

“The minority, that calls itself human”:

## Comedy of the Absurd in E.M.Forster's *A Passage to India*

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The reader will have become intimate with the underlying atmosphere of “comedy of manners”, by the time he/she finishes reading E.M.Forster's early novels from *Where Angels Fear to Tread* to *Howards End*. In these novels that were written by 1910, the final impression may vary from farce in which two culturally different societies clash, autobiographical fiction, to a meditative “bildungsroman”; yet Forster's unchanged concern focuses upon pinning down the delicate nuance of people's social behaviour to describe how the individual relations work, and ultimately to serve humanistic liberalism, on which he puts his prime value so far.

After the long interval of fourteen years, he completed *A Passage to India*, a novel which contains the timely discussion on the political and moral issues of the Anglo-Indian in British India, and a novel which is to be Forster's last piece. Though the author seems to introduce the novel to us in the same appearance of “comedy of manners”, however, we can sense something essential to the genre of comedy alter as the text proceeds: it becomes less and less funny, until it reaches the apprehension of the darkest corner of human mind. In this paper, I should like to look at the discordant element in *A Passage to India*, whose existence has kept the reader from perceiving this novel comfortably as a “comedy of manners.”

As far as the “comedy of manners” is concerned, the narrative must concentrate on making the reader keenly aware of social conduct and its nuance: whether it is expressed broadly or implicitly, the chief interest of the author never fails to lie in the subtle meanings of people's behaviour which are culturally circumscribed in the human society. In this novel, however, we

perceive a different aspect of Forster's sense of the comic, which has been latent in his earlier novels since he made Lilia's international marriage an unsuccessful one, and let Rickie be killed in despair. Thus Forster's secret acceptance of the infertility of the human relations or the limitations of rationalism behind the unpredictable violence or deaths can be found already in his early works, and it often invites the criticism that the atmospheric discord is a technical flaw in his creation, as is assumed to be seen in the ambiguous ending of *Howards End*. Though it includes less incursion of violence and deaths, the last novel seems to impress us with the discord most strongly. At the time of its publication, Roger Fry regretted that if only Forster had not put mysticism in it, while Virginia Woolf did not find it discordant, observing that Forster achieved the unification of the double-vision that had troubled his fiction. I wish to suggest that *A Passage to India* might also be read as a “comedy of the absurd”, which comes to be exercised in full scale in the process of transformation from the “comedy of manners” to a comedy of bleaker, and more complicated nature.

### I

The reader will notice that there is a subtle shift in the qualities of the comedy towards the end of the novel. The recurring motif of the unsatisfied promises and prospects accumulates to the point where the social comedy transforms into the comedy of the absurd, which represents the uneasiness of the modern human beings towards the surrounding circumstance which appears barren and aimless. In her study of *A Passage to India*, Penelope Pether concludes that Forster fails to

admit "the other" in India and goes back to the "pastoral" that is a myth of England Forster seeks as a shelter<sup>(1)</sup>, by enumerating Forster's references to "Grasmere" and its magical influence on the English people's personalities, and especially by picking out Fielding's final and instinctive conversion to "the human norm" he experiences when "he saw the buttercups and daisies of June"(p.253). It is true that for Forster the pastoral has indeed a healing value, which is sometimes attributed to Italy, and is more directly expressed in the countryside of England in *The Longest Journey* or *Howards End*, and he must have considered the pastoral as the basic ground which assures the characters of spaces for their escapade from the social restraints, such as the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. The lack of a happy ending which is indispensable to the comedy, according to Pether, comes from Forster's personal disappointment in India; yet this conclusion is undoubtedly insufficient, since the disappointment seems to derive also from within: his negative perception of England itself. Forster's disappointment must be deeper in the knowledge that the "pastoral" England will not embrace him as a fully qualified inhabitant as he has pretended himself to be.

Forster's coming home to England is prevented for two reasons; for one thing, the existence of the pastoral countryside which always stands for "the source of Life" has already begun to be threatened by the approaching urbanization in the predictive picture of *Howards End*. The more serious problem is that Forster cannot settle with the values and views of the traditional, that is, conservative England when it comes to the question of his religion or sexuality. Thus he is caught up in the cultural double-bind: though he retires from India being defeated by its incomprehensible vastness and orderlessness, as well as his sense of guilt caused by the fact that he belongs to the dominant race in the colonial India, there is no consoling place in the homeland, such as "the greenwood" where he lets the homosexual lovers, Maurice and Alec, roam for ever<sup>(2)</sup>. In the new edition of Forster's casebook, Jeremy Tambling, who is the editor, assumes that Forster comes to miss the Comic Spirit because of his "lack of affirmation"(Tambling, p.9). In my view, however, this

"lack of affirmation", which is to be more precisely defined as a sense of "homelessness", provides this Anglo-Indian novel with a wider vision. Though the concept of "social comedy" pervades the entire structure of the novel, the strain of "homelessness" invites us to re-consider its position as the comedy of "hollow men" which remains latent in our reading.

What makes this Indian novel controversial is its final pose of the denial of personal relations, which seems to cancel what Forster has so far maintained as his prime value. His sceptical attitudes towards the productivity of personal relations or rational progress can be observed in such points: his use of the deflation of expectation, or an undermining tone of the narrating voice, which largely influences the whole atmosphere of the novel. There are various levels of the narrative to which the theme of denial or scepticism is applied to, according to their seriousness. At the lighter level, the reader can still perceive the theme as one aspect of the social conduct of human beings, which is the chief material of the social comedy; but at the more profound level, the theme seems to push in a direction beyond the border of the "social comedy," into the more depressing kind of comedy that can be identified with the "comedy of the absurd", which is a genre of theatrical drama.

It might be no coincidence, then, that Forster has placed the Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Gods in the final chapter, which obviously is the one he experienced and recorded with great interest in the Indian journal *The Hill of Devi*<sup>(3)</sup>: "The following letters on the Gokul Ashtami Festival are the most important of my letters home, for they describe (if too facetiously) rites in which an European can seldom have shared." The last part of the novel, "The Temple", has long been regarded as a kind of "coda", where the narrative slows down as the exciting part of the story is over. Yet in the view of the "comedy of the absurd", the Hindu festival, to which Forster has given curiously careful details, is the central motif of the novel, and the controversial final scene shows the climactic moment of intensity and uncertainty as to whether the protagonist-characters can decide to take any action or not.

The drama of the absurd has characteristics such

as: the emphasis on habits or habitual actions as meaningless; characters as the unknowable creatures of habit without sufficient information about their backgrounds; the denial of rational progress or possibilities of improvement, in the forms of the unexpected violence or the sudden deaths of characters; the breakdown of the rational, or the emphasis on the unknowable nature of reality, resulting in the use of "slip of tongue", non-sense "mix-up", or silence. I should like to apply these features of "drama of the absurd" to the novel, and in the next section I wish to prove the propriety of reading it as the "comedy of the absurd" by examining the qualities of characters, incidents and settings which will serve as the evidence.

This novel is full of promises and invitations which are constantly misunderstood or unfulfilled, and they create the sense of being suspended in a world of uncertainty and unanswerability; the world is India which is assigned by the author to be the space for the human comedy. Quoting Aziz's "notorious" invitation — "I invite you all to see me in the Marabar Caves" (p.83), Sara Suleri claims that she has a more particular opinion on the subject, stating that "*A Passage to India* translates the question of cross-cultural friendship into a more vertiginous study of how cultures both issue and misread invitations to one another."<sup>40</sup> While she tries to direct the argument in the specific view of Forster's attempts to engender the illusory friendship between the colonizer and the colonized, I will discuss the implication of the term "invitations" as a more general idea of "promises" or "prospects," not merely as the term applied to the category of "friendship." The efforts to re-read any addresses, hopes and promises that expect response and result may help us perceive clearly that, the deflation of expectation is an indispensable device for making this novel look like a comedy of the absurd, which is farcical and meditative at the same time. The comic device is expanded to include the geographic features of India, along with the heavenly bodies and the whole universe which the narrator frequently mentions in the narrative.

