 30)

Gandhi's legacy will resonate in *neem dreams'* last chapters, with the mid-1990s demonstrations against the transnationals explicitly having a historical connection with Gandhian politics of *swadeshi* and *swaraj* (self-sufficiency, self-rule) of the Independence movement.

Even today you cannot spend any time in India without discussing Gandhi. I've listened to writers on post-coloniality discuss the need for a Gandhian leader in other post-colonial countries (Aboriginal Australia included). The qualifications, demurrals and even opposition to Gandhi's politics have their exemplar in the famous dispute between the Mahatma and one of India's greatest literary figures, Rabindranath Tagore:

Tagore versus Gandhi was the cherisher of beauty versus the ascetic; the artist versus the utilitarian; the thinker versus the man of action; the individualist versus the politician; the elitist versus the populist; the widely-read versus the narrowly-read; the modernist versus the reactionary; the believer in science versus the anti-scientist; the synthesizer of East and West versus the Indian chauvinist; the internationalist versus the nationalist; the traveller versus the stay-at-home; the Bengali versus the Gujerati; the scholarly Brahmin versus the merchant Vaishya; and most prominently of all, the fine flowing robes and beard versus the coarse loincloth and bald pate. ... Theirs was one of the great debates of the twentieth century. Gandhi has dominated it in the history books, in the universities and on the movie screen. But India has espoused Tagore's ideas far more than it has Gandhi's. (Dutta and Robinson 237)

Tagore, like Gandhi, was inevitably involved in the struggle of India for self-rule. Since I read the 1976 best-seller *Freedom at Midnight*, by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, I have been fascinated by the story of Indian Independence.

There might be a comparison with the Holocaust, that other massive twentieth-century event of extremes and atrocity. And a day after first writing this thought, I hear a publisher say, in a discussion of Indian literature on the radio, "Indian novels are full of Partition; it's like the Holocaust".

I have European parents and was born in Italy officially a displaced person. Any child brought up in Australia in the 1950s, as I was, could remain somewhat clueless as to the enormity and recentness of Europe's devastation, but when I finally travelled to Europe in my late 20s I realised something of the extent and the immediacy of its effects, even on those born post-World War 2. There might be some clues to my passionate interest in Indian Independence in the step removed from a historical relationship with India.

There would be a different affect to your interest in India if you had a British Raj ancestor. In *neem dreams* Jade assumes the only reason a guy like Andy has turned up in this remote southern hamlet is a search for an ancestor's story.

“I love your accent,” said Jade, understandingly. Things were looking up: how about this, a dishy Englishman? Looked like Ralph Fiennes. Here, of all places. Andy had come to trace an ancestor from The Raj, of course, she realised, a long-time ambition that had become an obsession; he was engrossed in the life of a stiff-lipped pukkha sahib in a solar topee and military boots, driven by long-irrelevant notions of *born to rule* and *propriety and decency*, with a pale English wife who wilted in the heat, no, thrived... (Baranay 2002: 100)

While the memory of the precise time and circumstances of my first reading is lost, I can smell the pink roses in the houseboat in Kashmir where I first re-read *APTI* (and, incidentally, first read *Hindoo Holiday*, which I quote as epigraph for my story “Snow-capped Peaks”, written there, (Baranay 1989b: 53-64) not knowing of Forster's connection with its author Ackerley).

My next re-reading was twelve years later, in 1998. *neem dreams* was well advanced. I had begun this project by reading and re-reading fiction set in India and it became clear that *APTI* was the ur-novel of the English – or the European, or the Westerner – in India. (Perhaps *Siddharta* is another, but let's leave that aside). A non-Indian, certainly an English-speaking non-Indian, cannot write a novel set in India *without* knowledge of *A Passage to India*. Decades of scholarship continue to address it; it is interesting how often the book is cited in the most recent bibliographies of post-colonial studies. *A Passage to India* fits Italo Calvino's definition of a classic as *a book that is always being re-read rather than read* (Calvino 1982: 125).

