"East is East" or transcultural cosmopolitanism? : Positions on cross-cultural encounters in post-colonial theory and in a series of "Passages to India"

Autor(en): **Prusse, Michael C.**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **19 (2007)**

"East is East" or Transcultural Cosmopolitanism? Positions on Cross-Cultural Encounters in Postcolonial Theory and in a Series of "Passages to India"

Michael C. Prusse

Postcolonial critics Homi Bhabha and Aijaz Ahmad disagree on the effects of migration and the ensuing cross-cultural encounters. Bhabha stresses the empowerment resulting from switching between cultures, whereas Ahmad dismisses this phenomenon as postmodern alienation. These critical positions are reflected in a series of "Passages to India," beginning with poems by Rudyard Kipling and Walt Whitman and continuing with E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and its film adaptation by David Lean. While Forster regards the possibility of friendship across cultures with great scepticism, Lean adopts a revisionist stance. He alters Forster's standpoint and makes friendship according to British (colonialist) terms feasible. Jhumpa Lahiri's short story, "Interpreter of Maladies," is influenced both by the novel and the film. Although her narrative ends as pessimistically as Forster's and appears to confirm Ahmad's misgivings, Lahiri's own biography rather conforms to Bhabha's optimistic vision of enrichment generated by transcultural cosmopolitanism.

The manner in which cultures come into contact – in particular when this happens in the context of global migration, experience of diaspora and a steep increase in hybrid identities – has generated lively debates among postcolonial critics. Homi Bhabha represents what could be called the visionary optimistic position, which may be best summed up in his statement that "the migrant is empowered to intervene *actively* in the transmission of cultural inheritance or 'tradition' (of both the home and the host land) rather than *passively* accept its venerable customs and

pedagogical wisdom. He or she can question, refashion or mobilise received ideas" (*Location* 1). Karl Schlögel assumes a similar position when he argues that a great deal of innovation is due to migrants who provide Western universities with talented young scholars and who initiate and contribute to economic development when they set up new business ventures. Schlögel lists Jews, Armenians, Indians in East Africa and the Hong Kong Chinese as examples of such flexible and resourceful migrants (41). However, this rather positive perception of migration and its consequences has been rejected by a number of critics. In particular Bhabha's sweeping assertion that the "migrant is empowered to act as an agent of change" and that the experience of the migrant encapsulates the common "contemporary compulsion to move beyond" (*Location* 1) has provoked harsh criticism. A notable voice among these opponents belongs to Aijaz Ahmad, who perceives the consequences of moving between distinct cultural backgrounds as a "frenzied and constant refashioning of the Self, through which one merely consumes oneself under the illusion of consuming the world" (291). Ahmad also states that the eventual effect "is a specific mode of postmodern alienation which Bhabha mistakenly calls 'hybridity,' 'contingency,' 'postcoloniality'" (291). Furthermore, Ahmad astutely precedes his analysis with the remark that the freedom "to invent oneself and one's community, over and over again, as one goes along, is usually an illusion induced by the availability of surpluses – of money-capital or cultural capital or both" (291). John McLeod also qualifies the impact of Bhabha's analysis by questioning the totalising assertion that *every* migrant, a figure curiously devoid of race or gender (or of social class, one might add), has such astounding powers at his disposal (218-219).

These two rather opposite perceptions of the postcolonial human condition should not be reduced to a simplistic binary model; they are simply two extreme poles in a complex field. Between these extremes there extends a continuum that encompasses a host of interfaces between cultures and allows room for a wide range of distinct visions. While for some "migration is not a mere interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but a mode of being in the world," for others it is a state of affairs that concerns them only marginally (King xv). The question of the validity of Bhabha's and Ahmad's critical positions is qualified by the fact that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They both provide an analysis of the nature of numerous cultural encounters taking place in various contexts. Bhabha himself appears to

