

**Beyond The Pale: Women, Cultural
Contagion, and Narrative Hysteria
in Kipling, Orwell, and Forster**
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Many critics have examined how, in the words of David B. Espey, “British Empire in India as represented in fiction from Kipling to Orwell is a male domain gradually eroded by British women. . . . The nature of imperial society . . . give[s] women a subtle and often sinister power over men” (185). Pat Barr has blamed Kipling for the “stereotyped and superficial vision of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian woman that has remained current ever since as being truly representative of the whole species” (159). But of course Kipling, as a journalist, was to some extent merely reporting the attitudes he heard expressed by actual Anglo-Indians like British Army officer John Morris:

And I think [the Englishwomen] were very largely responsible for the break-up of relations between the British and the Indians. In the early days, before the Englishwoman went out to India at all, British officers spent much of their time with Indians, got to know them better, got to know the language well and so on; whereas once the Englishwoman started to arrive in India, she expected her husband to spend his time with her. She couldn't communicate with anybody except her cook who knew a few words of English, so she was forced to rely almost solely upon her husband for amusement and company. I don't think she realized what a menace she was. (qtd. in Allen 176–77)

Kipling's stories certainly popularized and reinforced such attitudes towards the Anglo-Indian woman, as Daphne Patai maintains: “In British literature relating to the empire she is a staple caricature, re-sented by British and Indian alike, and from Kipling to Orwell there is

little change in the stereotype" (35). This consistent scapegoating of the *memsahib* has caused feminist critics to attack what Jenny Sharpe calls "a male-generated image that misidentifies the relative powerlessness of white women," and to argue instead that, "European women are the victims of a system not of their own making" (93). At the same time Sharpe and others have suggested that such criticism "fails to contend with how white women were instrumental (both as signs and agents) in maintaining colonial hierarchies of race" (93). Sharpe demonstrates that the inconsistencies found in the supposedly male-generated image of the *memsahib* are manifest in the writings of actual Anglo-Indian women like Flora Annie Steele, who, "perhaps more than anyone else, embodies the memsahib in all her contradictions" (93).

It seems, then, that the female characters in Anglo-Indian literature depict contradictions that are themselves embodied by the women on whom those characters are based. And though Sharpe intentionally excludes native women from her investigation of the role of women in imperial India, much recent criticism has focused specifically on the role and portrayal of native women in the literature. As Zoreh T. Sullivan remarks, "of all the aspects of native life impenetrable to the colonizer, the body of the Indian woman served as the most forbidden zone of transgression" (94). Sarah Suleri adds, "in nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian narrative, the body of the Indian woman dictates the limits and excesses of what a colonial epistemology allows itself to know" (92). While it is a common observation that one of the principal concerns of British authors of colonial texts is the ambivalent attitude of the English male toward English standards of civilization, Revathi Krishnaswami asserts that "the Indian woman in Kipling's tales typically serves as the middle term through which white male anxieties over racial and sexual identity, over status, power, and control, are expressed" (114–15). Therefore English male ambivalence is embodied (both literally and metaphorically) in the figures of both English and native women. Furthermore, critics have tended to assume an identity between the English male protagonists of these texts and their authors, and while this assumption may be tenable in some cases, in others the relationship between subject, narrator, and author is much more problematic. Three works of

narrative fiction by male British writers set in the British Raj—Kipling's short story "Beyond the Pale," Orwell's novel *Burmese Days*, and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*—clearly illustrate these ambivalent or ambiguous relationships by implicating the English male protagonist, the female antagonist/victim (both English and native), the narrator, and the implied author¹ in a complex and tragic pattern of attraction, revulsion, domination, and self-destruction. This complicated pattern mirrors the equally complicated attitudes of these three authors toward their involvement with the work of empire, attitudes both revealed and masked by the narrative choices made by each.

Though Forster's novel is by far the best known and most extensively analyzed of the three texts, I will argue that they all exhibit certain similarities in plot, protagonists, and relationships between Englishmen and women based on the following conceits: 1) the plot structure in each is in some sense tragic; 2) each employs as protagonist a young Englishman who has gone to British India to participate in the work of Empire; 3) in each text, women, either English, native, or both, are portrayed as threatening the successful completion of this work; and 4) in each text English women are equated with "civilization," an equation that becomes increasingly vexed in the twentieth-century texts. In the first two works, native women are seen as tempting Englishmen not only to sexual impurity, but also to the betrayal of "civilized" standards, while Englishwomen are seen as the enforcers of these standards upon men who, according to natural tendency, would otherwise "go native." Moreover, in the latter two texts, Englishwomen cause irreparable damage to strong friendships between English and Indian men. English civilization, along with the English women who maintain it, thus becomes an oppressive and destructive force, ironic in that the ostensible purpose of the British Raj was to bring the benefits of supposedly superior British civilization to the poor benighted natives. But in the works of Kipling and Forster, native or English women also function as sacrificial, redemptive victims, while in *Burmese Days*, the female protagonists (both native and English) are equally sacrificial but provide no redemption; indeed, there is no redemption for anyone in the bleak vision of the novel's narrator. Ultimately, all three texts exhibit varying

degrees of pessimism about the possibility of true cross-cultural understanding, at least in the context of British India, and all three place both the hope for the achievement of such understanding, and the burden of its failure, partly or wholly on women.

