



'Mimicry' and 'Ambivalence' in *A Passage to India*

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Abstract

“If colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce.” writes Homi Bhabha in *Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* (1983). Dr. Aziz and Nawab Bahadur in E.M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* (1924) belong to that party of English speaking natives who through their imitation of European culture bring out the ambivalence of colonial attitude. The fact that they are not blind imitators of colonial figureheads but sensitive agents who constantly re-evaluate the set of values and beliefs that the former propagate soon becomes a menace. What was meant to be a ‘safety valve’

backfires into a larger issue; the brutal tearing apart of the mask of liberal imperialism, the failure of the colonial objective to represent and manipulate the colonized. The present paper will focus on the mimicry of the colonized and the ambivalent responses of the colonizer, ranging from resemblance to denial and the consequential menace in *A Passage to India*_(1924).

Key words: mimicry, ambivalence, orientalism, gaze.

". . . the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and a moral fact. The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation . . ." (Said 21).

For centuries the West has offered evaluative judgement about the 'backward' culture of the East, in the complacent form of edified truth- as an academic discipline, as a "corporate institution" of handling and thus controlling notions about the Orient, and over all a hegemonic relationship that has the Occident permanently fixed upon the ladder of superiority (Said 21.) This includes not just the geographical or climatic differences but a whole network of other issues- social, political, cultural, psychological, scientific, intellectual, moral, ideological, all of them intertwining to validate the consistency of the channel of thought that 'Orientalism' projects; the prioritization of the white, European race over the coloured. The findings of Said viz. the 'orientalism' phenomenon definitely problematizes the stances of E.M. Forster and his quintessentially complex creation, Mr. Fielding in *A Passage to India* (1924) as benevolent, liberal imperialists.

On the other hand, can we really pin the novel to be a product of the 'strategic location' of a colonial author who affiliates himself to other canonical texts like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899)? It is true that Forster often falters to 'represent' the colonial problem, grappling with his personal sense of liberalism which contests the exploitation of colonial subjects on social, moral as well as anthropological grounds (the close knit cozy structure of Indian families, vis a vis the haughty Anglo Indian couples; middle class ethics as opposed to European scandal; the ancient rocks of the Indian sub continent and the cultivated English vale), and the however tiny belief of European superiority ingrained in every individual belonging to the three pioneering nations in colonization, Great Britain, France and America, yet it is really his acknowledgement of the non representable nature of the "colonial signifier" which redeems his work from overt colonial bias as Bhabha points out in the '*Articulating The Archaic*' chapter in *The Location of Culture* (1994) (127.) In the same chapter Bhabha goes on to say that "It is in the enunciatory act of splitting that the colonial signifier creates its strategies of differentiation the produce an undecidability between contraries or oppositions", exposing the ambivalent nature of colonial enterprise itself, torn between explicit domination and professed civilizing mission (128).

"We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them is my sentiments. India isn't a drawing-room" (41.) The irony of Ronny's statement about India early in the novel is brought out through Forster's portrayal of the bigger picture- the discriminatory practices of colonial authorities (from Major Callendar of Chandrapore to Colonel Maggs in the neighbourhood of Mau), the dissatisfaction of western educated natives against such practices, the multitude of subalterns who perish in the rubbish heaps of Chandrapore, denied access to either community, and the censuring, foolish (Anglo and Hindu) or silent (Muslim) women, denied any form of

justice or liberty save their exhibitiv value under the imperial rule.

The “muddle” that India is, is a man-made construct as the Orient, created by the homogenizing tendency of the West that seeks conformity to its ideals not true representation (Forster, 58). The whole tradition of Indian history written by colonial hand therefore becomes a mockery, a coloured account of the imperial gaze for consumption of the complacent West and the contemporary western educated Indians. The colonial objective of justification and consolidation of empire is based on labelling and constructing an identity for the East, but the vast territory of India simply refused to be imaginatively reconstructed thanks to its diverse topography and climatic regions and immense variations in language and culture. It is for this reason that India saw the rise of class of Indians educated in English language and thought, to act as interpreters between the colonial masters and their subjects (which often included the native kingdoms) and later for service in other offices- military, civil, clerical, medical etc. Hand in hand with this flourished the missionary culture, a process of further consolidating the empire that mocked the basic tenets of Christian religion (Bhabha 87). However, there was a split in this movement for western education among the enlightened Indians- while one group sought blind identification with the white ruling class, the other having imbibed the European spirit of liberty and equality, rallied against the evils of British rule. The latter were Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath banerjee, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Pherozshah Mehta etc. who ultimately laid the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. While the first group falls under the narcissistic imitators and surveilling agents of British authority, the latter can be justly called the “mimic men” (Naipaul’s phrase appropriated by Bhabha in *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*) questioning the authenticity of the colonizer’s fundamental superiority as (Naipaul 237; Bhabha 87). A. O. Hume's "safety-valve for the escape of great and