APTI is continually re-read not only passively, but is constantly re-evaluated, its concerns re-posed in terms contemporary with new readings:

From *A Passage to India* on, 'books about India' have been more accurately books about the representation of India, with each offering variants of the peculiar logic through which a failure of representation becomes transformed into a characteristically Indian failure. ...[T]he narrative is not brought to rest with the melodramatic rape trial and Adela's recantation, but is impelled into a description of the Indian's ugly failure to apprehend a European sensibility and the seductive qualities of his continuing ignorance. (Suleri 245, 249)

On my own re-reading I noticed that neem trees are mentioned on the very first page. That's the kind of thing a writer is happy to take as a sign.

The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and pekul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars. (Forster 1954: 9)

What becomes visible, what becomes hidden: this might be seen as a theme of both *A Passage to India* and *neem dreams*.

The narrative imperative: Aspects of two novels

How do I begin to write a novel? There's an idea that begins to obsess. Themes and images begin to weave into each other: characters, phrases, words, sounds: a collection of fragments that desire union in a single entity. What will bring it all together? What is it I am looking for, mentally shuffling these fragments, re-arranging them, building on them, combining or discarding them?

My method in *neem dreams* was similar to the one Graham Greene describes: travelling, gathering fragments, and puzzling at how they fit together until one day a story becomes apparent (Greene 1981: *passim*).

My novels rarely start with a story. Incidents and events, yes, people and places too, and the insistent need to be at work, writing, writing something to be read. But these are not sufficient to make a novel.

"Yes – oh dear, yes – the novel tells a story," admits Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (Forster 1955: 26). The tone is mournful, it is a regretful voice, the admission is reluctant.

Question: What does a novel do? Answer: It tells a story, of course! The reply may be made, surely is most often made, with vague indifference or with brisk insistence. Or, indeed, with a refusal of a simple answer.

But we regret the fact, Forster and I.

Why the regret? When I began to call myself a writer I referred to "short prose fiction" and "long prose fiction" rather than "short stories" and "novels". It was the seventies, and everything we did and were was being re-defined. It was modernism being new again.

Forster was writing in the era of early modernism. Modernism means experimentation in content and form, it means stream-of-consciousness and fractured chronology. It means using not the language of the past, not the language of formal address but the language you hear. It means that you can decide the novel does not need narrative.

Lionel Trilling identified modernism as “the disenchantment of our culture with culture itself” (Cahoone 391). Forster, while not as formally experimental as his contemporary Virginia Woolfe, was a modernist; he questioned the apparently obvious cultural imperatives.

neem dreams is written in the present era, widely called post-modern, and no one who lives in it cannot know how extensively this term has been interrogated. My own tendency is to favour the idea of post-modernism as the modernism of the late twentieth-century. This is in spite of also entertaining a tendency to think, as Ihab Hassan says:

Postmodernism may be a response, direct or oblique, to the Unimaginable that Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments. Certainly it is not the Dehumanization of the Arts that concerns us now; it’s rather the Denaturalization of the Planet and the End of Man. We are, I believe, inhabitants of another Time and another Space, and we no longer know what response is adequate to our reality. (Cahoone 395)

These days we contemplate the real possibility of post-human existence (a possibility explored by contemporary novels such as Michel Houellebecq’s sensational *Atomised*). Hassan’s comments resonate. Still, not knowing what, if any, response to our new reality is adequate, a novelist begins a response by writing a novel. And comes up with that strangely unyielding fact: the novel needs a story.

It is characters and settings (Forster calls them people and places) and their interaction that engender a novel; it is particular themes, issues, contentions; it is the language you want to use, and, also, it is your sense of your place within the culture you inhabit, a need to find and express this.

But you must find the story.

That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it were not so, that it could be something different – melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form. (Forster 1954: 26)

I wish it were not so, too. But the stories we tell tell us how much we need stories: it’s a matter of life and death:

Neanderthal man listened to stories...the primitive audience...gaping round the campfire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense... The novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him. We can estimate the dangers incurred when we think of the career of Scheherazade in somewhat later times. (Forster 1954: 26)

In the Introduction to his 2000 anthology on narrative (which includes, from *Aspects*, Forster's passages on story and plot), Martin McQuillan points out that it is a logical absurdity to imagine the disappearance of stories, for that would be a story in itself (McQuillan: 1-2). And the fact that we dream – make stories out of fragments – indicates how essential our need is.