Each of the three texts to be examined here employs as a protagonist a young Englishman—Trejago in “Beyond the Pale,” Flory in *Burmese Days*, and Fielding in *A Passage to India*—who has gone to India in search of a job and who, in his official capacity, is expected to uphold British standards and shoulder the “white man’s burden” by participating in the work of “civilizing the savages.” It is therefore crucial that he guard himself against any infectious corruption from native society by maintaining the appropriate distance even while in the midst of it. As Benita Parry has observed:

Once people are segregated because of race, class, or religion, delusions or fantasies about each other will grow rampant, and the British in India were obsessed . . . with those Indian customs which seemed to invite license and debase men. . . . They saw in India vestiges of a primordial, dark and instinctual past which their own society had left behind in its evolution to civilization. (3)

I will demonstrate that in each text considered here, the English male protagonist confronts the primordial, dark, and instinctual elements of native culture, albeit for diverse reasons, and thereby becomes enmeshed in that culture to a degree considered unhealthy by the British officers and their wives who are charged with enforcing the standards of British civilization on their own countrymen as well as on those they colonize.

I. “Beyond the Pale”

The title of Kipling’s narrative, first published in *Plain Tales from the Hills* in 1888, immediately raises the issue of civilization: inasmuch as the expression “beyond the pale” originally referred to the areas of France and Ireland that had not submitted to English military authority and were thus beyond the reach of English law and civilization. As with many of Kipling’s titles, this one appears to involve word play in

the double significance of “pale”—the paleness of English culture and women as compared to the darkness of Indian culture and women. The moralistic narrator opens the text with an interpretation of the Hindu proverb that serves as the epigraph—“Love heeds not caste nor sleep a broken bed. I went in search of love and lost myself”:

A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race and breed. Let the White go to the White and the Black to the Black. Then, whatever trouble falls is in the ordinary course of things—neither sudden, alien nor unexpected. This is the story of a man who wilfully stepped beyond the safe limits of decent everyday society, and paid for it heavily. (189)

The narrator here seems to be a veteran English officer who wishes to dissuade greenhorns from succumbing to the allure of India, its women and its culture. The story is clearly intended as a monitory device, at least at the outset. Trejago, the protagonist, appears to be the typical young British civil servant whose days are filled with the “routine of office work” or “put[ting] on his calling clothes and visit[ing] the ladies of the station” (193). Neither typical nor acceptable to the narrator, however, is Trejago’s interest in Indian civilization: “He knew too much in the first instance; and he saw too much in the second. He took too deep an interest in native life, but he will never do so again” (189). Trejago actually leads a double life: he is a proper young office worker and gentleman-caller by day; by night he is a denizen of the streets, lanes, and alleys of “the heart of the City.” It is on one of his customary “wanderings” that, while disguised in a *boorka*, Trejago stumbles into Amir Nath’s Gully. Upon hearing a “pretty little laugh,” he responds instantly by singing a verse from “The Love Song of Har Dyal,” a move that suggests he is knowledgeable of Indian courtship rituals. Furthermore, on the next day when he receives “an innocent unintelligible lover’s epistle” in the form of an object-letter, he interprets it correctly, again earning the narrator’s censure: “Trejago knew far too much about these things, as I have said. No Englishman should be able to translate object-letters” (191). But Trejago’s familiarity with *The Arabian Nights* and his literacy in object-letters are keys that gain him entry into the house of Bisesa, a

fifteen-year-old widow who serves as a housekeeper for her uncle Durga Charan. Indian social strictures required that women be kept in *purdah*, secluded from the eyes of all men save those of their immediate relatives, and therefore “the walls on either side of the Gully are without windows. Neither Suchet Singh nor Gaur Chand approve of their women-folk looking into the world” (189). Bisesa’s uncle Durga Charan, however, has inexplicably placed her in a room affording a view (through a grated window) into the Gully. And as the narrator ominously informs us, if Durga Charan had shared the views of his neighbours, “he would have been a happier man today, and little Bisesa would have been able to knead her own bread” (189–90). Her uncle’s failure to maintain strict observance of the traditional seclusion of women offers Bisesa partial access to the world beyond her room.

“Little” Bisesa is portrayed throughout as a childlike innocent; even the narrator’s comment that, “she prayed to the Gods, day and night, to send her a lover, for she did not approve of living alone” (190), carries no hint of criticism nor condemnation, but appears rather sympathetic for what fifteen-year-old widow would approve of living alone? Bisesa at first seems to see the affair as nothing more than entertainment and a cure for her loneliness and isolation, not as the prelude to any lasting commitment, and Trejago’s attitude is equally cavalier. He continues to call on the English ladies of the Station, and when “the exigencies of his other life [compel] Trejago to be especially attentive” to one of these ladies (194), the news soon reaches Bisesa’s ears. Curiously, Trejago’s life as an English civil servant is here designated his “other life,” thereby subverting the traditional imperial order in which the native (Spivak’s “subaltern”) is the other. Furthermore, the exigencies imposed on that other life by the English ladies at the Station are symptomatic of a pattern characteristic of masculine fiction in general and masculine British colonial fiction in particular: the women of the colonizing culture, a representation of the civilization and domestication from which men are forever trying to escape, and fearing the supposedly innate tendency of their men to cast off the vestments of civilization when exposed to the blandishments of native culture, enforce the institutionally mandated separation between colonizing men and

colonized women, and thus bear the blame for making intercultural relationships impossible.

