



Too Withdrawn To Draw His Sword: EM Forster and the Stoic Silence of His Words

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Abstract

This essay examines E.M. Forster's portrayal of cross-cultural relationships, contrasting his work with John Lang's 19th-century perspective. Forster, grappling with the colonial legacy, depicted the impossibility of East-West union in *A Passage to India*, influenced by his personal experiences and societal constraints, including the real-life struggles of interracial couples. Notably, all of Forster's novels were published within a concentrated period, 1905-1924, and he deferred the publication of his homosexual novel, *Maurice*, until after his death. Lang, conversely, satirized British smugness, portraying interracial relationships with less pessimism. The essay explores Forster's personal life, including his unrequited love for Syed Ross Masood, and how these experiences shaped his writing, particularly the ambiguous Marabar cave incident. Recent criticism re-evaluates Forster's complex morality, acknowledging his exploration of power dynamics and personal relationships amidst a changing world, marked by war, shifting social norms, and his own internal conflicts regarding sexuality and liberalism. The essay also examines critical reception of Forster, from Julian Barnes's initial dismissal to a later appreciation of his nuanced portrayal of human interaction.

Keywords: Forster, colonialism, John Lang, Julian Barnes, homosexuality, cross-cultural relations

Introduction

EM Forster (1879-1970) is one of the last writers of the colonial era; and one who looks back at the phenomenon with nostalgia. He is also someone who explores the possibility of cross-cultural romance in his literary work - but

comes to the conclusion that twain - east and west - cannot meet. Forster was a humanist, and a writer of the mundane. Interestingly, he is one of the most celebrated British writers of the 20th century, having been nominated for the Nobel prize as many as 22 times. He also declined the

knighthood in 1949. However, he shirks when it comes to taking on problems head on - he deferred the publication of his gay novel until his death; the potential romance in *A Passage to India* turns into shrieks in the netherworld; he withdraws completely from his literary life when he sees the old world crumbling. This paper would analyse the work of Forster, how his life informs his work, as also compare his attitude with that of John Lang, an Australian writer who lived in India in the mid-19th century, vis-a-vis their take on cross-cultural and coloniser-colonised relationships.

Forster's Foil in a Fiery Predecessor

John Lang (1816-1864), who in his own words and self-fashioning, was an "interloper" and a "mofussilite" - spent a bulk of his adult life in India, and is buried in Camel's Back Cemetery, Mussoorie. As an interloper - as someone who is present where he shouldn't be or doesn't have the permission to be (that's roughly the definition of a ghost too) - he, as a lawyer, challenged the East India Company in its own courts severally - and achieved a major victory in the case of Lala Jotee Persaud by having the case of forgery against his client overridden; and the court ordering the government to pay the Lala, a commissariat contractor, his dues, almost Rs 37 lakh - for the provisions he had supplied during the Anglo-Sikh wars of the 1840s. Lang also achieved a "gaol" term in Calcutta for two months, courtesy of the same case, in which he allegedly libelled against one Colonel Mactier, calling him a coward and pointing out that he had run away from a Kotah campaign (1824) - thereby justifying his sobriquet of an "interloper." As a mofussilite, Lang was quite eponymous; he lived in Meerut, Agra and Mussoorie rather than Delhi or Calcutta, and eponymously ran a newspaper called *The Mofussilite*, which was quite entertaining with his humour and wit, and a little nightmarish for the government, for it thrived on scandal within the legal and the military establishments. (Ranjan 2021) Governor General Hardinge summoned Lang about his

constant acerbic, vitriolic writing. It is best to report verbatim in words of Ramsay, who wrote about this incident:

When Lord Hardinge was on his way home, he passed through Meerut and sent for Mr Lang, addressing him as follows: "Now Mr Lang, I am going home and I should like to know why you have so persistently abused me. Speak without reserve, I shall not be annoyed."

"Well," replied Mr Lang, "will your lordship answer a question first?"

"Certainly"

"Why did your lordship come out to India?"

"For several reasons."

"Did not the wish to make money somewhat influence you?"