I will peruse the text in the following section to

find the recurring comic motif of invitations, and to observe how they are offered and repudiated. There are major ones and minor ones as to the scale of contribution to the plot, but they all serve to create a dominant atmosphere, or a "pattern." Obviously the invitation to the caves is the central event of the novel, but there are other invitations. Some invitations are more serious than others; for example, the novel could be said to begin with the most typical motif of the comedy, that is, the approaching of the expected marriage of Adela Quested and Ronny Heaslop. The comedy is often identified with a marriage plot, yet in *A Passage to India* the marriage does not take place; therefore it is the first "empty invitation" that sets off the novel's plot. The novel could also be said to end with the most serious, unanswered invitation of all when Fielding asks Aziz, " 'Why can't we be friends now?' " (p.289).

To perceive the aspect of India as a metaphorical space for the exchange of invitations between socially and culturally varied people, Suleri's notion of "Forster's obsession with representing India as a figure of both an erotic yet sterile duplicity" is suggestive of the fact that, in this novel the idea of invitation, which inevitably involves a possibility of sexual implications, functions only in the negative, as is demonstrated in the illusory, incomplete rape of Adela, or Godbole's explanation of Krishna who "refuses to come" to the milkmaid. To see how the "comedy of the absurd" penetrates the structure of the novel, I shall examine it focusing upon six points: the descriptions of the landscapes which reinforce the sense of "displacement" or "homelessness"; the repeated motif of invitations unanswered or promises broken; Godbole's unique philosophy of Good and Evil; the detailed description of the Hindu festival; Mrs Moore's surrender to nihilism and the effect of her death; the interpretation of the final conversation between Aziz and Fielding.

## II

Forster's comic technique is apparent from the start of the novel; *A Passage to India* opens with the evocation of India's landscape. It is not a mere

description of a landscape as is usually placed in the beginning of the narrative to conjure up the atmosphere, especially in the exotic narrative. To realize its effect, let us juxtapose the evocation in the first passage of *A Passage to India* with the description of the Thames that is placed in the nearly opening of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest town on earth<sup>(9)</sup>. (*Heart of Darkness*, p.27)

Then we should have a careful look at the opening passages of *A Passage to India*:

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. There are no bathing-steps, on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, and bazzars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. 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. Chandrapore was never large or beautiful(...) (p.29) (emphasis added)

What is noticeable first is the present tense used in the Forster's evocation, while Conrad's adopts the past tense to describe the scene. The impersonal tone of the narrator of *A Passage to India* which contains no personal pronoun is also noticeable, when it is

compared with that of *Heart of Darkness* which makes the reader aware of a grave-sounding commentator who refers to "us" in his narration, and adopts many emotion-bound adjectives such as "interminable," "luminous," "mournful" or "brooding motionless"; all of these are carefully placed to elevate the expectation of the readers, the expectation to be carried away into the fascinating world of fiction. The pseudo-touristic features in the opening of *A Passage to India*, on the other hand, serve to give the impression that this opening part functions as a stage direction which is meant to inform the reader, or the audience, of the bird's-eye view of the location. This angle is repeatedly inserted throughout the novel as if the author intends to distance the reader from the course of action in the narrative, so as to prevent us from the total commitment to the world of the "social comedy" it is telling.

The contents of the evocation requires sufficient attention to reveal the fundamental pattern of the unsatisfied promises that keeps working somewhere deep under the surface of the plot. The disillusioning and dodging tone can be felt through the succession of negative expressions such as "nothing extraordinary," "scarcely," "no," "never," or "shut out," "mean," "ineffective," "hidden away" and "deters." Yet the first line, "Except for the Marabar Caves — (...)the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary" appeals all the more strongly as a perverted version of the usual phrase of invitation which might likely be found in a Baedeker. Instead of emphasizing the exotic aspects of the landscape just as Conrad's narrative mystifies the Thames and London, the following lines in the Indian novel unroll the sober and nonchalant explanations of the "holy" Ganges and Chandrapore. The very lack of interest or expectation in the introductory passage, represented in the tropic phrase, "[l]eague after league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again"(p.30), urges the reader to pounce on the only "exceptional" objects that interrupt the endless expanse of earth, that is "a group of fists and fingers" that thrust up through the soil. Then the invitation becomes a disappointment again, for "[t]hese fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves": it means that what the reader counts on as the only "extraordinary"

existence turns out to be “caves”, the embodiment of emptiness. What the narrator exercises here is the deflation of exoticism, and the creation of interest through the denial of the usual.

The introductory passage with the negative imagery has specific origins in Forster's experience in India. The descriptions of the hill of Devi and the court at Dewas at the foot of the hill in the Indian journal provide us with the process Forster encounters the alien landscape and how he comes to articulate it into a fiction. After introducing the Maharajah's character whom he served as a private secretary, Forster goes on to make a brief summary of the location:

Round the Guest House no sentiments need cling. It was a dark red dump, dumped by itself by the waters of the Tank when there was any water. When there was no water it looked over cracked mud and stranded thorn bushes towards the distant town. Here the European visitors and officials stayed or were supposed to stay; here I stayed in 1912, but no one loved the Guest House.(...)

She [Chamunda, the goddess who is attributed to the hill of Devi] concludes the curiosities of Dewas. Nothing detained the tourist there, and the surrounding domain was equally unspectacular. No antiquities, no picturesque scenery, no large rivers or mountains or forests, no large wild animals, “usual birds and fishes” according to the Gazetteer, no factories, no railway station. Only agriculture. Flat or rolling fields, occasionally broken by flat-topped hills(...) Amidst these surroundings I was to pass six months of 1921 in the capacity of a Private Secretary. (*The Hill of Devi*, p.28)

We cannot miss the striking similarities between the opening of the novel and the persistent emphasis on the “unspectacular” features of Dewas in the journal. The following description of Dewas, written during his second visit to India, also gives us the original picture of “Chandrapore” which was “never large or beautiful,” and whose “zest for the decoration stopped in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever democratic”(A *Passage to India*, p.29). In the letter of October 10th,

1921, Forster writes of the State he was living in:

I found Dewas an untidy ant-hill, I leave it equally untidy but a desert. All the works have been stopped for lack of funds, and the hideous unfinished palace jags out of the landscape like a Mausoleum or a Lunatic Asylum. It is an appalling tragedy, rooted in the folly of ten years ago. The works should never have been begun. Properly administered, they might have come through, but as it is, they have drained the life of the State.... (*The Hill of Devi*, p.85)

It can be said that these observations of the alien environment could have provided Forster with a new technique which cannot be found in his preceding novels, that is the creation of the comic through negation. It appears to suit the novel's latent structure, the comedy of the absurd, which focuses upon the sterility of the world and the failure of rational progress. It seems that Forster finds the technique of great advantage to the narrative, for he repeats the use of successive negative terms in order to describe the landscape or the climate in India. For example, the narrator in the novel explains the fierce atmosphere of the approaching Hot Weather:

Presently the players went to bed, but not before other people had woken up elsewhere, people whose emotions they could not share, and whose existence they ignored. Never tranquil, never perfectly dark, the night wore itself away, distinguished from other nights by two or three blasts of wind, which seems to fall perpendicularly out of the sky and to bounce back into it, hard and compact, leaving no freshness behind them:(...) (p.103)

The author now almost habitually employs the denial of unification or completion, and this sense of futility by means of the disillusioning descriptions is what initially sets off the opening of the novel with the peculiar evocation.