Sharpe locates the “stereotype of the memsahib” in “the domestic role of the Anglo-Indian woman”:

A discourse of domesticity, as it is bound up with that of racial superiority, is manifested in the duty of colonial women to maintain a separation of the races . . . Because of her strategic positioning within an enforcement of the racial hierarchy, the memsahib is spoken of as embodying the worst evils of the Empire. She is a scapegoat for imperialism, the remedy and poison that both ensures racial separation and threatens to undermine race relations. (92)

In a similar way, Suleri examines the “revelatory pattern of embodiment” in which “Anglo-Indian narrative schematizes the Indian woman into two parallel images: she is either sequestered in the unknowability of the *zenana* or all too visible in the excessive availability of the professional courtesan . . .” (92). Bisesa, however, seems to embody the contradictory images: sequestered yet easily available; innocent yet exhibiting the charms of the professional courtesan.

The paradox embodied by the Hindu widow has been analyzed by Revathi Krishnaswamy, who links it to the controversy over widow remarriage that divided Hindus in the 1880s and avers that “the debate over Hindu widows predictably cast the Indian woman in contradictory terms as oversexed, immoral, arrogant, and ungovernable or as sexless, chaste, pure, and self-sacrificing” (116). But since women were excluded from the debate, says Krishnaswamy, “the widow thus became a symbolic site for a power struggle between colonizing and colonized men. By making a widow the unstable site of contention between Trejago and Durga Charan, Kipling’s story symbolically rehearses the ideological roles of white and brown men in a debate that effectively erased the subjectivity of the woman herself” (116). It is, however, Krishnaswamy’s reduction of Bisesa to a field of masculine combat that erases her, not the story itself or its narrator. A more judicious reading of the paradox depicted in Bisesa arises from Suleri’s argument that the seductive “nautch

girls" of Anglo-Indian narrative "emblemize a peculiarly Indian threat" (93), a threat arising not so much from the seductiveness of the courtesan but from "a hidden recognition that the Indian courtesan provided an uncannily literal replication of the part Anglo-Indian women had been imported to perform" (93). Suleri thus explains how "the colonial sexual dynamic . . . places the Anglo-Indian woman in a position of far greater confinement than that of her Indian counterpart" (92). Bisesa then functions as a richly overdetermined symbol of the multiple threats women pose to the work of empire and to cross-cultural understanding: she is both the seductiveness of native culture, embodied by its women, and she is the reaction against and retreat from that seductiveness embodied by the Anglo-Indian woman. Though hidden in the maze of Amir Nath's Gully, Bisesa's seductiveness, like that of Suleri's nautch girls, "has less to do with an Oriental mystery than with the potential vengeance of cultural contagion" (92). In "Beyond the Pale," those who have the most to fear from such contagion, the guardians of native patriarchy and the Englishwomen, exact vengeance.

The zeal of the Englishwomen to prevent the spread of cultural contagion causes Trejago some well-founded concern over how long "the ladies of the Station . . . would continue to know him if they knew of poor little Bisesa" (193), but he is wholly unprepared for Bisesa's reaction to the news that he has been paying particular attention to one of the ladies of the Station: she "raged and stormed, and threatened to kill herself if Trejago did not at once drop the alien *Memsahib* who had come between them" (193). Although Trejago attempts to reason with her, "to show her that she did not understand these things from a Western standpoint" (195), Bisesa remains adamant: "Nothing would satisfy her save that all relations between them should end" (196). The exact nature of the "Western standpoint" Trejago advocates is not made clear: presumably it is the male standpoint that tolerated Englishmen keeping mistresses while stationed in India. But whatever Trejago's expectations may have been, Bisesa finds it intolerable to share his affections with a *memsahib*, and it is she that ends the relationship, leaving Trejago to walk home "wondering." His consternation likely arises from a fifteen-year-old Indian widow's unanticipated

display of moral principles equal to those he feared among the English ladies of the Station.

Trejago is only momentarily daunted. He continues his frequent night visits to the Gully, but for three weeks his knock at the grated window goes unanswered. On his sixth foray, though, the grate slides open to admit him, and only then does he learn of Bisesa's ghastly punishment: "From the black dark, Bisesa held out her arms into the moonlight. Both hands had been cut off at the wrists, and the stumps were neatly healed" (196). Here I would agree with Krishnaswami: "The final image of Bisesa sticking her stumps out of the window inscribes the Indian woman's sexuality as a corrosive, punishing and punished commodity" (117). Trejago then suffers his own punishment (presumably at the instigation of Durga Charan), but one decidedly less drastic: out of the darkness a sharp pointed object is thrust into "one of the muscles of his groin," appropriately enough, leaving him with a slight limp that will stay with him "for the rest of his days" (196). Trejago's response is to flee: he casts aside the *boorka* and thus renounces not only Bisesa, but all of his interest in life beyond the pale as well.

