

Cameron Irby

Dr. Jana Giles

Literary Criticism

1 December 2015

“Boum”: A Nietzschean Analysis of *A Passage to India*

In *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster, there is a scene where Mrs. Moore experiences something not unlike divine inspiration. She does not receive the word of God, however, for her revelation throws her into a spiral of nihilism and despair. “Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth,” she reflects, and with that statement she discards her former self within the Marabar Caves (Forster 134). This moment, as well as many others, seems to reflect many aspects of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, although I could not find any proof that Forster read or particularly cared for the German philosopher or his rebellious and often confusing stances. In any case, the Marabar Caves are a pivotal point for the characters in *A Passage to India*, and it is at this point where the characters of Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore are irrevocably altered. The former, unable to reconcile her inner turmoil, is thrown into an impenetrably foggy state of mind, and the latter descends into the trap of nihilistic anarchy. By analyzing both of these characters and the society in which they live in through the lens of Nietzsche's point of view, the meanings behind their actions and reactions to the Marabar Caves can be revealed.

To begin, it is necessary to define Nietzsche's lens. To most, his philosophy seems muddled and distorted in comparison to other branches of philosophy. This can be attributed to the fact that, unlike most other philosophies, Nietzsche did not seek to build upon the thoughts of

those who came before him. He viewed his predecessors as “extraordinary stage-players and self-deluders” who “would like everything to be made after [their] own image, as a vast, eternal glorification and generalism of Stoicism” and wanted nothing more than to dance around the idea of truth rather than seek it out (Nietzsche 388-389). His opponents, such as Edouard Schure, could call him a madman, but even they recognized that “he made the mountains crumble” as he tore apart the foundation of Western philosophy: metaphysics (Schure 189). Otherwise known as Plato's realm of ideals, Plato believed that there exists two worlds: one in which exists the original or “progenitor” of the concept and one in which those concepts are repeated and recreated, otherwise known as our world (Plato 66). This idea of a world beyond our own was absorbed into early Christianity, which Nietzsche calls “Platonism for the 'people,’” and the ideal world was transformed into Heaven, leading millions to embrace “the noble lie of a true and constant world beyond this one” (Nietzsche 378, Berkowitz 915). It is this concept that Nietzsche attempted to destroy with his works.

Nietzsche's writing breaks the mold of Western thought through three tricky yet intriguing ideas. The first is that the modern concepts of “good” and “evil” are constructed by people and are not ideals in the metaphysical sense. As an example, let us use the aforementioned moral that people should prepare their souls for the afterlife. Many who ascribe to this moral attribute the term “natural” to that which they deem acceptable—“It is only natural to be humble for what blessings one receives.”—and condemn everything they find unsatisfactory as unnatural or evil—“Wanting more than what you have is bad!” To Nietzsche, nature “was not designed for human beings at all; nor were they designed for it,” and its indifferent nature denotes that the only natural way to live is “valuing, preferring, being unjust, being limited, endeavouring to be different...living according to life” (Kain 50, Nietzsche 388). Because of nature's indifference,

men cannot place the blame on anyone but themselves for the morals of society, for it is “we alone who have devised cause, sequence, reciprocity, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose,” and it is we alone who judge what is right and wrong (Nietzsche 404).

The second of Nietzsche's concepts is that of the “Will to Power,” or that part of humans that “elevates the individual above the herd, and is a source of fear to the neighbor” (Nietzsche 492). The Will to Power should not be equated with willpower, though they are remarkably similar, but it is rather “that which allows us to know the world, and to provide interpretations” (Belshaw 199, Kirkland 585). The Will to Power is, in other words, the will to truth. Because Western philosophy idealized only one specific set of morals, many people find their Wills to Power to be suppressed by those above them. To find relief from their inability to act, they transformed their inaction to the ideals that others should follow. This transformation of the hierarchy of values is what Nietzsche calls “ressentiment,” which he sees as “conscious refusal or self-denial, thereby making failure tantamount to virtue” (Kuchta 317). This is part of what Nietzsche refers to as slave morality, but it should be noted that slave morality does not strictly apply to only those without power. In many cases, such as with Ronny in *A Passage to India*, those in power possess a slave morality. For example, Ronny proudly proclaims, “We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant,” as a rebuttal to Mrs. Moore's criticism of his policing method (Forster 41). In the context of Nietzsche, Ronny tells himself that by “systemizing a violence that calls itself reason” he can be a more effective ruler of the people he looks down upon (Pugliese 283).

