

Sympathy in the Novels of E. M. Forster

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V. S. Naipaul, in an interview with Farrukh Dhondy in the August 2001 edition of *Literary Review*, discusses E. M. Forster's attempts to represent the people of India and their religious and philosophical beliefs in *A Passage to India*. "People like E. M. Forster," Naipaul conjectures, "make a pretense of making poetry of the three religions. [...] It's utter rubbish" (33). Furthermore, Naipaul associates Forster's homosexuality, and his friendship with Syed Ross Masood, with the processes of imperial economic exploitation: "[Forster was] a homosexual and he [had] his time in India, exploiting poor people, which his friend Keynes also did" (33). Naipaul adds dismissively that, with respect to the position of *A Passage to India* in the literary canon, "I think people don't actually read it, you know" (33).

Coming from the winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize for Literature, these ramblings can easily be taken as the definitive critical word on Forster. As P. J. M. Scott says in his study of Forster's literary contributions, "perspective needs restoring" (151). *A Passage to India* "is not free of serious flaw," as Scott admits, and it has been fashionable at certain moments in history to avoid studying writers whose values may be problematic, whose characters may be stereotypical, or whose cultural and historical context may seem antiquated (151). That being said, Naipaul's immediate association of Forster's and Keynes's interest in India with their homosexuality is to look at less than one side of a complex issue. To associate homosexuality with the processes of exploitation, and to conclude that Forster "belonged to this kind of nastiness," is questionable at best (33). Naipaul's conclusion that Forster "encouraged people to lie" about India is misleading (33). Forster's work is characterised by a search for paths towards individual truths and an opening up of the deeper corners of consciousness. The themes and subject matter of *A Passage to India* distinguish it among other novels of the time, both in its exploration of the new human connections in the diverse modern world, and in its determination to avoid privileging one worldview above another. Forster's time in India, and the relationships he formed there, are relevant to his writing. Forster himself, however, said bluntly in a letter to Masood that although he began *A Passage to India* as a bridge of sympathy, he later abandoned this course because "my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable. I think that most Indians, like most

English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they sympathise with one another or not" (Furbank xx). Indeed, the novel avoids simplistic idealisations of Anglo-Indian relations; it compels its readers to confront truths, however uncomfortable, about their inner selves and their relation to the world.

Balachandra Rajan proposes that the act of reading about an imperial context may not always be pleasant, but that "it should be enlightening" (49). From Milton's *Paradise Lost* through to Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, texts dealing with perceptions of the Orient have been constructed from a Western point of view. As a consequence, they have focussed largely on monetary or natural riches, the peculiar Otherness of local inhabitants, or the corrupting desire to possess and control both riches and inhabitants. Joseph Conrad wrote of a hidden treasure in *Nostromo*; H. Rider Haggard wrote of a beautiful white African queen in *She*; and George Orwell, almost forty years later, wrote of the corruption of the imperial civil service in *Burmese Days*. Western writers' inability, historically, to acknowledge the perspective of the Other is an extension of British historian David Cannadine's proposal that the British Empire was as much "about the replication of sameness and similarities originating from home as it was about the insistence on difference and dissimilarities originating from overseas" (xix). Inasmuch as Cannadine hypothesises that the British Empire was an expansive realm of social structures which sought to construct contrived affinities across boundaries, the literature of empire was similarly about the construction of sameness to the exclusion of Otherness. According to Rajan, reading today about empire from these Western perspectives requires an assessment of that which is omitted from the narrative (49). Forster stands unique among his contemporaries because his interest in the way that shared emotion can act as a bridge for intimate sympathetic relationships challenges the imperial model in which the perspective of the coloniser is privileged over that of the colonised.

Forster's understanding of sympathy arises from the writings of Conrad and Haggard, as well as from the writing of William Makepeace Thackeray, Rudyard Kipling, and Virginia Woolf. All of these writers were to some extent preoccupied with the processes of ordering and controlling the imperial world. Forster's belief in the importance of establishing sympathetic connections across cultural boundaries

arises largely from the traditional imperial habit of controlling the colonised peoples by encouraging them to conform to a specific cultural paradigm. This tradition links sympathy to the construction of artificial affinities, and to the idea of speaking for the Other. Forster, however, moves beyond the tentative explorations of his predecessors. Masood defined sympathy, for which he uses the word *tarass*, literally thirst, as “the capacity to enter the feelings of another and absorb the atmosphere of a place” in a letter to Forster (Bharucha 107). By departing completely from England for India, thereby entering the physical space of another, Forster constructs sympathetic relationships within, and as a consequence of, a foreign, inhospitable, setting.

Ultimately, sympathy cannot overcome all boundaries, in Forster’s opinion. In the pursuit of truths, Forster is the first to admit the unknowable. He is preoccupied with the question, posed at the beginning of the novel, of whether or not it is possible for an Indian and an Englishman to be friends. The reply echoes at the end of the novel, ambiguous to the last, “no, not yet [...] No, not here” (293). It is significant, nonetheless, that Forster addresses the possibility for genuine sympathy between individuals of such different cultural backgrounds. While other writers examine sympathetic relationships between genders or classes, Forster uses the novel form to explore the possibilities, and limitations, of sympathy in a much larger context.

When Forster wrote to Masood about sympathy in *A Passage to India*, he added that he wasn’t interested in sympathy as an artist, although perhaps as a journalist (Furbank xx). In a certain sense, he may have meant that the novel is not an artistic record of an immutable truth; rather, it is a report of how things are, and how they are changing, according to a particular artist. In his introduction to the Everyman edition of *A Passage to India*, Furbank writes that the novel is full of the phenomenon of change, and that it is precisely this “profound concern with change which gives [the novel] the force of historical truth” (xviii). Forster’s characters are, at times, somewhat one-dimensional and stereotypical, and the fact that he is ultimately doubtful about the possibility of forging human connections across racial or cultural boundaries is potentially discouraging. Nonetheless, in his earlier works and especially in *A Passage to India*, he consistently surpasses the writing of any of his contemporaries in his analysis of inter-class and inter-racial relationships, his depiction of the very real burden of history, and his belief in human growth. Forster’s refusal to close the novel with a relationship of complete understanding might

dishearten readers, but it demonstrates uniquely the modern struggle to find personal truth in the space between the disharmony of misunderstanding and the impossibility of full union.

Strangely enough, having dismissed Forster and “that kind of nastiness,” Naipaul goes on in his interview to extol the value of Rudyard Kipling’s Indian tales, categorizing Kipling as one of the “writers who have done something new” (36). Indisputably, Kipling’s writings on India explore the far corners of the empire innovatively. In many senses, Forster is the literary inheritor of both a manner of constructing imperial relations in a novel and of representing human interaction in colonial space pioneered by Kipling. As British society faced upheaval in the last years of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Indian society, populated by long-time traditionalists and xenophobes, clung resolutely to their community. Edwardes writes, Anglo-Indians “slowly began to realise that the tide was running irresistibly against the old order” (167). Both before and after the Great War, Anglo-India continued to keep an eye on “some British [who] tried to break through the barriers between themselves and the Indians, but [since] few had much success,” not much was made of these attempts at sympathetic fraternisation (167). In the literary world, novels such as Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* of 1901 questioned the position of Anglo-Indians in society, much as Forster, twenty years later, would question the mere presence of Anglo-Indians in an imperial context that was beginning to decay.

Kim has been described as a novel in which “brotherhood and despotism keep uneasy company”; Kipling’s story of an Irish orphan who becomes the “friend of all the world” is at the same time both optimistic about relations between coloniser and colonised and deeply conflicted about the limits of these relations (McClure 70). Kim grows up in a world entirely unlike that into which he was born: he is an English child in India, raised by a half-caste Indian woman and befriended by a Tibetan lama. He masters the empire by becoming what S. P. Mohanty aptly calls “an accomplished insider” in the various Indian communities, “without having given up any of his privileges as an outsider” (243). Kim’s life, in fact, is even more complicated than that. He, in effect, puts his privileges as an Englishman on hold to engage in what Mahbub Ali, another one of Kim’s mentors, calls the “Great Game”: the network of British spies and colonial servicemen who surveyed and controlled the far reaches of empire in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan (129).

The colonial world of Kipling’s time faced

myriad challenges: colonisers consolidated and fortified their power through new railways, agricultural projects, and censuses. At the same time, colonialism was affected by the violence of the South African War, and the collapse of the Oriental Banking Company, which, as Sandison notes in his edition of *Kim*, cost Kipling his life savings (xxxvi). As a response to these unsettling events, Kipling offers a new kind of adolescent imperial hero, the boy who, somewhat superficially, develops sympathetic relationships across races and nations in order to serve his country more effectively. For when Kim leaves St. Xavier's, soon after learning that his schooling teaches him to "command natives," he pens a note to Mahbub Ali stating that "certain things are not known to those who eat with forks. It is better to eat with both hands for awhile" (128). This act of defiance marks the beginning of Kim's efforts to construct a new life for himself, a life which incorporates both a distinctly English and a distinctly Indian adolescence. Some things about empire, Kim teaches his elders, can only be learned by engaging in dialogue with, or in emulation of, the Other.

