

## THE MARABAR CAVES: THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN THE ENCOUNTER IMPASSE BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

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كهوف مارابار: آثارها المترتبة في معضلة لقاء الغرب بالشرق

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الملخص:

تشكل كهوف مارابار الموجودة في مدينة (تشاندرابور) الهندية الجزء الاساسي في رواية (ممر الى الهند) للكاتب الأنكليزي (أي أم فورستر) حيث تدور جميع الاحداث حولها. أن وجود هذه الكهوف في القسم الاول والثاني ومعظم القسم الثالث من الرواية يشير الى محور قوة هذه الكهوف في تركيب العمل الادبي. لقد أستخدم الكاتب أي أم فورستر الحدث المأساوي الذي حصل في هذه الكهوف من اجل لقاء الضوء على مسألة تعذر إقامة صداقة بين الغرب والشرق طالما ظلت الهند تعاني من نير الاحتلال الأنكليزي ولقد شدد الكاتب على هذه الحقيقة من خلال النهاية الكارثية لرحلة أستكشاف الكهوف التي خطط لها دكتور عزيز من أجل أن ترى السيدة مور والأنسة عديلة كويستد الهند الحقيقية.

### Abstract

The Marabar caves of Chandrapore constitute the central part of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* where the entire events revolve around them. The presence of the caves in the first section, then the setting of the second section, and finally most part of section three refers to their powerful significance in the structure of the narrative. E. M. Forester utilizes the tragic event in the caves to cast light on the impossibility of establishing friendship between East and West as long as India suffers from the British colonization. Forster accentuates this fact in the disastrous end of the Marabar caves' expedition which Aziz plans for Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested to see the real India.

**Keywords:** Marabar Caves, colonialism, Anglo Indians, Indo Europeans, prejudice, racism

### Introduction:

Forster describes the Marabar caves in Chandrapore as dark, "They are dark caves" (Forster, 1924: 138). They look like a dome from a distance where there is nothing special to see but darkness, "There is nothing inside them" (Ibid: 139). They fill visitors with terror for they reduce any sound, whether human or just a fingernail scratching the wall, into a horrible echo. While filling each and every corner in the enclosed caves, the echo inspires its visitor with the sense that all human actions are meaningless. In this sense, the caves in collaboration with geographical factors contribute to supply the British with a definite message that they are not welcome in Indian, and it is highly impossible to build mutual relationships with the indigenes on the ground that the British colonizers' inability of understanding the cultural differences between the two divergent races.

During their expedition to the caves, Adela and Mrs. Moore both go through a terrible experience as they encounter the riddled echo inside the caves: Mrs. Moore "had nearly fainted" (Ibid: 158). She is terrified to see the smallness and hollowness of her Christian faith. She suffers from frustration and instability due to her failure to grasp the cultural differences. Later on, she gives up the desire to see India, and decides to head back home. Adela also endures the same terror as she exposed to the horrifying experience in the caves when she imagines that Aziz attempts to rape her. She also comes to realize that she has no affections for Ronny, her future husband, and then she endures a hallucination that Aziz attempts to molest her there.