The third part of Nietzsche's philosophy is that of the *Übermensch*, or “superman.” This is Nietzsche's concept of humanity's future, and it is these supermen who will “renounce the bad taste of wishing to agree with many people” and will “arrive at these truths by means of lives of

experimentation” (Nietzsche 427, Dalton 63). They may be ridiculed and convicted by the herd for breaking the accepted moral code, but it will be the supermen who rise and create new ideals and new ways of being human, “beyond good and evil, and no longer... under the dominion and delusion of morality” (Nietzsche 441).

Now that Nietzsche's philosophy has been adequately defined, we can now begin our examination of Adela and Mrs. Moore. When we first encounter Mrs. Moore, she is discovered by Aziz as he is exploring a mosque. Upon further inquiry, Mrs. Moore reveals how she is not only considerate of Indian culture, which cannot be said for most of her British counterparts back in the club, but she is astonishingly curious about the world outside of the club. From the very beginning, Mrs. Moore is trying to differentiate herself from the English herd by actively refusing to cooperate with the status quo. Where the others “have a drink, have two drinks” and watch performances of *Cousin Kate* repeatedly, Mrs. Moore goes out to see India and its inhabitants (Forster 17).

The same cannot be said for Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore's companion in India. While Mrs. Moore's son Ronny was the one who requested Adela come along, Ms. Quested does not have a lot of affection for the young lad, and her attentions are dead-set on an obsession with “the *real* India” (Forster 16, original emphasis). This statement, which is met with humorous jabs and frivolous curiosity, actually places her in a parallel with Mrs. Moore. Where Mrs. Moore has matured to the point that she is responsible for her own self and can make her own decisions, Adela has little experience on her own and relies on those around her to guide and teach her about the world. Unfortunately, the men and women of the club do not share her desire to see the real India nor do they enjoy, as Mr. Fielding quips, “seeing Indians” (Forster 18). Rather, they prefer to “hold sternly aloof” and “reproduce British culture in a foreign landscape” through

excessive parties in the club and performances of their favorite British plays, no matter how many times they have seen it before (Forster 19, Kuchta 316). The only times they wish to associate with the native populace are when they wish to do so. Adela's desires eventually reach the ears of the Collector, who is "only concerned to give her a good time" during her stay in India, and he arranges a Bridge Party for her, which is quite possibly the furthest thing from the "real India" as one can get (Forster 20). Despite this concession toward Adela, most of the dinner party in the club are apprehensive towards the idea, but they go along with it out of a sense of duty.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Moore is reveling in the sights and sounds of India. Where the club stifles her with heat and chatter, "here she was caught in the shawl of night together with earth and all the other stars. A sudden sense of unity, of kinship with the heavenly bodies, passed into the old woman and out, like water through a tank, leaving a strange freshness behind" (Forster 21). Sadly this inner tranquility does not last, as her son Ronny worries incessantly for her and complains about her describing Aziz as if he were British and not Indian. Yet her description enthralls Adela, who exclaims, "While we talk about seeing the real India she goes and sees it" (Forster 23). Once again, she expresses her desire to break from the British herd and find India for herself, as Nietzsche would most likely have approved of. Something continues to hold her back, however, and she can not quite make out what that something is. To the reader, what is holding Adela back is her peers. She desires to see the real India, but she is silenced by the numerous voices telling her to stay away or try to charm her with "superficial glamour" and Bridge Parties (Forster 20).

Speaking of Bridge Parties, I would like to take a moment to explore the dynamics between the British and the native Indians through the Collector's "bridge... between the East and

West” (Forster 20). Specifically, it is important to note that almost all of the Indians invited to the party are gathered “at the farther side of the tennis lawns, doing nothing” because none of the British ladies and gents want to converse with them. “The great point to remember,” Ronny bluntly points out, “is that no one who's here matters; those who matter don't come” (Forster 30). To the club's members, there is no point to the Bridge Party other than to accentuate the differences between the East and the West. The entire party is effectively a zoo full of the indigenous people for the British to jest and amuse themselves with, and so they do not represent India as Adela nor Mrs. Moore would have preferred. They are merely a semblance of what the British imagine India to be.