The last lines of the story suggest that Trejago has completely suppressed all memory of his affair with Bisesa: "But Trejago pays his calls regularly, and is reckoned a very decent sort of man. There is nothing peculiar about him, except a slight stiffness, caused by a riding strain, in the right leg" (198). The lie he has told the English ladies to account for his injury has become truth in his mind, and since, apart from the narrator's occasional intrusions, it is through Trejago's eyes that we view the events in the story, it is his version of the truth with which the reader is left. But the irony is clear to any reader (if not to the narrator): although the narrator has at the outset informed us that Trejago "paid for it heavily," in reality it is Bisesa who pays—not only with her hands but with her life, for in a patriarchal society what use is a fifteen-year-old widow who can neither cook nor do housework? Trejago, meanwhile, is allowed to return to English society with nothing more than a slight limp. Thus the rhetorical aims of the narrator and implied author become highly problematic in this story: if we take the opening lines seriously, as do most critics, the story is intended as a warning to young Englishmen of the

tragic consequences of venturing beyond the pale, yet the denouement of the story blatantly undercuts this purpose. What kind of moral lesson is presented by a story that begins, “if one acts in such a way, one will come to ruin,” but ends, “Trejago transgressed, but was punished only in a minor way”? Was Kipling so incompetent a storyteller as to be unaware of this contradiction? Or is the implied author in the last lines mocking the sanctimonious tone the narrator has displayed throughout? Sullivan comments, “the production of the role of Englishman as native-lover plays out, in part, an explicit political and cultural interest in preserving the European against local contamination. But since the narrator (and Kipling himself) admit to their own recurring fascination with the contamination, the position of the author is at best finally ambivalent” (94). Sullivan and others have noted how Trejago’s nocturnal wanderings replicate Kipling’s own behaviour while working as a journalist in Lahore. He describes them in *Something of Myself*: “I would wander till dawn in all manner of odd places--liquor shops, gambling and opium dens . . . or in and about the narrow gullies under the Mosque of Wasir Khan for the sheer sake of looking” (338). According to John A. McClure, however, “Kipling’s immersion in the Indian community seems never to have progressed far beyond such excursions . . . the routes taken by Trejago . . . were avoided by their creator” (46). Since no one can be sure to what extent either Trejago or the story’s narrator can be identified with Kipling, Sullivan is correct in characterizing the position of the author as “finally ambivalent.” It is noteworthy, though, that the allegedly imperialist and racist Kipling of “white man’s burden” notoriety has produced a story demonstrating that the burden of the clash between English and native cultures is borne so disproportionately by the natives. It perhaps goes without saying that the penalty for sexual indiscretions is borne disproportionately by women in both cultures.

In “Beyond the Pale,” then, the relationship between Englishmen, English and native women, and British “civilization” seems to be this: Trejago represents “civilized” standards, desires to participate in native culture without abandoning English civilization, but is prevented from doing so by both the guardians of English culture (the ladies of the Station) and of native culture (Durga Charan). But the narrator’s warn-

ing that Trejago's attempt to navigate both cultures is doomed is not borne out by the denouement. The only real victim in this story is the native woman, Bisesa. But is she a tragic or pathetic character? If she is a tragic figure, is she then responsible for having brought the tragedy on herself through her ignorance, her culturally inappropriate desire for a lover, or through her own boldness in venturing beyond the pale of *pardah*? Or is she the innocent victim of Indian patriarchy on the one hand, and English exploitation on the other? The narrator provides no answer to these questions, outside of expressing an apparently genuine sympathy for Bisesa and leaving the reader with the impression that Trejago is something of a cad, at best. But whether it is her individual acts or qualities that result in Bisesa's tragedy, or the cultural systems she and Trejago find themselves locked into, is left unclear. What is clear is that a story that begins by warning Englishmen to avoid contamination by Indian society ends by questioning the purity of English civilization itself, in that both English and Indian society appear complicit in Bisesa's ruin.

But the ambivalence of the narrative stance and structure of the story implicates its readers as well, as Danny Karlin observes:

The design of 'Beyond the Pale' . . . also brings into question the part played by the reader. In exemplary tabloid fashion, the story exploits our appetite for scandal and sensation . . . our pleasure as voyeurs and consumers. This pleasure is irresponsible and shameful; no more than the narrator are we to suffer for it as Bisesa and Trejago suffer for theirs. What began as a game for them ends in retribution, but the form of the story opens up this very process to the reader's play of intelligence; the act of understanding may, disconcertingly, be both enlightened and corrupt, morally discriminating and morally unstable. (13)

Trejago knew too much but understood too little. The story's narrator and implied author know all that Trejago knew and understand more. Similarly, we modern readers of the story, armed with a century's worth of historical knowledge and critical methodology, may claim to have a

superior understanding of its significance. But, if what began as a game for Bisesa and Trejago ends as a game for the story's readers, a game from which we walk away with nothing more than a slight limp; if we relate to the story as voyeurs and consumers rather than fellow sufferers, then our judgment of that story and its characters is no more enlightened or morally discriminating than the cultures or author that produced them.

