

# UNIT 2 REPRESENTATION OF INDIA (A)

## APPROACHES TO THE NOVEL

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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The two main objectives of this unit are (a) to indicate the various kinds of writing in *A Passage to India* and (b) to indicate various critical approaches which may be applied to the text. Taken together they suggest the wide range of representations of India: those offered by Forster in the novel and those offered by critics who have written about this and related texts as well. All illustrations from the text will be drawn from its opening chapter so please read Chapter 1 alongside this unit.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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The epigraph to *Howards End*, the novel Forster published immediately before *A Passage to India* urges the importance of connection: 'Only connect the prose and the passion ... and both will be exalted'. I think of this as suggesting something of a clue to Forster's method in the later novel in the way it indicates the need to make links and connections between various levels of reality both within the text and outside it, between various kinds of literature with which Forster was familiar and between various contradictory political and cultural influences on the period over which the novel was written. This activity of building bridges and associations was one that was self-avowedly close to Forster's heart. As he once said 'My defence at any Last Judgement would be that I was trying to connect up and use all the fragments I was born with'. Does this activity suggest the need for *tarass* or imaginative sympathy — particularly when exploring a range of cultures — which was discussed at the end of Unit 1? Or does it suggest a concern with self-expression that may edge out political and cultural concerns outside the self? The answer is a matter of opinion but in either case please try to think of how a text, which results from such a need for connection, is likely to have within it several types of writing. I suggest that each kind of writing in *A Passage to India* is the expression of a particular kind of reality — historical, literary or philosophical. Furthermore each kind of writing produces a certain representation of India which in turn corresponds to that particular order of reality. I shall try to work my way through these types of writing in the order in which they appear in Chapter 1. Please keep your text open throughout this unit so that you can make your own readings and draw your own conclusions.

I will also discuss some well-known critical approaches to the text. I shall try to illustrate these approaches with examples from Chapter 1 and to suggest — as I see them — the strengths and the limitations of each. I shall also try to indicate how each kind of criticism produces a corresponding representation of India.

May I make a few suggestions here? First — although only Chapter 1 is used for the sake of convenience — illustrations of textual and critical practices set out in Unit 2 may be found throughout the novel. Please apply these arguments as freely as you wish. Next please don't worry if the arguments set out in this unit seem a little confusing at first. Use them only to get a sense of direction. Once you finish reading the text (perhaps after Unit 3) you might like to re-read Unit 2 to see how far you can apply its ideas. Then please do not apply any of the classifications mentioned here rigidly when you read the text. Both when you read this unit and when you read the novel you will see how each category of writing is both a stimulus and a response to another. Finally please feel free to disagree with any of the readings offered here, either those cited by the critics or those arguments put forward by me. Unit 2 will, I hope, suggest various ways of reading the text. It will work best however when you begin to map your journey through *A Passage to India*.

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## 2.2 KINDS OF WRITING IN THE TEXT

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### 2.2.1 The Travel-Guide

The very first thing that the text does, I think, is to trick the reader. Look at the way it opens:-

Except for the Marabar Caves — and they are twenty miles off — the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely....The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest ....The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving.

What does this kind of writing actually do? First it seems designed to help a reader 'place' a town in her mind by suggesting its importance on account of any natural, historical or architectural features it may possess. Conversely, as in this case, it helps the reader rate such a town as being of no significance since — bar the caves — Chandrapore has no extraordinary feature. Next the account seems designed to help a reader find her way around such a town. River, streets and buildings are 'placed' against each other so that the ugliness which marks one feature automatically touches the next. Again the reader's mind seems to be made up for her in advance. Even before she sees the town to decide for herself, the account appears to have taken her decisions for her. All its main features seem to have been rated. Indeed, so negative is the account in the particular and the general that she may well decide to give the town a miss. Finally the account seeks to transfer the meanness of the town to its residents. 'The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving'. The dismissal seems complete as people and places seem consigned to the dustbin where they belong.

What kind of an account is this? It is in fact very like a travel-guide designed to provide a tourist with as comprehensive an account of a country as possible before she embarks so that she can plan a pleasant and profitable stay. To help a tourist prioritise sights and places travel-handbooks usually have a system of rating. Indeed in his first two novels Forster had already had a good deal of fun with travel-guides. *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View* had pointed out how limited were the insights offered by the Baedekar travel-guides to the culture of Europe in general and Italy in particular. Its practice of predetermining the interest of a place by awarding it an appropriate number of

product of various imperialisms, are shown as being of no lasting importance. In a way this might be said to recall a line from Whitman [1.2.1]:

All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd and link'd together/  
The whole earth, this cold impassive, voiceless earth, shall be completely  
justified.

At the same time I think Forster may be reckoned more radical than Whitman on this point as Forster's opening shows nature to be an active, deciding participant in the cosmic drama: 'The sky settles everything ....' The non-human world is thus brought into the novel to redress the imbalances and discriminations created by the human world. In this sense I think it is fair to say that Romanticism is used to facilitate a critique of imperialism.

Nonetheless the same charge of essentialism discussed in the context of Whitman [1.2.1] may be brought against Forster here. Yet again no attempt is made to consider the specificities — social, political or cultural — of the Indian situation. Is Forster using the beauty and an unexamined assumption of liberation that sometimes characterises this writing to gloss over such ugly realities? In other words is Romanticism ultimately being used as an escape-route away from the guilt of Imperialism?