The unusual education of Kim in Kipling's novel marks a departure from early empire writings by British authors. Kipling is one of the first writers to write about India with evident knowledge and love of its geography, and one of the first to encourage a familiarity with its languages and cultures. At the same time, Kipling's portrayal of Kim is an example of what Mohanty calls the theme of "possession without implication" within colonial discourse (247). Kim has friendships with various Indians, and develops an unique love of the country he has been born and raised in. These characteristics are also representative, however, of the "modern" imperialist who desires to become more involved in local affairs and customs while maintaining his imperial authority. In other words, the Anglo-Indians of the day were intent on "forms of necessary abstraction," on constructing an image of the self that is both highly visible, ritualised, and authoritative, as well as invisible, subversive, and stealthy (248). Kipling's novel supports the stance of this new Anglo-Indian, who asserts that colonial rule no longer only requires an iron fist and a strong sense of order, but also a sense of the context of the "Great Game."

While *Kim* by no means challenges the most firmly entrenched precepts of colonial rule, it re-defines them in light of imperial change. As Mohanty suggests, the novel moves towards an admission of a world in which Englishmen and Indians, officials and civilians, lamas and spies, "inside and outside, can be seen as implicating and potentially re-defining one another"

(249). Kipling's characters may form "culturally vacuous" relationships, but his novel also develops relationships between coloniser and colonised which are more self-reflexive for the coloniser, and in which personal sympathy may become as important as economic or social concerns (Mohanty 247). Rudyard Kipling is in this sense an original writer. More importantly, his contribution to the development of new conceptions about imperial relations is relevant to Forster's writings on the limits of sympathy in *A Passage to India*.

Both Forster and Kipling share a narrative heritage of representations of India that extends at least back to Thackeray's 1847 novel, *Vanity Fair*, which portrays the social divisions that were surfacing even in the early days of Victoria's reign. Thackeray's vividly drawn portrait of a collapsing social elite lends credibility to Cannadine's theory that imperialism sought to replicate the traditional picture of the English squirearchy (5). Inasmuch as Cannadine argues that this lifestyle was dying in England even as it formed the backbone of the empire, *Vanity Fair* depicts the final days of a British defense against encroaching outside forces. *Kim*, published half a century later, marks the final end of this battle, an end foreshadowed in the social instability of *Vanity Fair*.

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray addresses the conflict between segregated groups in early Victorian society. He is interested in the myriad roles that people assume to fit into the confines of civilized British life, and focuses on the life of Becky Sharpe. Thackeray situates Becky outside the limits of English society by a number of factors: she is a woman in a highly patriarchal, militarised society, born of a French mother in an age of French-English hostilities, the upper-class-aspiring daughter of an artist father, and an orphan in a patrilineal community. Thackeray's portrayal of chameleon characters such as Becky, characters who destabilise and de-centralise the structure of British high society, is ultimately ambiguous. While he condemns Becky's falseness, he also admires her courage, her resourcefulness, and her talent for assuming various roles in order to construct alliances with or elicit sympathy from other characters.

Becky's first scheme to ingratiate herself with the ruling classes is to marry Joseph Sedley, the son of a stockbroker. The uncivilized but clever Becky is good - and English - enough for Jos as far as the bourgeois Sedleys are concerned. "Better she," Mr. Sedley confides to his wife, "than a black Mrs. Sedley, and a dozen of mahogany grandchildren," qualifying Becky as lower than a woman of fortune or family, but better than one of another race (53). Becky is a highly

unsuitable partner for Jos, however, in the eyes of George Osborne, the son of a military man with aristocratic ambitions. George protests, by way of explanation, that he is “a liberal man;” but one with “proper pride,” who knows his “own station: let her know hers” (59). Referring both to Jos’s success as a collector in India and his social ineptitude, he vows that he will “take down that great hectoring nabob and prevent him from being made a greater fool than he is” (60). George’s statements reveal the extent to which ideas of race and class were intertwined at the time: British subjects of various economic backgrounds were expected to be almost as isolated from one another as those of various racial backgrounds. George assumes that establishing connections across either of these categories undermines something fundamentally British, something that makes him proud to know his own station: the establishment and maintenance of boundaries between human beings. Becky’s relationship with Jos challenges these assumptions, and if Becky should succeed in crossing class boundaries, either through genuine sympathetic connection or sheer cunning, other boundaries might similarly be crossed.

As readers, we are hardly any closer to forming an opinion of Becky at the end of the novel than we are when Thackeray confides to us in Chapter III that “if Miss Rebecca Sharp had determined in her heart” to marry Jos, “I don’t think, ladies, we have any right to blame her” (21). Thackeray’s ambivalence towards the French female invader of the British male *élite* may be symptomatic of his ambivalence towards the changes occurring at this time to the structure of the traditional aristocracy. He was well aware of, even as he struggled with, the stifling atmosphere of Victorian England. Forster refers to the remnants of this atmosphere in “Adrift in India,” when he tells of an Englishman who maintained that a common ground for friendships with Indians exists in India, but “if we were all somewhere else, I don’t expect it would be the same” (*Abinger Harvest* 300). Indeed, England seems to be a perfect site for social stratification to take place. Even in a novel about the viciousness of English society, Thackeray’s own misogyny and class-consciousness sometimes intrude on the text, accentuating his arguments about the proliferation of the various snobberies of the day. He only refers to the empire when he mentions Jos’ occupation; few scenes in the novel are set in India. The imperial context is thus eliminated, thus destroying any possibilities of interaction with a most terrifying Other, the colonial subject.

Despite including characters of various economic backgrounds in his novel, and depicting their responses to one another and to outsiders of various

European origins, Thackeray ends *Vanity Fair* when the fortunes of the old aristocracy overcome any threats from outside forces and are passed on seamlessly to the next deserving generation. The remote places of the empire remain remote, and serve merely as “an appropriate dumping ground for a man of Jos Sedley’s nonexistent talents,” where one sends a man of a dubious social and economic position (Brantlinger 93). The old order is still very firmly in place; however, “all snobbery has its origin in a feeling of insecurity” (Greig 46). *Vanity Fair* strikingly portrays the emergence of real divisions in British society as the middle class develops, and raises new questions about social mobility and British identity. Although Greig argues that few Victorians took Thackeray’s novel seriously, believing him to be uncertain and disjointed where writers such as Dickens were full of gusto, I would add that Thackeray’s uncertainty, in retrospect, makes his *Vanity Fair* so rich (48). Rather than resorting to superficial answers to the problems of the day, Thackeray presents the reader with unanswerable questions, and a world that was more chaotic than static.

As if in recognition of how novels such as *Vanity Fair* forced “some of the more obvious imperfections of society upon its readers notice,” British Victorian society reacted by constructing various comforting images to re-enforce the stability of the empire and of the social order of old Britannia (Greig 47). Attention shifted from the preservation of the dominant aristocracy (a more complicated matter) to the preservation of the overriding social structure of the family. Historians and writers alike have paid substantial attention to the image of the household as a microcosm of the empire. The well-run household is analogous to the well-run empire, and the fate of the empire is implicitly tied to the fate of the family. As the structure of the modern nuclear family becomes the model upon which the structure of the empire is based, the importance of communication, understanding, and the development of human relationships to the furtherance of British dominion is thus underscored. Forster himself uses this analogy, indirectly, in *Howards End*. The disharmonious union of the Schlegel and Wilcox families is comparable to the disharmonious union of modern Britain as it faces similar delicate interactions between classes and with various members of the imperial family, interactions that develop increasingly into attempts at sympathy.

The comparison between family and empire became more pronounced at various historical moments: while Forster used it as a literary trope as late as 1915, it entered the political and social lexicon as early as 1857. While it was generally true that this

“ambitious ideology [...] aspired to a universality [...] which was beyond its historical reach,” it was also true that at times, revolts of various sorts within the empire coincided with revolts of various sorts at home (Chase and Levenson 6). These events were then sometimes conflated. The passing of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act in Britain in 1857, for instance, the year of the Bengal army revolt in India, raised the question of how to preserve the traditions of empire abroad and how to preserve the sacrament of marriage at home. Indeed, “these are very different questions, but their historical convergence and their structural similarity bring them confusingly close” (Chase and Levenson 194).

The centrality of the issue of *sati* in the debates over India, for instance, emphasised that England often sought to re-create in India a value system that was already crumbling in England. *Sati* is the traditional suicide of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, an act which both symbolises a wife’s desire to assure her husband’s liberation and her willingness to remain loyal to him. As a religious act (a fact in itself debatable), the practice of *sati* should be acceptable according to liberal sympathetic attitudes about religious diversity. Moreover, the rhetoric of moral restraint and lifetime commitment in the English marriage debate was hard to interpret as anything but implicit approval for *sati*. However, British liberals were reluctant to sanction wife-burnings, especially when they were often involuntary.