growing forces" culminated in a national movement nevertheless as British colonialism through its repetitive mistakes and "slippages" created the very thing it wished to avoid and abort, its response ranging from 'narcissism' to 'paranoia' towards the growing fervor of nationalism (54; Bhabha, 91). The educated Indians of *A Passage to India* (1924) - Dr Aziz, Nawab Bahadur, Mr. Das, Hamidullah, Mahmud Ali, Amritrao, Godbole and even to some extent Dr. Panna Lal, share this dichotomy of western education among them.

The Nawab Bahadur accosts and entertains Ronny and Adela with a car ride, staying within his limits. Influential among his own cultural circle he even encourages others to attend the Bridge party at the English Club. However, he finds himself simultaneously identifying with and detached from the colonial rulers (denied entry into the Club otherwise). He enacts the role of an agent of colonial surveillance at his own men through his imitation of the western standards and is as much as its victim. Despite his good breeding he cuts a farcical figure, sitting with a lapdog in the front seat of Miss Derek's car, subsumed from the Mudkul Estate, while Ronny fondles Adela. Colonial mimicry is indeed a 'camouflage', as the Nawab is much too aware of the differences that set them apart yet behaves quite unperturbedly in the present situation. After the Aziz's release from imprisonment, he renounces the British conferred title and pledges to live like "plain Mr. Zulfiqar", denouncing western influence, a phenomenon which inverts surveillance and challenges British dominion in India (Forster 235).

Dr. Aziz is the most potent figure of 'mimicry' in the novel. A qualified doctor, "a handsome little oriental", his credentials are branded as someone of the "spoilt Westernized" type, mimicking the elevated ideology of colonial rule (Forster 165; 65.) The repetitive image of the caged/wounded bird associated with him underscores the "ironic compromise" mimicry has reserved for him (Bhabha 86.) Under the surveillance of Major Callendar and native spies (Panna

Lal, Ram Chand, Rafi, Antony) he chafes as a colonial subject behind European shirt collars and facile manners. The world outside knows him as a doctor, a Muslim, a non-white individual, each of which categories cannot define the real man behind the labels, he is a poet too, a father, a widower, and many other selves that colonial agents fail to recognize. However the juxtaposed labels of doctor and a native make him a truly "recognizable other", the "*almost the same but not quite*" that the colonizer seeks as a means to his end (Bhabha 86). Located in between, he (Aziz) has full claims to belong yet cannot belong to the hallowed white race which is validated by virtue of its difference from the other. These differences are usually ludicrous like Nawab Bahadur's loud shriek, Godbole's socks and Aziz's collar: "Aziz was exquisitely dressed, from tie-pin to spats, but he had forgotten his back collar-stud, and there you have the Indian all over: inattention to detail; the fundamental slackness that reveals the race" (Forster 65.) Just as Bhabha says colonial mimicry advances through repetition, irony and slippage, there is both conscious irony and unconscious slippage in Ronny's remark. As readers we know that it is really Fielding who cannot remember where he puts the collars while Aziz lends him his own, yet colonial prestige must rely on the assumed inferiority of the 'other'.

It's not just the 'polyphony' of voices at the ending that conclude the fundamental "incompatibility of the empire and the nation", the strain reverberates through the novel in utterances at crucial junctures : "Mr. Fielding, no one can ever realize how much kindness we Indians need, we do not even realize it ourselves.", says Aziz while Fielding, a liberal if not a staunch imperialist thinks- "Kindness, kindness, and more kindness- yes, that he might supply, but was that really all the queer nation needed? Did it not also demand an occasional intoxication of the blood?" reverting to Orientalism (Anderson 87; Forster 100- 101.)