II. *Burmese Days*

While "Beyond the Pale" employs some of the same structural elements as Orwell's *Burmese Days*, the texts have important differences. As I have noted, in "Beyond the Pale," the Englishman suffers only psychologically, and then only briefly, whereas it is the native woman who ends in disaster. Conversely, in *Burmese Days*, all the principal characters come to ruin, both English and native, men and women, as the result of the structures of both Burmese and English civilization. I will demonstrate how, in *Burmese Days*, this downfall is again embodied by Englishwomen, but in this case with much greater amplitude. Set in Burma in the waning days of the British Raj (Burma was at the time considered part of British India—by the British at least), the novel charts the fall of three tragic figures: Flory, an English timber merchant, Ma Hla May, Flory's Burmese mistress, and Dr. Veraswami, an Indian physician who appears to be Flory's only friend. All three come to ruin in the end, partly as a result of the political machinations of U Po Kyin (a Burmese subdivisional magistrate who is scheming against Veraswami to be elected as the first non-English member of a prestigious club). Their downfall, however, can be attributed equally to the disruptive influence of Elizabeth Lackersteen, the niece of a timber firm manager, who, as is immediately recognized by another Englishman, has "come out here to lay her claws into a husband, of course. As if it wasn't well known! When a girl's failed everywhere else she tries India, where every man's pining for the sight of a white woman" (110). Flory, the English male protagonist, first came to Burma at age twenty after his parents used their influence to secure him a position in a timber firm. He stuck with his position, as he tells himself, to escape military service during the Second World War. The narrator attributes Flory's avoidance of service to the corrosive effect of his

prolonged exposure to native culture: “in reality, Flory had dodged the war because the East had already corrupted him, and he did not want to exchange his whisky, his servants and his Burmese girls for the boredom of the parade ground and the strain of the cruel marches” (67). The East has corrupted him by making him contemptuous of both the Burmese he oversees and the English who oversee him. And when, shortly after departing for his first home leave, the death of three men from his firm necessitates his return to Burma, he experiences “one of those moments when one becomes conscious of a vast change and deterioration in one’s life. For he had realized, suddenly, that in his heart he was glad to be coming back. This country which he hated was now his native country, his home” (71). But Flory is not completely at home in Burma, either. Although he has a Burmese mistress and an apparently cordial relationship with Dr. Veraswami, he is still lonely; he desires above all “someone who would share his life in Burma . . . who would love Burma as he loved it and hate it as he hated it” (72). Flory’s mixed love and hatred for Burma is visible in his treatment of Ma Hla May, just as his mixed longing and repulsion for England can be seen in his longing for and repulsion of Elizabeth. But Ma Hla May is ultimately merely a toy for Flory, and like Trejago, he easily dispenses with her when Elizabeth diverts his attention.

Elizabeth represents what Flory had desired but despaired of finding: “someone who understood him: a friend . . . Or a wife? That quite impossible she” (72). As in the texts by Kipling and Forster, the principal function of the English *memsahib* in Orwell’s novel is to prevent Englishmen from “going native,” as is the case with Mrs. Lackersteen, who after catching her husband “drunk, supported on either side by a naked Burmese girl, while a third up-ended a bottle into his mouth,” has monitored his behaviour “like a cat over a bloody mousehole” (21). But Flory imagines Elizabeth to be different. She has not been touched by the English presumption of class, perhaps because of the years she spent in Paris with her mother, an artist and bohemian. The reader, however, soon realizes that she is essentially little different from her aunt, and she proves to be not as unattainable as that “quite impossible she” of whom Flory had dreamed, that is until his prospects are dashed by the

resurgence of the life of corruption he believed he had abandoned with Ma Hla May. Like Trejago's transgression, Flory's temerity in venturing beyond the pale will result in ruin, but this time the catastrophe will encompass English and Burmese alike.

Just as Bisesa was condemned to mutilation, so Ma Hla May faces punishment by her culture for having violated its standards through her dalliance with an Englishman, although in her case what is scandalous is not the dalliance itself but her subsequent rejection, and the penalty is social and psychological rather than physical. After Flory has banished her from his house, she returns to beg him to take her back. When Flory angrily demands, "Why did you not go home to your village?" Ma Hla May responds with a "furious tirade":

Ah, what shame, what shame! Two years I was your wife, you loved me and cared for me and then, without warning, without reason, you drove me from your door like a dog. And I must go back to my village with no money, with all my silk and jewels and *longgyis* gone, and the people will point and say, "There is Ma Hla May who thought herself cleverer than the rest of us. And behold! her white man has treated her as they always do." I am ruined, ruined! What man will marry me after I have lived two years in your house? (153–54)

Flory can make no response: "Every word she said was justified, and how tell her that he could do no other than he had done? How tell her that it would have been an outrage, a sin, to continue as her lover?" (154). As in "Beyond the Pale," the Englishman is again at a loss before a woman who cannot "understand these things from a Western standpoint." Apparently the native woman is expected either to be content to carry on as a man's mistress while he devotes his serious attentions to an English woman, as in Bisesa's case, or to go quietly back home and face the stigma of having been thrown out of a white man's home, in the case of Ma Hla May. Neither Bisesa nor Ma Hla May passively accepts the "Western standpoint." Bisesa insists on ending the relationship, while Ma Hla May appeals by any and all means for justice, or at least mercy. And both women, either directly or indirectly, participate in the punish-

ment of the offending Englishmen. John McBratney has suggested that Bisesa is complicit in Trejago's wounding and thus serves as an instrument of British correction:

By a kind of metalepsis, British officialdom strikes, through a series of Indian substitutes, at one of its own who has offended against its code of sexual decorum. On one level, Durga Charan's thrust is motivated by male rivalry. But on a more fundamental level, it is driven by the desire of Britons to discipline their own when the latter engage in sexuality beyond acceptable limits. (72–73)

Ingenious as this reading may be, it runs counter to the thrust of the rest of the story, which takes pains to emphasize that Trejago suffers no severe punishment from British society for his foray beyond the pale. So Bisesa's role in her uncle's vengeance remains obscure, but Ma Hla May is clearly a willing participant in exacting the penalty that Flory will eventually pay.