The debate about *sati* exposed not only empire quibbling but also the “unsteady relations between modernity and tradition” within both countries (Chase and Levenson 196). British governance of India was being manipulated to fulfil the nostalgic desires of those who saw Victorian England as a place that allowed less and less room for the aristocratic oligarchy of *Vanity Fair*. As Cannadine proposes, “the ideal of social hierarchy was seen as the model [that...] formed the basis of the fully elaborated Raj in India” (9). British historian Michael Edwardes claims that the Victorian Anglo-Indians “became completely what they were already becoming in the last twenty years of Company rule”: a caste of their own in the caste-conscious India, self-contained and utterly hostile to Indian encroachment into their government and judiciary system (165). Home society was still clearly marked by a similar stratification. In his study of Britain from 1870-1997, Martin Pugh asserts that although the Victorians enjoyed “a relatively stable class society,” various minorities were challenging the English, High Anglican, aristocratic population (105).

Many modernist writers dealt with the political

and social instability of the turn of the century by focussing on instances of personal and social intimacy. These are explicitly the themes of novels such as *Howards End*, in which Forster concentrates on sympathy within a family setting, and *A Passage to India*, in which Forster explores sympathy in the larger setting of empire. *Howards End*, published in 1910, addresses this conflict between old and new orders in Britain. Much like *Vanity Fair*, *Howards End* is primarily set in England but refers to other European countries as its characters define themselves and their place in society. In the novel, Forster establishes what will become the central themes of *A Passage to India*: the development of meaningful relationships between human beings, and the divisions that obfuscate these relationships. *Howards End* is, like *Kim* and *Vanity Fair* before it, intensely preoccupied with traditional British questions about identity and nationhood. In contrast to *Kim* and *Vanity Fair*, however, *Howards End* addresses these questions from a new perspective: explicitly that of the German Schlegel sisters, and implicitly that of the marginalized groups of British society.

The novel begins with the often-quoted epigraph, “only connect.” Much has been read into this phrase: critics such as Hampshire, for instance, have written that it has “a philosophic rather than a social sense” (47). I believe it can be understood to have both. Forster is concerned in all his novels with how the philosophical and spiritual implications of “only connect” bear weight on our ability to connect with others socially. In other words, Forster parallels the ability to establish connections within ourselves (between our outer and inner lives, our emotions and our actions) with the ability to allow us to establish emotional connections to others. The epigraph thus echoes throughout *A Passage to India*, in which the link between self-awareness and awareness of and sympathy with others is made more explicit.

Forster also raises in *Howards End* the question of what defines a social group, or an entire civilisation. Echoing throughout the novel, almost as clearly at times as the epigraph, is the phrase used by the Schlegels to describe the type of people they associate with. The criteria for determining who is “our sort” is one of the central concerns of the novel. The Schlegel sisters’ Aunt Juley asks early on if the Wilcoxes are “our sort” (23). Forster reasons that life in the metropolis of London is less meaningless when we conceive of a God who is “a man of our own sort” (116). Even the Wilcoxes consider whether the Schlegel girls are the right sort. When Evie Wilcox expresses her disapproval of the flowers sent by Margaret Schlegel upon Mrs. Wilcox’s death, she is reminded that this might be a

German custom. “Oh, I forgot she isn’t really English,” Evie exclaims (110). After a pause, she adds revealingly, “that would explain a lot” (110). For the Wilcoxes, “our sort” are those who are English, who hold to the traditional values of a traditional England, and who possess what Helen later drily calls “common sense” (236). The Schlegels’ version of “our sort,” as described by Aunt Juley, relies more on literature and art; tellingly, Helen’s appreciation of her friends and family and the “diverse influences [that] had gone to their making” occurs at a concert (46). The term also re-appears in *A Passage to India* when Ronny uses it in conversation with Adela at the beginning of the novel. “I prefer my smoke at the club amongst my own sort,” he confesses to her as he describes the Club, Anglo-India’s feeble attempt at social and cultural unity (21).

Margaret’s epiphany later in *Howards End* that “it takes all sorts to make a world” is thus exceptionally telling (112). According to Michael Bradbury, Margaret acts “as the moral center for those who surround her” in the novel (142). We are told that she was remarkable even as a child, having discovered, from family arguments over which country was supported by God during the war, “that any human being lies nearer to the unseen than any organization” (44). Margaret’s continued wrestling with the unseen, and the everyday realities that naturally distract from the full understanding of this unseen, serves as an important backdrop for the rest of the novel. For Forster, individuals can approach truth more nearly than any group, and Margaret’s attempts to construct sympathetic relationships of her own and for others bespeaks her individual attempts to find this personal truth. For her, the differences between people are often artificially constructed: Aunt Juley might posit one idea of identity and sameness, while Henry Wilcox might posit another. These differences are a social fabrication, and are therefore in some sense illusory. Margaret thus recognises and rejects the arbitrary divisions of the term “our sort,” maintaining instead that, to her, no one character in the novel is more or less alien than another.

At the end of the novel, Margaret remarks that it is strange that she “had charged right through these Wilcoxes and broken up their lives”; rather than breaking up anything, I think that Margaret, more than anyone in the novel, brings things - and people - together (331). Granted, not everyone is entirely happy with these new connections: upon hearing of Henry Wilcox’s will, in which he leaves Howards End to Margaret, Paul Wilcox remarks petulantly that the arrangement has “apparently got to suit us” (330). Nonetheless, Margaret effectively bridges many of the gaps in the novel; her position as intermediary between

Henry and Helen illustrates how she links the old world to the new. In doing this, she widens what Bradbury calls the thematic “circle established at the opening, so that our sense of the possibilities of what may be connected, and of the problems that must be resolved, is steadily increased” (142). The novel leaves many problems (the future of Helen’s baby, the fate of the Bastis, and the tenuous relationship between the Schlegel and Wilcox families) unsettled. This is its fragile strength: its openness both lends itself well to the plurality of modern life, and, like Margaret’s personal strength, her “uncanny [...] triumph,” fails to resolve completely the problems of modern identity and connection (331). For this reason, Forster encourages his readers to “go further than Margaret Schlegel or the novelist himself can” (Bradbury 143). Novelistic representations of this struggle to identify the self, and situate this self within a cultural and communal whole, necessarily involve compromises. Thus, the representation of partial connection mixes with an understanding of the connections that are, for the moment, impossible to construct or represent, such as the link between the Schlegels and Leonard Bast. These the reader is free to explore as an instance of sympathy.

Howards End, one of Forster’s most conventionally English novels, is thus very much in the style of novelists such as Thackeray. The struggles between classes and nationalities at the heart of Becky Sharpe’s journeys across England and France in *Vanity Fair* are only infinitesimally closer to being resolved in Margaret’s and Helen’s journeys of a less literal nature in *Howards End*. Forster’s novel, however, deals with the divisions of a society on the brink of monumental changes differently than *Vanity Fair*. Both Forster and Thackeray refrain from easy answers to questions of personal identity and social connection. Forster depicts Margaret in a far less ambiguous light than Becky Sharpe, however. Furthermore, he opens up the questions of identity and connection to include the possibility that his readers might surpass the boundaries he has revealed in his novel. Forster’s eagerness to move beyond the limitations of the historical moment and the literary text distinguish him from earlier writers who wrote about human connections. Trilling writes that Forster uniquely accepts “the human fact,” and that he is “content with the human possibility” (22). Rather than believing that we can better ourselves, then, Forster believes that future human beings will be able to live out their potential by “ordering and distributing [their] native goodness” (23).

Forster’s liberal philosophy about the human possibilities for development is rather weak in its open-endedness. He does not elaborate on whether the

progress of the individual will necessarily conform to the best interests of society, relying on abstractions like “native goodness” to refer to whatever guides the evolution of future humans. Forster’s vagueness about the direction of the individual’s development is partially linked to his homosexuality, articulated only in the novel *Maurice*, which was completed in 1914 and remained unpublished until after Forster’s death in 1971. In *Maurice*, the title character has a recurring dream of a shadowy figure. For such a friend, Maurice believes he could “count the world nothing, [for] neither death nor distance nor crossness could part them” (26). Forster aspires to the condition of this dream throughout all his novels: a friendship that transcends all boundaries and is worth more than any religion, class, race, or gender. Elaine Showalter writes that Forster criticises in *A Passage to India* the “failures of institutions to live up to his ideal” of the potential for permanent union between two people (4). Aziz says of his childhood and his poetry that “every one was my friend then. The Friend: a Persian expression for God. But I do not want to be a religious poet” (251). Aziz here rejects religious symbolism, expressing a desire for human connection with Fielding, whom he addresses. Forster’s criticism of stifling institutions in *A Passage to India* is extended in *Maurice* to include the failure of institutions to recognise the possibility of relationships between men. Forster thus leaves the trite phrase our “native goodness” undefined because it is linked implicitly to the development of these homosexual relationships. For Forster, sympathy is not impossible when it occurs outside the boundaries of the normative heterosexual world, as it is outside the boundaries of the Anglo-Indian hegemony, but it is still entirely unnamable. He admits that he cannot publish *Maurice* “until his death or England’s” largely because of the repressive attitudes towards homosexuality that English society encouraged (Bharucha 109).