A Passage to India is about the British in India, about relationships between the British and the Indians in the early twentieth century, about prejudice and justice and friendship and how myths are made. Or it's about "an unimaginable space which cannot be inhabited by the present tense, resisting even the European attempt to coax it into metaphoricity" (Suleri 250).

But that is not its story, those are some of its themes, or interpretations, and if someone asks of a novel *What's it about?* they are usually asking about the story.

A Passage to India is the story of a young woman, Adele, who comes on a visit to India to meet her fiancé. She is accompanied by his mother Mrs Moore; she wants to see the real India and to make friends with Indians; she is invited to an expedition to some nearby caves and there suddenly accuses the nice Indian doctor of molesting her and a court case ensues where finally...

No need to go on. Summing up the story tells you something, but it does not give you a sense of the novel.

Sharing Forster's regret about story, I tend to gape and swallow and hesitate when asked what *neem dreams* is "about".

About India. About globalisation. About 300 pages. About mainly these four characters...

neem dreams is about Westerners in India, it's about cultural exchange, it's about how politics and myths, as well as personal products, are made, it's about how globalisation works to perpetuate the powerlessness of the powerless... It *will* be about what its future readers and critics say it's about.

But what is the *story*?

Oh dear, of course there is a story.

And now the story can be defined. It is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence... *Qua* story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next. (Forster 1955: 27)

Still, the story is not what a novel is “about”.

Nor is the story what makes you want to read a novel, not always. I will choose a novel for its writer, sometimes one who could write about anything they please and please me; I will choose a novel for its subject matter (experiencing India) if it is one I am currently pursuing; I will choose a novel that has been recommended; one that I have enjoyed before; one that promises a new experience of language. It is what Forster calls *value* that matters to us more: “something which is not measured by minutes or hours, but by intensity (Forster 1955: 28).

But a novel must have a story. Which is not the same as its plot, as Forster also insists.

The plot is narrative’s joy. Plot is where character is drawn, plot is effect and cause, plot has room for themes and issues and digressions and set pieces and re-building of structure into original shape; it is in the plot that the writer struggles and experiments and is surprised, as if ambushed, by elements that the novel’s origins had still concealed.

The plot then is the novel in its logical intellectual aspect: it requires mystery, but the mysteries are solved later on: the reader may be moving about in worlds unrealized, but the novelist has no misgivings... He plans his book beforehand: or anyhow he stands above it, his interest in cause and effect give him an air of predetermination. (Forster 1954: 96)

Aspects of the Novel is E.M. Forster’s other classic, a book-length essay on the novel. It remains – in spite of some out-dated examples from novels that have been long-forgotten in our day – an incisive examination of the form, informative and wise about the novelist’s art, and piquant with dry wit. I keep recommending this book to new writers and students, and it has equal place with Kundera and Calvino on my shelf of favourite fiction writers on fiction writing.

Just when you think *Aspects* is quaint and dated, Forster says something of uncanny particular relevance. Time is our enemy, suggests Forster, chronology is a demon (1955: 9-23). He conjures up an image of all novelists writing their novels in a circular room, simultaneously, outside of time. Look, he says, at these pairs of passages of writing. We see at first how alike they are. But they are from very different writers, very different times.

Compare two passages from Samuel Richardson and Henry James, and find, says Forster that:

Surface differences are indeed no differences at all, but additional points of contact. (Forster 1954: 16)

Compare passages from Wells and from Dickens:

...they do not register any change in the novelist's art. (18)

Compare Sterne and Woolf:

...their medium is similar, the same odd effects are obtained by it. (16-20)

Realise then, that:

The novel's success lies in its own sensitiveness, not in the success of its subject-matter. (20)

Admittedly, there are some problems here. One, all his examples are British (if you count James). Two, you could argue that it would be as possible to choose passages that show the novelist's art has changed, that effects have changed, and that subject matter is of supreme importance. But the point, finally, is that all exist in a comparable form, that of the novel.

The novel is not its story, the story is not the reason we embark on writing our novels in the circular room outside of time. Yet – *oh dear* – a novel contains time, chronology, therefore story.