### Forster's Vision of the Marabar Caves

It is very important to understand what happened in the caves is the cornerstone of the novel's structure, and that everything else revolves around it. In this critical time of the novel in the twentieth century, Forester intends to portray India as a country of riddles that, "can only present confusion of morals and misunderstandings between the colonialists and the locals" (Childs, 1999: 349). The number of the caves which a visitor sees does not count much because they are all alike on the ground that they do not present anything extraordinary. As such, a visitor cannot decide after he returns to Chandrapore "whether he has an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all" (Forester, 1924: 138). Forester makes the image of the caves even vaguer by saying that a visitor is even incapable of finding the exact expressions to describe them. This is precisely what Adela experiences after her visit to the caves for she cannot recollect what happens. Her hesitation to decide as whether or not proceed with her testimony makes her drop her accusation in the court against Aziz for she thinks that she probably hallucinates. She becomes uninterested in the whole issue and is, therefore, unwilling to discuss it any further. Hence, the incident of the Marabar caves does enhance the relationship between the Indians and the English; however, it incites Aziz and Fielding to work harder in order to establish a common ground for mutual understanding and respect between the Indo Europeans and the local Indians, a mission which they unfortunately fail to accomplish. Nevertheless, the incident of the Marabar caves is only important up to the point when Adela withdraws her accusation. After this, it is no longer important. Fielding, the only male in the English club who seems to be willing to befriend the Indian natives, explains the incident to the interest of the Indian doctor. He suggests that Adela commits a mistake arguing that, "I believe that you yourself broke the strap of the field-glasses; you were alone in that cave the whole time" (Ibid: 240). Fielding's justification persuades Adela to drop her charge in the court. For the first time, in all the confrontations between the two nations, the Indians achieve a national victory and avenge their pride against all sorts of subjugations they suffer on the hands of the Anglo Indians. But, Fielding and Adela have to pay for allying with the Indian side, and the price is that they are dismissed from the English club.

The Marabar caves represent the most essential subject in the novel for they stand for the splendid mystery in *A Passage to India*, the country that includes a variety of mystic religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism and the like. The contrastive images of similarity and difference, presence and absence that a visitor perceives at the end of his visit to the caves, follow one after another in sequence without negating each other. Godbole confirms this by saying that, "Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence" (Ibid: 186). In his comment on the failure of the West to comprehend the mysticism of the caves, Boehmer argues that they "denote nothing but their own vacancy of meaning" (Boehmer, 2005: 77). In the light of this fact, Forester is successful in making the land itself an entity in the novel that refuses to be fully understood and mastered by British colonists. In this sense, Boehmer intends to point out that no matter how hard individuals of both races strive to span bridges of mutual understanding, they fail in the end due to the superior- inferior outlook that the Anglo Indian adhere to measure their relations with other nations.

Right from the start of the narrative, the author puts heavy weight on the significance of the caves by describing them as places merely devoid of life. He initiates the first section of the novel by saying that, "They are dark caves" (Forester, 1924: 138). This darkness is merged with the reader's uncertainty to tell after "Having seen one such cave, having seen two, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty-four,... whether he has had an interesting experience or dull or any experience at all" (Ibid: 138) after he returns to Chandrapore. The only impression a visitor has at the end of his experience is that it is a fancy in which the darkness of the caves mingles with the human imagination to produce new images just like the ones we acquire in childhood where kids allows their imagination to take them far while telling them tales.

In his lecture on the nature of evil in relation to the echo, Godbole argues that, "Good and evil are different, as their names imply. But ... they are both of them aspects of my Lord. He is present in the

one, absent in the other ...” (Ibid: 186). The implication of this is that the original sound is good whereas the echo is always harmful for it does not imply any hope. And since the caves are defined as a physical matter emptied of its spirit, therefore the westerners are nothing but bodies without souls. The significance of this particular statement is that that western visitors experience nothing when they visit the Marabar caves. On the basis of this interpretation, the atmosphere inside the cave causes dreadful panic on the side of the Anglo Indian visitors for it makes them lose their sensation and identity. In a word, it causes them to feel that they are equal to the ruled in race and power. Mrs. Moore, for instance, is so terrified and nearly faints when she comes out of the caves to the extent she refuses to reveal what happens there: “The more she thought over it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became ... the echo begun in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life” (Ibid: 160). In other words, the echo turns every form of existence into a meaningless outcome, a fact that the rulers are unable to comprehend.