A complication in the plot of the relationships between men and women in *Burmese Days*, and even more so in *A Passage to India*, is the presence of a strong friendship between the male English protagonist and an educated male Indian, in both novels a doctor. Although there is no hint of any homosexual element in the relationship between Flory and Veraswami, nevertheless this relationship, like that between Fielding and Aziz in *A Passage to India*, is threatened and ultimately destroyed by women. Orwell's Dr. Veraswami is a devotee of Western culture who considers "the British, even the least inspired of them" to be "torchbearers upon the path of progress" (42). But the doctor's fawning admiration of Western culture and absurd loyalty to England, while providing Flory the opportunity for amused debate, is not the sort of friendship he desires. Instead, Elizabeth comes to symbolize Flory's ideal relationship. When he imagines their married life, he sees their home furnished with the indices of refinement:

. . . books and water-colors and a black piano. Above all the piano! His mind lingered on the piano—symbol, perhaps be-

cause he was unmusical, of civilized and settled life. He was delivered forever from the sub-life of the past decade—the debaucheries, the lies, the pain of exile and solitude, the dealings with whores and moneylenders and pukka sahibs. (272)

The sense of exile, of what Homi Bhabha has called “unhomeliness,” that has embittered Flory against both Burmese and English culture, vanishes with his vision of a culture dependant on neither Burma, nor England, but one that blossoms out of the now seemingly attainable union with the “quite impossible she.” After Ma Hla May, at the behest of U Po Kyin, reveals the details of her liaison with Flory to Elizabeth and the other assembled English people in a humiliating scene in church, Elizabeth informs him, “I don’t play the piano,” and the “impossible, mythical black piano” now becomes “the symbol of everything that that futile accident had wrecked” (278). “That futile accident,” the narrator and readers know, was no accident, but the result of U Po Kyin’s carefully orchestrated plot to discredit Flory and thus eliminate his support for Veraswami’s membership in the club, leaving the way open for U Po Kyin to enjoy the status of being selected as the first non-English member. But if Flory had not rejected Ma Hla May in hopes of marrying Elizabeth, U Po Kyin would have had no scandal to use against Flory, and his plot against Veraswami would have come to naught. As it happens, both the Burmese woman and the English woman are instrumental in the tragic falls of Flory, Veraswami, and Ma Hla May herself.

In *Burmese Days*, then, the relationship between the Englishman, women, and civilization is as follows: like Trejago, Flory is caught up in a complex attraction for both English and native culture. He is also repelled by the bastard versions of both cultures that British rule in Burma has produced. Burmese women are merely objects of sexual pleasure for him, though he does seem to feel genuine pity for Ma Hla May at times. She is ultimately expendable, though. It is Elizabeth who matters. As constructed by Flory’s imagination, Elizabeth represents the ideal type of English woman and English civilization, but both prove to be an illusion. No reader will be surprised when at the end of the novel the nar-

rator informs us, “Elizabeth has grown mature surprisingly quickly, and a certain hardness of manner that always belonged to her has become accentuated . . . in short, she fills with complete success the position for which Nature had designed her from the first, that of a burra memsahib” (287). The narrator’s ironic stance here scarcely masks the assessment that Elizabeth’s success in becoming *memsahib* is actually a failure, a betrayal of the enlightened principles to which her Paris years had exposed her. In this sense, Elizabeth too falls victim to British India. And Veraswami represents the possibility of mutual understanding between English and native men, but that understanding is undermined by both the disapproval of English and by the envy of native society. Flory, Ma Hla May, and Veraswami all end in ruin: Flory in suicide, Ma Hla May “in a brothel in Mandalay” where “her clients pay her only four annas and sometimes kick her and beat her” (285), and Veraswami in a “dreary” job as Assistant Surgeon with “reduced pay” in the “dusty and intolerably hot” city of Mandalay. Orwell constructs a narrative of ruin in which both English and native women have been instrumental, and both have been victims as well. As Patai points out,

it is not general despair over imperialism, after all, that drives Flory to suicide, but, more immediately, his loss of manly prestige. Ironically, this loss comes about through two women, Ma Hla May and Elizabeth, neither of whom possesses the personal autonomy enjoyed by Flory. They are colonized people, and the colony they belong to is female. (52)

In *Burmese Days*, however, unlike Kipling’s story, we have no moralizing narrator assigning blame to a particular individual or culture. Here the perspective of the narrator seems indistinguishable from that of Orwell himself, who has made it quite clear in essays like “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Hanging” that such tragedies are the inevitable result of imperialism. In the essays, however, it is the native inhabitants of Burma who are shown to be the principal victims of an impersonal imperialist system, while in the novel both English and natives are victims. Significantly, blame for the Englishman’s suffering is specifically assigned to Englishwomen in the person of the “burra memsahib”

Elizabeth Lackersteen. Thus for Orwell, as for Forster, the most insidious form of imperialism is that imposed by the *memsahib*.