"Certainly," said Lord Hardinge, "for I am a poor man."

"Well, then," said Mr Lang, "I came to India for the same reason; and I found I could not make money faster than abusing your lordship's policy. If I could have made as much by praising it, it would have given me greater pleasure. It is a simple question, not of principle, but of 'L.s.d.'" Lord Hardinge was delighted with this frank avowal. (Ramsay 1882: 124)

John Lang is an important and interesting point of departure, as well as a counterpoint to discuss the idea of Anglo-Indian writing as well the authors under focus - him being a predecessor to these writers, and surprisingly ahead of them in terms of defiance of the establishment.

Can the Twain Meet?

Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is his most celebrated canonical work - celebrated for exploring a possible romantic relationship between a British woman, Adela Quested, and an Indian man, Dr Aziz. The exploration ends in

a shriek of Ms Quested inside Marabar caves, and there ends the quest of this love. It is clear within the text that Dr Aziz did not molest her. The idea of such a union itself is molestation, the text seems to suggest.

On the other hand, Lang parodies the smugness of the British reader in his novel *Will He Marry Her?* (1858) Leonora is a white woman, a child of a fairy tale fortress romance between her British father and a 'sable' (black) Indian queen. The father hides his family, not because he's embarrassed, but because it would be an embarrassment for a royal personage, her mother, to show that she had married an ordinary soldier. Leonora has a twin sister, Sheereen, same as her in features, but dark complexioned. Augustus Reckless recklessly woos Leonora through the novel – but she would accept him only when he travelled to India, and after she had seen his reaction to her family. Leonora, then, is Anglo-Indian as we know the term today, half-caste, product of colonial-time interaction. Immediately after the marriage, Leonora gets a fit and dies, and turns as dark as her sister in her death. Lang's novel could be a moral message, or a statement of impossibility like Forster's, three quarters of a century earlier. However, the strategy is quite the opposite – the narrative mocks the British readers for their smugness and ignorance.

Forster's paradigm of impossibility of a union of the East and the West, though, has a contemporary context. Long after the rebellion of 1857, long after the Doctrine of Lapse¹, long after Lang; the Doctrine of Lapse reared its head in strange ways in Forster's time. Maharaja Martand Bhairav Tondaiman went to Australia to play cricket in 1915, and got very bad press –

a colonial man dressing like a gentleman etc. However, Melbourne girl Molly Fink took a fancy to him, and ere long, they were married. The king of Pudukkottai faced harassment no end after this – the British government refused to recognise the marriage and accord the privileges of a queen to Molly. It is also suspected that Molly was poisoned during her pregnancy. With their son, Martand Sydney, the couple moved to Sydney; and thence to England, and to France. The Maharaja retired and gave up his kingship formally when his son was refused recognition as his heir.² After the death of Martand, Molly had a rather stormy life in America, where she lived a life of penury; and her son Sydney was booked for jewel theft. Joan Falkiner, also from Melbourne – almost two decades after Molly's marriage – married Taley Khan, ruler of Palanpur, a princely state in Gujarat. The British government also did not recognise her as the queen. It was only on 14th August 1947, a day before Indian independence, that Lord Mountbatten granted the title of 'Her Highness' to her.³ (Falkiner 2012)

These two are not isolated incidents; they are high profile and therefore have attracted whatever little attention they have, on the margins of history. Coralie Younger's *Wicked Women of the Raj* chronicles multiple such cases where European girls of average professions had affairs with Indians – and were of course dubbed as gold diggers. The trend dates back to as far as to the mid and late 19th century, when 'wild' girls from Australia were sent 'home' to England to learn 'home science' and become proper brides for the gentry. On their 'passage to England' they had to stop at Colombo or Bombay, where many of these liaisons

¹ The Doctrine of Lapse entailed annexation of kingdoms that had a ruler who was "manifestly incompetent or died without a male heir." It was instituted by Court of Directors, and the first state to be annexed was Kittur in 1824. Generally the doctrine is associated with Lord Dalhousie (Governor General from 1848 to 1856), for he aggressively documented and used this policy. The rebellion of 1857 was

triggered, amongst other things, by this doctrine. The Rani of Jhansi faced this threat, as is well known, and John Lang was her lawyer for the case.