Another peculiar picture in this novel is that of the Caves, which decidedly relates the narrative to the issue of unknowable reality, and it consequently leads the

reader to speculate on the religious issues; our anxiety for the absence of the Absolute is the base of the consciousness that regards the world with respect to the comedy of the absurd. The motif of the lack of the absolute knowledge is expressed by various objects and incidents in the episodes, the resource of which we are sufficiently given in the Indian journal. Yet the Marabar Caves are, paradoxically, the most eloquent image of the unknowable reality in the novel.

The opening of the "Caves" part is told in a detached tone of the narrator with the impartial, bird's-eye-view angle to the same effect as the opening of the novel has. It provides the reader with two distinguishable aspects of the hills of Dravidia: its incredible antiquity, and its infinite hollowness. What seems most crucial in these two aspects is their common nature that, human beings are unable to perceive them, and therefore unable to experience them. The narrator displays the geological characteristics of India, depicting the rise and fall of the lands since the birth of the earth; then he contrives to express the inexpressible thus:

There is something unspeakable in these outposts. They are like nothing else in the world, and a glimpse of them makes the breath catch. They rise abruptly, insanely, without the proportion that is kept by the wildest hills elsewhere, they bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen. To call them "uncanny" suggests ghosts, and they are older than all spirit. (*A Passage to India*, p.125)

The reader must be bewildered by the term "insanely," for it is actually an odd expression to be adopted to the landscape; it implies the absence of logic in the context. Yet what seems to be "insanity" is the aim of the narrator, since he refuses to label it as "uncanny"; this term of Freud supplies us with the rational ground to recognize the irrational, and guarantees the safety of the complacent reader who asserts his/her sanity. These antique hills, however, assert themselves as being beyond explanation, refusing even to be classified as the supernatural. The inexpressibility of the space is also obvious in the description of the caves themselves:

The caves are readily described. 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 the hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar cave. Having seen one such cave, having seen two, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty-four, the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all. He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind, for the pattern never varies, and no carving, not even a bee's nest or a bat, distinguishes one from another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation — for they have one — does not depend upon human speech. (p.126)

Here we can see the allegorical images which come to be popular in the drama of the absurd. The fable of the visitor emphasizes the image of meaningless accumulation, and the persistent negation implies the loss of individuality; both of them are the chief motifs to create the sense of the absurd, which encapsulates the time of uncertainty and anxiety. For example, Ionesco makes his stage full of chairs increasing every minute, in order to impress the audience with the absence of people who are to sit on them (*Les Chaises*), and the two schoolmates of Hamlet are never sure about their names and always get confused with each other's (Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*). The experience of the caves again far outweighs the "human speech," and it is confirmed in the story by Godbole's perplexing silence in the discussion of the Marabar caves.

The cave seems, however, not altogether "unspeakable": within the circular chamber, the narrator regains the mastery of his omniscience and shows the reader an unexpectedly beautiful picture of the interior, which provides a suggestive contrast to the exterior:

...There is little to see, and no eye to see it, until the visitor arrives for his five minutes, and strikes a match. Immediately another flame rises in the depth

of the rock and moves towards the surface like an imprisoned spirit; the walls of the circular chamber have been most marvellously polished. The two flames approach and strive to unite, but cannot, because one of them breathes air, the other stone. A mirror inlaid with lovely colours divides lovers, delicate stars of pink and gray interpose, exquisite nebulae, shadings fainter than the tail of a comet or the midday moon, all the evanescent life of the granite, only here visible. Fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil — here at last in their skin, finer than any covering acquired by the animals, smoother than windless water, more voluptuous than love. The radiance increases, the flames touch one another, kiss, expire. The cave is dark again, like all caves. (p.126)

There are ambivalent elements in this passage that lead to another deflation of expectation. The images of a struck match and the flame reflecting on the polished wall invite the reader to the emotional commitment to the scene, and when the two flames “approach and strive to unite,” the reader become almost assured that the narrator projects Forster’s motto which is a preface to his fourth novel, *Howards End*, “Only connect...,” onto the dumb show by the personified flames. The prospect of the connection is not satisfied (“but cannot”), because beneath the similar appearances there is an essential difference in chemicals. The atmosphere gets intense when the narrator compares the separated flames to the “lovers,” and the sense of sensuality increases as he emphasizes the keen sense of feeling by describing the walls of the cave as their skin which are “finer,” “smoother” and “more voluptuous.” The effect of this increasing excitement is reinforced by the quickening tone of the sentence whose structure obviously gets looser than that of the earlier sentences. These sense-centred descriptions serve to create the illusion of reality; what is contained within the inlaid mirror is “only here visible.”

The *real* appearances of the walls, however, are illusory, and it is implicitly expressed in the same passage. There is the sense of brevity or fragility, which emerges from the information that the visitor arrives

only “for his five minutes”; then the description becomes crowded with the excessively poetic vocabulary: “delicate stars,” “exquisite nebulae,” “shadings fainter than the tail of a comet” or “the midday moon,” and the common nature to all these images is concluded in an emotionalizing term, “the evanescent life.” Thus there are both ascending movement and the descending movement of emotions in the passage, and they are rather abruptly cut off by the climactic moment: “the flames touch one another, kiss, expire.” The condensed phrase to declare the end of the dumb show must leave the reader in the strong sense of disappointment at what should have been there at the climax; yet there is “nothing extraordinary” as “[t]he cave is dark again, like all other caves.” This passage describing the interior of the cave, therefore, embodies the deflation of expectation that is the fundamental structure of the novel as the comedy of the absurd.

The darkness takes us back to the motif of the insanity of the endless time and space. The narrator returns to his detached tone and makes comments from the height. A cave with the name “Kawa adol,” which means “a swaying bird,” is described with special attention:

...One of them is rumoured within the boulder that swings on the summit of the highest of the hills; a bubble-shaped cave that has neither ceiling nor floor, and mirrors its own darkness in every direction infinitely. If the boulder falls and smashes, the cave will smash too — empty as an Easter egg. The boulder because of its hollowness sways in the wind, and even moves when a crow perched upon it; (...) (p.127)

This description is also filled with the sense of futility, and moreover, the incomprehensible nature of the natural surroundings is emphasized through the terms such as “infinitely,” “empty” and “hollowness.” In Forster’s accounts of these inhuman spaces, we can hear the echo of Pascal’s desperate confession, “le silence de ces espaces infinis m’effraie,” which expresses the fear of human beings towards the unknowable, when one could not be assured of the existence of the Absolute to

rely on.

The "infinite space," which is the void of the rational or the fertile, is exactly where the comedy of the absurd takes place, with the comic characters whose blind behaviour the reader can laugh at in the impartial point of view. Thus the Marabar cave functions as a kind of differentiating device in the novel: the comic is put into practice through the farcical conduct of the characters, and the cave establishes a seemingly senseless frame which prevents the reader from sympathizing with the characters. The picture of the "swaying bird" also provides us with a clear analogy of the human conditions in a visible form. In Forster's other novels, we can only perceive the negative power in the world in a more abstract way, such as the goblins creeping in Beethoven's "the Fifth Symphony" in *Howards End* as the metaphor of evils; in *A Passage to India*, then, we are forced to see grotesquely comic situation in which human beings are embedded without plausible causes or consequences, which is repeatedly emphasized by the references to the caves throughout the narrative.