Forster thus continually undermines the hegemonic structure of British society in his novels. He does this in *Maurice*, in which he suggests at homosexual love, and also in *A Passage to India*, in which he acknowledges that the key to modern human development no longer lies in distance, whether it be in the form of impervious hierarchies or imperial boundaries. The development of sympathy lurks at the margins of works by writers such as Thackeray and Kipling, but finds its ultimate realisation in Forster’s novels. In *Howards End*, Forster emphasises the absolute essentiality of human connections to navigate the complexities of the modern world. Nothing is more likely to mend a divided family, or, possibly, a divided empire, than human sympathy, the development of

relations with others. As Margaret says towards the end of the novel, with reference to the various divisions between characters, “don’t you see that all this leads to comfort in the end? It is part of the battle against sameness. Differences - eternal differences, planted by God in a single family, so that there may always be colour” (328). The world both narrows alarmingly, or, as Helen puts it, “life’s going to be melting down,” at the same time that it expands at a breathtaking rate (329). To navigate differences, Forster suggests, one forges sympathetic relationships while respecting multiple perspectives.

This new world of inconceivable complexity is evident in Virginia Woolf’s early writing. Her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, published in 1915, chronicles the voyage made by Rachel Vinrace to South America. Rachel’s exposure to the opinions of those who travel by boat with her, and to the natural world and religious practices of the South American continent, shape her adolescent mind and precipitate her mental breakdown at the end of the novel. Virginia Woolf’s interest in character psychology, stream of consciousness, and the roots of human sympathy in shared experience are apparent in *The Voyage Out*, and she uses these techniques to address contemporary issues such as political idealism, secularism, female emancipation, and class relations. *The Voyage Out* represents the tensions evolving in British definitions of what is truly foreign, and what role the British must play in the modern world.

In *The Voyage Out*, people reach across gulfs of estrangement to achieve both self-awareness and awareness and understanding of those around them. Rachel first converses with Richard Dalloway, who offers her a firmly traditional interpretation of British, and imperial, relations. According to Richard, the empire should be characterised by “unity of aim, of dominion, of progress” (55). He has little concern for English injustices perpetrated on other peoples: when he refers to “unmentionable things done in our very midst,” the reader may assume he means in the horrors of imperial rule, but he refers merely to factory conditions in England (56). Although sensitive to the suffering of his own, he “can conceive of no more exalted aim [than] to be a citizen of the Empire” (57). His praise of imperial England, his view of women as confined to the private sphere and ignorant of political matters, and his clumsy attempts to communicate the meaning of his life overwhelms Rachel, who, by the end of the chapter, is “sitting silent, [looking] so queer and flushed” (60).

Rachel’s conversation with Richard Dalloway sets the tone of many similar conversations later in the

novel that leave Rachel shaken by confrontations with other values and moralities. The voyage to South America is itself compared early on in the novel by Clarissa Dalloway to the general movements of British imperialism, and its moral, religious, and economic hegemony. Clarissa says that “being on this ship seems to make [what it means to be English] so much more vivid [...] It makes one feel as if one couldn’t *not* be English” (42). Many of Woolf’s characters, such as Clarissa, directly oppose the tentative openness to difference suggested by many of Forster’s characters. Both writers explore divisions and connections between human beings, yet Forster and Woolf, as well as their characters, respond to divisions and connections differently.

For Woolf, the formative process that Rachel undergoes on her voyage is fundamentally traumatic. As Rachel travels further away from England, she begins to see schisms between Englishmen and Englishwomen. Social gatherings help her to solidify these perceptions: the ship itself gathers together various people for her to observe, as do the picnics and dances of the South American vacation. Participating in these events exposes Rachel to the randomness of modern life, a reality that is evident when she attends the church service at Santa Marina and observes that “blundering effort and misunderstanding were perpetually going on” (215). At the same time, participation in a community exposes her to the underlying reliability of human relationships that exists beneath this level of random life. Writes Jane Wheare in the introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Voyage Out*, the development of human sympathy, for Woolf, counters “an interpretation of experience as meaningless” (xix). Rachel voyages out, then, into the world of sympathy. The hurdles she has to overcome on the path to forming more meaningful relationships with others seem overwhelming to her, however, and precipitate her demise. Woolf herself admits that even the common experience of life in the South American villa cannot entirely surmount all obstacles to sympathy, for “age puts one barrier between human beings, and learning another, and sex a third” (156). Education becomes an important theme in the novel since Rachel’s voyage is also, more generally, a trip into the world of adulthood. Paradoxically, however, although education encourages Rachel’s psychological development, it increases her exposure to myriad views, which complicate the establishment of her own truths.

In the course of her education, Rachel is sent contradictory messages about how much to read and how much importance to place on learning, and also about the very nature of the modern world. Richard

Dalloway and Uncle Ridley represent ideological opposites to more progressive characters like St. John Hirst and Terrence. For instance, Richard believes that women do not have a mind for the truly cerebral world of politics, whereas St. John believes that the enlightenment of women is crucial for the progress of the modern world (150). Meanwhile, St. John tells her to read Gibbon, while her uncle Ridley dismisses the historian (157). The very foundations of civilisation are brought into question as each character gives Rachel a different opinion. Consequently, she begins to wonder whether, in the modern world, religion, literature, and all of the other foundations of culture are merely, as she calls them in a chapter later excised from the novel, “scratching on the matchbox” (377).

Virginia Woolf suggests to the reader that although Rachel may be correct in rejecting aspects of society which are no longer adequate for representing the multiplicity of modern culture, she is perhaps too quick to despair of finding anything to hold on to in the world. Rachel’s final illness and death, described as a process of falling into “a deep pool of sticky water” from which she only surfaces briefly and without any will of her own, is linked to how overwhelmed she finds herself to be by the pluralities of human experience and expression (322). Despite her former reliance on the world of music to “say all there is to say at once,” she seems to feel tormented by the weight of other people’s unspoken and spoken views of the world and her inability to find herself within them (377). She alternately hallucinates either a sea or a mountain, both immovable forces of nature that loom over her and smother her (377).

Rachel, somewhat like Septimus Smith, the shell-shocked suicide of Virginia Woolf’s later novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, thus dies hoping to preserve something that matters in her death. Perhaps this something is similar to what Clarissa Dalloway describes upon hearing of Septimus’ death as being “wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured, [...] let drop every day in corruption [and] lies” (202). Rachel, like Septimus, is unable to see the value in going on living in a world changed both by her own personal trauma and by the unassimilability of this trauma within her mind. Human connections, often made in social settings that are both alienating and exhilarating, are upheld in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Voyage Out* as a means by which to overcome the meaninglessness of modern British life. Rachel Vinrace feels herself “forced to engage in dialogue” with her fellow travelers, and is caught between the stifling world of the Victorians and the new world of her fiancé, Terrence, and his friend, St. John (Wheare xxxiii). Rather than embracing change,

she is swallowed up by the force of the conflict between the two.

In *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf chronicles the social transformations already occurring around her through the experiences of a young Englishwoman coming of age. As Jonathan Schneer writes in his history of London in the year 1900, Britain “governed (directly or indirectly) the destinies of four hundred million people, [and] owned the greatest empire the world had yet seen” (4). However, Britain was also hurtling towards a great change, including a thawing out of social hierarchies and Victorian principles. Human relationships became all the more important in a world which was, according to historian Martin Pugh, “undeniably marked by unusual controversy” and “violent challenges to authority” (150). Some people saw these as signs of a British breakdown, culminating in the chaos of two world wars and the collapse of empire. Many changes in Britain at the time were, however, extremely positive: women were granted the vote, the living conditions of the working class were improved, and class stratification generally lessened. On a larger scale, these changes were symptomatic of British confrontations with traditional representations of self and Other in a social climate that was opening itself up more to the outside world. British men and women of all classes found their fates intertwined with the progress of the modern world, and intertwined again with those of all the citizens of the empire.

Britons’ fledgling attempts to construct intimacy and sympathy revealed the inadequacy of conventional social structures to allow for the challenges of modern experience. Until then, the imperial context had validated and re-enforced traditional social structures. The British viewed the social structure of the empire, according to Cannadine, “by analogy to what they knew of, [...] or in extension of it, or (sometimes) in idealisation of it, or (even, and increasingly) in nostalgia for it” (5). This impression of the British self and the colonial Other is hinted at in the writings of Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* and Forster in *Howards End*. It made an overt appearance in Kipling’s sly boy-hero Kim, and is, by the time of Woolf’s Richard Dalloway, being questioned.

Against this lineage of imperial representations, *A Passage to India* moves beyond simply examining British identity, directly inviting its readers to confront and defy traditional constructs of self and Other. In the past, British writers raised questions about empire indirectly through the representation of domestic hierarchies, as in *Vanity Fair*, or by using unknowable foreign-ness to construct a self-image, as in *The Voyage Out* and *Kim*. Forster, however, raises questions about

the implications of a seemingly modern Western humanist perspective on the human soul’s process of becoming aware of its place in the universe. In *A Passage to India* Forster links this search for individual psychological and spiritual wholeness with the search for sympathy. He thus places sympathy within the larger context of empire, a distinctly foreign space, and within the context of the development of emotional and spiritual depth.

