

NAIPAUL'S 'CAVE' AND FORSTER'S: EXPLORING SPATIALITY AND REPRESENTATION THROUGH THE METAPHOR OF THE CAVE IN *AN AREA OF DARKNESS* AND *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

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Abstract. This paper attempts a reading of V. S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* through the dual prisms of a Forster-esque humanism and postcolonial discourse. It explores and examines, in particular, the symbolism of the cave—a space that both Forster and Naipaul found loaded with possibilities of articulation. Furthermore, it argues that in both *A Passage to India* (1924) and *An Area of Darkness* (1964), the cave functions as a powerful 'representational space'¹ embodying, in Henri

¹ In *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre identifies a conceptual triad of space consisting of spatial practice, representations of spaces and representational spaces—the last one “embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces) (Lefebvre 1991: 33).

Lefebvre's words, "complex symbolisms" and is "linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life" (Lefebvre 1991: 33). In pointing out the basic similarities and differences of the primary import of this symbolism in the narratives at issue, this paper examines the latent potential of (mute) space to communicate and generate meaning. The symbol of the cave, as this paper goes on to argue, in both Naipaul's and Forster's narratives, becomes the symbol of India—albeit from different historical and socio-political perspectives. While Forster's novel, through the metaphor of the cave, signals the failure of the European imagination, Naipaul's travel narrative manipulates it to unleash the rhetoric of desire—the postcolonial longing for the 'uncontaminated' zone free from the violence and excesses of the imperial adventure.

Keywords: Naipaul, Forster, *An Area of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, Space, Desire and disappointment, Cave, Imperial rhetoric

Published forty years before V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* (1964), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924)—a novel that was written at a time when the (British) Empire's hold on its colony (India) was on the wane—can be read on the whole as an experience of India. The liberal and humanist imagination triumphs in Forster's narrative that grapples with complex issues, such as the power relationship between the Orient and the Occident, shifting subjectivities and the double vision deepening the alterity of lives lived in the periphery. Through *A Passage to India*, Forster captures India at a crucial moment in its history—in an era marked by great social change and shifting power politics. In resisting the Anglo-centric domination of the subject, Forster's

representation of India embodies the univocal failure of forced intimacies evident in the Marabar Cave episode. The symbol of the cave becomes the symbol of India—a site of failure of the Western imagination and its ultimate incapacity to re-appropriate the East or to generate it. This paper, in using Henri Lefebvre’s theory on the production of space, argues that the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*, function as a ‘representational space’ within the narrative that ‘speaks’ just as a character would and that constitutes the “affective kernel” of Forster’s narrative. Unfortunately, the veritably pre-linguistic vocalization that the cave returns (when spoken to, in the thundering, echoing “Boum”) implies the essential unrepresentability of India. Extending Lefebvre’s analysis of representational spaces and while furthering the argument that the caves represent the hermeneutic core of Forster’s narrative, it is possible to show that the aspect that the caves most strongly underscore, in all specificity and with a profound irony, points towards the otiosity of the novel’s title.² That the vocabulary of the Raj—notwithstanding the British Empire’s physical appropriation of its colonies—falls short in epistemic competence or simply denotes a lamentable lack of comprehension of its subject on account of its puerile insistence on a dominantly ‘English’ interpretation of the subcontinent and its multifarious (essentially non-English) social forms, attitudes and ethics attests to its inability to identify or empathize with the dialectic interaction between space (the subcontinent) and its original inhabitants. Adela’s confusion, it might be added,

² Benita Parry raised this issue in her essay, “Materiality and Mystification in *A Passage to India*.” “The reputation of *A Passage to India* as conventional in form, language and attested value,” noted Parry, “has inhibited discussion on an emergent modernism that is inseparable from the novel’s failure to reach the destination intimated in its title.” See Parry, 162.

owes more to this lack of comprehension than any congenital deviousness on the part of the native subject. Edward Said had drawn our attention to Forster's use of India in *A Passage to India* as a space that cannot be necessarily illustrated—the 'material' being too transcendental to be accommodated within the canonic formalism of the novel: "I have always felt that the most interesting thing about *A Passage to India* is Forster's using India to represent material that according to the canons of the novel form cannot in fact be represented—vastness, incomprehensible creeds, secret motions, histories and social forms."³ As Said makes it clear, this representational impasse is a corollary of the failure of the European imagination to determine the true nature of the cultural ground on which the colonial encounter was being played.