The advantages of the device might be found in its paradoxical, healing ability. Martin Esslin argues in his manifesto of the "theatre of the absurd" that, it enables the audience to look directly into the arbitrary and desperate situation of the age with the clear consciousness, by removing periphrases and optimistic illusions that blur the immediate perception of fear or anxiety; he asserts that giving a specific form to the ambiguous anxiety must help the audience be freed from the anxiety, which is the central nature lying in any one of the world literature with "black humour." If people are healed by the laughter which results from the recognition of the absurd, what has bothered them must be the anxiety that comes from the illusion which is incompatible with the severe reality. The greater the anxiety and the temptation of the illusion are, the more useful the healing effect becomes<sup>60</sup>. If we apply this enlightening argument to the novel, it probably explains the considerable influence of the Cave on the characters and the reader. For example, Adela enters the cave and comes out, realizing that she has confused the desire to see the real India with her personal, rather sexual

problem: "Do I like anyone, though?"(p.236). She confesses to Fielding afterwards, what she was thinking when entering the cave:

'...I entered that cave thinking: "Am I fond of him?" I have not yet told you that, Mr. Fielding. I didn't feel justified. Tenderness, respect, personal intercourse — I tried to make them take place — of —'

'I no longer want love,' he said, supplying the word.

'No more do I. My experiences here have cured me.(...) (p.238)

Adela's comic blindness towards her own repressed desire is cured by the cave, and there is a profound abyss between Adela and Fielding, who does not enter the cave throughout the narrative, in the way of perceiving the truth; Fielding insists on the identity of the man who followed Adela into the cave, for he "do[es]n't like it left in air," but being "left in air" is the very essence of the experience the cave would offer. Adela, transformed into a cleverer person in the particular respect, answers "indifferently": "Let us call it the guide,(...) it will never be known. It's as if I ran my finger along that polished wall in the dark, and cannot get further. I am up against something, and so are you. Mrs Moore — she did know'(p.238)". The reader can recognize the effect of that "polished wall" on the workings of Adela's mind.

Mrs Moore "did know" what disturbed Adela in the cave, because she also entered the cave with the horrible "echo." Though the echo is usually considered to have brought the negative change in Mrs Moore's personality that leads to her surrender to nihilism, it is also the case of healing through the disillusioning effect of the cave. The careful reading reveals, as is discussed in the third chapter, that Mrs Moore's inexpressible anxiety and scepticism spring from her old age; more precisely, her long, devotional commitment to the self-denying task of bringing up the children. Yet being confronted with the echo that murmurs, "'[p]athos, piety, courage — they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value,'" Mrs Moore is freed from what has bothered her in the course of the narrative:



Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no response to her soul, 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 anyone, not even with God.(...) For a time she thought, 'I'm going to be ill,' to comfort herself, then she surrendered to the vision. (p.146)

The slight remnant of the efforts to cling to the illusory frame of the daily life can be seen in her self-deception in the thought "I'm going to be ill," but the subversive influence of the cave manages to make her accept the true cause of her uneasiness. The unknowable cause of Mrs Moore's sudden change of character raises the question of the consistency in character which is taken for granted in the literature of realism, and that is also a chief component of the comedy of the absurd.

As I have discussed so far, the Marabar hills and the caves in the novel represent the tragi-comic situation of human beings, who are left in the incomprehensible expanse of the darkness: being given no absolute standard of values to direct their conduct, and eternally ignorant of the true reason for their existence, that is repeatedly and more broadly expressed in the works of Camus. There is, however, affirmative aspect of the caves and hills: through the deflation of expectation, or the painful loss of illusions which are necessary for our daily comfort, we can gain the ability to see the uncontrollable existence in our perception of the world which affects human lives to a great extent. As to whether human beings will change for better or for worse because of the recognition of the absurd, Forster hesitates to give a decisive conclusion. We are only able to observe the comic effects of the absurd permeating through the narrative with Forster's skill in making patterns and suggestive incidents in a subtle manner. If *A Passage to India* embraces a disturbing quality, we must not easily turn to mysticism as Roger Fry observes; I wish to argue that this novel is poised barely between the social comedy in the form of a conventional, realist novel, and the drama of the absurd

in which characters appear to be mere puppets against the landscape Forster could no longer find familiar enough to organize into fiction. In *A Passage to India*, "the subtle manners in people's social behaviour" which formerly comes first in Forster's concern seems gradually replaced by something else that is deeply related to its emerging theme, and I shall scrutinize it in the following section.

### III

One of the comic techniques in the comedy of the absurd is the repetition of behaviour. The impact of the comic would be weaker when we read a work than we appreciate it visually, such as the silent movies exploit automatic action and repetitive failures to the comic effect. In reading Forster's novels, it needs particular attention to grasp the repetitive patterns of behaviour or incidents, for he opposes to the mathematical precision with which the action of the characters or the events in the narrative are constructed<sup>7</sup>. In *A Passage to India*, however, there are motifs of repeated mistakes or the habitual behaviour, in the delicate context of cross-cultural society, that seem to produce nothing but muddles and despair. It simply creates the farcical atmosphere in which we can laugh at the characters in a superficial reading, but there actually are points in the novel when the patterns of the repetitive conduct or events turn out to be the allegorical pictures of inconsequence and futility.

What is repeated most noticeably in the novel is the failure to answer other people's expectation, which naturally leads to the deflation of prospect, the chief technique to represent the sense of the absurd. As soon as the story begins, the young, Indian doctor Aziz is summoned by Major Callendar; it is ironic that Aziz has just claimed that the English is no suitable topic of conversation at the dinner: "Why talk about the English? Brrrr...! Why be either friends with the fellows or not friends? Let us shut them out and be jolly"(p.33). Aziz reluctantly obeys the order as his friends persuade him, but his indignation is justified, for he arrives in a hurry at Major's house only to find he is out.

This episode shows a picture of the typical

deflation of expectation, which produces major and minor ripples in the circle of the Anglo-Indian society. Forster does not avoid the responsibility of the ruling race, however, by simply regarding the disappointment Aziz experiences as a result of some "unknowable" force, but he admits that the presence of intercultural slant is the troubling element. The view is reinforced by what Aziz experiences next; seeing helplessly the wives of the English officers taking his tonga without any apology, Aziz confides himself that "So it had come, the usual thing — his bow ignored, his carriage taken"(p.36). The comic effect of Aziz's miserable situation is not weakened by the reader's sympathy naturally arisen towards him, since the narrator cleverly adds Aziz's malicious comment on the Mesdames's features: "...it comforted somehow that Mesdames Callendar and Lesley should both be fat and weigh the tonga down behind. Beautiful women would have pained him"(p.37).

Yet this humiliating event affects Aziz's psychology in such a subtle way that he eventually fails to attend the Bridge Party the English Collector is to give. First, the narrator reports the comic row between Aziz and the Major which took place on the morning after the disappointing evening; the Major accuses Aziz of not coming promptly when summoned, and Aziz's honest excuse makes him more furious, yet this springs from a complete misunderstanding on the Major's side. Aziz cannot make out why he is blamed, and decides to let it pass as an amusing accident, for "when his spirits were up he felt that the English are a comic institution, and he enjoyed being misunderstood by them"(p.67). Yet "the amusement" is to fade soon since it is unnatural: "it was an amusement of the emotions and nerves, which an accident or the passage of time might destroy it." So it is Aziz's turn to break his promise; he plans to go to the Club to join the Bridge Party with his fellow assistant Dr Panna Lal, but at the last moment he decides to neglect the appointment. This results in revealing the delicate problem within the Indian society which tacitly holds the strict class-system; Dr Lal comes to believe that Aziz deliberately neglects the appointment in order to insult him out of his superior breeding.