² See Duyker, Edward and Coralie Younger. *Molly and the Rajah: Race Romance and the Raj*. Australian Mauritian Press, 1991.

³ See Falkiner, Suzzane. *Joan in India*. Yoda Press, 2012.

happened⁴. Therefore, it is not Forster's worldview that is to be blamed entirely; his experience of the context suggested to him that though these affairs were a lived reality, they were still an impossibility in terms of social acceptance.

Forster's redemption is in that at least his plot involves a European woman and an Indian man. In Lang's time in the mid-19th century this territory was pretty much untouched. For all of Lang's transgressions where he makes a British man of peerage marry a Muslim, low caste, black woman (deliberately all the marginal categories) in "Black and Blue" and "Mahomedan Mother"⁵, he does not go to the other side – that of a British woman marrying, or having an affair with an Indian man. The native woman as prize, of course, is an age-old tradition and logic of conquest, war and colonialism – and still these terms have been traditionally gender neutral in imagination. And yet, Lang is ahead of his times in openly mocking racism, in fact caricaturing it; whereas Forster just limps with his time, desirous of and yet unable to look at the future. Taking cue from Lang, Wilkie Collins – the originator of the modern detective novel⁶ – in *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) caricatures racism through the persona of his protagonist. Lucilia Finch, blind since birth, falls in love with Oscar. Oscar has been attacked by robbers and is being nursed back to health by Lucilia. A medicine involving a silver compound, however, turns Oscar black – and even though Miss Finch does not know colours or sight, she has a phobia for 'dark complexion'.

Fusty, Musty, Dusty

Julian Barnes, for a long time, found Forster irredeemable, as he points out in "I was

wrong about EM Forster" (2016). Barnes tells that he revisits the same copies of the books he read in youth if he has to reread an author, and his copy of *A Passage to India* had no pencil markings of words like 'irony' – which suggests to him that it was one of the dullest novels he had encountered in his youth. Barnes is scathing and repeats the term "fusty, musty and dusty" for Forster's two novels, *A Passage to India* and *A Room With a View*, severally in this article. Barnes gave Forster's *A Room With a View*, a second chance in his forties, and for him "EM Bloody Forster...still didn't cut the mustard."⁷

It was only when Barnes reattempted reading Forster much later that he found a blaze of light in his first novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), for its witty and lampooning take on English snobbery and social manners. I had my 'Barnes' moment with Kipling with Kipling's first, and autobiographical novel, *The Light That Failed* (1890) in which the protagonist, Dick, has a Miltonian moment – the painter loses his eyesight, and therefore his love as well. This novel of Kipling can be read for teenage adventur-ish delight and for social documentation, but not for insight into trembling vulnerabilities and into troubles of human soul which is offered in ample measure in his first novel (in some measure in *Kim* as well, but that for later). There is something about first and autobiographical novel (both categories intact) as Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) also suggests in its breadth of looking at partitions of nations, homes, minds, souls; and its evocation of uncanny connections, and of shadow lines between love and lust etc. The same Amitav Ghosh, who is a ruling writer of the postcolonial moment still, turns, as Barnes would have put it, fusty, dusty and musty in *The*

⁴See Allen, Margaret. "White Already to Harvest: South Australian Women Missionaries in India." *Feminist Review* No. 65, *Reconstructing Femininities: Colonial Intersections of Gender, Race, Religion and Class* (Summer, 2000), pp. 92-107

⁵ Both stories are in Lang's collection *Wanderings in India*.

⁶ *Moonstone* (1868) is considered the first modern

English detective novel. This declaration was made by none other than TS Eliot.