The visit to the Marabar caves cannot connect West with East on the social and cultural levels. As such, all the endeavors to bridge the two opposing nations always come to a frustrating ending due to the fact that this terrible experience affects all the characters involved. Adela, for instance, abandons her desire to befriend the Indians after the cave incident; she accuses Aziz of attempting to rape her in one of the dark caves, but comes to drop her charge against him Aziz later on. This bitter experience widens the gap between the natives and the Anglo Indians. Moore, on another hand, becomes suspicious in her personal relationships with the Indian indigenes; she does not believe him to be guilty of assaulting Adela, but she is unable to attend the trial to defend Aziz, her only Indian friend. Commenting on this point where the affections of the natives grow antagonistic against the British administration, Nafi Jamal Subhi Ismail stresses this point by saying that,

The aspiration of man to understand himself and universe has resulted in various systems of belief and codes of behavior, ... also alienation from his fellowmen within other cultures, and..., in a more complex bewilderment about his social and spiritual (2016: 19)

This terrible experience in the Marabar caves is very beneficial in Forster’s argument that the inability of the Anglo Indians in comprehending the cultural identity of the colonized causes them to keep alienating themselves from the natives. He, therefore, wonders, “Were there worlds beyond which they could never touch, or did all that is possible enter their consciousness? They could not tell . . . Perhaps life is a mystery, not a muddle” (Forester, 1924: 331). The mysteriousness of the Indian cultural norms is definitely hard understood by foreigners who prefer isolate themselves in their racial circle to mixing with the natives.

### **The Impact of the Caves in Spanning the Bridge between West and East**

Forester uses the concept of space as a personified message which becomes incomprehensible by the British characters in the novel. In the light of this statement, the Marabar caves come to play the role of protagonist against the colonizers when they frighten them away from the Indian land. Aziz in his arrangement to visit to these dark caves, attempts to build a mutual understanding between the two opposing nations. This expedition is supposed to end happily but it ends in a catastrophe when the cave incident damages each and every endeavor to reconcile the West with the East. Right from the onset, Forster keeps describing the Indian land as one of the unfriendly factors contributing in discarding the colonizers from the country. In this case, he depicts the Marabar Caves in a totally inhospitable way. For him, they are just, “fists and fingers . . . thrust up through the soil” (Ibid: 138) dispelling the British from India. This image indicates that the caves do not seem welcoming as they emerge from the ground as thorns which can harm the aliens in case they approach them. Leela Gandhi states that the relationship between the Indians and the British does not seem to be a good one despite the various attempts of reconciliation. The expedition of the Marabar caves is projected as one of these endeavors. Gandhi goes on to argue that, “the tensions between the British and Indians... explode in the Marabar Caves incident” (Gandhi, 1998: 97-8). Forester employs this incident in a figurative way to serve this purpose when he proposes that even nature emerges to be a threatening factor to the British explaining

that they, themselves bear this sort of fear inside their hearts towards the Indian locations. On the basis of this recognition, the Anglo Indians realize that they are not welcome on this land.

By reviewing the description of the Marabar caves again, the reader becomes aware of the fact that Forster intends to show that India resists and refuses in every possible way a friendship between a native and a colonizer. The natural outcome is that the British colonizers in India react with fear and suspicion to the Indians and everything connected with nature, such as weather, animals and landscape. Thus, the British are so overwhelmed with terror that even Mrs. Moore, the broad minded British lady and her companion, Adela, end up to be entirely unable to control their terrible fear in the cave. Forster describes this horrifying moment, "For an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic" (Ibid: 158).

### **The charge of rape and the destruction of connection**

Adela and Mrs. Moore are different in their orientation from the entire British community, except for Fielding, in that they have a very peculiar interest to discover the real India. This inclination is not very much welcome among the Anglo Indians who persist to reject every possible tendency to bridge the social gap between the Indian and British communities. Nevertheless, the two British ladies fail to achieve this objective after their painful experience at the Marabar caves for they are incapable of digesting the fact that India is a mystic country, a kind of spiritual philosophy that the western world is not interested to seek for its roots and trends. However, Adela's experience in the caves remains vague throughout the novel for she fails to provide a precise description of what actually happens there except for some minor unimportant details about scratching the wall with her nail to produce the echo, the shadow she sees, and the way she escapes from the cave. The vague memory of this experience shapes the whole critical discourse of the novel *A Passage to India*. All she can think of is that she endures a horrible mystic experience because of the riddled echo inside the cave which she, later on, appears unable to comprehend. The vague source of the echo makes even her incapable of presenting clear cut evidence whether or not Aziz really attempts to rape her. The experience affects Mrs. Moore horribly as she is exposed to the echo as well. She can forget everything in the Marabar hills except the echo sound which fills her with terror. She feels that she cannot testify in the court for two main reasons, her instability and her respect for Aziz. Accordingly, she feels useless to the British in Aziz's trial. However, she plays an important role in convincing Adela of Aziz's innocence.