After this travesty of a get-together, Mrs. Moore and Ronny engage in a heated argument on how the British treat the natives in India that I alluded to earlier. Ronny, as stated before, infuses his rage with pride and proclaims himself “a servant of the Government” and a keeper of the peace all the while condemning those he has sworn to protect (Forster 41). It is here that Mrs. Moore runs into a stumbling block in her criticism. Due to her inability to communicate her feelings toward her son, she tries to use Christianity to influence him, saying that “the desire to behave pleasantly satisfies God” along with other trifling sayings (Forster 42). Like Adela, Mrs. Moore has not completely shaken off British society and its trappings, and she still holds many Judeo-Christian values. Alas, Ronny is unswayed by her cliché phrases, as “the conversation had become unreal” and petered out (Forster 42).

Later on, Aziz attempts to create a more Indian party for Adela and Mrs. Moore, but this, too, winds up being a farce. In his earnestness to make true, British friends, he smudges facts about India and plays up customs and locales as if they were grander than they really were. His rambling was absorbed by Adela completely, so much so that “she regarded *him* as 'India,' and

never surmised that his outlook was limited and his method inaccurate” (Forster 61, emphasis mine). Eventually, the conversation drifted to that of the Marabar Caves, Chandrapore's somewhat popular landmark. Adela, thirsty for more knowledge, implores Aziz, “Then tell me everything you will, or I shall never understand India. Are they the hills I sometimes see in the evening? What are these caves?” (Forster 65). Aziz, at a loss for words, asks his friend Professor Godbole to describe them.

After an impressive pause he said: 'There is an entrance in the rock which you enter, and through the entrance is the cave.'

'Something like the caves at Elephanta?'

'Oh no, not at all; at Elephanta there are sculptures of Siva and Parvati. There are no sculptures at Marabar.'

'They are immensely holy, no doubt,' said Aziz, to help the narrative.

'Oh no, oh no.'

'Still, they are ornamented in some way.'

'Oh no.'

'Well, why are they so famous? We all talk of the famous Marabar Caves. Perhaps that is our empty brag.' (Forster 64)

This conversation is the best description of the caves that Adela and Mrs. Moore receive, and this sparse and almost cryptic explanation is actually quite insightful when viewed through Nietzsche's philosophy. Since there is no “purely imagined world of the absolute and immutable,” everything can only be described as what it is (Nietzsche 384). There are no hidden meanings behind what we see. These caves are what they are, and they possess no meaning within themselves. Even without any implicit meaning or moral to tie into them, the Marabar

Caves exist and will continue to exist.

To traditional Western philosophers, these caves would either have a meaning or, lacking one, be ignored. Nietzsche, much like Aziz, viewed life like “a human toy that refused to work” and struggled with a replacement for the void left by the absence of a metaphysical world (Forster 64). The solution seems deceptively simple. If the Marabar Caves, or life in general, have no meaning, why not give them a meaning? Nietzsche writes, “Everything that is profound loves the mask,” and he suggests that we should all assign an individual interpretation to life (Nietzsche 426). Following this vein of thought, Aziz gives the Marabar Caves the role of meeting ground for his new-found friends, and he invites them all on a marvelous field trip to view the caves.

While Aziz had readily given the caves a meaning, Adela and Mrs. Moore struggled to come up with one. For Adela, her trouble was due to her being “both in India and engaged to be married, which double event should have made every instant sublime” in comparison to her former life (Forster 118). One of the so-called virtues that British society had instilled in her was the idea that “the whole stream of events is important and interesting, and if she grew bored she blamed herself severely and compelled her lips to utter enthusiasms” (Forster 118). In other terms, Adela has constantly filled her life with distractions, and she is uncertain what to do during lulls where nothing occurs. She instead disguises her anxious need to do something with excited yips of insincere happiness.