⁷For discussion around Barnes's views on Forster – see Barnes, Julian. "Julian Barnes: I was wrong about EM Forster" *The Guardian*, 2 Dec, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/02/julian-barnes-i-was-wrong-about-em-forster>

Hungry Tide (2004). Pia, an America-returned Bhadrakol cetologist takes the help of Fokir, a fisherman for her research – and just when a possibility of romance between their worlds, separated by many gulfs and bays, emerges – Ghosh brews a storm in which the fisherman dies saving the Bhadrakol lady, much like a Bollywood film that can't resolve a tension it has created, or if it is in a desperate need for a martyr. Even John Lang would probably have killed the fisherman, but after mocking the reader three times round, and not in the manner of Ghosh or Forster, hiding behind writer's prerogative, using a cave and a storm; using nature for convenience in generally otherwise anthropocentric plots.

The Summer of Forster's Life

There's more, though, about the Marabar caves and *A Passage to India*. Biography generally doesn't shed much light in terms of textual analysis of an author's work, and therefore it's best to bring it in late. Forster's biographer, Damon Galgut, however, attempts an analysis of Forster's text through his author's psychological and social struggles. Galgut tells that Forster produced most of his work between 1905 and 1910; and began writing *A Passage...* in 1913 but gave it up in favour of *Maurice*, his "unpublishable" homosexual novel. (It was published only posthumously, in 1971) *A Passage...* was finally completed only in 1924, after eleven years. Forster also started *Arctic Summer* in 1911 which he never finished.⁸ And therefore, Galgut has titled his novel loosely based on Forster's life, *Arctic Summer* (2014). Siddhartha Deb says of the novel that "Fussy, gentle, perpetually middle-aged and used to thinking of himself as a "minorite", Galgut's Forster seems to be drawn with fidelity to the historical persona of the English novelist that has been passed down to us in his own words as

well as in biographies and critical works."⁹ This is quite an exciting addition to the corpus of Forster studies as we would discuss in the ensuing paragraphs.

Forster came to India in pursuit of a man, his friend, Syed Ross Masood, in 1912, and stayed in India for six months. Masood was a 'straight' man, and so a trip made across the seas for unrequited love would indeed be a burden on Forster's heart. Galgut tells that Forster reminisced years later, "I might never have gone to his country, or written about it ... I didn't go there to govern it or to make money or to improve people. I went there to see a friend." In this, Forster does sound an "interloper" much like John Lang. This trip left a deep impression on him, and several incidents in *A Passage...* are directly from this trip. It was only after twelve years, when he returned to India as private secretary to Maharaja of Dewas, was he able to complete the novel. In the interregnum, he was writing and therefore, Galgut concludes that it was not a general writer's block, but a specific block involving a specific moment in the novel – which is indeed the cave moment. Galgut quotes Forster from a 1952 interview with Paris review, "When I began *A Passage to India* I knew that something important happened in the Marabar caves, and that it would have a central place in the novel – but I didn't know what it would be." Therefore, this moment was drafted and re-drafted several times by the writer, with a hint of violence against Adela Quested in the first draft.

When Forster was visiting Masood, he paid a visit to Barabar caves in Bankipore where Masood was staying at that moment. The goodbyes were, however, said on the night prior, and Masood did not come along with him. Galgut contends that something happened on that night, wherein Forster got a straight or an

⁸ See Galgut, Damon. "EM Forster: 'But for Masood, I might never have gone to India.'" *The Guardian*. 8 Aug, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/08/em-forster-passage-to-india-rereading>

⁹ See Deb, Siddhartha. "Arctic Summer by Damon Galgut - Review", *The Guardian*. 28 Feb, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/28/arctic-summer-damon-galgut-review>

oblique rejection – and the two did not meet during the rest of Forster’s trip which still had three months left, in 1913¹⁰. So, the Barabar caves became Marabar caves, and unrequited love became unrequited love in the fashion it is in the novel. Forster also must have tried to understand his readers, and his market, and the Molly Fink situation wouldn't really have helped Forster take the leap of faith¹¹.