One of the interesting interpretations as to why Adela accuses Aziz of rape attempt and then changing her mind to drop her testimony in the court is introduced by the critic Silver Brenda R. who says that Adela, as an Anglo Indian woman, believes that the Indians have an inherent sexual desire for the European feminine gender. On the basis of this belief, she assumes that she is predisposed to be raped by Aziz when they are alone in the cave. Before the incident of the caves, Adela introduces herself as a woman of intelligence; she believes in conducting a liberal, honest conversation. But after the caves, she remembers the discourse she has with some British women about the sexuality and rape intentions the natives have towards the British females, "having been absorbed by the male discourse that surrounds rape, she herself disappears" (Silver, 1988: 100- 1). The characters in *A Passage to India*, except for Aziz and Adela, seem uneager to discover what actually happens in the caves; they are, instead, interested in the possibility that a black Indian very likely rapes the white European woman. It is this idea that drives the British to gather round Adela during Aziz's trial. But the entire English community turns against her as she refuses to testify against Aziz in the court. This stance causes her to be discarded from the British club.

The incident of the Marabar cave casts light on very significant issues, like racism and British nationalism; it builds a wall in the face of any possible effort to establish friendship or any sort of mutual understanding between the two opposing communities. It is this incident that eliminates all possibilities for the Indians and the British to come any closer. Aziz, who keenly strives to make advances to the Anglo Indians, now thinks that the people from both sides can never be friends. This explains why symptoms of defiance to the British system and administration, even inside the British

club, are spotted. Fielding, for instance, defies his countrymen when he takes sides with Aziz owing to his strong belief in his friend's innocence. He, therefore, insists on continuing his friendship and backup to Aziz by convincing Adela to change her mind and drop her charge against Aziz. He challenges his countrymen for the second time when he offers Adela accommodation and food when no one else is ready to serve. But this particular last stance makes Fielding lose his friendship with Aziz. Fielding sincerely tries to convince Adela that she is mistaken in accusing Aziz of the supposed rape. And, as an English man, he is aware of the fact that the English women hate the Indian natives to an extent that Adela may possibly be influenced by the English women's gossip that Indian men are assumed to be savage rapists of white women. Fielding is also aware that by assisting Aziz and leaving the club, he sides with the Indians whom are considered to be a low race, and therefore deserves to be called, "anti-British [and] seditious" (Forster, 1924: 193). Nevertheless, he seems to be content with the consequences of his stances which are not appreciated by the majority of the Anglo Indian in the British club.

### **The confusion of the Marabar Caves**

The Marabar caves cause a sort of intellectual confusion to the British since they are unable to find a logical interpretation of their significance. Besides, the riddled echo they produce creates a sense of bewilderment in their minds. Hence, critics interpret the denotations of these monuments in different ways. Brown's believes, for instance, that the Marabar caves are nothing but a savage primitive world and the civilized European man should not experience. He implicitly prohibits the connection between the British and the Indian particularly in these savage places for they carry the feature of "primitivism, a world which is naturally kept separate from a civilized man" (Brown, 1966: 155). In another word, these caves symbolize the cultures of the colonizers and the colonized that can never meet. From this particular colonist point of view, an impartial individual can notice that the British colonials, as prejudicial racists, have this inherent element of alienation in their psyche; they view themselves as a superior race that have the right rule and subjugate the inferior race.