While Adela tries to fill the void of boredom with hopes that things will get more exciting, Mrs. Moore does the opposite and lapses into a sense of apathy. She tries to make out something from the nothing that surrounds her, but all she can see is “the country, fields, then hills, jungle, hills, and more fields” (Forster 121). India, or perhaps the world, has become a blur



for her, and she struggles to come up with an appropriate meaning to bestow upon it. Aziz's party does not interest her as much as she assumed it would; in fact, "a Marabar cave had been horrid as far as Mrs. Moore was concerned, for she had nearly fainted in it, and had some difficulty in preventing herself from saying so as soon as she got into the air again" (Forster 131). There was nothing remotely remarkable about the caves, but her reaction to the caves particularly interesting: "For an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic" (Forster 131). This sounds very similar to Nietzsche's description of one's first descent into nihilism, in which he states that, once one realizes the truth of the universe, "he will suffer from such a view of things as from sea-sickness" (Nietzsche 406). While I cannot say that Mrs. Moore was inspired by Nietzsche's description, she does match it to a startling degree, especially so as the story progresses.

The other, more important take-away that Mrs. Moore obtained from the Marabar Caves was "a terrifying echo" that is "devoid of distinction" and continues to resound in her mind as she reflects on her life and her personal beliefs (Forster 132). This echo, this infinitely looping "bom" that had infected her somehow revealed to her that which Nietzsche proclaimed to have found. They had found that "everything exists, nothing has value" (Forster 134). The world to Mrs. Moore had been shattered and meaningless for a long time, but she had ignored it, choosing instead to turn to "poor little talkative Christianity" and the duties of an old British woman of some stature (Forster 134). Once the echo began to take root in her being, her self-deception was broken, and "the mood of the last two months took definite form at last, and she realized that she didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with any one, not even with God... She lost all interest, even in Aziz" (Forster 134). She could no longer find the "affectionate and sincere words that she had spoken," and she, from this point on, completely

changes in personality (Forster 134).

But what about Adela? What did the Marabar Caves do to her? This is a more complex question compared to Mrs. Moore's encounter because of the notable gap in the narrative. We know what happens as she explores the caves up to a certain point, but at that point the story switches the reader's perspective from Adela to Aziz, as well as leaping forward in time an undetermined amount. From what can be gleaned, Adela is not at all focused on the expedition with Aziz to some of the caves on the Kawa Dol. They visit quite a few caves, but “there was nothing to see,” allowing Adela some time to reflect on her recent engagement to Ronny (Forster 135). She inevitably comes to the conclusion that “no, they did not love each other” and that she had only agreed to do so out of “common sense and goodwill” (Forster 136). After a brief discussion with Aziz about his own marriage, Adela “went into a cave, thinking with half her mind 'Sightseeing bores me,' and wondering with the other half about marriage” (Forster 137). Then the story changes hands, but presumably Adela suffers a similar sense of “sea-sickness” as Mrs. Moore experienced and gets lost among cacti and sand until she is recovered by Miss Derek, one of the ladies of the club, and brought back to Chandrapore.

When Adela is encountered again in the narrative, she is under the care of Miss Derek and Mrs. McBryde as they try to remove all of the cactus needles from her body. Adela pays them no mind, however, as she continues to battle with the echo within her mind. The only thing she can mutter in this state—“In space things touch, in time things part”—is so random that she herself “could not decide whether the phrase was a philosophy or a pun” (Forster 174). Once she regains her strength, she tries to tell the ladies what really happened in the caves, but she is mentally split between the cruel truth that she does not want to marry Ronny and the sweeter lie that Aziz had tried to hurt her. The problem with the latter, however, is that “she would hear the

echo again” every time she tried to use that excuse for her thoughts (Forster 174). In a sense, the echo has become her conscience, trying to lead her towards the truth.

Eventually, Adela reunites with Mrs. Moore, but this is not the Mrs. Moore that she once knew. Now, her replies were pointed and “her Christian tenderness had gone, or had developed into a hardness, a just irritation against the human race” (Forster 180). This version of Mrs. Moore had become selfish and only took a half-hearted interest to Adela's chatter. The only time she shows interest is when Adela mentions that she, too, hears the echo. When Adela asks Mrs. Moore how she can “get rid of it,” Mrs. Moore responds, “I don't suppose you ever will” (Forster 180). Her lack of definition as to what the echo is or how to quell it is quite curious, as the echo seems as un-descriptive as the Marabar Caves. One could almost say that if one enters the caves they hear the emptiness within themselves. This is similar to Nietzsche oft-quoted line from *Beyond Good and Evil*: “And if thou gaze long into the abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee” (Nietzsche 466). From this perspective, Mrs. Moore's answer makes sense. The echo is the resounding of the emptiness that life actually contains, and Adela, who is unable to reconcile with this truth, continues to ignore it and tries to simply follow the crowd of British ladies crying that Aziz had tried to hurt her when it could not be any further from the truth. The truth is that nothing happened, nothing is, and nothing was happening in the Marabar Caves, and it is this truth that Adela and Mrs. Moore hear when the echo resounds within them.

