

The Uncanny in the Marabar Caves: Revisiting “A Passage to India” in the Light of Heidegger’s “Dasein”

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Abstract: The whole symphony of “A Passage to India”, with the complex ensemble of colonialism, trade, culture, race and religion turns insistently to the mystery behind the nameless horror of the Marabar caves. The deafening echo has a profound impact on Mrs. Moore and from the dark recesses of the cave blares the universal essence of human life. In the face of the dreadful moment, a confrontation between the authentic “I”, (Dasein) and the inauthentic “I”, (Das Man) ensues that makes her realize the predicament of the modern man. The paper attempts to analyse the novel within the framework of Martin Heidegger’s theory of Being-in-the-world and thereby foster the ideal of inclusiveness of all life forms.

IndexTerms: Dasein, Being-in-the-world, Heidegger, existence.

All the critics and readers of Forster stand undivided in their acclaim of “A Passage to India” being his best work. Steeped in social and moral seriousness, the atmosphere that pervades the narrative is new and profound devoid of the embellishments of poetry, beauty or satire. In each reading the novel sketches a new representation of India encompassing multifold historical, cultural and philosophical expressions. At the backdrop of the novel lies the watershed years of colonialism entwined with the complex issues of race, class and gender that weaves the storyline. Written in the high noon of the imperial age, Forster’s representation of India is caught in the nexus of empire, commerce, caste and religion. Beginning with Indian history, politics and landscape, the work progresses to converge on philosophy to discuss metaphysics of universal interest and application.

Devastated by the worst wars in history, Europe lay in shambles in the beginning of the twentieth century. In the tumultuous political aftermath, the social order had been shaken bringing with it the downfall of all ideologies that sought the unity of the Western world. It was in this context of chaos that philosophers brainstormed for a new concept to reunite the shattered masses. Heidegger’s monumental *Being and Time*, takes up the question of Being, to the way of being, which is essentially human (Eagleton, 1996). His exhortations are basically existentialist, as the sole focus is on the Being-in-the-world/Being of man. Western civilization had placed metaphysics at the centre of all scholarly disciplines, which is the root cause of the fret and fury of modern man. The hiddenness of Being, the most primitive entity has caused the problems that man face today. Being-in-the-world explicates the mode of being, which is human. The “disclosure” of Being happens to man, on the face of death or dread, hence Dasein is at the centre. There is disclosure, there is truth, only because there is Dasein ie. the authentic self (Heidegger, 1962). In the light of the concepts of Being-in-the-world and Dasein, the work attempts to render meaning to the dark emptiness that envelops the Marabar caves. It would also substantiate the experience of the primary character, Mrs. Moore, in the caves. Whom was it that she heard? Was it simply an illusion, a religious experience or just an unknown fear?

In nineteenth century European Literature, India evoked a true fascination in the English minds as a land of magic and snake charmers. The exoticism adopted by many writers of the age in the writings of India, has often deviated from the truth and had set the impetus for the Western civilizing mission. It was commonplace for Britishers to make a trip to India, as colonialism not only means political and economic control, but educating and civilizing its subjects. The evergreen expression of the tedious task of enlightening the

colonized is no better conveyed than in Kipling's poem, *The White Man's Burden* (1899). But there also existed a contradictory view that a journey 'East of Suez' had a sense of liberation. Many of the classic works in British Literature are replete with the echoes of the visions from the Oriental philosophy. Amidst the material richness of urban culture there is a constant search for the finite and transient human self in the spiritual hollowness and erosion of religious faith. Most of all, such a journey is beset with nostalgia and anguish contingent on a journey away from the known, the loved world.

For Mrs. Moore, the journey initially was just a tourist affair but in the course of the novel, it turns out to be an unfolding of the broader meaning of human existence. It happens to be an evocative voyage celebrating an inter-racial harmony and healing all alienations of life on earth. It helps her understand the finitude of human life. She becomes a medium, "to indicate the human predicament in a universe, which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds" (Forster, 1924, p.335). Forster presents her of an inscrutable nature, wrapped in mystery. With a compelling charm yet reserved in countenance, the character is of great significance. It is through the elderly lady that the novelist enunciates the theme of the novel, "...the search of the human race for a more lasting home, about the universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky..." (Forster, 1924, p.251).