Writing about the poetics of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Sanford Schwartz proposes that one important element of these poets’ interest in other disciplines such as philosophy was their “tendency to pose a sharp opposition between conscious ‘surfaces’ and unconscious ‘depths,’ between ordinary experience and a hidden realm of mental life of which we are generally unaware” (4). Schwartz proposes that modern writers believed that the depths of consciousness were no longer entirely transparent (4). In his exploration of the limits of sympathy in *A Passage to India*, Forster reflects on how our ability to interact and connect with the unknowable Other across the boundaries of the modern world reflects on our ability to connect with the unknowable within ourselves.

Forster is intensely preoccupied in *A Passage to India* with the burden that history places on the exploration of the human soul and the exploration of sympathetic relationships. Historian Allen Greenberger writes that the British literary attitude towards social interaction between the races can be separated into two periods. In the 1890’s, writers believed that friendship was not possible at present, whereas by the 1920’s and 30’s the consensus was that friendship was not possible ever (152). Writers such as Forster, Greenberger asserts, believed that finding solutions to the “social problem” should be a priority within imperial affairs, and that, as a consequence, there was “little need for political reforms” (151). The inevitability of political reform is, however, crucial to reading the end of Forster’s novel; in fact, Forster belongs more to Greenberger’s “at present” group of writers than to his “never” group. Forster agrees with Fielding’s opinion that to concentrate exclusively on political reforms, without emotion, was “beginning at the wrong end” of things (102). As Aziz understands and Fielding does not, however, emotional bonds across cultures will only be possible when India is a nation, because political reforms must necessarily supplement and nourish any sympathy that has already been forged. Human relationships and politics are linked throughout the novel, extending Forster’s idea that “the state [is] shaped to protect us from the threat of equality,” and thus sympathy (Showalter 5). The traditions of imperial

control prevent equality by re-enforcing traditional hierarchies. Aziz overstates his point somewhat (“we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea,” he vows) but his statements contain an element of truth: only when the two men meet on equal footing can they be friends (293).

By advocating personal relationships between Britons and Indians in *A Passage to India*, Forster refutes the hierarchy of imperial exchange proposed by S. P. Appasamy. The natural path of exchange insists that “Britain had something of value to offer to India, and [...] that India needed what Britain offered” (Appasamy 19). Forster subverts this tradition, Appasamy explains, because, in attempting to identify the reasons for British failures in India, he realises why both sides have failed to connect with one another. In trying to “retain as completely as possible his identity,” the Britisher has rejected everything and everyone Indian (20). Imperial failures are partially due to a decision to avoid interaction with the colonised peoples so as to retain an idea of imperial identity. By recognising that different races may have something to offer the allegedly superior race, writers like Forster break with the traditional hierarchy of imperial relations that assumes the colonised peoples offer nothing of value. Although I would maintain that this ethic is already becoming obsolete in *Kim*, Appasamy credits Forster, supported by Leonard Woolf and George Orwell, with more or less single-handedly revealing the obstacles that the lack of sympathetic connections presented to the maintenance of empire (21).

Forster illustrates the pervasiveness of the traditional imperial model through the character of Fielding, an atypical, anti-traditional white Briton of the ruling classes. Forster’s earliest description of Fielding alerts us to the fact that he is older than the usual Anglo-Indian recruit. He thus remains unaware of the inner workings of the imperial structure, having had his formative years elsewhere. This makes him more likely to believe that a relationship across cultural boundaries can be constructed in the first place; he has a more open mind than the seasoned Anglo-Indian or the young Englishman coming to India for the first time. He has not been schooled in proper imperial behaviour, and is thus better equipped to question it when he does come into contact with it. For instance, when Fielding speaks to Mr. McBryde after Adela’s attack, he cannot understand McBryde’s unwavering conviction that Aziz is guilty. When McBryde insinuates that Aziz went “not only very bad, but very queer,” Fielding replies that he does not follow (151). McBryde, an Anglo-Indian civil serviceman born in Karachi, is a breed of Englishman that Fielding cannot comprehend. Precisely because of

this failure to connect with his own sort, as the Wilcoxes might have put it, Fielding is able to forge connections elsewhere.

Fielding’s inability to understand the outlook of characters like McBryde, however, is both an asset and a flaw. Misunderstanding allows him to question normative behaviour in the Anglo-Indian community; it also prevents him from realising the inadaptability of his outlook to the repressive and hierarchical Anglo-Indian society. In this respect, he is not unlike McBryde himself, who is confused by Fielding’s response to the crisis, or Forster, whose loathing for the Anglo-Indians results in his stereotypical representation of them in the novel. Fielding cannot comprehend any perspective on India other than his own. He sympathises with characters like Aziz, and even Adela, because he can relate to their sincere desires to explore and learn. He is, however, unable to feel McBryde’s disgust for and control over India. Fielding’s inability to construe any sympathy with McBryde prevents him from understanding McBryde. Moreover, because he does not recognise the hegemony of the typical Anglo-Indian perspective, he is unable to work constructively against it. Fielding’s idealism, the well-raised and well-meaning Englishman in him, prevents him from seeing the true extent of the xenophobia of Chandrapore’s Anglo-Indian community. For instance, when he remarks at the club that of course the white races are not exactly white, he means only to be “cheery” and does not realise that white has little to do with colour and “that it is the height of impropriety to consider what it does connote” (52). One obstacle to full understanding in the novel, then, and to the full expression of sympathy, is Fielding’s own inability to understand himself or his people. His lack of concern for, and lack of exposure to, the language and customs of the British Empire helps him to forge inter-racial relationships. Unfortunately, these things also blind him to the reasons why his relationships will fail.

Forster tells us that Fielding believes men can best reach one another “by the help of goodwill plus culture and intelligence - a creed ill suited to Chandrapore, but he had come out too late to lose it” (52). Forster’s emphasis on the fact that this creed is ill-suited to Chandrapore itself implies that perhaps the problem isn’t Fielding’s creed, but the specific place he has come to in India. The historical realities of empire, most explicitly its isolating nature, are perfectly exhibited in the civil station of Chandrapore which “shares nothing with the city” of Chandrapore (2). The burdens of history and geography can be far more fatal to Fielding’s creed than any ideology. As Turton says later, Fielding, “imbued with modern ideas,” has been

making remarks since his arrival in Chandrapore that, to the Anglo-Indian community there, are “insulting,” a term which Turton does not define, but links to the attack on Adela in the caves (147). In the character of Fielding, Forster recognises the cultural and historical contexts of a relationship, and the burden these factors place on a relationship. Understanding Anglo-Indians like McBryde and Turton is a crucial step towards understanding the gulf that separates one well-meaning Indian from one well-meaning Englishman. The burden of historical fact must be acknowledged, grappled with and subverted from within, as Forster does in a novel explicitly written for, and in defiance of, an English audience. By writing in the genre and language of the people he criticises, Forster meets his intended audience on their ground. Fielding, shouting at Turton after Adela’s attack, is far less successful in getting his attention because he does not make this effort to hear or speak Turton’s language.

As much as it is true that Forster recognises the burden of history and makes all attempts to refute stereotypes in *A Passage to India*, the novel is a product of its time. Edwardes writes that the novel is “just as offensive in its drawing of Indian characters as its predecessors” (172). Aziz’s character is particularly exaggerated. The intensity of his affection for the English, and his disagreements with Fielding and Ralph Moore, are sometimes childish. When he hears that Adela and Mrs. Moore intend to join him and Fielding for dinner, he reflects petulantly that “he preferred to be alone with his new friend” (55). Moreover, during the scene when Fielding visits Aziz’s sickbed, Fielding is similarly one-dimensional. He spreads his brand of aesthetic humanism with all the cheery Britishness of clumsy sahib-dom. Forster’s description of the Indian response is even more trite; he writes that they do not understand Fielding because

unless a sentence paid a few compliments to Justice and Morality in passing, its grammar wounded their ears and paralysed their minds. What they said and what they felt were (except in the case of affection) seldom the same. They had numerous mental conventions, and when these were flouted they found it very difficult to function. (98)

A commonly held, stereotypical British view of Indians, this is a pitiful explanation of the obstacles to sympathy between the two peoples. The assertion that well-educated Indian minds are paralysed by reasoning that does not conform to their grammatical rules is condescending. The implication that Indians rarely speak what they feel or vice versa also perpetuates the image of the Indian as unreliable and generally

dishonest. Forster clearly wishes to underline here how we can use sympathy to overcome the lies of everyday life. The Indian, according to him, only says what he feels in cases of affection; however, the Englishman’s “undeveloped heart”, as Forster describes it in *Abinger Harvest*, may prevent him from saying what he feels in return (15). Forster thus alludes to the kind of miscommunication that thwarts sympathy throughout *A Passage to India*; however, he uses a disappointingly oversimplified image to do so.

