

## Chapter 4

### E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924)

*A Passage to India* (1924) by E.M. Forster is another novel which displays some of the characteristics of modernism, as it confronts the sudden decline of British imperialism – not least in the symbolism of the Marabar caves which lie at its heart. Drawing on Forster’s visit to India in 1912 and his later experience as private secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas,<sup>1</sup> *A Passage to India* is a satire, both biting and comic, of the behaviour of the British Raj in the early twentieth century. It takes us away from the concerns of the English middle classes, teased out in Forster’s earlier work, into the muddle and mystery of India under colonial rule.<sup>2</sup>

The opening sentence of the novel – ‘Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary’ – sweeps us immediately into the life of colonial India, with all its contradictions and complexities, as it is played out in the ordinary city of Chandrapore, and it points to the single extraordinary event in the Marabar caves which for just a few days disrupts that life.

The remainder of chapter 1 is a description of Chandrapore, written in the bland style of a travel writer more interested in facts than atmosphere. In the eighteenth century Chandrapore was an impressive

---

<sup>1</sup> Forster writes about this experience in *The Hill of Devi* (1953).

<sup>2</sup> Readers may enjoy in particular *A Room with a View* (1908), set in Venice and about the emancipation of Lucy Honeychurch, and *Howards End* (1910), about the conflict between the capitalist Wilcoxes and the liberal-minded Schlegels. Forster regarded *Howards End* as the best of his novels.

place and a few fine houses remain from that era, but it was 'never large or beautiful' and now it is the ordinariness which is striking: 'There is no painting and scarcely any carving in the bazaars'; the temples are 'ineffective'; everything is 'so abased, so monotonous'.<sup>3</sup> Chandrapore is built on the banks of the Ganges, but any prospect of the river is shut out by the bazaars and it serves only 'to wash the excrescence back into the soil'.<sup>4</sup> This part of Chandrapore, the Indian part, is a muddle and reflects the muddle of India. But away from the river and the poverty of the city, things change. On higher ground there is a 'maidan' (a large open space) and a hospital, and this is where the Eurasians live; and beyond that, higher still, is the civil station, the well-ordered home of the Raj, 'where the streets intersect at right angles', with its bungalows, its own grocer and cemetery, and the red-brick club, where the colonial rulers congregate. 'It shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky' and the criss-crossing roads come to be seen not only as a symbol of order, but also as a net which the British have thrown over the natives.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed such is the apartness of the civil station that from its high vantage point (metaphorical as well as physical) the Indian Chandrapore cannot be seen. Trees have grown up, as if trying to escape and trying to find light and air, screening the teeming life below and so effectively disguising and beautifying the city to which newcomers 'have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment'.<sup>6</sup> Thus when Mrs Moore and her prospective daughter-in-law, plain Adela Quested, arrive, they are disappointed not to see the 'real India' and determine to discover it. The journey of discovery is the 'passage to India' of the novel's title – not the romantic sea voyage that has brought them here, but the quest, incorporated in Adela Quested's name, to experience the country which will become her home if she marries Mrs Moore's son, Ronny Heaslop, the City Magistrate. Then the closing sentence of the chapter echoes the opening sentence: to the south is the one outstanding feature of the landscape, the 'fist and fingers' which are the Marabar Hills, 'containing the extraordinary caves'.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London: Arnold, 1924), chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 1.

In chapter 2 we meet the novel's protagonist, the young Muslim doctor Aziz, an emotional and excitable widower, who at an informal and chaotic dinner listens to his uncle, Hamidullah, and his lawyer friend, Mahmoud Ali, discussing whether it is possible for an Indian to be friends with an Englishman: this is the question which lies at the heart of the novel and will be answered at the end. Although such friendship might work in England (Hamidullah was educated at Cambridge), Englishmen arriving in India intending to be gentlemen 'are told it will not do' and gradually forget their good intentions, while women arriving from England are even more overbearing than their husbands and will be changed for the worse within six months. The superior attitude of the English is portrayed when Aziz receives a message from Major Callendar, the Civil Surgeon, calling him away; but when Aziz arrives at Callendar's compound, Callendar has already left without leaving a message and Aziz's 'tonga' (carriage) is appropriated by the screeching Mrs Callendar and Mrs Lesley to take them to the club. Walking back home, Aziz stops to rest at a mosque. He meets Mrs Moore and is surprised she is not like the other English because she speaks to him as an equal.