In the section titled "Pilgrimage" in *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul recounts his expedition to the Cave of Amarnath in the Himalayas. "The cave," writes Naipaul, lies thirteen thousand feet up the eighteen-thousand foot Amarnath Mountain, some ninety miles north of Srinagar and is made holy by the five-foot ice lingam, symbol of Shiva, which forms there during the summer months" (Naipaul 2002: 164).⁴ While, on the one hand, the overly numerical and objective description of the geographic amplitude works as a formal recognition of the ultimate banality of the touristic desire and experience, on the other, it also functions as a subtle subversion of the *exotic*—the primary thematic focus of the Orientalist travel narrative of the nineteenth century.⁵ In *An Area of Darkness*, the geography lends itself easily to description, as does the topography of the Marabar Caves in

³ Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. US: Vintage Books, 1993. 200.

⁴ All the references to the text are taken from the 2002 Picador edition of the book.

⁵ For more on this see Suleri, "Forster's Imperial Erotic."

Forster's *A Passage to India*: "The caves are *readily described* [emphasis added]. A tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide, leads to a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter. This arrangement occurs again and again throughout the group of hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar Cave" (Forster 1924: 124). The structure, emptiness and the Cimmerian gloom of the Marabar Caves are intricately tied to the complexities of the colonial encounter in as much as their symbolic geography functions as a dual metaphor for the ultimate failure of the imperial rhetoric, on the one hand, to achieve an accurate cultural representation of India while on the other, to realize a complete and unambiguous dominance over its colonial subject. Through the formal disavowal of the romantic ideal, Forster makes it clear that the extraordinary vacuity of the caves and their topography are symptomatic of the intrinsic banality of the exotic. As Sara Suleri notes in her essay "Forster's Imperial Erotic": "The touristic experience of colonialism is deglamorized into mathematical computations of how literally banal the exotic may be" (Suleri 2005: 145).⁶ Concomitantly, the caves plead their own triteness and the echo that plays in their dark interiors functions as a nihilistic delusion lying at the heart of the entire colonial enterprise.

Similarly, Naipaul's description of the geography leading to the Cave of Amarnath shuns the celebration of the exotic. To Naipaul, the true mystery of the cave lay not in his personal religious fervor but in the cave's "situation." The isolation of the Himalayas, the divinity of the massive ice phallus and the ancient world order of the Hindus preserved the mystery of the cave. It was emblematic of the ancientness and immutability of the Indian civilization—a symbol of the Hindu

⁶ All the references to the text are taken from the 2005 Penguin edition of the book.

inclusiveness that reflected a seamless pattern of integration. The cave is an important symbol in *An Area of Darkness*—its geographical situation, besides evoking adolescent desire,⁷ also enhances the articulateness of the narrative by animating the ineffable abstractions of India and Hinduism. In other words, the cave’s status as a ‘representational space’ derives from its latent power to articulate the metaphysical—or the *res cogitans* of Cartesian ontology.⁸ In *A Passage to India*, on the other hand, the Marabar Caves insinuate the intrinsic anomie of the colonial heartland—they underscore the failure of the imperial rhetoric to rightfully populate the interstices of the collective colonial consciousness, to direct its course or to control its fate through a possession that is at once literal as well as symbolic. Hence, inside the caves, the echo returns an interminable, incomprehensible “Boum”—evocative of the doomed imperial intimacy that is bound to be frustrated in an atmosphere fraught with confusion, alterity and dispossession. This is where the narrative withdraws—refusing to function as the (metaphorical) *passage* leading to a system of knowledge that proves to be not only inaccessible but also inscrutable—a barrier so formidable and so fraught with the “secret motions” Said wrote about that it is impossible to apprehend the structure of its spatiality. The unlikely alliance of the British and the Indian is hence aleatory and in all case—as

⁷ For more on this, see Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 178.