Forster’s characterisations reflect his own individual biases about people. He presents us with the impulsive, emotional Indian, Aziz, who is so eager to please Fielding during one of their first conversations that he uses stereotypically British expressions and makes a rather vulgar reference to Adela’s breasts (105). He describes the prototypical Anglo-Indian as callous and conceited. Furthermore, he depicts Adela, caught between Anglo-India and the real India, as a “spoiled, vapid [and] hysterical” virginal Englishwoman (Hitchins 225). She only becomes an individual to Fielding after her retraction, when she is homeless and in despair, for she then ceases to examine life in her “schoolmistressy manner” (221). For Forster, she is never a real person; after a brief discussion with Fielding after her retraction, she disappears back to England without any further word. Forster only allows her to escape the traditional gender roles of Anglo-Indian existence by leaving India. She is thus primarily a novelistic ploy, another obstacle to the progress of the sympathetic relationship between Aziz and Fielding. Upon learning that Fielding has married not Adela but Stella Moore, Aziz exclaims revealingly, “I thought you married my enemy” (275). Adela’s role in the fundamental relationship of the novel, then, is one of a misunderstanding: she obfuscates Aziz’s love for Fielding, a particularly misogynist position for Forster to put her in. Characterisations are thus often the novel’s weakest aspect, for in them Forster reveals his own prejudices.

Forster himself addresses the ease with which character can be misread or even deliberately twisted when he describes the absorption of Mrs. Moore, Esmis Esmoor, into Hindu mysticism and mythology. Ronny reflects that the hysteria over Esmis Esmoor probably results from a few of her passing remarks about the caves, which he believes were then sold “for a few annas,” as though creating a character is as easy as buying something at the market (203). As Forster implies, anything loses meaning when interpreted; one of the obstacles to sympathy is the inability of one person to understand another’s character. Forster’s representation of Adela, for instance, is thus not as negative as many critics believe it to be; Forster clearly

implies that Adela, along with all Anglo-Indian women, is a victim of the “enforced togetherness of marriage and cultural isolation” which “has stunted [her] development” (Showalter 5). Forster recognises that the social climate of Anglo-India has ignored and marginalised Adela’s experience, thereby preventing Forster from accurately representing her perspective.

A Passage to India is not worth abandoning, as Naipaul would have us do, because it presents the twentieth-century reader with characterisations that may sometimes seem antiquated, even offensive. Tellingly, Forster explores sympathy more extensively across races than across genders: sympathy between Aziz and Fielding is easier to cultivate than between Adela and Ronny. Aziz’s character, although sometimes represented as superficially as Adela’s, is also realistically, even poignantly, conflicted. The sentiment between Aziz and Fielding is evidently one of masculine kinship: Aziz lends Fielding a collar-stud, they discuss the typically male topics of poetry, politics, and women. However, even as Forster subscribes to the gender stereotypes of the day, he also points out their deficiencies: Aziz and Fielding fall out, leaving only the cross-racial connection between Aziz and Mrs. Moore. Aziz clearly idealises her while she is alive, and increasingly after her death. Her continued presence in the novel and Aziz’ love for her, however, is ultimately positive, for it suggests that he may make, in her name, future connections, further explorations in human sympathy. Forster clearly implores us to avoid complacency with regards to cultural and racial divisions; Aziz declares after the events of “Caves”, with reference to his poetry, that “the song of the future must transcend creed” (243).

In spite of the subversive nature of the novel as it moves away from the confines of its time, *A Passage to India* is a product of an individual historical moment. “What is so astonishing about *A Passage to India*,” confesses Rustom Bharucha, “is that it resonates with [...] colonial attitudes and tensions while remaining a novel “set out of time” (111). Even as Forster unwittingly represents the last vestiges of imperial control over the identity of the Other, he breaks from this control. Aziz’s declaration that “India shall be a nation” may have seemed farfetched and ridiculous at the time, but his desire for political changes that will open the door to better personal relations, is both impossible, and, incredibly, possible (293). The political changes that Aziz hopes for, as we now know, occur, but this is almost beside the point, since neither Aziz nor Fielding can foresee the outcome of British involvement in India. Forster, however, continues to pursue the search for personal truths and individual

sympathy despite political fluctuations. As much of the old Victorian and Edwardian world unraveled in the wake of the Great War, novels such as Forster’s mark an exceptional time, a time both caught between two crises, and profiting from the cultural fecundity which resulted from this liminality.

Levine writes that critics have had a problem with *A Passage to India* because they “have expected a tidy and consistent schematisation and an endorsement of the philosophic views held by one of the characters” (165). I would add that both readers and critics expect Forster to be encouraging them to endorse his own philosophical or spiritual views. Forster invites us to engage with his own revelations of individual truth, however, and to use them to construct and challenge our own perspectives of the world. Many modernist writers were interested in the multivocality of modern life; *A Passage to India* reflects this interest in various worldviews and personal truths. While Forster may conclude that sympathy is not possible for his characters, he is not offering his novel as a definitive statement of ultimate truth. It may be his truth, but it need not be everyone’s. When he says, then, that his novel is a novel out of time, he reminds us that great works of literature resonate beyond a specific historical context, and pose questions that remain relevant. As in *Aspects of the Novel*, he encourages us to think of British novelists not as floating down the stream of historical time, but “as seated together in a room, a circular room, [...] all writing their novels simultaneously” (27). The questions that Forster raises in *A Passage to India* about personal identity and human connection are undeniably questions that could be posed in such a room: they are relevant through time, despite the historical determinants of race and character that each writer endorses.

Thus, as well as being a novel out of time, *A Passage to India* is explicitly concerned with the limitations of human nature at a specific moment in time. While Forster was most likely unaware of how his own biases were revealed in the text, he does address the historical burden placed upon the personal relations that form the core of the novel. Here he affirms that by becoming aware of the reasons we have failed in the past to construct relationships across boundaries, and by establishing our own truths, we will be able to use our instincts for connection more efficiently in the future.

Forster is also aware of and interested in the influence of the geographic space of India, and Chandrapore itself, on the debate about human sympathy and the individual unconscious. Adela’s initial declaration that she wants to see “the real India” forms

the basis for the explicit plot of the novel (18). It is unclear to what extent this wish influences the hallucination of an attack; in the cave, she may well have confronted some of the primacy of the real India. Shusterman writes that there are two Indias, “the literal India, the earthly Asiatic nation with its millions of people striving towards national independence and self-government; and [...] the figurative India, the transcendental cosmic clarity towards which all humanity is striving” (166). A true traveller must move beyond simply romanticising the foreign, a theme that is thoroughly explored in Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. The characters of *A Passage to India* do indeed want to move past the romanticised landscape that Phillip Herriton clings to with such outmoded desperation in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Mrs. Moore paves a path out of Anglo-India when she first explores the mosque, a distinctly foreign space that Aziz reminds her she has no right to be in (12). Adela and Fielding follow, leaving the Phillips of the world to cling to Romance, which tellingly “only dies with life” (26). Forster injects his characters in *A Passage to India*, whatever else may be said of them, with plenty of life. They seek, even if they do not find, the cosmic clarity beyond the literal facts that Shusterman describes.

For most of the English characters, this cosmic clarity only ever reveals itself as a colossal muddle. The blurring of boundaries gives life its greatest significance and allows for brief human connections. For instance, Forster examines male-female interaction in *A Passage to India* as one manifestation of social divisions in the modern world. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the British parliament had granted women the vote for the first time in history. During the course of the women’s movement, the differences between the genders was the subject of much discussion. Most men, and many women, such as Eliza Lynn Linton, strongly believed that a woman’s place was in the domestic sphere, and that the involvement of women in the public sphere was “a curious inversion of sex” (188). The debate about appropriate roles for men and women raged on even after women won the vote. Much of the British public continued to believe that, just as they struggled in the post-war years to assimilate the loss of a generation of young men, so too did they struggle to assimilate the loss of traditional family and social values. Many sought to preserve traditional values and gender divisions in the modern world. Moreover, in the wake of the Great War, the gap of experience between the men at the front and the women at home exacerbated feelings of individual isolation. The chapter of Vera Britten’s *Testament of Youth* that deals with the end of the war is appropriately entitled “This loneliest hour,” not

only because of the divisions the war has created or exacerbated, but simply because “this was a different world from the one that I had known” (462). Life in the trenches separated men from women, separated V.A.D.’s at the front (like Britten) from other women, and separated male veterans from non-veterans as well. Women, however, stood in the most precarious social position, both newly equal to men in the eyes of parliament, and undeniably different from them in their wartime experiences.

Mindful of the events of the past twenty years, Forster depicts the relationship between Ronny and Adela as one of emotional vacuity and misunderstanding. In India, where traditional boundaries can be challenged and subverted in a less restrictive environment, Adela and Ronny’s inability to connect is more glaring. When Fielding leaves Ronny out of his plans at the bridge party for another gathering, Adela muses that Ronny will probably be too busy to join them (38). She then begins to imagine their life together and envisions herself always removed from direct experience with Ronny, because he is busy with the other Anglo-Indian couples or with the Anglo-Indian version of the real India, of which Adela can only ever see a static picture (38). Marrying Ronny would mean all of the divisions and categories of British domestic existence, a blend of antiquated gender and class roles transported into a hostile foreign environment. Adela’s womanhood is laced with deeper significance in India. She takes on iconic status as “an English girl fresh from England” (148). She represents all that the civil service fights in the colonies to defend: an image of Englishness, and English femininity, that is tied to national and racial superiority. The mere hint that Adela has been insulted makes Turton vow to the Indians he passes in the street, “you shall pay for this; you shall squeal” (149).