Such a truth is difficult to accept, and even the acceptance of this truth does not give happiness. While Mrs. Moore readily accepts this nihilistic view of the universe, she laments that she did not learn it earlier in her life. She laments, “My body, my miserable body... Why isn't it strong?” (Forster 181-182). She had spent so many years deluding herself that she was supposed to love her children and enjoy her matronly role in British society, but she only wants to be left

alone with a her “pack of patience cards” to keep her company (Forster 182). When she gets her chance to be on her own as she sets off on a journey back to England, she imagines that Asirgarh, a city she spots from the window of the train, speaks to her and proclaims, “I do not vanish” (Forster 189). This is the key moment that Nietzsche advised for in those who learned the nihilistic truth. Mrs. Moore could not truly take heart in what she saw or felt because “one can transcend nihilism only by thinking through and beyond it” (Altizer 1019). She realized that, as the train carried her farther and farther away from Chandrapore and India itself, she “could never visit Asirgarh or the other untouched places” that she had not realized she desired to see (Forster 189). With this last thought, she recognizes that the echo was not trying to run her out of India and the Marabar Caves were not the harbingers of the end but were instead markers of a new beginning (Forster 189). Sadly, she does not get to enjoy her psychological freedom, as she dies shortly afterwards of heatstroke.

Adela, on the other hand, wrestles with what to do with her echo. She can choose to accept it and follow her own path, thereby freeing herself from the constraints of proper British society like Mrs. Moore did, or she can suppress it and follow through with the trial against Aziz, letting the herd decide for her what to do and what to say. The latter choice would torment her with the sound of the echo, which Adela unconsciously hears as “Doctor Aziz never did it” throughout her conversation with Mrs. Moore (Forster 184). While she mistakenly attributes the statement to Mrs. Moore, she intrinsically recognizes that she had, in fact, “made an awful mistake” that she must repay (Forster 182). Until she does so, the echo will continue to bounce around in the abyss of her mind, but she relinquishes control of her life to the people around her, hoping to find some comfort in what they tell her. She turns to Christianity “after years of intellectualism,” chooses to drink brandy instead of eating, and alters her speech by “forming

each syllable carefully as if her trouble would diminish if it were accurately defined,” all the while knowing that the “echo has come back again badly” (Forster 190-192).

It is not until Adela is seated in the witness stand and about to condemn Aziz that she knew that she had to “tell the truth and nothing but the truth,” even if that truth is not what the men and women of the club want to hear (Forster 205). Upon making this choice, her memory of what occurred became completely clear as the echo no longer obscured it. It was not an outward attack from Aziz that she had suffered but “her private failure she dared not allude to” that she feared, and it was her lack of love for Ronny and her adherence to the status quo that had shaken her and stuck with her for so long (Forster 205). Once she says, “I withdraw everything,” she breaks out of the mold society had given her, just like Mrs. Moore had done, but now she has an entire life to live in which she can make her own choices and do as she pleases without fear of deceiving herself (Forster 208).

Knowing that the world has no meaning does not mean that nothing matters, as Nietzsche points out in his works and as Adela and Mrs. Moore discover within *A Passage to India*. Instead, knowing that the status quo equally has no true hold on the world opens the universe to a wide range of interpretations and new ideas. Mrs. Moore can, for what few moments she has left in her life, “retire then into a cave of [her] own” and rest away from the world and its problems (Forster 180). Adela finds an equal release when she discovers what the echo means, and she is also young enough to enjoy it. This lets her not only grasp that “we all must die: all these personal relations we try to live by are temporary” but also that she can do as she wishes (Forster 239). She does not have to get married off and find love, but she can choose instead to “want others to want it” (Forster 238). She can help the world in that new, unique way, as a superwoman unbound by society and her own inhibitions.