Humankind apparently *needs* stories; *why* this might be so has to do with what makes us human: that we create meaning. As Umberto Eco says:

[W]e are continually tempted to give shape to life through narrative schemes...

Fiction makes us feel more metaphysically comfortable than reality. There is a golden rule that cryptanalysts and code breakers rely on – namely, that every secret message can be deciphered, provided one knows that it is a message. The problem with the actual world is that, since the dawn of time, humans have been wondering whether there is a message, and if so, whether this message makes sense. With fictional universes, we know without a doubt that they do have a message and that an authorial entity stands behind them as creator, as well as within them as a set of reading instructions. (Eco 1994: 99, 116)

Since Forster, the question of narrative has been extensively re-positing; we have often been told the novel is dead while more novels than ever are being published; we have examined narrative through structuralism, deconstruction, *l'écriture féminine*, psychoanalysis, identity politics, and, of course, post-modernism; our understanding of basic questions (setting, character, structure) has been refined; we usefully employ terms that post-date Forster: *focalisation*, *narrative agent*, *implied author*; and we have paid a lot more attention to the context and culture in which writing takes place (see McQuillan *inter alia*). Yet

Aspects of the Novel remains pertinent to consideration of the novelist's craft, and is frequently cited in later works on the developing theorising of narratology; while more sophisticated ideas on narrative have burgeoned (see, for example, Prince, Bal, Rimmon-Kenan), Forster provided a foundation for them.

In the identification of the need for story, in the refusal to take story for granted as the basis of the novel, in the fresh consideration of aspects of story, Forster became for me an exemplar of a novelist who embraces the considerations of craft while being at the service of art.

And whatever we say about the novel, one thing above all remains true: let Forster have the last word:

The final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends, and of anything else which we cannot define. (Forster 1954: 23)

Travels with E.M. Forster

Conjecturing that the novel *A Passage to India* formed, at least in part, my awareness of India, desire for India and exploration of ideas about India, and finally led to the writing of *neem dreams*, I began to find Forster freshly fascinating.

E.M. Forster is not the kind of writer I'd have imagined I'd choose to spend a lot of time with. So English. Repressed. Timid. He hid his homosexuality most of his life. He never wrote overtly gay characters and gay relationships in his novels. I couldn't help wishing that he had. I couldn't help wanting to turn instead to a life that rebels against conformity and hypocrisy. Someone exotic or in pursuit of exoticism.

I probably shouldn't say *gay* by the way. It's anachronistic. Once a composer who had written an opera about Oscar Wilde was telling me about an interview with a gay journalist who typically attacked him for refusing to call Wilde *gay*. Wilde wasn't gay, said the composer, I am but he was not; there was no *gay* to be, there was no gay culture then. In Forster's world it was homosexual or, more exactly, homoerotic.

Forster was about 19 years old at the time of Wilde's infamous trial and Wilde's cruel disgrace might well have put him right off any notion of being, as we now say, out.

For the young Forster and other "men under that star", the orchestrated demolition of Wilde...devastated hope and destroyed affiliation for

homosexual men generally, and permanently affected Forster both as a private person and as an evolving writer. (Haralson 60)

And the point is, gay is not quite synonymous with homosexual, gay is a construct of culture and implies gay culture.

Forster used the word *queer* liberally, including in *A Passage to India*, to mean peculiar. In a new collection of essays, *Queer Forster*, edited by Robert Martin and George Pigghard, the writers focus on Forster's place in the emerging field of queer studies and his place in the re-evaluation of modernist invention of sexual identity. Counting up the uses of the word *queer* in *A Passage to India*, Yonatan Touval remarks

...it's as though queerness is the stuff Indians (or, like Fielding, Adela, and Mrs. Moore, things *gone* Indian) are made of, the very essence of Indianicity. Or if not India's essence, at least its identity.
...[Q]ueerness...becomes constituted by its difference from the English.
(Touval 242-3)

And it is not only "Indianicity" that marks this difference of course, but something far less visible, something unacknowledged: a sexuality that cannot be revealed or discussed, something that could only be defined in terms that set it aside from the ruling English idea of itself.