Considering the external shape, Forster describes the Marabar caves as thorns in a barren deserted area. In their description, these hills defy the order of the universe and present a mysterious phenomenon. Forster further depicts them as extraordinary with the outer and inner shapes indicating that they bear unusual implications where a visitor is unable to gain any knowledge unless he or she is mystic. Forster, by means of describing these caves as a historical site of India, wants to confirm that the caves display a philosophical outlook implied in the diction of the narrative. For this reason, the characters in the novels are helpless to describe the caves when they are asked to do so for there is no particular diction they use to give an ample image. So, when Adela asks Godbole to describe the famous caves, he "forewent the pleasure" (Forster, 1924: 75) only able to indicate what they are by describing what they are not. After he describes the Marabar Caves as both 'extraordinary' and 'renunciation', Forster states that, "The caves are readily described" (Ibid: 124). This statement makes the mystical Godbole incapable of describing the caves any better. Physically speaking, the caves have entrances through which visitors can go through to see and discover their whereabouts. The caves which are accessible are referred to as living caves and they available only for the people who desire to discover their essence; whereas the caves that cannot be visited are referred to as dead for they are sealed and they exceed the living ones in number. However, they are just ordinary caves that carry no sense of ominous connotation nor suggest any significance on the ground that they produce echoes only.

The fact that these two dissimilar caves do not meet implies that there is no connection between the spiritualism and materialism. This dissimilarity between the dead and living caves also refers to the impossibility of bridging East with West, namely, India with Britain. Stone Wilfred H. argues that, in the novel, Forester intends to convey a message to his readers that the western and eastern philosophical views oppose one another, nevertheless, can be viewed as complementing each other:

“this is not to say that Forster is a Hindu or that he is propagating Hindu values . . . , and that we in the West in particular are impoverished by our repression of the irrational and the unseen” (1985: 18).

The caves denote a meaningless message to the readers on the ground that the echo which they produce disperses other sounds as well as it unifies them. Interestingly enough, the interior of the caves deeply fascinates the visitors with a series of echoes generated from the first sound. Accordingly, Forester argues that, Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof . . . Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce “boum.” . . . And if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes.(Forester, 1924: 159)

Throughout the narrative, Forester intends to remind his readers that the caves exist even before humanity do, and when a visitor enters them, he or she is filled with the sense that they do not hold any value because they are empty and lifeless. Both the inner and outer design of the Marabar caves denotes the myth of the first creation of the world, Forester argues, “Older than anything in the world... [and the hills that border them are] torn from [the sun’s] bosom” (Ibid: 137), at the time of creation. Noticeably, the novel time and again emphasizes the fact that no human language can express the implied meaning of the hills that encloses them. Forester argues, “Nothing, nothing, attaches to them, and their reputation [because their interpretation] does not depend upon human speech” (Ibid: 138). He continues to say that, “Nothing is inside them, they were sealed up before the creation of pestilence or treasure; if mankind grew curious and excavated, nothing, nothing, would be added to the sum of good and evil” (Ibid: 139). This statement articulates the fact that these caves are very ancient in history and they defy Europe’s claims of superiority.

#### **The impact of the caves on the Anglo Indian females**

Forester argues that the significance of the echo does not lie only in its potential to integrate all other sounds, or perceive the meaning or meaninglessness of these sounds, but also lies in the fact that it presents various forms from this process via which it joins different levels of sounds. Mrs. Moore understands that this dull echo underestimates life and her religious beliefs in Christianity. This also denotes that her faith in Christianity seems to be changed when she is in India on the ground that her belief in the existence of God grows weaker to an extent that her Christian praying “satisfied her less . . . . Outside the arch there seemed always an arch, beyond the remotest echo a silence” (Ibid: 71). In India, Mrs. Moore experiences the Indian mysticism; she becomes spiritually fond of India; yet, incapable of comprehending it. In the end, she becomes exhausted and falls wretchedly into a deck chair. Adela, on the other hand, is disillusioned with an imaginary rape attempt inside the cave. However, her dropping the accusation against Aziz creates a chaos in the courtroom. Forester describes this muddle saying that, “people screamed and cursed, kissed one another, wept passionately . . . hundreds of things went on at once, so that afterwards each person gave a different account of the catastrophe” (Ibid: 232). This proves that India is a country of diverse viewpoints which have nothing in common with Britain. Here, there are two different nations with two different cultures where friendship is impossible to establish.