The second example I would cite is more illuminating; when Mr. McBryde offers his

version of "Oriental Pathology" in the courtroom, his remark that "the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not vice versa", is immediately challenged by another remark from the non white audience- "Even when the lady is so uglier than the gentleman?", a very pertinent question, probably mouthed by an educated man that turns the so called cultural superiority of the whites on its head (194). Such is the arbitrary force of British colonialism that it sweeps past any sense of ethnicity or moral values among the natives. The pathology of McBryde, the verbal tirades of Major Callendar and Mrs. Turton, the foolish fears of Mrs. Blakiston are all representations of India or more specifically their ideas about the Orient and its inhabitants, exempting the native's original history, socio-economic background, and a device of marginalization. Mimicry like Orientalism repeats its tenets rather than representing the east. Fielding's attempt to sum up, homogenize the multiple strands of socio-religio-political significations that inhabit India in a single word "muddle", ironically confers on the readers his faulty vision, an incomprehensibility regarding the east, as the Turtons had done:

'I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddles.' said Mrs.

Moore.

'A mystery is a muddle.'

'Oh, do you think so, Mr. Fielding?'

'A mystery is only a high sounding term for a muddle.

No advantage in stirring it up, in either case. Aziz and I

know well that India's a muddle.'

'India's - oh, what an alarming idea !'

'There'll be no muddle when you come to see me', said

Aziz, rather out of his depth . . . (58)

The discomfort of the Indian mind at such a simplified and prejudiced description is evident and we realize why Aziz and Godbole are unharmed by the echoes of Marabar, because as Indians they have learned to live with differences and doubts existing in the multiple layers of society and religion, unlike the English they do not wear a mask of complacent understanding, which is stripped bare along with every vestige of racial superiority in the face of infinity uttered by the rock: "Boum", or the sky (Forster 131). Although the cave episode is followed by Aziz's arrest and trial he gains tolerance, true understanding of the imperial rule and is infused with the constructive spirit of nationalism. He also befriends two Hindus, Godbole and Mr. Das, and becomes the physician of an old Hindu kingdom of Mau, something which he had not foreseen. The colonial responses to the Caves, the symbol of unharnessed, and hence threatening meaning of India, ranges from indifference (Fielding), spiritual vacuum (Mrs. Moore) to paranoia (Adela) while Godbole rejoices in the glory of God, who is present even in His absence and holds out the notion of collective good and evil as opposed to the demonic vision of the other conceived by the English society at large in colonial India or elsewhere.

The colonial agenda flourishing through the "strategic limitation" of natives, through periphrasis, abuses, stereotyping, creating norms to prohibit their entry into any European Club, restaurant, railway compartments, and other such establishments, sowing seeds of suspicion against any communion between the two races, and numerous other laws draws attention to the

loopholes in the process nevertheless (Bhabha 86). A sign of "double articulation", the mimesis of western education is actually a means of inculcating colonialism further into the native's habit, but ironically it has put the Hamidullahs, the Azizes, Amritraos on the same platform as their colonial masters, the Turtons, the Callendars and Heaslops and the very factor of resemblance (education) is turned into a device of discrimination and rejection (Bhabha 86). The traditional benefits of western education for Indians is exposed as a means to the end of strengthening the hand of the ruling corpus, and intensifying surveillance (the platform full of Anglo Indian population), poses a threat to any talk about liberty and equality:

'Excuse me -' It was the turn of the eminent barrister from Calcutta. He was a fine-looking man, large and bony, with gray closely cropped hair. 'We object to the presence of so many European ladies and gentlemen up on the platform,' he said in an Oxford voice. 'They will have the effect of intimidating our witnesses. Their place is with the rest of the public in the body of the hall, We have no objection to Miss Quested remaining on the platform, since she has been unwell; we shall extend every courtesy to her throughout, despite the scientific truths revealed to us by

the District Superintendent of Police; but we do object to
the others.'

'Oh, cut the cackle and let's have the verdict,' the Major
growled. (195-6)

Even the stresses on the barrister's "Oxford voice", distinguishable fine looks among the masses explicate the limiting gaze of colonialism that reduces the other to a "partial presence" arbitrarily (Forster 195; Bhabha 86).