[W]hile queerness is never more explicitly defined than in the assertion that it lies somewhere in the difference between things Indian and English (but on the side of the Indian) McBryde's [the District Superintendent of Police in *APT*] know-it-when-you-see-it brand of epistemology...is indicatively shared by the entire Anglo-Indian community. ...[Q]ueerness is that difference in the Indian which the quality of being English enables (entitles?) one to know. (Touval 243)

Similarly, sexual "deviance" has usually been discussed as a "difference" which the quality or identity of being "normal" enables and entitles one to "know".

You do not need to know anything about Forster, his life and times, to read *A Passage to India*, to enjoy and appreciate it. These days it's a common assertion that you ought not *need* to know about a writer's life, that perhaps you should not, that the author is dead and the reader lives. Text, only text. New Critic W.K. Wimsatt in "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) influenced the turning away from biography and authorial intention as ways to understand and evaluate works of fiction. Later theorists such as Roland Barthes posit the absence or even the death of the author-god. In his famous essay "The Death of the Author", without

which no contemporary discussion of writing can take place, Barthes sees a given text as either indeterminate in meaning, or as capable of multiple readings:

[T]he space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. (Barthes 147)

And Foucault also undermines the idea of an author as an autonomous, creative individual:

The coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy and the sciences...

The author-function is...characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society. (Foucault 1980: 141, 148)

It's as if we always thought so. But then, as Kevin Brophy says:

At a moment when the author as creative origin of a literary text has seemingly been undermined in favour of the text's existence as a cultural, political and historical artefact, as a production of language itself, or as inevitably subversive to its own assertions, [the] recent annexing of the creative function to a widening range of discourses seems to breathe a paradoxical life back into the author as creative origin. (Brophy 32)

Many of us *do* like to know about the life and times of writers who fascinate us. Booksellers confirm that writers' biographies are more popular than ever. Like many readers, I am curious about the life of writers whose work interests me. But what might biographical knowledge add to the reading?

Can it take the place of reading? I wonder, for example, if more people haven't read *about* the Bloomsbury group, Woolf especially, than have read the works.

I read the books of writer-friends with a special interest, aware of the person behind the text. When a new friend seeks to read my books I know their idea of me has something to do with why. Critical writing, of course, can choose to engage with the text alone, and recent fashion usually insists that it does, but a reader can choose their own degree of interest in the writer.

I don't need to know about Forster to appreciate his books, but I like to. I now read *Passage* after reading Forster's other novels, his Indian journals, his *Aspects of the Novel*, some of his other non-fiction. I read biographies and critical works about him. This would have to make a difference to my reading of *Passage*, but what *kind* of difference does it make?

Repressed or not, Forster is the writer who produced the work I am giving a lot of attention. Though he led a life that initially and superficially I have little sympathy for, I begin to find the life has other dimensions than the closeted one, and that what we might think of as regrettable “closeted-ness” might have been a strength for the writer, and that Forster had admirable qualities.

And what if he had no such qualities? As it happens I have no desire to listen to Wagner’s music so I don’t have to think about whether his proto-Nazism would interfere with my pleasure. No artist whose work I do admire has, so far as I know, a world view as repulsive as Wagner’s; still they are not necessarily someone I’d want to be friends with. You don’t judge a work by the life. But knowing about the life gives your interest in or knowledge of the work another dimension: it places the work in a context that reveals something more of its origins and its worldliness.

Still, Forster was secretive about his homosexuality for most of his life, and certainly up to the time *Passage* was published. Where his homosexuality was concerned, says biographer Francis King, Forster

...was not one to stand up and be counted but to sit down and be counted out. When Ackerley once took Forster to task about his timidity, saying ‘After all, Gide has come clean,’ Forster snapped back ‘But Gide hasn’t got a mother.’ He seemed to have forgotten that Gide had both a wife and daughter. In addition to scruples about his mother, Forster also felt that to publish the book [*Maurice*] would somehow damage his image as ‘the Sacred Maiden Aunt of English Letters, Keeper of the Bloomsbury Conscience’ (as Cyril Connolly characterized him). (King, F. 57)

Ackerley, now there’s a chap to want to spend some time with: handsome, flamboyant, *out*. “Arse-holes to you!” he’d say on the rare occasions his frankness about his sexual proclivities met with open derision or hostility. Very different, remarks Forster biographer Francis King, from the man whom Virginia Woolf described as *timid as a mouse* (King, F. 79). Ackerley’s entertaining, vivid book *Hindoo Holiday* (1932)¹ is an account of his time as a secretary to the homosexual Maharajah of Chhatarpur, an engagement that Forster engineered. The two men corresponded during this time and became good friends.