However, back at the club the idea of meeting with natives is seen as at best amusing and at worst despised: 'Wanting to see Indians! How new that sounds!'; 'Natives! Why, fancy!'; 'Why, the kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die,' says the appalling Mrs Callendar. And from Ronny to his mother, '... please don't talk about Aziz to Adela ... she'll begin wondering whether we treat the natives properly, and all that sort of nonsense' – though in fact Ronny is comparatively fair-minded.<sup>8</sup> When Adela remains determined to meet with 'real' Indians, Mr Turton, the Collector who controls the city, arranges a 'Bridge Party', inviting a group of natives to the club to meet with the English. But the party serves only to emphasise the divide between the rulers and the ruled, with mutual mistrust between them. The English stand on one side of the tennis lawn and the natives on the other, while kites and a vulture hover threateningly overhead. There are few attempts at communication. 'I consider they ought to come over to me,' says Mrs Turton. 'I refuse to shake hands with any of the men, unless it has to be the Nawab Bahadur.'<sup>9</sup> Only Mr Fielding, Principal of the Government College, engages with the Indians and, impressed by the enquiring

---

<sup>8</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 5.

attitude of Mrs Moore and Adela, he invites them to tea, happily accepting their suggestion that Aziz should join them: Fielding is full of good sense and often serves as Forster's mouthpiece in the novel. That evening Adela understands that as Ronny's wife she would also be likely to fall into the colonial way of life and would see India 'always as a frieze, never as a spirit'. As if to confirm her worst fears, dinner that evening is 'Julienne soup full of bulletry bottled peas, pseudo-cottage bread, fish full of branching bones, pretending to be plaice, more bottled peas with the cutlets, trifle, sardines on toast: the menu of Anglo-India'.<sup>10</sup>

Fielding's tea party and its aftermath are central to the novel's plot. Aziz arrives early and a friendship begins to form between him and Fielding, who is only in Chandrapore to run the College and keeps his distance from the Raj. As the party progresses it is clear that Mrs Moore has the same liberal attitude as Fielding, whereas Adela, to Fielding's annoyance and in spite of her professed 'quest', turns out to be more intent on learning facts about the country than in any sort of interaction with it; as he later puts it, 'She goes on and on as if she's at a lecture – trying ever so hard to understand India and life, and occasionally taking a note'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Adela's lack of empathy with India and Indians leads to her letting slip that she could not settle here and thus cannot marry Ronny. Such lack of empathy, and the divide between the English and the Indians, are evidenced further in the different ways in which they think and communicate. The English rely on literal meanings and in a typically colonial way they use naming as a form of control; for the Indians, however, names, definitions, and even facts, are elusive and it is 'the truth of mood' behind the language that matters – so when Aziz gushingly invites Mrs Moore and Adela to visit him, he intends only to show generous hospitality and is horrified when Adela accepts.<sup>12</sup> Not wishing the ladies to see his lowly lodgings, he arranges an expedition to the Marabar caves instead, though is equally surprised when his intended diversion is also accepted. The fourth guest at Fielding's tea party is Professor Godbole, an elderly teacher at the College. Godbole is a Hindu and it is here that the religious division in India between the Hindus and Muslims (like Aziz) begins to become apparent: it is another part of the muddle. Godbole believes in all of nature living in harmony and has divorced himself from the tribulations of everyday life.

---

<sup>10</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 11.

<sup>12</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 7.