favour explanations in the form of a paradox. In "Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism" he asks rhetorically: "What is the sign of 'humanness' in the category of the transnational 'cosmopolitan'" (40)? Later on, in a different context, he observes "an engaging paradox in the notion of 'cosmopolitan' community" (42). The apparent contradiction that increasing migration, an immense growth in communication and the ensuing cultural contacts have not had the expected effect on cross-cultural encounters, namely to diminish the gulf that remains between cultures and communities, poses a number of questions that are to be examined by means of a number of "passages to India." The British Empire was at the root of creating many of these cultural encounters, and even Britain herself was not, as some believe, "culturally and ethnically homogeneous before the Second World War" (McLeod 206). Since colonialism caused a great deal of migrant movement it makes sense to move through time, namely from colonial to postcolonial India. This makes it possible to observe developments in the meetings of cultures that have led to the forming of the two critical visions outlined above.

The ensuing analysis focuses mainly on three "passages to India," first on E.M. Forster's best-known book, *A Passage to India* (1924), on David Lean's screen adaptation of Forster's novel (1984), and, on Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999). These "texts" were selected because they are evidently linked by a common theme – cross-cultural encounters and the resulting misunderstandings – and because the second is an ideological reaction to the first while the third, Lahiri's short story, is clearly a response to both novel and film. The three passages also share similar settings although both Lean's film and Lahiri's story make deliberate and decisive changes to Forster's original. This permits an analysis of the same situation repeated and interpreted in chronological order, from colonial to postcolonial time. Biographical information on postcolonial authors and critics, such as Lahiri herself, is used to support the reference to the critical positions of Bhabha and Ahmad.

***

In her long history that saw the rise and fall of numerous civilisations India has regularly provided the setting for contact between and across cultures. Rudyard Kipling in his often quoted poem "The Ballad of East and West" (1892) appears to suggest that there is no bridge that can

span the gulf between cultures when he states that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (190). However, his encompassing statement allows for one exception, namely when "two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!" (190). Kipling, not only with this poem but also by means of numerous short stories and novels, the best known of which is arguably *Kim* (1901), established a discourse on Anglo-Indian relations that was to be taken up by numerous writers. Kipling, whose literary achievement is still subject to controversy because of his entanglement with colonialism, certainly assumed the role of "chief-propagandist" for the British Empire (Allen 39). The author's attitude in "The Ballad of East and West," although basically jingoistic, can be described as realistic, less sceptical perhaps than Ahmad's, who clearly argues from a different ideological position. Kipling disallows understanding between cultures unless the representatives from both cultures can meet on equal terms. Due to colonialism (Kipling wrote numerous texts that assert the supremacy of the British and hence justify their rule over India), this kind of meeting is extremely unlikely. Even more disturbing is the fact that the man of equal status in the poem comes from Afghanistan – a country that successfully resisted British colonial expansion – and not from the subjugated races of the Indian subcontinent. Kipling's verdict on the people under British rule, acutely expressed in "The White Man's Burden," is much more problematic since it exposes his paternalistic attitude: "Watch sloth and heathen Folly / Bring all your hope to nought" (261).

A much more subtle but also more sceptical vision is presented in E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* (1924), which, by means of title and action, ironically undermines the transcendental notions of Walt Whitman's poem (in the context of postcolonial criticism it would probably be more adequate to speak of transcultural notions). The following excerpt from the poem proclaims Whitman's enthusiastic projection of cultural contact, which is engineered by architects, machinists and explorers and thus, as Teresa Hubel maintains, "glorifies imperialists and their mission to the world" (352):

> Passage to India!
> Lo, soul! Seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
> The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work,
> The people to become brothers and sisters,
> The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,

> The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
> The lands to be welded together. (565)