The novel in question truly hinges on the cave moment; Forster in his eleven years of confusion, packed in that ambivalence in that scene. There is a shriek, and Dr Aziz is not responsible. Is someone else responsible – that question is never answered. Is it her own demons attacking Adela, or is it a supernatural element? Is it Forster’s own cave – where Adela, much like Forster – shy, reticent, unable to deal with the world, finds the cave alluring enough to shriek inadvertently? To this reader, however, it is the demon of colonialism, of Kipling's adage “East is east and west is west, and never shall the twain meet.” (The Ballad of East and West, 1889). It is noteworthy to compare this with several of Lang's white protagonists from a couple of generations earlier, mouthing severally in different novels, “India he loved, England he despised.”

The meticulously researched novel of Galgut uses a lot of material from Forster – letters, rather obfuscating diary entries, and writings about Forster – to reconstruct the reticent life of Forster, through the wall of his words as well through the complex relationships he shared with Masood, his wartime Egyptian lover in Alexandria, Greek poet CP Cavafy etc. Nora Satin begins her exposition of Forster with a discussion about his collection of letters *The Hill of Devi* (1953) – these were letters he wrote to friends in England while he served as private secretary to the Maharaja of Dewas. Satin describes Forster’s fondness for the Maharaja who aroused in him a curiosity for

Eastern spirituality; as she also describes Forster’s bewilderment at various things he saw in India. Galgut makes an important addition in his novel, and tells that in Dewas too, like Alexandria, Forster had a lover – a court barber named Kanaya (most likely Kanhaiyya). Forster skips any talk of Kanaya in this book – which shows how he would have had to deal with homophobia of his time, by keeping silent about this episode, as also by deferring the publication of *Maurice* to after his death. Deb contends that Galgut’s novel sees in “Forster's roughness towards the wheedling Kanaya ‘the imbalance of power’ at the heart of empire. Galgut's understanding of the interplay between love and power animates this final section of the book, with Forster, the character of his novel, realising that no relationship is immune to such extreme inequality, not even that with El Adl (the Egyptian lover).” This tension between love and power in Forster’s mind, then leads to the now famous cave scene, wherein love is possible in a moment; and the rest is a lament.

Nora Satin sums up the creeds of Kipling and Forster as “Empire” and “personal relationships” and that is how the criticism around these two figures roughly operated until the 1960s (of course neither time nor genres are watertight, but this was the general trend). Personal relationships are indeed the preoccupation of Forster in all his six novels, and he spoke of this idea quite frequently; and this is best contained perhaps in his aphorism, “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.” This seems to be an aphorism that has had a shelf life (aptly so with its provocation), with it being quoted after his death in 1970, through to Julian Barnes mentioning it in 2016. As an international figure, traveller, and having had love interests across cultures, of course Forster understood the parochial nature of

¹⁰ See Galgut, Damon. “EM Forster: ‘But for Masood, I might never have gone to India.’” *The Guardian*.8

Aug, 2014
¹¹Ibid.

nationalism – and yet he also understood the power dynamics of Empire, class and sexuality as it played out in his relationships with Syed Ross Masood, El Adl and Kanaya. Interestingly, all three lovers were of different classes (which is also testimony to Forster’s much talked about accommodativeness) and all the affairs ended differently, which has something to do with such power dynamics. Ed Adl died of consumption.

Out of flavour, but never out of favour

With a linguistic turn to philosophy in the 1960s and post-structuralist criticism in vogue, Forster fell from grace (but never from discussion) until recently. We’ve already seen that Barnes considers two of his novels as uninspired in terms of pushing the limits of language or thought. Literary criticism that was much more politically and linguistically aware post-60s looked at Forster as the last vestige of the Empire. Paul B Armstrong sums up these decades of criticism, thus:

“When E. M. Forster is invoked by politically minded contemporary critics, it is usually to attack or dismiss him. His name has become a token for error or lamentable naivete, whether he is presented as an illustration of the fallacies of liberal humanism, or as a last remnant of British imperialism, or as a practitioner of traditional narrative methods who lacks self-consciousness about the epistemological ambiguities of language.”¹²

In the recent years, there has been a revival in interest in Forster, as a visionary who understands that despite the dialogic exegesis, there are subtle ways in which narrative voice and point of view interpellate a reader into their ideological apparatus, in Althusserian terminology. Armstrong contends that in *A Passage To India*, Forster educates his readers about what in contemporary theory is known as