“India, the Himalayas: they went together. In so many of the brightly coloured religious pictures in my grandmother’s house I had seen these mountains, cones of white against simple, cold blue. They had become part of the India of my fantasy.”

⁸ Descartes distinguished between corporeal substance and thinking substance calling the former *res extensa*, or extended substance, and the latter *res cogitans*, or thinking substance.

Fielding's idealism and Aziz's growing nationalism would attest—almost certainly anachronistic. The alleged rape of Adela Quested in the caves marks the precise moment of disjuncture from which the narrative increasingly veers towards its own negation in the collector's "[i]ntimacy—never, never" culminating in the resonant "[n]o, not yet" and [n]o, not there" of the closure. As Suleri aptly remarks: "The disaster of the Marabar outing has less to do with a condemnation of colonial rape than with a study of profound fragility of colonial intimacy" (Suleri 2005: 147). The "fragility of colonial intimacy" constitutes Forster's primary concern in *A Passage to India* and he adopts the metaphor of the cave—whose closed space, instead of containing the disappointment and deficiency of the participants of colonial encounter, releases them—to dramatize the ultimate futility of contrived intimacy and untenable imperial ambition.

The ice phallus in the Cave of Amarnath—recognized as the god Shiva and continuity—is emblematic of India and the inclusiveness of Hinduism that "discarded nothing." As if making possible the utterance of the Indian novelist R.K. Narayan, "India will go on" (Naipaul 2002: 9), the phallus endures as a symbol of continuity of India and its civilization. Inside the cave, in the teeming crowd of pilgrims, the individual is obliterated: "[t]hey were like pebbles, they were like sand: a stippling of colour..." (Naipaul 2002: 181). With bodies pressing against one another inside its dark interior, the cave resembled an Indian bazaar—reminiscent of the crowds of Bombay, the overwhelming chaos—a miniature nation striving to establish contact with its sacred past, to consecrate with its gaze the very symbol of its consonance and continuity. The Cave of Amarnath in Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*—its chaos unbearable to the outsider, its logic innate to the believer—anticipates the idea of India that was to manifest itself in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*: the idea of a

dynamic nation held together by “a central will, a central intellect, a national idea” (Naipaul 2010: 603).⁹

In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul contemplates the Himalayas as “the Indian symbol of loss”—the remoteness of the mountains symbolizing the gulf that separated the pilgrims from their past and to which they must return in the hope of discovering their history as one people, an idea of a unified national consciousness that goes beyond caste, class or religion. *India: A Million Mutinies Now* bears witness to the laborious and painful development of this idea of India as a single nation slowly taking root in the collective consciousness of the nation. If India in Forster’s *A Passage to India* functions as the stage on which the drama of imperial friendship is enacted in all its incongruity leading to its ultimate and inevitable collapse, in Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*, a post-Independence India confirms the inherent frailty of the imperial enterprise:

The English, as Indians say again and again, did not become part of India; and in the end they *escaped* [emphasis added] back to England. They left no noble monuments behind and no religion save a concept of Englishness as a desirable code of behaviour...which in Indian minds can be dissociated from the fact of English rule, the vulgarities of racial arrogance or the position of England today. (Naipaul 2002: 214-15)

This concept of Englishness, observes Naipaul, is “a product of fantasy” that stresses the narcissism of imperial England; it accentuates the ultimate failure of the British rule in India

⁹ All the references to the text are taken from the 2010 Picador edition of the book.

foreshadowed by Forster in the collapse of idealized “friendship” and the final expunction of cultural sympathy in *A Passage to India*. Juxtaposed against this (English) obsession with the self, an involvement that precluded all other intimacies, Naipaul positions the Indians’ “inability to look at their own country directly” as a natural coping mechanism to come to terms with the ubiquitous distress that threatens to pull the decolonised nation-state down into the bottomless abyss of regression and anomie. That neither a refusal to see nor an attempt to proclaim the past can in reality help prevent such a hazard is made way too obvious by Naipaul, who through an equally complex and elaborate cultural exposition of India concludes: “It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling” (Naipaul 2002: 290).