III. *A Passage to India*

In "Forster's Women: Eternal Differences," Bonnie Blumenthal Finkelstein postulates an inverse relationship between English and native systems of oppression in the structure of *A Passage to India*: "Against a background of oppression and manipulation of Indians by their British rulers, a parallel domestic imperialism emerges: Indian men oppress their women, while British women manipulate their men" (117). Indian women, however, play no central role in the novel, appearing only briefly at the Turtons' "bridge party," and then only to contrast Mrs. Moore's and Adela's genuine goodwill with Mrs. Turton's hostility and condescension. The other native women who appear in the novel (though only off stage, as it were) are Dr. Aziz's deceased wife, whose photograph he shows to Fielding, and the "Mohammedan ladies" who fast to protest Aziz's arrest. These women could conceivably be considered victims of patriarchy: Aziz's wife who dies in childbirth as a result of an arranged marriage to a man "who disliked union with a woman he had never seen" and who "begat his first child in mere animality," and the Mohammadan ladies who "being invisible . . . seemed dead already" (238). No liaisons between English men and native women are mentioned in this novel; instead, the primary relationship that developed is the one between the English school principal Fielding and the Indian physician Aziz. Unlike Orwell's Veraswami, Aziz is extensively developed; indeed, critics agree that it is Aziz rather than Fielding who is the central character of the novel. The focus of the novel is the relationship between Aziz and Fielding, and it is this relationship that an English woman, Adela Quested, recklessly destroys. Another English woman, Mrs. Moore, serves a redemptive role, however, and Adela herself appears to have been redeemed by the end of the novel, though the damage done to the friendship between Fielding and Aziz, and by extension between England and India is irremediable.

In contrast to Flory, the older Fielding, principal of Government College in Chandrapore, manages to know India without being cor-

rupted by it: “The world, he believed, is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence—a creed ill-suited to Chandrapore, but he had come out too late to lose it” (65). Though Fielding’s faith in the power of good will, culture, and intelligence to bridge the gap between people will indeed prove ill-suited to Chandrapore’s climate of mistrust among Hindus, Muslims, and the English, it is not he but Aziz who will suffer as a result of a misunderstanding. The suffering is not the result of venturing beyond the pale (though that is how the English will attempt to characterize it). Instead, I will argue that the suffering recounted in *A Passage to India* results from a failure to venture far enough beyond the pale.

The plot structure of *A Passage to India* resembles that of *Burmese Days* insofar as the relationship between Flory, Veraswami, and Elizabeth resembles that between Fielding, Aziz, and Adela. However, Fielding never displays any attraction for Adela (though when Fielding and Aziz are briefly reunited at the end of the novel, Aziz has been labouring under the misconception that Fielding has married Adela). But just as Elizabeth functions as the vehicle for the destruction of the friendship between Flory and Veraswami, so Adela disrupts the friendship between Fielding and Aziz. Although in this case neither man is exactly ruined, Aziz feels that his reputation has been shattered by Adela’s unsubstantiated allegations. Furthermore, in *A Passage to India*, the equation between women and civilization is also foregrounded. Of the three writers discussed here, only Forster examines imperialist and patriarchal oppression from the perspective of women and provides a range of female characters invested with the same complexity and richness afforded to the male characters of Kipling and Orwell.

Forster’s female protagonists Adela and Mrs. Moore, like Orwell’s Elizabeth, initially take steps to distinguish themselves from the typical Anglo-Indians. Unlike Elizabeth, both Mrs. Moore and Adela escape being molded into *memsahibs*—Mrs. Moore by death and Adela by alienating herself from the entire English community when she withdraws the assault charges she has brought against Aziz, thus leaving her utterly alone, because she has already alienated herself from the entire Indian community—Hindu and Muslim alike—by bringing the charges

in the first place. It may be argued that the self-sacrifices of Mrs. Moore and Adela save both the English and Indian communities from disaster. For if Adela had not withdrawn the charges, Aziz would almost certainly have been convicted, and had Aziz been convicted, the Indians would almost certainly have rioted for his release, putting Fielding in the same position Flory finds himself in near the end of *Burmese Days*: he would have had to defend the British, whom he largely despises as they do him, against the natives whom he secretly favours. Conceivably the result would have been tragedy for all involved. All that prevents the fulfillment of this disastrous scenario is Mrs. Moore's influence on Adela, evidently made possible by her death at sea while returning to England, along with Adela's willingness to act in accordance with this influence, regardless of the consequences to herself. As Nigel Messenger observes:

Adela . . . commits textual suttee. By espousing and then rejecting a conventional plot expectation, she exposes the violence latent in Anglo-Indian rule in India but, by destroying any possibility of heterosexual closure, she also destroys herself. In this, she joins other Forsterian martyrs and scapegoats . . . who sacrifice themselves in order that others—and less orthodox plot possibilities—may live. (108)

I would include Mrs. Moore in Messenger's pantheon of Forsterian martyrs and scapegoats, and thus the two principal victims of the cultural misunderstandings dramatized in *A Passage to India* may be seen as the salvation of all.