“a central dilemma of political life: How can one commit oneself to the realization of particular values and beliefs while maintaining an ironic awareness of their contingency and contestability, their incommensurability with other equally plausible ways of thinking?”¹³

Satin is correct in pointing out the importance of personal relationships and having a code of conduct, so to say, that Forster demonstrated both in his work and life. Her work is also important in that it demonstrates this idea of exploring moments of ideal personal resonances, through a close analysis of the five novels. She also points out the lack of criticism of the Empire in *A Passage...* and yet upholds his prerogative to underplay it, for his politics was about exploring human sensibility.

Upon his death in 1970, several critics offered interesting insight into Forster’s processes. Lord Annan, like Satin, contends that “personal relationships” are the key to Forster’s work, and that he had his own creed of “sensitivity to life, and to a complex morality.” It is important to unpack this “complex morality.” On the one hand, Forster felt an assault on his sexuality; and on the other a withering away of liberalism with World War I – this made him withdraw from writing about a world he could no longer comprehend perhaps. Nora Satin misses out on this discussion around his sexuality as well as liberalism, though both debates were around in Europe – which also shows how knowledge production and dissemination operates through a time lag between the West and East. Frank Kermode surmises that *A Passage...* is a great novel, and the other four novels are good. Forster who lived a solitary, isolated life, found ground for expression in the eccentricity and vitality of India, Kermode opines, and the beauty of his successful novel is that it captures the essence of Forster’s worldview – that personal relationships end in failures, and that their bliss is achievable only for a moment; and it is the

¹² See Armstrong 1992. 365

¹³ Ibid.

hunt for this moment that propels human relationships.

George Steiner further unravels the matter of “complex morality” saying that Forster’s world was lost after the war; he thought the world was increasingly an intolerant place. Also Forster did not like the standardisation of human values that democracy (or democratic capitalism) was ushering in. Steiner says that there was always pressure on him because of his “sexual taste” but more than that it is about a man with a set of codes and sensitivity and unable to live according to that. So, on the one hand, Forster is a withdrawn, shy man from the beginning as sexual “minorite”; on the other he holds his liberal, bourgeoisie values dear where political changes come through spreading warmth and intellectual ideas and not through revolution; and on yet another Forster is comfortably ensconced in the Empire where his class position makes him mention Syed Ross but not the barber.

Herein perhaps lies the answer to Julian Barnes’s question as to why Forster stopped writing novels altogether, with half his life still ahead of him. Richard Marquand offers a counterpoint, that Forster stopped writing because he was happy – it is unhappiness that manifests in art, he contends. Marquand also offers another interesting insight – that Forster did not want his books to be made into films; for he hated the American foreign policy and wouldn’t want to get involved with American money. Filmmaking with Hollywood would entail American money. And this also throws an interesting insight into Forster’s sensitivity; which however, did not apply to the British empire.¹⁴

To sum up, it would be interesting to look at Forster’s self-image. In a war time essay, “What I Believe”, Forster says, “I do not believe

in belief, but this is an age of faith...and there are so many militant creeds...in self-defence one has to form a creed of one’s own ... tolerance, good temper, and sympathy are no longer enough in world rent with religious persecution...”

Clearly the war, violence, religious bigotry tore up the sensitive writer and he withdrew into his creed of valuing personal interaction over the image of a public figure. About his writing, on his 80th birthday, in 1959, Forster contended that he was not a great novelist. He said that he wrote three types of narratives– “about the person I think I am, the people I would like to be, the people who irritate me.” He said that figures like Tolstoy could paint a much bigger canvas. Forster’s two confessions are to the point and they sum up years of critique – he was a man who had to withdraw from the world after the world he knew started crumbling; and he was a writer who understood interaction between two human souls, and that is what he wanted to treat as the whole.

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¹⁴ The critics discussed in this paragraph all appear in A BBC obituary documentary about Forster, 1970. July 14, 1970. BBC,

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