Forster, however, declined to write a preface for *Hindoo Holiday*.

He gave as his reasons that he thought the book too good to need a preface and that he did not wish to compromise himself over the Maharaja. But Ackerley realized that the true reason was that Forster shrank from being associated with what, by the standards of those times, might be regarded as improprieties and, in consequence, provoking his mother’s disapproval. (King, F. 90)

¹ A new edition, restoring earlier cuts, was issued in 2000.

Oh dear, Forster is no hero! Shrinking from being associated with improprieties! Not daring to provoke mother's disapproval! Can one admire the work of such a man? His work was so successful that even before *Passage* was published he was considered to rate up there with Lawrence and Joyce. What did he have to lose?

Forster's life was dominated by his close attachment to his mother who lived to the age of ninety (as did Forster).

Though he was never prepared to 'come out', his attitude to homosexuality became increasingly frank over the years. The process is illustrated by three incidents, one in the thirties, one in the forties and one in the fifties. The first is the successful prosecution of James Hanley's partly homosexual novel *Boy*. Forster did not offer to appear as witness, along with such writers as A.P Herbert, H.G. Wells and J.B. Priestly, but privately he expressed admiration of that book and his anger that legal proceedings should have been instituted. The second is the publication of a letter by J.R. Ackerley in *The Spectator* of November 1942, after a 'witch-hunt' in Abergavenny that had ended in one successful suicide and two attempts at it. Forster was not prepared to sign this letter but he gave Ackerley considerable help with its drafting. The third was an article, 'Society and the Homosexual', which he wrote for the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1953.
(King, F. 89)

Forster did not write another novel after *Passage*, so there is no telling what effect this "increasing frankness" might have had on aspects of subsequent novels. But he wrote many articles, essays, and a classic guide to the city of Alexandria, admired – and put to good use – by Lawrence Durrell (author of the *Alexandria Quartet*) among others. He wrote an affectionate biography *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson*. He wrote letters and petitions, joined societies, appeared on platforms, attended congresses, sat on committees. Twice (in 1934 and 1942) he became President of the National Council for Civil Liberties, and he served as president of the Humanist Society. (Can one *not* admire the work of such a man?) And in *The Spectator* in 1936 he said what every schoolchild like me (decades later) would have wanted to hear:

"...If the impossible ever happens and I am asked to help break up a school what I shall say is this: 'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and bies [sic]. School was the unhappiest time of my life, and the worst trick it ever played me was to pretend that it was the world in miniature. For it hindered me from discovering how lovely and delightful and kind the world can be, and how much of it is intelligible. From this platform of middle age, this throne of experience, this altar of wisdom, this scaffold of character,

this beacon of hope, this threshold of decay, my last words to you are:
There's a better time coming.” (quoted in Furbank 48)

Could a greater frankness have helped him attain a greater artistic achievement? There is the repression-is-good-for-the-art-if-bad-for-the-artist school of thought; that kind of thing is often heard. A friend emailed to me:

Forster, the patron saint of the outsider's dilemma, writing like mad while he was closeted, drying up the minute he accepted his homosexuality. Me, I wish Forster could've gone on writing incisive social canvases *with* ???? gay characters - but his gay side produced *Maurice*, a nice little coming out story - and that's understandable, according to my channel theory. (The theory that goes: art forms are a channel, the individual artist is water flowing. If you want to flow down an established channel, that's nice and easy. But if you want to flow down a channel that doesn't exist yet, you have to flow a bit, jump out and dig a bit, flow a bit further and then jump out and dig the next metre of the channel - and in consequence, you're unlikely to flow as far as a writer who accepts the status quo ... and you certainly won't be as able to concentrate on making pretty ripples as you flow.) (Pausacker 2000)

The novel *Maurice*, written before *Passage* and not published in Forster's lifetime, is generally found disappointing. It is curiously passionless, in spite of the homoerotic affairs it depicts. His other novels seem wiser about human passion, more worldly.