The trouble sets in after her visit to the Marabar caves. She was the first to step into the cave, feels uncomfortable, rushes out and seems to be bewildered by an inexplicable eeriness inside the cave. It is in the cold darkness of the caves that the concoction of all the ingredients of life: history, time, philosophy, religion, brews up to nourish the universal essence of humanity. Conveying universal truth about human psychology and experience, an interpretation is that:

"The caves represent the unconscious in two senses - the repressed elements in the individual life and the survivals in modern man of the prehistoric and the pre-human, those elements that Freud termed the id, so that [the echo from the caves] is something before language... [and] before mortality. It is a time and condition that wipes out distinctions...all the distinctions on which Anglo-India built its culture and empire. That is why it is so terrifying" (Beer, 1985, p.22).

Ever after she seems to be unsettled with the echo in the caves persistently resounding in her ears. It troubled her to such an extent that her control over life slowly slipped away. Her attitude to all the worldly cares was ignorant; unable to write to her children in England, and no more interested in the marriage of Adela and Ronny. Most of all, though aware of Aziz's innocence, she did not bother to give the crucial evidence defending him. She had severed her ties with the material world and it is her spirit, the inner self, that clarifies Adela's thoughts and helps her to retract the allegation against Aziz. The mystification of the cave scene is about the disclosure that occurred to Mrs. Moore about the most primordial concept, the concept of Being that presupposes all other entities.

With clever symbolism, Foster explains the confusion in the mind of Mrs. Moore. Irrespective of whatever was uttered in the caves, it always reverberated with the same- a booming sound. The ultimate answer to our frantic quests and relentless efforts is 'bom', a void, a meaningless echo. To the end, everything is null. It is actually a mystery as to Moore's experience within the caves. There is only a description that something landed on her mouth that stifled her voice. Later on a realization dawned on her that it was the image of a child on the hip of its mother. The incident had knocked off unbridled thoughts from many critics explaining the situation. Forster himself had left it at a loose end. But he wanted the readers to believe that she had only experienced something base and petty. "An ordinary, everyday occurrence can have deep and abiding consequences for the life of a human being is one mark of the absurd." (Wartenberg, 2008, p.173). The cave episode in the novel is a manifestation of the way certain critical transformation in life happens at the face of death or dread. Inherent in the vision that occurred to her is a persuasion to make way for the Being and to wholly turn to the earth, the primary fount of all meaning, the inexhaustible mother.

As Wartenberg asserts, “A more definitive path is that provided by death, for the Existentialists – Martin Heidegger in particular- think that facing one’s own death provides the force needed to extricate oneself” (Wartenberg, 2008, p.166) . It might be her own grave that she had met in the depth of the darkness which enlightened upon her that life is a void. The cave symbolizes the mundanity and ennui of the world. It might be a call to realize the Being, so primordial an entity, the forgetfulness of which has created all the problems. According to Heidegger, “ the essence of truth is the disclosing of the meaning of that which we call Being” (1962). The revelation of the truth, the authentic self, has left her completely deflated. Wartenberg says, “As Tolstoy describes it- and Heidegger endorses and follows him in this respect- the authentic self is there in the deepest recesses of our being, awaiting our discovery and acknowledgement” (Wartenberg, 2008, p.170).

To Moore the vision seemed to be credible, but difficult to negotiate considering her upbringing in conventional, affluent circumstances. She goes into the cave as a Christian, but the ideologies of religion and race hold no more a place in her consciousness after the mystic encounter. The echo in the cave is entirely devoid of distinction, challenging all meanings distinguished by the power of reason. “Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof. “Boum” is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or “bou-oum,” or “ou-boum,”—utterly dull (Forster, 1924, pp. 161-162). All the divine words of all religions would only amount to ‘boum’. None of the religious incantations could cope with the unreason held out by the caves, but are uniformly distorted.

In a world of social, political and religious conflict, the echo in the caves emphasizes the nonsensical categories and conformities of human society. It instigates to turn away from the conformist self and to embrace the “authentic self” that lives in integration with the universe. It is an unusual state when anybody becomes more than the self, if they think of others. This can only impart an ecstasy to the process of being-in-the-world, a realization of the Absolute.

The cave episode is pivotal in suggesting the confluence of all religions of the world in the authentic “I” of the self, preaching love and harmony. The emphasis on inclusiveness that pervades in all the pages of the novel is an impetus to embrace all life-forms. The primal forces in the cave speak of a human experience not touched by culture, history and gender. It is to this blissful serenity of existence that Mrs. Moore gets transported. Her mystified self stands in strange contrast with the former banal conscience. Her departure from India is described this way, “She watches the indestructible life of man and his changing faces, and the houses he has built for himself and god” (Forster, 1924, pp.213). It was truly a journey of exile, guilt and liberation for Mrs. Moore when finally she dies with the mystery of the Eternity, the sublime locked in her bosom.

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