At the beginning, the idea of visiting the Marabar Caves sounds fabulous to see the real India when Aziz first makes this offer to Adela and Mrs. Moore, but the drastic conclusion of this adventure prevails very negatively almost everyone in the Indian and British communities. In his comment on this tragic end, Forster says that that, “[The British and the Indian] were sucked in like water down a drain” (Ibid: 158). All the principal characters are affected in one way or another: Mrs. Moore’s impression after she enters the cave is that she feels suffocated and, therefore, cannot control herself. The fact that she takes it on her shoulder to break the boundaries separating the British and Indian communities causes her to undertake this painful experience before the end of the novel. This implies that the Marabar caves, like all the Indian locations, are just tools Forester utilizes to expose the fact that they separate the West from the East and present India as an everlasting mystery which is insoluble by the

foreigners. Of course, not all the characters are able to encrypt the mystery or the echo. Accordingly, Stone Wilfred H. argues that:

there are mysteries in this novel that cannot be solved . . . and the characters are tested by whether they can deal with those mysteries or cannot. Not all of the characters enter the caves, but we can nevertheless say that some characters can enter them and some cannot". (1966: 17)

Mrs. Moore tries to comprehend her experience in the cave, whereas Adela hates what happens to her in there, and insists to stay as an alien to the Eastern culture. In this sense, her philosophical western mindset makes her think that Aziz attempts molesting her in the cave. Later on, she withdraws her charge against Aziz claiming that she seemingly has a hallucination due to the blazing heat.

While pondering the incident over and over, Adela sometimes comes to a point where she believes that she experiences the physical assault in a very bitter way owing to fact that she is different in color and race from the Indians. This incident in the cave forces her to recognize a serious issue that she, as a foreigner, is superior to the Indian community in terms of culture, power and race. She is unable to discard this idea from her mind that both the color and beauty of her body are a good reason for Aziz to execute his attack against her. In this sense, she cannot dispose herself from her colonial sense of racial superiority; she recognizes her character in material and physical terms for which she suffers from the attempt of rape. Silver argues that when Adela is enclosed by the cave, "she is enclosed as well by relations of power, including gender, that make possible the discourse that represents woman as pretense for male rivalry" (1988: 103).

Right from the very moment Aziz is accused of the molesting Adela, Forester persists to inspire his readers with explicit hints here and there in the novel that he never commits the act of raping. But, his readers are not aware of what happens in the cave and how Adela's strap on her glasses break. Forester himself claims that he has no clue. In reference to this incident, Furbank, in his book, *E. M. Forester: A Life*, quotes Forester, who says that, "In the cave it is either a man, or the supernatural, or an illusion" (Furbank, 1978: 374). Lack of knowledge in the cultural differences between West and East may also lead the foreigners to visualize illusory things under the effect of certain sounds. Homi K. Bhabha admits this view by saying that, Cultural difference, as Adela experienced it, in the nonsense of the Marabar Caves, is not the acquisition or accumulation of additional cultural knowledge; it is the momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification, at the edge of experience.(1994, 126)

The novel has a tragic end when the cave trip fails to reconcile West with East. This particular adventure, like all other attempts to span a bridge between the British and the Indians, is a total disappointment to the readers because they separate more than they connect. Edward Said concludes that, "We are left at the end with a sense of the pathetic distance still separating 'us' from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West" (Said, 1977: 244), when Aziz and Fielding are unable to be friends anymore because the Indian land, sky and nature, "didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there'" (Forster, 1924: 316).

### **Conclusion:**

The paper concludes that places in a given country signify the culture and national heritage of people on the ground that they inspire them with the utmost power to resist whoever wants to occupy and subjugate the indigenes. On the basis of this fact, Forester makes a special reference to this canon in *A Passage to India* through employing the Marabar Caves to suggest that it is highly impossible to West and East to meet on a under the condition of occupation. The mystic riddled echo and the frightening shape of the caves keep the Anglo Indians aloof from the Indian land. Adela and Mrs. Moore are just examples the novelist sets to stress this fact. The expedition to the Marabar caves fails to span the bridge between the Indian and British in the end.

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