## 2.2.4 Social Comedy

If the novel provided the reader with drama only on a cosmic scale, I would be tempted to say 'Yes'. However *A Passage to India* also works on the level of social comedy and the comic mode functions as a useful corrective to the cosmic mode. Take for instance this account of the Civil Station from Chapter 1: '...viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place .... It is a tropical pleasance, washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and peepul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars .... They glorify the city to the English people ... so that newcomers cannot believe it to be a meagre as it is described, and have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment'. Look at the curious way in which the writing works. First there is an eloquent overflow of feeling for the beauty that seems to be an integral part of the town when viewed from its British enclave of the Civil Station. The deliberate use of the archaic word 'pleasance' heightens this stereotypical Romanticised picture, rather like that of Coleridge's *Xanadu* where 'Alph the sacred river ran / Through caverns measureless to man / down to a sunless sea'. Next there is a slight change. The trees are given their common Indian names, neem and peepul, and are shown to hide the sordid realities of bazaar life. Then the reader is told that even if the trees look beautiful, the newcomer is warned to expect a meagre town. Finally the exotic pretensions of the description are punctured by the line about the disenchantment people feel when they are made to confront the ugly realities behind the leafy screen of the trees. Social comedy thus punctures easy Romanticism. The cosmic seems likely to win at first: the tropics are paradise, the river noble, and the trees are stronger than 'man and his works'. The comic is always at hand though and introduces the note of disillusionment by wryly pointing out that at the end of the day there is always a sense of let-down. So the intensely-imagined metaphysical presentation of India that was discussed earlier [2.2.3] is questioned from within by the comic mode.

## 2.2.5 The Modernist Quest

Ultimately there is also I think a modernist impulse that helps shape the novel. Chapter 1 for instance begins and ends on the same note: that of the challenge posed to order and rationality by the Marabar Caves. The very first sentence announces their extraordinary nature and the conclusion circles back to a reminder of the 'fists and fingers [that] are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves'. I suspect that the caves are used here to suggest a disturbance of a sane and unquestioning acceptance of the universe. They defy all rational attempts to classify them. To this extent they may perhaps symbolise a quest for meaning that, within the context of Modernism [see Glossary to Unit 1] could

*mandala*: Such an approach may suit a ruler as the exotic is distant and therefore can be shaped according to a ruler's will or a ruler's imagination. It may also suit a tourist since the exotic always has curiosity-value. But to what extent does it help our passage through the text?

### 2.3.2 Studies in Language

With analyses of language I find myself much further down the road. Take the following extract for instance and place it (as this critic goes on to do) against the first paragraph of the novel:

So far as this text is ideological, it is an ideology which manifests itself as space — the space between cultures, the space beyond the human, the space which never will be sufficiently filled by aspiration or encounter .... The frequent use of the word 'nothing' in *A Passage to India* therefore supports my general argument that negation has ideological significance (Beer, 46-7).

First try to list the various forms of negation that occur in the opening paragraph: 'nothing extraordinary', 'scarcely distinguishable', 'no bathing steps', 'not to be holy', 'nor was it ever democratic', 'no painting' and 'scarcely any carving'. Next contrast this with the apparently positive constructions: 'Houses do fall, people are drowned'. Does this not suggest that meaning is to be found in the negatives which move the description ahead rather than the positives which carry a sense of black farce? Then try to work out a possible consequence. Can it be that this is going to be a novel where what is either unstated or just mentioned will be more important than what is ceaselessly described? In this case for example the Marabar Caves to which reference is made only twice in Chapter 1 are easily more important than the Chandrapore which is described in detail. Finally think about the theoretical significances of this critical model. At the end of this essay, the critic remarks 'Forster's work presages the end of empire, not simply of the Raj in India (though it does that) but also the end of that struggle for dominion which is implicit in the struggle for language and meaning — the struggle to keep man at the centre of the universe' (Beer, 58). Here I should say that I have divided views. I agree that — as with the negatives in Chapter 1 — I feel I am reading a text written towards the end of the Raj in the sense that the language draws attention to the power of the non-human and human worlds to survive various imperialisms. But doesn't the language draw a great deal of attention to itself? After all we do not meet a single character or event in Chapter 1. We interact only with the language. And I find that puts a burden on me because — as in this chapter — I am forced to relate immediately to the novelist and to what *he* thinks and feels as he represents India. What do *you* think about language here?

### 2.3.3 Colonial-Discourse Analysis

Analyses of writing about India focus with increasing frequency on the politics of the representation of India, whether these be the politics of race, the politics of class and the politics of gender. I have clubbed these three subdivisions together not because I think they are synonymous but because — with this kind of fiction — there has been a continuing dialogue between these subdivisions. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is an exhaustive exploration of the 'discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, socially ... and imaginatively' (Said, 4). In other words Said suggests that just as imperialism means political control in the field of government and economic penetration of markets it implies a certain representation of the East in literature. This stereotypical representation portrays the East as irrational, incapable of self-government and therefore open to the organising imagination of Europe. Subsequently Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) insists that class and gender are as important as race when it comes to understanding human experience. Neither Said nor Ahmad has written on Forster at any great length here so I will try to apply their ideas to Chapter 1 to suggest how these work. As far as the question of race goes, we are told about the Indian inhabitants of Chandrapore, the British visitors