There is a lot to admire about Forster – his championing of the Alexandrian poet Cavafy and of his own compatriot Ackerley, and many personal kindnesses and unobtrusive generosity recorded in his biographies. And he was the one who famously said: “*If I had the choice between betraying my country and betraying my friends I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.*” (Forster 1951) *That* I have *always* admired, long before I knew who its author was.

Francis King calls this statement “silly”, pointing out

Most of a man's friends are also his fellow countrymen and Forster's preference...is therefore to betray the many rather than the one. An absurdity... (King, F. 116)

But I find this objection the far greater absurdity; Forster of all people would not suppose that friendship is prescribed by nationality, nor that national pride should blind one to superior accomplishments elsewhere:

No English novelist is as great as Tolstoy... No novelist anywhere has analysed the modern consciousness as successfully as Marcel Proust.

...English fiction...does not contain the best stuff yet written, and if we deny this we become guilty of provincialism. (Forster 1955: 7)

Forster's reminder that a great deal of viciousness arises out of the supposed virtue of patriotism, and that friendship is a supreme value, is demonstration, I believe, of a superior ethical sense.

His hypothetical choice *still* incites debate and commentary, attack and defence from several angles:

E.M. Forster has been routinely ridiculed by conservatives... Why would such a man advocate treason? The simple answer is that he did not. In fact, he has been misunderstood and, in a way, even misquoted. ...He concluded not with a ringing declaration of the duty to aid the class struggle but with an appeal to ancient and mediaeval notions of loyalty and friendship:

Such a choice may scandalise the modern reader... It would not have shocked Dante, though. Dante places Brutus and Cassius in the lowest circle of Hell because they had chose to betray their friend Julius Caesar rather than their country Rome.

(Fleming, T. 2001)

The author of the classic text on the outsider's (that is, non-Indian's) experience of India places himself outside the identification with the British in India that might superficially be expected of him. It is reasonable to suppose that it is his repressed homosexuality that gives him this extra edge, this ability to observe with something that passes for detachment. But it is not exactly detachment, it is a lack of attachment to and identification with the group he is with and supposedly *in*. Early pages of *APTI* show Indian characters in intimate conversation: scenes like this have no less conviction than those showing the English venting their racism among themselves.

Forster's engagement with India was one of "aesthetic kinship and intellectual sympathy" in the words of a contemporary Indian author and publisher, who also says approvingly:

Forster was a subtle thinker who caught the "clash of civilisations" at an early moment... He was an oddball Englishman of immense learning and hellishly independent opinions... He was outspokenly anti-imperialist, anti-Fascist, anti-fundamentalist. (Advani 2001)

While Forster never enacted the obvious flamboyance, outspokenness and outrageousness that once was more to my taste, he is read today as a queer writer. As Christopher Reed says in this context

I have to reply in the negative to the question, “was Forster queer?”... The more interesting question, however, is “/s Forster queer?” (Reed 86)

Forster’s discretion, even his timidity, need not be seen as not meaning a lack or failure of nerve in the artist, but a source of strength, a way to cultivate qualities of detachment, perception, perspective and the invaluable certainty that one’s work is to expose and explore what generally is hidden, unacknowledged, unspeakable. This was his great achievement in *A Passage to India*.

If Forster was my first guide to India, then, there could have been far worse ones.

Forster brought to India an understanding of the paradoxes in man’s situation matured through contemplating other societies; from India he learned of aspects to the existential condition atrophied or stultified by modern civilization, and in Indian thought and the symbolism of her myths, art and architecture, he discovered other dimensions; to man’s perpetual search for self-understanding.

It is as if India redrew the contours of reality for Forster. (Parry 272, 265)

To “re-draw the contours of reality”: yes, reality will never do for some of us; and that’s always been the reason for reading, for travel, for India.

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