Reaching his home, Aziz's spirits revive again, as he finds quite unexpectedly a note from Fielding, the headmaster of college, inviting him to tea. This invitation gives him particular joy, because "Fielding had asked him to tea a month ago, and he[Aziz] had forgotten about it — never answered, never gone, just forgotten. And here came a second invitation, without rebuke or even an allusion to his slip"(p.71). This explanation might remind the reader of the curious similarities between Aziz's behaviour and the Hindu tenets the Maharajah dictates to Forster in the Indian journal; the philosophy provides us with useful suggestions in relation to the characteristics of the comedy of the absurd. In the journal, Forster cites his own letter written on March 6th, 1913, reporting amusingly the Hindu philosophy which is obviously new to his intellectual curiosity:

...When I asked why we had any of us ever been severed from God, he[the Rajah] explained it by God becoming unconscious that we were parts of him, owing to his energy at some time being concentrated elsewhere.(...)

I think I see what lies at the back of this — if you believe that the universe was God's conscious creation you are faced with the fact that he has consciously created suffering and sin, and this the Indian refuses to believe. "We were either put here intentionally or unintentionally," said the Rajah, "and it raises fewer difficulties if we suppose it was unintentionally." (*The Hill of Devi*, p.13)

This discussion is reported to have a symbolic conclusion. The Rajah abruptly ended his speech at the news that the Rani was ill, "and said he would return but did not"(p.14); Forster, then, unintentionally fills the position of a human being whose existence is neglected by God.

We can find the analogy of this philosophy in the crucial piece of "the theatre of the Absurd," that is Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In the play, the two vagabonds are killing time as they are waiting for the unknown person named Godot. At the end of each day they are repeatedly told that Godot will never fail to

come tomorrow, so they continue waiting for his arrival even when the curtain falls. In a sense, Godot is meanwhile unconscious of the existence of the two as his attention is "concentrated elsewhere" as the Rajah explains God's neglect of human beings.

I shall return to the novel to see the examples of the deflation of expectation through Aziz's behaviour. After answering Fielding's invitation with an affectionate reply, Aziz flies to his friend Hamidullah's, both to inform this great news and to gain any information about Fielding, especially about how to please him best. The narrator extinguishes Aziz's fever by a brief conclusion: "But Hamidullah was still out, and Mahmoud Ali, who was still in, would only make silly rude jokes about the party"(p.72). Here the reader must again be impressed with the comic patterns of the undermined prospects, to which Aziz contributes to a considerable extent.

The question as to whether Aziz can meet his "Godot" or not is, I wish to argue, one of the chief interests of the novel, and Forster seems to make "no exit" to the question. Fielding is one of the candidates, but his three major failures "to be there when needed" are highly suggestive of his inadequacy. Fielding is late for the departure of the train on the picnic day and disappoints Aziz deeply ("Bad, bad, you have destroyed me", p.131), and this is the first failure which results in the explosion of the cultural conflicts in the long perspective. The second occasion is when Aziz gets arrested on suspicion of the attempted rape; though Fielding promises to "see you through," "before they could make their way through the chaos Fielding was called off by the authoritative tones of Mr Turton, and Aziz went on to prison alone(p.156)". The comic effect of Fielding's repetitive failures becomes almost cruel as we see him rushing in to the maddening crowd outside the court to save Adela from harm. Although his perfect innocence is proved, Aziz seems pathetic in asking Fielding to come back to him: "Cyril, Cyril, don't leave me,"(p.212). Fielding's answer is "I'm coming back..." but he does not, just as the Rajah who didn't return to Forster's company. Aziz seems at last to realize painfully that Fielding is not his saviour: "Cyril, again you desert," cried Aziz"(p.214). After gaining the

knowledge, Aziz increases his criticism towards the friendship with the English, and the narrator admits the essential change in his character: "He was good - tempered and affectionate but a little formidable. Imprisonment had made channels for his character, which would never fluctuate as widely now as in the past"(p.231). This change also serves to let the reader feel less sympathy with Aziz than he does in the early stage of the novel.

#### IV

There remains one more character who is deeply relevant to the creation of the comedy of the absurd; that is, Professor Godbole, an old Brahman, who threads through the narrative, considerably affecting the lives of the major characters in a subtle way. At first glance he might appear to be a stereotyped Hindu scholar whose enigmatic aspect is comically exaggerated, but the careful observation reveals that he is another embodiment of the theme of comic absurdity. His model is vaguely identified in the Indian journal of 1912- 1913 which is included in *The Hill of Devi*, yet what Forster borrows from the model seems to be limited to his unusual name("— What a name! —") and his musical skills<sup>(8)</sup>.

What is striking about Godbole is the lack of his inner speech and the abundant details of his outer appearance, which make a suggestive contrast. He first appears in the tea party at Fielding's college building, and immediately catches everyone's silent but eager attention:

He[Godbole] took his tea at a little distance from the outcasts, from a low table placed slightly behind him, to which he stretched back, and as it were encountered food by accident; all feigned indifference to Professor Godbole's tea. He was elderly and wizened with a gray moustache and gray-blue eyes, and his complexion was as fair as a European's. He wore a turban that looked like pale purple macaroni, coat, waistcoat, dhoti, socks with clocks. The clocks matched the turban, and his whole appearance suggested harmony — as if he had

reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed. The ladies[Adela Quested and Mrs Moore] were interested in him, and hoped that he would supplement Dr Aziz by saying something about religion. But he only ate — ate and ate, smiling, never letting his eyes catch sight of his hand. (pp.81 – 82)

A character in the comedy of the absurd tends to be a figure of inexplicable habit with little individuality, and Godbole seems to be a good example. His outer features impress the reader with the sense of cross-cultural reconciliation, and it is supported by the narrator's favourable notion, "harmony," which is attributed to no other characters. His complexion which is "as fair as a European's" appears symbolic as to the capability of social intercourse with a European. But then, it may be too symbolic; though his complexion is fair, his mind might be unreadable to the Westerner, and his silence can be seen as the persuasive evidence.

Another key suggestion here is the pretended indifference, which is found in common in Godbole and the other guests, that takes the reader back to the argument of the Hindu understanding of the world as God's unconscious creation. Here we see the theatrical effect of the Chinese-box structure, where most of the guests are trying not to see Godbole having tea, and Godbole is also trying not even to "catch sight of his hand" as he continues eating and smiling. This is almost a caricature of the enigmatic Oriental, yet it is curious that we are not tempted to consider his taciturnity as idiocy or emptiness. The narrator suggests Godbole's unknown attraction by saying that "The ladies were interested in him," which bears the same effect as Margaret's recognition of "the idea of greatness" that Mrs Wilcox should give in *Howards End*. It can be said that Godbole's "greatness" may come from his apparent, ambivalent wish to be unnoticed, and to be unconscious of parts of his body. According to the Hindu philosophy, a human being is the object, while God is the subject, in the universe He created; to be forgotten, then, is the normal state of human beings, and to remember is the divine conduct, and Godbole humbly enacts, through his comic behaviour, both roles of a

human who is neglected by God, and of God who is inattentive to his subjects.

We should also notice, however, that his greatness is again subtly undermined by his coward attitude towards the governmental authority. It might be more shocking and puzzling, as little of Godbole's inner voice is revealed by the narrator in the narrative. When Adela and Aziz are tackling together over the lack of vitality in the Anglo-Indian society, Godbole will not join them:

The old man was silent, perhaps feeling that it was unseemly of her[Adela] to criticize her race, perhaps fearing that if he agreed she would report him for disloyalty. (p.83)

The inconsistency the reader may sense in Godbole's personality is the technique Forster employs to let Godbole be the component of the comedy of the absurd, not as a stereotyped holy figure which destroys the ambiguity and the unknowability in the novel.