The natural world in India makes Adela painfully aware of the rigidity of her British identity on two occasions. When she and Ronny are planning to dissolve their engagement, they see an unidentifiable bird flying overhead. As it dives into a tree, Forster tells us that “the mere asking of a question” about the bird’s identity in a country inhospitable to any process of categorisation, “causes it to disappear or to merge in something else” (73). Identification is raised again when the car Adela and Ronny are travelling in hits something on the road. Adela thinks at this moment that she, unlike the thing they have hit, is labeled, a knowledge that makes her feel humiliated (81). This humiliation marks Adela’s recognition that, as Showalter suggests, Anglo-Indian women are labeled as “exports, [...] reminders of home, [...] placed in a situation where

they have no real identity” (5).

A similarly confusing accident occurs in *Howards End* when the car in which Margaret Schlegel and Charles Wilcox are travelling hits a cat. Both accidents expose the rigidity of socially-constructed gender identities. Charles hides the collision from Margaret, telling her that her car “just touched a dog” (212). Once again, the animal hit is unidentifiable, and once again, the accident discloses an important aspect of the main female characters’ personality. The accident in *A Passage to India* reveals to Adela that she is labeled, constrained within her identity as an Englishwoman. The accident in *Howards End* reveals to Charles that Margaret “had a tongue, [and] would bring [...] disgrace on his father” (214). Her insistence on jumping out of the car when Charles refuses to stop at the scene of the accident suggests to him “a woman in revolt” (212). Despite their confrontation, however, they both agree not to tell Henry, Margaret’s fiancé, about her unfeminine behaviour. Margaret may initially refuse the categorisation that marks female life in *Howards End*, throwing herself out of the car to prove a point, but she ultimately subscribes to it by covering up her protest against the men’s treatment of the accident. It is easier to let Henry and the rest of the men continue to label women as nervous, acting irrationally out of hysteria.

Forster elaborates in *A Passage to India* on the idea developed in *Howards End* that labels seem to come too easily to the unquestioning English, most markedly with respect to women. The English accept the stagnancy of tradition unquestioningly, and slip into a comfortable mode of non-communication, just as Henry accepts Margaret’s false version of the accident, and her feminine helplessness, and tells her to “hurry up and change” (214). Similarly, as soon as Adela and Ronny’s quarrel in the car is entirely over, Ronny releases Adela’s hand, ending their moment of unity; he then muses that he is pleased, but “that he had really nothing to say” (81). Adela’s time in India makes her, for all her naïveté, painfully aware of the inadequacy of this state of non-communication. As much as true connections between people are most difficult in the repressive English environment, as Forster implies in “Adrift in India,” they are less difficult in a place that so obviously reveals the inadequacy of this lifestyle.

After she realises her own social and emotional suffocation, Adela implores Ronny to discuss their relationship. Ronny admits he “doesn’t much believe in this discussing,” however, and closes the door to further intimacy (72). Both remain silent about the decision to terminate their relationship, just as they are about the decision to resume it after the car accident. One of the separations between modern individuals,

then, is gender itself, a fact which is made painfully clear in a foreign setting. Adela becomes aware of, and tries to fight against, the limitations of female Anglo-Indian experience, but her inability to understand herself, or know what she wants from Ronny, prevents her from constructing a sympathetic bond. Ronny is similarly disabled, and, rather than continuing in this state of emotional and sympathetic “inertia,” Adela returns to England (237). Being in India makes Adela aware of the inability of traditional modes of interaction between genders to encompass the bewildering newness of human experience. Forster thus uses a male-female relationship to illustrate how a foreign space can influence sympathetic connections.

Adela’s illness following the incident in the caves makes explicit the trauma of what she realises about identity and intimacy in India. Like Rachel in *The Voyage Out*, Adela reveals the root of what disturbs her in her confused ramblings. We observe along with her, as we did along with Rachel, the people who come and go while she rests. Rachel had commented on their opinions crashing over her like waves, but Adela comments that they “all seemed very much alike” (174). She is haunted by the phrase, “in space things touch, in time things part” (174). She reminds herself that nothing has actually happened to her; she has not, as it were, actually been assaulted. As she understands this, and understands that her community will not understand this, she feels some remorse for the people who will be blamed for her attack. It is “not her crime,” she thinks, nor is it that of any Indian (175). No actual person has attacked Adela, although she describes how “there was this shadow, or sort of shadow, down the entrance tunnel, bottling me up [...] I hit at him” (174). Stone compares this shadow to the Jungian Shadow, “that deepest and darkest bottom of the unconscious which strikes unspeakable horror in those unequipped to encounter it” (335). Adela’s shadow is multi-layered: it represents the depths of her unconscious mind, but, more specifically, it represents her realisation of the failure of human beings to achieve the intimacy that she has come out to India to seek. She has, of course, come out to decide if she wants to marry Ronny; more generally, she had made her passage to India in pursuit of a sense of intimate belonging. During her stay, she learns that true human connection is impossible, and that it may be just a fleeting illusion.

In the previous quotation, Adela identifies the shadow as male; this label may be a result of slippage within Adela’s mind between her own feelings about marriage and Ronny, still unacknowledged shadows in her head, and Aziz, whom she has noticed is rather attractive. Adela’s illness thus results both from her

inability to understand her own feelings about Ronny, and from her fears about the spiritual desolation of Anglo-Indian life. Somehow, in the cave, she confronts the fact that she and Ronny are hardly connected. She speaks to Aziz outside the cave because she has “no one else to speak to,” not only at that moment, but also almost anywhere in the novel (137). In space, on “that eternal rock,” she and Aziz connect, just as intensely, for one moment, as she and Ronny did in the car; both couples join hands. Adela has shared something with Aziz, but it has ended as all moments of intimacy must, for in time things part. The gap in the narrative at this point, a gap that swallows up almost all of Adela’s experience in the cave and her consequent illness, hints at a larger realisation that Adela makes. The presence of this gap intimates the inability of language to articulate the multiple truths beyond rigid categories, the truth of the flash of cosmic clarity that Adela perhaps sees for an instant, and that overwhelms her. In the primeval starkness of the caves, one of the vast recesses of an ancient land, Adela realises that she and all human beings strive for moments of personal intimacy in the face of a numbing eternity. Although intimacy may appear to be less complicated in India, Adela is terrified by the sheer enormity of insurmountable divisions and multiple truths in the modern world.

India is also of the utmost importance for Forster’s discussion of whether personal connections can transcend the traditional boundaries of the geographical Anglo-Indian space. In the final section of the novel, Aziz scornfully describes how the English patrol India: “this pose of ‘seeing India,’ which had seduced him to Miss Quested at Chandrapore, was only a form of ruling India; no sympathy lay behind it” (278). For in order to cultivate sympathy, one must engage with India in a far more complex fashion than the average Anglo-Indian does, walled in by house and stone and hill, as Forster describes in the first pages of the novel. To see India is to cultivate some degree of intimacy with an Other that had, until now, been pushed as far away within the imperial context as possible. Adela achieves this intimacy with Aziz near the caves for an instant, ruins it unwittingly by an insensitive comment, realises almost simultaneously the inadequacy of even this brief connection, and despairs. Aziz and Fielding, less aware of the India that Adela sees in the caves, continue to strive for sympathy and are thwarted by their inability to achieve self-awareness and by historical obstacles. Even to suggest that Britons should try to sympathise with the Other at any cost (even the cost that Adela pays) and in spite of inevitable failure, is a subversive statement in Forster’s time. To add that failure may be a result of shortcomings on

both sides of the imperial equation, shortcomings rooted in our inability to understand ourselves, is even more so.

The caves themselves are key to our understanding of Forster’s justifications for these assertions. As in *Howards End*, Forster is mindful in *A Passage to India* of the stumbling blocks set up along the path towards characters’ deeper understanding of themselves and others, obstacles which often take the form of mental categories, social constructs, cultural conceits and divisions, and even insults and practical jokes. In the second and third sections of the novel, these obstacles make themselves apparent: Adela puts forth and then retracts her statement of assault, the main characters part company, the god refuses to come, and Shahane writes, “the caves give a negative answer, though it is only one of the many possible answers” (117). I do not think the caves themselves give a negative answer to anything in the novel; they are, as Levine writes, neutral, “utterly without moral attributes” (177). They represent, says Shusterman, “the universe as microcosm” (167). As such, the caves are not evil, but their echo, their effect on the characters in the novel, is. Even an echo, however, has the potential to be good, if the person who hears it understands its message.