To treat the subject of its author’s homelessness as extraneous to the fabric of *An Area of Darkness* would be to overlook a crucial aspect of the narrative. It overlaps with the antisystemic concerns of postcolonialism—concerns that the text occasions and those that must be addressed in order to arrive at some of the epochal formulations with regard to nationhood and identity. The peculiarity of Naipaul’s position with regard to the narrative of *An Area of Darkness* is that he is the one who, at the same time, writes and is *written on*. The subjects of Indian passivity or the ability to retreat, besides facilitating the arduous and complex task of deconstructing the collective Indian psyche, act as oblique references to the writer’s autochthonous constitution. And although “three generations and a lost language” signaled a definitive disjuncture, they also uncovered elemental affinities with the greater (Indian) philosophy of despair:

It is only now, as the impatience of the observer is dissipated in the process of writing and self-inquiry, that I see how much this philosophy had also been mine. It had enabled me, through the stresses of a long residence in England, to withdraw completely from nationality and loyalties except to persons; it had made me content to be myself...it had convinced me that every man was an island, and taught me to shield all that I knew to be good and pure within myself from the corruption of causes. (Naipaul 2002: 200)

Furthermore, the issues of displacement and homelessness naturally occasion a comparison of colonial India with colonial Trinidad. While in the case of colonial Trinidad, a country where he was born into a family of migrant Indians, Naipaul locates the general affinity for Englishness as part of a wider systemic appeal of the British Empire (with the notable absence of perceived oppression), the imposition of colonial rule on India bespeaks violence and vulgarity. The coming together of the two nations, India and England, and the latter's dominance over the former was a brutal expression of colonial hegemony; it remained an "incongruous imposition." The incongruity of the encounter—glaringly evident in colonial mimicry, in the "comic mixture of costumes," in the ridiculously grandiose and anachronistic architecture, and in the "widespread use of an imperfectly understood language"—underlines the profound embarrassment of the Indian inheritance. And, as if in order to further emphasize the infantilism of the object of colonisation, Naipaul (in *An Area of Darkness*) remarks: "...it was Europe that revealed India's past to India and made its veneration part of India's nationalism. It is still through European eyes that India looks at her ruins and her art" (Naipaul 2002: 221). In *An Area of Darkness*, he emphasizes the mutual relation between mimicry and identity—characteristic of colonial societies and the entire colonial experience—and its impact on

(erstwhile) subject peoples. The development of the colonial subject is a major concern of the Naipaulian discourse; in fact, Naipaul's analysis of Indian attitudes derives mainly from what he perceives as an unrelenting (and often, unconscious) mimicry of the West coupled with intellectual "crampedness"¹⁰ but more wholesomely, from a paramount frustration at the failure of discovering a pre-colonial India. If, for instance, the Marabar Caves in Forster's colonial pastoral¹¹ "roughly translates into the anus of imperialism" (Suleri 2005: 132), the Cave of Amarnath in *An Area of Darkness*—high up on the Himalayas—translates into the (only) Europe-free zone in the essentially colonised landscape of post-Independence India, representative of its pre-colonial past, the quest for which occasioned Naipaul's inquiry of India and, by extension, into himself.

¹⁰ See Cudjoe, Selwyn R. Gordon Rohlehr on V. S. Naipaul: An Interview with Selwyn Cudjoe. *Carib* 2 (1981).

¹¹ According to Raymond Williams: "The lands of the Empire were an idyllic retreat...New rural societies entered the English imagination, under the shadow of political and economic control: the plantation worlds of Kipling and Maugham and early Orwell; the trading worlds of Conrad and Joyce Cary." For more on the colonial pastoral, see Williams, 281.

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