Despite the flaw in the character, Godbole is still important, for he introduces the essential motif of the "undermined expectation" into the novel at the level of human behaviour. He obviously contributes to the pattern of the motif by several actions, or, "inactions"; he is originally responsible for Fielding's delay: " 'Godbole's puja did it,' cried the Englishman. The Brahman lowered his eyes, ashamed of religion. For it was so: he had miscalculated the length of a prayer"(pp.131 – 132). In time of Aziz's adversity, Godbole demonstrates his peculiar perception of Good and Evil as the presence and absence of God, which results in the complete withdrawal from the social conduct, and it puzzles and irritates Fielding whose Western-born humanism prevents him from looking at the world the other way round. Godbole's idea of Good and Evil which links the individual with the Universe evidently bears the similarities to that of the Rajah's that Forster reports in the Indian journal. Then Godbole disappears in the middle of the "Caves" part (in the twenty-first chapter) without plausible causes in the narrative: "...But the old fellow[Godbole] had gone to bed, and slipped off unmolested to his new job in a day

or two; he always did possess the knack of slipping off”(p.181). When we see him again in the final chapter, he is still described with slight irony as the person “who had never been known to tell anyone anything”(ch.36, p.275), since he lets Aziz be mistaken as to whom Fielding chooses as his wife. Aziz has to build his life upon the mistake for two years disconnecting himself from the Moslem society, partly because of Godbole’s negligence; the negligence is not altogether futile, though, for Aziz experiences the imaginary resurrection of late Mrs Moore with such a drastic impact, as his former disappointment of that great measure only can give. An expectation is borne, flattered, deflated, and revived again; it can be said that, the absurdity of the human conduct indicates our tragi-comic efforts to get a little closer to the core of the impenetrable world. Such an awkward attitude towards life may invite some comic occasions such as Aziz’s quick shifts in his state of mind, or Fielding’s unlikely, temporary insight into his barren life(pp.179– 180); yet there is poetic beauty in the comic of the absurd, as is often observed in the modern drama of the absurd, and in Godbole as well as Aziz and Fielding, we can see certain, humane weakness which arouses in us some intimacy and a sense of humour in a sober way.

I should like to pick out the most typical scene in which Godbole displays his function as the agent of the comedy of the absurd, and the nuance of the comedy of manners still balances. When Aziz and Adela make an impatient inquiry into the nature of the “unspeakable” Marabar hills, Godbole seems to avoid answering them for some vague reason:

‘Are they large caves?’ she asked.

‘No, not large.’

‘Do describe them, Professor Godbole.’

‘It will be a great pleasure.’ He drew up his chair and an expression of tension came over his face. (...) After an impressive pause he said: ‘There is an entrance in the rock which you enter, and through the entrance is the cave.’

(...)

‘They are immensely holy, no doubt,’ said Aziz, to help on the narrative.

‘Oh no, oh no.’

‘Still, they are ornamental 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.’

‘No, I should not quite say that.’

‘Describe them to this lady, then.’

‘It will be a great pleasure.’ He[Godbole] forwent the pleasure,(...) (p.84)

Aziz has the similar experience that “A power he couldn’t control capriciously silenced his mind,” so he thinks he understands Godbole’s difficulty and tries to play with it. Yet the narrator cynically depicts the silent war of ideas beneath the “light and friendly” dialogue which Adela, a Western-educated woman, cannot perceive, with mock solemnity: “She did not know that the comparatively simple mind of the Mohammedan [Aziz] was encountering Ancient Night” (p.84). This is the game Aziz will never win, and he cannot realize it, since he challenges the incomprehensible. Godbole himself remains a human being, though, and a somehow comic figure just as others are. To Fielding, there seems to be: “no reserve or tranquility to draw upon in India. Either none, or else, tranquility swallowed up everything, as it appeared to do for Professor Godbole. Here was Aziz all shoddy and odious, Mrs Moore and Miss Quested both silly, and he[Fielding] himself and Heaslop[Adela’s fiance] both decorous on the surface, but detestable really and detesting each other”(p.86).

The most vivid example of the absurd arrives at the last moment of the tea party. There is the farcical scene where all the members (except Ronny Heaslop) exchange their endless “Good bye” as they are leaving, and Adela carelessly says, “Good bye, Professor Godbole,(...) It’s a shame we never heard you sing.” To their surprise and embarrassment, Godbole abruptly starts singing a religious Hindu song. The song ceases casually as it began, and Godbole explains its meaning:

‘...I placed myself in the position of a milkmaid. I say to Shri Krishna: “Come! Come to me only.” The God refuses to come. I grow humble and say: “Do

not come to me only. Multiply yourself into a hundred Krishnas, and let one go to each of my companions, but one, O Lord of the Universe, come to me." He refuses to come. This is repeated several times....' (p.87)

The repetition of "Come" provides an impressive contrast to the repetition of "Good bye": a lot of "Good bye" exchanged among these "dwarfed" figures are the negative metaphor of the ruined religious rituals, which was once alive with the abundant meaning and expectation in the period such as, say, the Medieval age, when people were able to hope something extraordinary would happen to them. Miss Abbott in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* might be one of the happy few who can say "I wish something would happen to you"(p.168); but in the last novel Forster creates the world where the incomprehensible only serves to increase muddles, and at best to lead to the severe knowledge of reality, as the echo in the cave does to Mrs Moore and Adela. Then, Mrs Moore puts a symbolic question that represents the central interest of the comedy of the absurd:

'But He comes in some other song, I hope?' said Mrs Moore gently.

'Oh no, He refuses to come,' repeated Godbole, perhaps not understanding her question. 'I say to Him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.'

Ronny's steps had died away, and there was a moment of absolute silence. No ripple disturbed the water, no leaf stirred. (p.87)

The slight hesitation in the narrating voice — "perhaps" — leaves room for our understanding that Godbole does grasp what Mrs Moore means: "is there any hope of Salvation's coming?" This anxiety caused by the uncertainty of life is what the drama of the absurd is chiefly concerned; let us take an example from Stoppard's meta-theatrical play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* :

Guil: But for God's sake what are we supposed to do !

Player: Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn.

Guil: But we don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don't know how to act.

Player: Act natural. You know why you're here at least.

Guil: We only know what we're told, and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true.

Player: For all anyone knows, nothing is. (...) (pp.48-49)

Guil: Pass!  
(*The Player passes into one of the wings. Ros cups his hands and shouts into the opposite one.*)

Ros: Next!  
(*But no one comes.* )

Guil: What did you expect?

Ros: Something...someone...nothing. (*They sit facing front.*) (p.50)

What these schoolmates of Hamlet want to know is exactly what the two vagabonds in Beckett's play want to know; that is what Forster wishes to answer in the last part of the novel. The position of "the two" is filled with Aziz and Fielding this time.

In the context of his evaluation of T.E.Lawrence, Edward Said quotes the final conversation between Aziz and Fielding<sup>(9)</sup>, as he exploits its impact by erasing the context and the shades of feelings in the description. On their final conversation Said puts a singular emphasis, arguing thus:

...the East is brought tantalisingly close to the West, but only for a brief moment. We are left at the end with a sense of the pathetic difference separating "us" from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West<sup>(10)</sup>.

I should now look at the final scene of the novel, being fully prepared by the examination of the text I have

exercised so far to prove the necessary condition for Forster's creation of the comedy of the absurd. The controversial ending of this novel leaves the reader in rather a casual manner thus:

'Why can't we be friends now?' said the other[Fielding], holding him[Aziz] affectionately. 'It's what I want. It's what you want.'