After the tea party the day ends with yet more muddle. Adela tells Ronny that she no longer wishes to marry him and he seems relieved as much as upset; then, driving back from watching the polo, their hands touch and they decide they do want to marry after all – ‘I don’t feel a bit excited – I’m just glad it’s settled up at last,’ says Adela to Mrs Moore that evening. ‘It’s as if I got everything out of proportion.’<sup>13</sup>

Aziz is not allowed to forget the visit to the Marabar Caves and he organises the expedition splendidly. There is an early start to catch the train just before dawn and for Aziz, who has spent the night on the station platform in nervous anticipation, it is the happiest moment of his life. But Mrs Moore, who is feeling her age, and Adela are less enthusiastic; in fact, since the tea party they have been apathetic and have ‘felt nothing acutely for a fortnight’.<sup>14</sup> With the engagement between Ronny and Adela apparently settled, Mrs Moore’s thoughts have turned back to England and her other children, while Adela ponders her future marriage with less than excitement. They are ‘civil’; they comment ‘appropriately’; and they are settled in the privacy of a ‘purdah’ carriage, comic in its excess, with ‘the piles of rugs and bolsters, the rolling melons, the scent of sweet oils, the ladder, the brass-bound box [and] the sudden irruption of Mahmoud Ali’s butler from the lavatory with tea and poached eggs’.<sup>15</sup> Fielding and Godbole are also due to join the expedition, but Godbole has prayed for too long and they arrive after the train has left.

The journey is both dull and threatening, with the half-asleep ‘pomper, pomper’ of the train, the oppressive heat, and the sky turning an ‘angry orange’. As it approaches the Marabar hills, the train pulls into a station where an elephant is waiting to carry them to the caves. The first cave, into which the whole party crowds, is dark and claustrophobic, and Mrs Moore panics and is disorientated:

She lost Aziz and Adela in the dark, didn’t know who touched her, couldn’t breathe, and some vile naked thing struck her face and settled on her mouth like a pad ... She hit her head. For an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic. For not only did the stench alarm her; there was also a terrifying echo.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 8.

<sup>14.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 14.

<sup>15.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 14.

<sup>16.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 14.

The echo, 'boum', a motif that will recur throughout the novel, reduces every word and every sound, perhaps the meaning of all life, to the same bland emptiness. When they emerge, Mrs Moore sees there have been no villains, and the 'naked ... pad' was no more than a baby carried by its mother, but still the cave has been a spiritual black hole, reducing good and evil to the same level, stripping away any sense of value, and sucking both energy and belief from her. Suddenly her Christian faith loses its meaning and has no place in the vastness of India: 'at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from "Let there be light" to "It is finished" only amounted to "boum".'<sup>17</sup> In a way, her spiritual severance from life mirrors that of Godbole: he rises above the everyday, but she stares into the abyss and there is only despair. The echo will stay with her for the rest of her life.

While Mrs Moore recovers, Aziz, Adela and a guide carry on exploring alone. Aziz is thinking of the magnificent breakfast he has laid on; Adela thinks gloomily about her proposed marriage: 'She and Ronny – no, they did not love each other.'<sup>18</sup> What happens then is the chief muddle of the novel, but what is certain is that Aziz and Adela enter separate caves, so Adela's subsequent accusation that Aziz has assaulted her in a cave is without foundation. There are no witnesses, Aziz protests a bewildered innocence, but in India the word of the white woman is believed without question and he is imprisoned, then bailed, to await a show trial with an almost inevitable outcome. Only Fielding believes Aziz and is ostracised by the English as a result. Mrs Moore, already drained by her experience, has no interest in the case either way; even before the trial takes place she takes ship for England and dies soon after sailing from Bombay.

The trial itself, recounted in chapter 24, is at the centre of the novel's satire. Nowhere is the divide between the Raj and the native Indians more apparent: at one stage of the often comic proceedings, all the whites, except Fielding, are sitting on the platform with the presiding magistrate, Ronny's assistant, while all the Indians are sitting below. Major Callendar regards the whole business as 'a damn good thing ... It'll make them squeal and it's time they did squeal.' As for Nureddin's injuries in a car accident with Aziz, Callendar comments with relish: 'His beauty's gone, five upper teeth, two lower and a nostril ... Old Panna Lal

---

<sup>17</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 14.