The ambiguous status of Adela and Mrs. Moore has led to a great deal of controversy among critics over Forster's portrayal of women. While Sharpe extends the *memsahib* stereotype from Kipling through Orwell to Forster, whom she says has "justifiably been taken to task for situating the evils of colonialism in the attitudes of Anglo-Indian women," (121), Elaine Showalter sees Forster as an ally in the feminist attack on the stereotype:

. . . Forster tells us enough about the circumstances in which the women find themselves to make it clear that they are the

victims and not the villains of their culture. They too are exports from England, symbols of the distance between the rulers and the natives. It is not their fault that their presence is necessary to keep the men from sexual contact with the natives. (7)

But ascertaining the attitude of Forster himself toward any of his characters is more complicated than it is with Kipling or Orwell. While the implied author of “Beyond the Pale” appears at the end of the story to be satirizing the opening narrative, and while the narrator of *Burmese Days* is, as Patai says, “only a transparent screen for Orwell, whose sarcastic narrative voice is heard with special clarity in his sarcastic depictions of women” (43), Forster’s narrative employs a range of voices that many critics have likened to the echo in the Marabar caves, wherein “if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently” (*Passage* 163). In *The Appropriated Voice*, Bette London painstakingly compares numerous passages in *A Passage* with their sources in Forster’s letters and journals to show that although several have been copied almost verbatim, the diegetic contexts in which they are placed in the novel radically alter their significance and effect. The displacement of the novel’s voice among such a range of characters—Fielding, Aziz, Mrs. Moore, and Adela are only a few—whose situations and perspectives are also constantly shifting renders it susceptible to what London calls a significant “slippage.” This slippage occurs most dramatically in the trial, when Adela withdraws her charges against Aziz, and is symptomatic of the novel’s “narrative hysteria”:

in her symptoms of hysteria, she presents a text gone awry, and she becomes the victim of those who would read her right. For the British, as for the Indians, this new text only confirms their worst fears; Adela’s breakdown is the inevitable consequence of attempted intimacy with the other—a case of cultural transgression with its attendant disease. (London 86–87)

London’s analysis of “the way in which a classic anxiety about contamination (the unspeakable fear of interracial sex) is displaced onto

an anxiety about the integrity of voice” is astute and convincing, as is her suggestion that “Adela’s narrative can be read as an analogue for the situation of Forster’s text—a text generated by fears of narrative/cultural contagion . . .” (86). Whether these fears are Forster’s own, however, is not conclusively established. Although London alludes to expressions of some of these fears in Forster’s journals and letters, the voice of the novel cannot be reduced to that of its author, but like the echoes in the caves, it leaves its auditor with only “distorted refractions of an original utterance that can never be reclaimed” (87).

Despite the evident impossibility of reclaiming the “original utterance” of the voice that produced *A Passage to India*, Forster has frequently been lumped together with Kipling and Orwell as a misogynist writer who, while critical of British subjugation of India, is blind to his own participation in the subjugation of women. In the works examined here, however, the implied authors exhibit considerable sympathy for both native and English women who are victimized by native patriarchy and English imperialism. It is true that in all three works English women are presented as collaborators with the colonial system of cultural segregation. It is important to note that in every oppressive system one finds individuals who collaborate not by choice, but by compulsion and who are thus both villains and victims. And are the Englishmen who created these fictional characters, or the implied authors who tell their stories, also complicit in their victimization? Suleri questions the “rhetoric of binarism” that governs critiques of colonialism:

For colonial facts are vertiginous; they lack a recognizable cultural plot, they frequently fail to cohere around the mastermyth that proclaims static lines of demarcation between imperial power and disempowered culture, between colonizer and colonized. Instead, they move with a ghostly mobility to suggest how highly unsettling an economy of complicity and guilt is in operation between each actor on the colonial stage. (3)

If then despite the difficulty of reclaiming the “original utterance” of their creators, Trejago, Flory, and Fielding can be seen in some sense as projections of Kipling, Orwell, and Forster, and if their stories are

to some extent exercises in self-criticism, perhaps to that extent they serve to expiate their authors' evident sense of guilt at being participants, however reluctant, in the system whose evils they so powerfully expose. Rey Chow has called for "a mode of understanding the native" that replaces "the model of western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as a primary, active 'gaze' subjugating the native as a passive 'object'" with one in which "it is actually the colonizer who feels himself looked at by the native's gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer 'conscious' of himself, leading to the need to turn this gaze around and look at himself, henceforth 'reflected' in the native object" (51). Morally discriminating readers who see themselves firmly on the enlightened side of the "static lines of demarcation" Suleri identifies might profit from such a disruption, one that interrogates own complicity and guilt in the economy of colonial literature, as voyeurs and consumers or as full participants in the suffering of all the characters—male, female, native, and English, narrators; and authors—in the unfolding drama.

Note

- 1 I am employing the term Wayne Booth uses in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and elsewhere to distinguish between the writer who physically produces the text and the voice readers hear in the text, a voice that may or may not coincide with that of the narrator.

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