But the horses didn't want it — they swerve apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there.' (ch.37, p.289)

We can see that the final scene is unfairly dealt with by Said as I have suggested. What Forster indicates here is a vision of India as the denial of finality of the narrative, in other words, as the recognition of the limitations of "human speech." He leaves unanswered what seems not to be grasped by the rational thinking; it is not that he repetitively employs the Western discourse which constructs the incapability of friendship in the different culture. On the contrary, *A Passage to India* can be said to deal with a far more fundamental problem of the communication between human beings: by juxtaposing their postures of "raging" and "half-kissing", Forster tries to express the difficulties in knowing the true motivation of human conduct. Here it is implied that a sincere attempt to achieve contact with the "other" can take the form of fighting ("We may hate one another, but we hate you most", p.289). We can sense Forster's self-criticism in the final scene where it is Aziz who rightly recognizes the possibility of such ambivalent contact, while Fielding's blurring humanism still makes him think that friendship between the unequal subjects is possible; this insight into the representation of psychological influence of the Imperialism on the educated people also proves that, reading *A Passage to India* as another example of the Orientalist discourse is not only unjustifiable but also futile. The novel ends up in issuing the question as to

whether the time will come, when the contact without conflict become possible; just as Godot does, Forster postpones his final answer: he makes the Indian landscape say "not yet," and "not there." Obviously, these are not expressions of the final refusal, but indications of the possibility of relationship in another paradigm of, say, nation, such as the "one India" that Aziz comes to long for. While there is the hope of Salvation's coming, the human being can repeat "Come, come" as Godbole is said to continue doing so.

## V

As I have argued in the beginning of this paper, the section of the Hindu festival should not be discarded as a mere slowdown in the narrative; the "Temple" section seems to summarize what the novel has developed. It starts with the exploration of the dark elements of the human nature in the form of the traditional social comedy; the nature of comedy in the novel subtly transforms from the comedy of manners — its interest in the nuance of people's social conduct — to the comedy of the absurd, which is concerned more with the unstable, arbitrary position of the human being in the universe. Then these conventional techniques of wheeling the narrative by hopping around in the consciousness of several characters, which Forster has employed so far, makes it difficult for him to relate the realistic events or characters to an artificially alienated setting, as the drama of the absurd often does. Therefore Forster had to contrive some theatrical device to create a sense of the transcendent in the realistic context of the novel; the Hindu festival proves to be a proper representation of the comic in the absurd, to which Forster's own experience of Gokul Ashtami gives its sufficient support.

The way the narrator describes the festival is strikingly close to the way he does in the opening scene, where he emphasizes the disillusioning features and deflates the reader's expectation. They become explicit when the narrator explains the unspectacular sight of the approaching festival thus:

...they did not one thing which the non-Hindu would

feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form. Where was the God himself, in whose honour the congregation had gathered? Indistinguishable in the jumble of his own alter, huddled out of sight amid images of inferior descent, smothered under rose-leaves, overhung by oleographs, outblazed by golden tablets representing the Rajah's ancestors, and entirely obscured, when the wind blew, by the tattered foliage of a banana. (ch.33, p.258)

Despite the electric lights, the God's face "could not be seen," hundreds of silver dishes are displayed "with the minimum of effect," and the inscriptions of poems are hung "where they could not be read." The most absurd expression in the festival is "God si Love"(emphasis added), which is misspelt in the place of "God is Love," that is "composed in English to indicate His universality." This unfortunate slip works as a strongly visible image of the rational which can be easily subverted by arbitrariness. The right term "is" serves to connect "God" and "Love", and the wrong one, "si", fails to link these two religious concepts; yet these concepts are not altogether irrelevant, and the affinity remains with no logical explanations. The end of the Hindu festival is reflected by the narrator thus:

That was the climax as far as India admits of one. (...) The image[of the God] went back too, and on the following day underwent a private death of its own, when some curtains of magenta and green were lowered in front of the dynastic shrine. The singing went on even longer ... ragged edges of religion ... unsatisfactory and undramatic tangles ... 'God si Love.' Looking back at the great blur of the last twenty-four hours, no man could say where was the emotional centre of it, any more than he could locate the heart of a cloud. (ch.36, p.284)

What is reluctantly referred here as "the climax" is the collision of the boats which brings together two parties — Aziz, Ralph, and Stella escorted by Fielding. The farcical picture of this collision can be seen as a concise

re-enactment of the former, serious conflicts between Indians and Anglo-Indians, but its significance is decreased in the context of the endless, centre-less festival, as if it implies that, the Cave affair which changed the lives of those concerned is but another obscure climax of life within the arbitrary, absurd universe. The existence of individuals is again "dwarfed" in the narrator's detached perspective, and his cynical vocabulary such as "underwent a private death of its own" catches us by surprise, showing how much Forster himself has undergone a mental change in his creation.

## VI

Forster's change of view towards the human condition is explicit in his use of unexpected violence and sudden deaths in the novels. We can understand the process in which the violence and deaths transform from the agents of the incomprehensible that arbitrarily interfere in the lives of men, to the inevitable parts of the uncontrollable cycle of life and death.

Many critics have considered the casual treatment of violence and deaths as a major feature of Forster's work. In his introduction, Peter Burra declares that, though lacking the actual probability, the feature "possesses that operative truth" (*A Passage to India*, Appendix II, p.296). We easily remember several examples: Lilia's sudden death, and the baby that is killed in the carriage accident in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*; the sudden death of Agnes's fiancé, and Rickie's self-sacrifice with resignation in the railway accident in *The Longest Journey*. In *Howards End* it is typically shown by the short and abrupt description of the events that lead to Leonard's pathetic death:

The man[Charles Wilcox] took him[Leonard] by the collar and cried, 'Bring me a stick.' Women were screaming. A stick, very bright, descended. It hurt him, not where it descended, but in the heart. Books fell over him in a shower. Nothing had sense.

'Get some water,' commanded Charles, who had all through kept calm. 'He's shamming. Of course I only used the blade. Here, carry out into the air.' Thinking



that he understood these things, Margaret obeyed him. They laid Leonard, who was dead, on the gravel; Helen poured water over him. 'That's enough,' said Charles. 'Yes, murder's enough,' said Miss Avery, coming out of the house with the sword. (pp.315-316)

This event is so unexpected that the reader may be dubious about it, and then feel somehow deceived, mostly because the novel is supposed to be a social comedy, in which the major characters are not allowed to be killed in such a serious way that disturbs the total atmosphere of the light narrative.

Forster seems to justify the use of violence and deaths of this kind by claiming in *Aspects of the Novel* that, a novel must have some eye-catching elements in it to keep the reader's attention. The theory may flatter the reader by its casual way of addressing, but John Beer warns not to take the author's ironic manner literally, as the plot of Forster's work is given the carefully premeditated articulation. For example, the novelist is likely to prepare for the surprise by direct and indirect hints so that the reader may not be annoyed by the irrational course of events. Forster's surprises placed in the context of the social comedy, on the other hand, "do sometimes jar — particularly those irruptions of death or violence which break suddenly into a prevailing atmosphere of domestic comedy"<sup>(1)</sup>. Admitting that Forster deliberately employs the divergence, Beer continues:

The result is that sudden death enters the novel with the jarring quality that it has in real life. The harmonic pattern within which we are comfortably established suddenly gives away. There is a moment of reality — but the reality of everyday life, not of art. (p.12)

Already in the early novels Forster seems to bring in the unpredictability to the narrative, so that the fragile, transient life of the human being may show up more vividly the comic aspects of human behaviour. Lionel Trilling also states that the nature of death in Forster's novels is deeply related to his view of life, as Forster is

not necessarily pessimistic, but is strongly concerned with its finiteness. Through these observations the reader will understand that Forster possesses some kind of faith in the transcendental value of violence or death, and will also realize that their impact remains valid so far as he maintains the frame of social comedy.