<sup>18</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 15.

brought him the looking glass yesterday and he blubbered ... I laughed; I laughed ... nothing's too bad for these people.' The Superintendent, who puts the case against Aziz, betrays 'no hatred of Aziz, merely an abysmal contempt'.<sup>19</sup> His suggestion that Aziz deliberately had Mrs Moore crushed in the first cave, so leaving Adela unprotected, provokes uproar: Mahmoud Ali, who is defending Aziz, storms out of the court and the crowd outside begins to chant her name – 'Esmis Esmoor'. For all her lack of interest, Mrs Moore will become a local hero and a symbol of conciliation, with two graves in Chandrapore even though she has been buried at sea. As the case proceeds and the court quiets, it is Adela's turn to give evidence and she relives the day which, looking back, had an 'indescribable splendour' after all. As the questions come, she answers each of them truthfully, but they seem to break whatever spell she has been under and, when asked whether Aziz followed her into the cave, she realises that she cannot be sure. And then, 'I'm afraid I have made a mistake ... I withdraw everything.'<sup>20</sup>

In the chaos that follows Adela's acquittal, the Indians celebrate riotously in the streets and Fielding rescues Adela, taking her to the comparative safety of the College. It remains unclear what provoked Adela's accusation of Aziz. Was it the guide or an unknown assailant who attacked her? Or was it some sort of hallucination, connected 'by a thread' to her engagement to Ronny and exorcised by the Superintendent's questions?<sup>21</sup> Or is Aziz nearer the truth when Fielding suggests he dictate a letter of apology for her to sign: "Dear Dr Aziz, I wish you had come into the cave; I am an awful old hag, and it is my last chance." Will she sign that?<sup>22</sup> Or, in spite of their attempt to find a logical explanation, was it mystery rather than muddle? Fielding has a new respect for Adela and to him she has changed and become a real person – 'she was no longer examining life, but being examined by it'; however, for Hamidullah the retraction of her accusation is no more than 'cold justice': 'truth is not truth in that exacting land unless there go with it kindness and more kindness and kindness again'.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 24.

<sup>20.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 24.

<sup>21.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 24.

<sup>22.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 27.

<sup>23.</sup> *A Passage to India*, chapter 26.



Part III of the novel, which pulls together its various strands, is set two years later at the Hindu city of Mau, hundreds of miles west of the Marabar hills. Ronny has broken off the engagement to Adela and she has returned to England. Fielding, who has persuaded Aziz not to pursue Adela for damages, has also returned briefly to England – and Aziz persuades himself that he has actually married Adela for her money; indeed, at one point Aziz half believes it was Fielding who assaulted Adela in the cave. At Mau the sensational Hindu festival of Krishna is in full swing and it brings together Professor Godbole (now Minister of Education), Aziz (who, though a Muslim, has become chief medicine man to the Rajah), and Fielding (who has been sent to look at English education in the remoter states and is here with his new wife, Mrs Moore's daughter, Stella, and her brother, Ralph). They all meet up in another muddle when, watching the festival from the water, their boats collide and capsizes.

At first Aziz will have nothing to do with Fielding, but once misunderstandings have been cleared up they ride out on horseback together. Aziz looks forward to the day when 'India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one!'<sup>24</sup> Until then, until the English are no longer the colonisers, and however much they wish it, Aziz and Fielding cannot be friends and the novel's symbolic ending answers the question posed in chapter 2:

'Why can't we be friends now? ... It's what I want. It's what you want.'

But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart ... the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet' and the sky said, 'No, not there.'<sup>25</sup>

*A Passage to India* is not as tightly constructed as Forster's earlier novels and suffers from the occasional languor, but it is more ambitious in its scope and creates a vivid picture of India in the last gasp of imperialism. However, for all its condemnation of the British Raj, the satire of the novel is two-edged and Aziz and his excitable friends are not wholly treated with sympathy (compare Rudyard Kipling's

---

<sup>24</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 37.

<sup>25</sup>. *A Passage to India*, chapter 37.



affectionate – though not uncritical – treatment of India in *Kim*).<sup>26</sup> So the implication is not that India should be granted its independence (at least, ‘not yet’) – it would simply disintegrate into anarchy – but that the British should influence through friendship and respect, and not through the haughty disdain of the likes of Turton, Callendar, and their wives, who would be wholly laughable figures if they were not also so self-serving, offensive and cruel.

SAMPLE

---

<sup>26</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (London: Macmillan, 1901).