Not realizing the eminent threat behind such a myopoeic vision, the British empire rests upon sand, the very privileges borne out of the difference between Britishers and the natives would lead to its downfall, on the grounds of racial inequality, economic and intellectual exploitation, social injustice and undeserved cruelty. In this light we may read Mrs. Turton's invective, Callendar's abuses, Fielding's nonchalance and dismissal of India as a "muddle", McBryde's pathology that run across the text as parodies of history. (Forster 58). Colonial agencies mime historicity to authenticate their personalized beliefs about a race they denigrate, a country they fail to understand, silencing the discordant voices to rule over them, it is the "final irony of representation" in Bhabha's words (88). The Indian landscape's mocking farewell to Mrs. Moore:

" 'So you thought an echo was India; you took the Marabar Caves as final?' they laughed. 'What have we in common with them, or they with Asirgarh? Goodbye!' ", depicts the underlying irony of the incomplete vision of colonial mimicry that reduces people of flesh and blood to farcical

figures (Forster 186).

The kind missionary figures of Chandrapore, Mr. Graysford and Mrs. Sorley are however set apart from the denigrating people of the same race, travelling with the natives, never entering the Club, teaching the Indians about the inclusiveness of Christ's mercy. Yet there is an ambivalence even here, in their attitude to lower species of animals and insects which point out the fundamental motivation behind 'othering' as a means of securing individuality: "Jackals were indeed less to Mr. Sorley's mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well embrace all mammals, And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation." The omniscient narrator concludes "We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing." this is the truth behind every mimesis (Forster 30).

The "double vision" of colonial mimicry thus steadily jeopardizes the claim of British privileges in the novel (Bhabha 110). Aziz and other educated Indians and even the mass (except Panna Lal) breaks out of the mould of the "authorized version of otherness", articulating the very discourses of race, culture, language and history whose differences had constructed their inferiority, to question and challenge the colonial authority (Bhabha 88). This constitutes the menace of mimicry; the colonizer is now subject to the gaze/ surveillance of the colonized, homogenized and reduced into a "partial presence" (Bhabha 86):

. . . Under his [Turton's] very eyes, the temper

of Chandrapore was altering. As his car turned out of the

compound, there was a tap of silly anger on its paint - a
pebble thrown by a child. Some larger stones were dropped
near the mosque. (189)

. . . A few years
ago, the Rajah [of Mau] would have taken the hint, for the Political
Agent then had been a formidable figure, descending with
all the thunders of Empire. . . [But now] To see how much, or how little,
Colonel Maggs would stand, becomes an agreeable game at
Mau, which was played by all the Departments of State. (263)

. . . He [Aziz] cried: ' Clear out , all you Turtons and
Burtons. We wanted to know you ten years back- now it's
too late. If we see you and sit on your committees, it's for
political reasons, don't make any mistake.' (286-7)

In all the three extracts colonial power politics undergoes a dramatic change, an inversion of roles. Periphrasis has caught up with British individuals as well- "Esmiss Esmoor" (Mrs. Moore),

"the red-nosed boy" (Ronny), "old hag" (Adela) fill the atmosphere of the novel in a murmur of unrest. Nationalism is underway; Ramchand has already joined a committee, overcoming the barriers interposed by religion to criticize the British raj.

The "interdictory" nature of mimicry is better illustrated through the mixed race - the ludicrous figure of the soldier in the Club hurling obscenity at Fielding and Mr. Harris, (chauffer of Nawab Bahadur) (Bhabha 89). While the soldier gets away with his overbearing jokes and hostility towards the natives, Mr. Harris is haunted by the sense of not belonging to either community, just like the educated Indians to whom gates of higher offices would be closed despite their qualifications. These "metonymy of presence", slippages, ironies, stereotypes, obscenities produced by mimicry cannot be repressed any longer but threaten the imperial rule with "conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory identity effects" that does not hide behind narcissism or civilizing mission (Bhabha 89; 90). India's "God si love" doctrine can accommodate everyone, it has no other objective but communion of souls, even extended to a tiny wasp. The kingdom of Mau does not care for imperialism, it is far closer to earth, the punkah-wallah in the courtroom of Chandrapore, and the naked servitor of Mau episode, are more powerful and eternal figures in their essential beauty and harmony with the universe than the temporal, mediocre figures of the imperialist race (258). The dawn of historical consciousness, both national and international has begun as an inevitable process; it is already too late to prevent the menace permanently. It can be checked through the split agents of mimicry, Mr. Haq and Panna Lal perhaps, other two farcical figures but the reality of national consciousness is all the more powerful in Aziz and Ramchand.

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