In *A Passage to India*, the nature of violence or death inevitably changes according to the transformation of the comic qualities in the novel. Since there is the underlying strain of "the absurd" in the novel, the impact of the unexpected violence or deaths is absorbed into the imagery of the "deflation of expectation" which penetrates the narrative. Consequently, the use of the abrupt incursions of violence or deaths seems to be reserved; the most brutal event must be the attempted rape of Adela, but the possibility of Aziz's guilt is apparently denied by the narrator.

We can still find, however, the examples of significant deaths in the narrative that create a new pattern of the uncontrollable force in the universe. Mrs Moore's death on shipboard is one, and the Rajah's secret death during the festival is the other. What is common to them is that their deaths are kept unknown to the public for a short time so as not to disturb those who hear the news. When Fielding once gives away the news to Aziz ("Fielding could not stand the tension any longer and blurted out: 'I'm sorry to say Mrs Moore's dead', p.231), Aziz is not persuaded by the remark: " 'I do not believe him,' said Aziz; he was inured to practical jokes, even of this type." Here Fielding fails to kill Mrs Moore's ghost, since "people are not really dead until they are felt to be dead," and this perception of death is strikingly distant from the "jarring quality" that Beer considers it has in real life. It is true that the atmosphere of the scene where Mrs Moore's death is made known is somehow "jarring":

Meanwhile Hamidullah, determined to spare the enemy no incidental pain, had said to Ronny: 'We hear, sir, that your mother has died. May we ask where the cable came from?'

'Aden.'

'Ah, you were boasting she had reached Aden, in

court.'

'But she died on leaving Bombay,' broke in Adela. 'She was dead when they called her name this morning. She must have been buried at sea.'

Somehow this stopped Hamidullah, and he desisted from his brutality, which had shocked Fielding more than anyone else. (p.226)

The effect of abusing the dead for a personal revenge is felt even grotesque, yet the quick shifts in the people's reaction keeps the novel from becoming indulged into the meditative tone. It is clear from what Adela says that Mrs Moore can be regarded as a kind of saint, whose name is repeated as if she is now a Hindu goddess, "Esmis Esmoor/ Esmis Esmoor...." This incantation connects her to the deceased Rajah. Aziz, as the appointed doctor of the court, knows the Rajah's death, but decides to keep it secret for a while not to spoil the festive mood among Hindus. Yet Ralph Moore, who resembles his late mother in composition, finds out with his uncanny instinct where the Rajah's body is preserved, and Aziz is struck with awe:

...'Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Radhakrishna Krishnaradha,' went the chant, then suddenly changed, and in the interstice he heard, almost certainly, the syllables of salvation that had sounded during his trial at Chandrapore. 'Mr Moore, don't tell anyone that the Rajah is dead. It is a secret still, I am supposed not to say. We pretend he is alive until after the festival, to prevent unhappiness.' (p.282)

The considerate pretension to make the dead stay until the new God is born responds to the reincarnation of Mrs Moore in the new name. This is Forster's affirmation of violence and death as the necessary conditions of regeneration, which he finally achieves in the form of seemingly negative posture, concluded by "Not yet," and "Not there," and this "acceptance" of the incomprehensible universe Forster has gained bears the imaginary link between Godbole's endless plea for God's coming. Through the close study on the text, it has become clear that the ideas of Hindu religion has

influenced Forster to the extent that he had to desert his long-acquainted style of writing, that is the social comedy in a form of the comedy of manners; yet the impact of Indian natural landscape, its incomprehensible vastness and antiquity should not be overlooked. While the earth and the sky of India refuse to answer the plea ("Come, come"), we are still allowed to sustain the irrational hope of achieving contact between individuals, and Forster leaves his "comedy of the absurd" as the farthest milestone of his creation. He decides to make the narrator linger on the spot where the two protagonists, Aziz and Fielding, ride abreast arguing, just as Beckett leaves the vagabonds linger on the stage, looking forward to meet the one who is "not yet" present. The novel can be said, then, to have some affinity with the drama of the absurd, as Martin Esslin mints the term, which tries to destroy the illusion about the human condition, and help us find the comic in the world where "[i]t matters so little to the majority of living beings what the minority, that calls itself human, desires or decides"(ch.10, p.115).

## VII

In contrast to the early novels in which the optimism towards the personal relations is tainted by his latent, pessimistic resignation, *A Passage to India* leaves us with a strange feeling of optimistic resignation. I wish my essay has sufficiently proved that, through his own experience of the encounter with the "other" culture as an European, Forster's discernment has deepened enough to recognize the anxiety and despair as evidence of his surviving interest in the "other," which is worth constant efforts to encounter.

As we have witnessed, the comic qualities of Forster's comedies undergo a significant change. It starts off as social comedy, especially interested in the people's manners in the social context, but it gradually becomes "mixed up" with the uneasy features of the comedy of the absurd, which cruelly aims at what we hesitate to laugh at, or what is not laughable at all. Yet the strength to find the comic in the conduct of human beings, that is socially and intellectually circumscribed,

is the central grip of the novel, and in that respect, the delicate techniques of the comedy of manners are indispensable to assure that Forster's comedies should never lose the ground of every-day details. The reader who has attentively followed the process of the transformation of Forster's comedies must have realized that, the comic in them works best when the modern, every-day elements of life are connected with the timeless, unknowable aspects of the world. When we consider Forster's intense curiosity about every "evanescent" detail of human activities, which can be abundantly displayed in his letters, essays, the Indian journals, our perception of the comic and the absurd will be renewed; the cooperation of grotesqueness with the comic in the last novel is, boldly speaking, the modern version of Memento Mori, which can be understood as the salvation through the denial of our illusory hope or confidence.

Especially on the issue of the cross-cultural relations, this ambiguous comedy, without clear-cut features and solutions, seems to warn the reader not to assume easily that one can understand the "other" through the rational interpretations of one's limited experience, or not to "forgive yourself" by the seemingly conscientious, facile apologies for whatever harm one has done to the "other." *A Passage to India* is thus unspoiled by the Orientalist discourse, due to its subtle, enduring efforts to stand as close as possible to the author's inner reality.

### Notes

This essay is a rewrite of a part of my MA thesis which was submitted to the University of Tokyo in December 1996.

Primary source: E.M.Forster, *A Passage to India*, ed. by Oliver Stallybrass (London: Edward Arnold, 1924; Penguin Books, 1936; reset from the Abinger Edition, 1979). All the pages referred are given after quotations in the text.

- (1) Penelope Pether, "A Passage to India: A Passage to the Patria?", quoted in *E.M.Forster:*

*New Casebooks* ed. by Jeremy Tambling (Macmillan, 1995), p.207.

- (2) E.M.Forster, "Terminal note" on *Maurice* (Edward Arnold, 1971; Harmondsworth, published in Penguin Books, 1972), pp.217-222.
- (3) E.M.Forster, *The Hill of Devi and other Indian writings*, ed. by Elizabeth Heine (Cambridge, The Provost and Scholars of King's College, 1953; Edward Arnold, 1983), p.60.
- (4) Sara Suleri, "Forster's Imperial Erotic", *The Rhetoric of English India* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.132.
- (5) Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902; Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1989), p.27.
- (6) Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962), p.334.
- (7) E.M.Forster, "Pattern and Rhythm", *Aspects of the Novel* (Edward Arnold, 1927; reset from the Abinger Edition, 1976; penguin Books, 1990).
- (8) E.M.Forster, *The Hill of Devi and other Indian writings*, p.203.
- (9) E.W.Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Georges Borchardt Inc., 1978).
- (10) E.W.Said, quoted in *E.M.Forster: New Casebooks*, ed. by Jeremy Tambling (Macmillan Press, 1995), p.8.
- (11) John Beer, *Achievement of E.M.Forster* (London, 1968), p.12.