Mrs. Moore, the first to hear any echo at all, is definitely not a suitable recipient for its message. The echo of the Marabar caves is “devoid of distinction,” Forster observes, and merely repeats back monotonously what is said; Mrs. Moore takes this as the final message of India itself, the ultimate truth beyond all experience (132). She is taunted by the coconut trees she sees on her voyage home for thinking “an echo was India [...] the Marabar caves [were] final” (189). The caves are described by Stone as an example of the Nothing at the root of human existence, “not just an emptiness, a presence as well as an absence, [...] bringing a message of terror or of peace - depending on the individual’s capacity to receive or assimilate it” (307).

The caves, as narrative locales of a primal human condition, echo what is being said at any time; at the dawn of the twentieth century, they repeat back the diversity of the modern world, both more unified and more complex than ever before. Both Adela and Mrs. Moore cannot assimilate this undiluted message of multivocality, the former because of the suppression of her own emotions, the latter because of her somewhat rigid spiritual beliefs. They cannot admit the possibility of another reality beyond that to which they so firmly cling. Having been so directly confronted with an echo of the modern human consciousness, they are, as Shusterman says, “entangled [...] in something greater

and more mysterious than [their] minds can fathom” (167).

At the same time that Adela and Mrs. Moore are overwhelmed by the echo, however, Forster urges us, as readers, to concentrate on the cultivation of our own minds and souls as the only means of maintaining course through the echoes and muddles of modern life. When Fielding says that “the echo is always evil,” Forster shows us another character who is overwhelmed by the misunderstandings that are possible between people, and the failure of human connections to last (250). Similarly, Shahane concludes simplistically that the caves symbolise nothing more than “a primeval universe of evil, chaos, and annihilation” (117). Showalter adds that the novel ends with the punishments of those characters who cannot construct sympathy: Aziz, she writes, “will no longer try to befriend an Englishman” (14). Forster’s outlook is not quite as exclusively nihilistic as Shahane and Showalter suggest. He hopes that there are those for whom the echo of the caves need not be evil, although actual human connection may be “more distant than the caves,” as Aziz admits (283). Fielding’s and Aziz’s horses may swerve away from one another in the final scene of the novel, but this swerve is countered, Bharucha suggests, by Ralph’s comparable swerve towards Aziz only pages earlier (118). Ralph’s movement towards Aziz, “a swerve of voice and body that Aziz did not recognise” counters Fielding’s failure to connect with Aziz (283). Sympathy, then, Ralph reminds us, can be newly constructed even at the most seemingly unsympathetic moments. Moreover, it is worth reaching out for time and again, just as Aziz, having decided not to befriend any more Englishmen, unconsciously reaches out for Ralph Moore’s hand.

The development of inner consciousness and outer sympathy in the twentieth century world, a world both increasingly fragmented and increasingly complete, thus forms the core of Forster’s novel. Speaking of the interwar period in *The Development of English Prose Between 1918 and 1939*, Forster says that “man is [now] beginning to understand himself better and to explore his own contradictions [...] This exploration [...] has brought a great enrichment to the art of fiction” (9). Among other things, it has revealed “the presence in all of us of the subconscious, the occasional existence of the split personality, the persistence of the irrational especially in people who pride themselves on their reasonableness” (9). The exposure of the subconscious can often be disagreeable; Forster reminds us that the inter-war period is “an age in which sensitive people could not feel comfortable,” for many of the best writers of this time, such as Joyce and Woolf, “have

done little to hearten us up” (16). They have, however, sought material for their novels in the world around them, re-creating it “temporarily sheltered from the pitiless blasts and the fog” (16). Forster’s discussion of the valuable work of writers who, in the “long week-end between two wars,” tried to “create through art something more valuable than monotony and bloodshed,” applies as much to Forster’s own novels as it does to those of Joyce or Woolf (22). In *A Passage to India*, Forster reaches beyond the pessimistic confines of the long week-end to a deeper understanding of how our connections of sympathetic feeling and creative thought can foster greater self-awareness.

In this respect, although Aziz may be one of Forster’s many stereotypical characters, at the end of the novel he “has been energised by the narrative [and] stands ready to make his own passage through history, although he no more than the narrator knows where that path will lead” (Herz 126). Aziz recognises that the insensitivity of most of the Anglo-Indians obstructs sympathy at the same time as he recognises that “we can’t build up India except on what we feel” (102). In spite of these insidious barriers, he agrees to meet Fielding and his party again, years later, at Mau. There he encounters Ralph Moore, the son of his beloved Mrs. Moore. At first, he is irritable from his meeting with Fielding, which has proved that the two men still have trouble sympathising, or even communicating. He thinks specifically, as he examines Ralph’s bee-stings, about the callousness of Ralph’s half-brother, the intolerable Ronny. His irritation manifests itself in his handling of Ralph, and the latter exclaims, “your hands are unkind” (281). Aziz is thus startled out of his self-absorption at the same time as he is made aware of the chanting of the Hindu worshippers. Forster describes the intricacies of the religious ritual, a half-way point before the god Krishna’s arrival, in order to intimate Aziz’s arrival at a half-way point before a similar kind of spiritual awakening. Aziz finally mirrors the extending action of the god of love and reaches out to Ralph, overcoming his own cynicism to “know with his heart” that Ralph is the son of his beloved Mrs. Moore, and that “indeed until his heart was involved he knew nothing” (285). Despite the pain inflicted by both Britons and Indians on one another, the chanting and Ralph’s presence make Aziz aware of “the syllables of salvation that had sounded during his trials at Chandrapore” (285). Forster thus deftly interweaves the ongoing religious ceremonies and Aziz’s confrontation with Ralph, asserting the ability of sympathetic feeling to prevail over even myriad differences.

The religious context of the scene also reminds us that Forster examines spirituality as an alternative for

imagining sympathy in the novel. Whereas sympathy forges connections through a shared emotional bond, religion forges connections through shared beliefs and values. Many critics have asserted that the Hindu mysticism so clearly depicted in the above passage provide us with the ultimate meaning in the novel. Shahane writes that Christian love, typified by the character of Mrs. Moore, “is unequal to the task of resolving the moral and spiritual dilemmas” of the novel without the Brahmanical mysticism of Godbole (117). I believe that Forster implies in *A Passage to India* what he makes explicit in *Maurice*: the loss of religion in the modern world is due to the inability of most religious doctrine to relate to human experience. Much of Britain is described by Forster in *Maurice* as having a religious “nerve,” not quite of faith itself, but of the last vestiges of a now-inactive faith (46). No religion affords a suitable method for living in the modern world, a world that requires us to find our own truths. These truths may very well include faith, but such a faith must be a living faith that can communicate with the modern unconscious and allow for the possibility of interpersonal sympathy. As Stone suggests, Forster is most respectful of Hinduism because it is “least resistant to the unconscious and the instinctual, [...] least appalled by the vision of the shadow” (339). No one spiritual perspective is universally valid. Each, including the Islam of “Mosque,” the primitivism of “Caves,” and the Hinduism of “Temple,” nonetheless contributes something to the process of human understanding. Each offers a path inward towards the depths of the human soul and outward towards the rest of the world.

Forster reveals in *A Passage to India* that Margaret’s dedication to human connections in *Howards End* is a personal, not a universal, truth. Forster leaves us in the final portion of the novel with Aziz, with the foundations of future human connections sparked by the initial magical moment between Aziz and Mrs. Moore in the temple at the beginning of the novel. In exploring the possibility for connection between human beings who begin to understand themselves, Forster expresses a state of being ultimately beyond the limitations of his generation. Like Maurice’s dream that

remains on the edges of his consciousness, Forster envisions an intangible, unclear future. His vision is nonetheless insistent. He searches in *A Passage to India* for what Martin describes as “a reality which might be opposed to the so-called realities of life as it is lived, and of experience” results in both triumph and failure (151). Despite historical context, and despite our “underdeveloped souls,” Forster does hint at the possibility that we will one day be able to construct sympathy. By listening to the natural world, allied in the novel with the human unconscious as a dark mystery, we can begin to listen to the silence beyond the words of our conscious lives.

Forster clearly states the message the natural world passes on to its befuddled human inhabitants in a passage of the manuscript quoted by Levine in her interpretive work on *A Passage to India*. Here, Forster writes of a tree on the Marabar Hills that speaks to Fielding. The tree observes that Fielding wants India, and the tree itself, an anomaly on the parched hill, to be, and to divulge, only mysteries. The tree, however, objects: “I announce no mystery, only a muddle; the universe, incomprehensible to your reason, shall yet offer no repose to your soul” (171). Forster’s inclusion of the word “yet,” a word that readers of the final version of the text might well associate with the earth’s rejection of Fielding and Aziz’s friendship at the end of the novel – “not yet, not here” – signifies his belief in the human potential. The terrifyingly old world of the caves and the terrifyingly new world of the crumbling empire are incomprehensible even to the rational Fielding and to the emotional Aziz. They need not be incomprehensible to all humankind. The tree, like all the natural world at the end of *A Passage to India*, prophesies that a day might come when the human soul might experience some repose, both from its own crises of identity, and from the agony of an exquisite, and ultimately fleeting, moment of sympathy. Forster, in writing *A Passage to India*, implores us to try to comprehend how, by understanding ourselves, we can understand our world, and move beyond this agony.

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