The optimistic spirit of Whitman's poem and the rather bleak presentation of human relationships in Forster's novel, curiously enough, appear to be based upon a similar pattern of optimistic versus pessimistic visions – some would call them realistic – as the contemporary postcolonial debate introduced above. In the case of Forster the negative label is not surprising: the author is frequently identified as a pessimistic writer (Lewis 221). Malcolm Bradbury describes Forster's outlook on life as a "sense of serious historical unease," which is coupled "with a principle of spiritual vacancy" (16). Peter Morey on a positive and Hubel on a negative note read the novel as an encoded admission that the liberal humanist criticism of the British Empire was doomed to fail and that it rather helped perpetuate certain unfortunate images of the "other" that are the result of contemplating everything with Western eyes (Morey 53-79; Hubel 351). The famous ending of the narrative, where Forster denies his protagonists, Richard Fielding and Dr Aziz, the prospect of friendship, appears to support this interpretation. Furthermore, it suggests that the novelist took a gloomy view of the possibility of friendship between Britons and Indians in general (at least at the time of writing his novel):

> "Why can't we be friends now?" said the other [Fielding], holding him affectionately. "It's what I want. It's what you want."
>
> But the horses didn't want it – they swerved 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." (316)

A Passage to India serves as a classic example of an analysis of cultures in contact, a theme that Forster exploits thoroughly. As the ending quoted above illustrates the novelist's central message is that the meeting of cultures can only result in friendship on a footing of equality, in other words once the imperialist rule over the subcontinent has ceased. Similarly, Brantlinger states that Forster evidently understood that a number of factors, such as "imperialism, economic exploitation, and religious prejudice made friendship between nations as between individuals impossible" (224). After introducing the question of whether friendship

between Britons and Indians is at all achievable on the third page of the novel, the author has Dr Aziz, still at an early stage in the narrative, encounter a British subaltern when playing polo, a meeting that leaves both of them thinking "If only they were all like that" (76). The devastating irony of the presumed racial harmony depicted in this scene resurfaces later on in the narrative, after the incident in the Marabar Caves, when Sahibs and Memsahibs rally in the club to discuss the impending crisis. While ranting against educated Indians in general, the subaltern, who is also present, unmasks his simplistic cultural presuppositions by declaring that "Any native who plays polo is all right," unaware that it was Aziz he had "had a knock with" on the Maidan (192).[1] Forster himself stated that his narrative was originally devised as a mediator between orient and occident:

> When I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West, but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable. I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not. ("Letter to Masood," quoted in Stallybrass 15)

The core of the narrative, Aziz's failed quest for friendship with Mrs Moore and Miss Quested (whom, according to Forster, he is not at all interested in), and its disastrous consequences, further illuminate the fraught relations between Indians and Britons. The spiritual bonding of Aziz with Mrs Moore that prompts his exclamation that she is "an Oriental," appears to be a singular astonishing exception (45). Although Forster has a somewhat tarnished reputation in certain postcolonial critical circles he succeeds, according to Abdul JanMohamed, "in comprehending or appreciating alterity" by bracketing "the values and bases of his culture" (22). Forster himself hinted at similar motives in a letter to Edward Candler, an admirer of *A Passage to India*, who had served in India and disagreed with the portrayal of the "Turtons and Burtons":

> We both amuse ourselves by trying to be fair, but there our resemblance ends, for you are in the Club trying to be fair to the poor Indians, and I am with the Indians trying to be fair to the poor Club. By busting our respective selves blue, we arrive at an external similarity, but that's all. (Quoted in Hitchens 217)

---

[1] This particular passage has been commented on by a number of critics, for instance by Lionel Trilling. See his essay, "A Passage to India." (1943) Reprinted in Bradbury 87.

The 1984 screen adaptation of Forster's novel, directed by David Lean, caused quite a stir that resulted from the director's tampering with Forster's best-known narrative. Lean's retelling of *A Passage to India* – he wrote the screenplay himself – is based on a number of interpretations and more or less subtle changes to Forster's original that provoked, even before the film was released, a vitriolic reaction by Salman Rushdie in his essay "Outside the Whale" (1984). Rushdie criticised Lean on the basis of an interview that the director gave to Derek Malcolm in the *Times*, from which the novelist quotes in his essay. Rustom Bharucha cites a remark by Rushdie that "Lean's interviews merit reviews – perhaps more than his films themselves" (159). One unfortunate comment that Lean made was that "nobody has yet succeeded in putting India on the screen," which had Rushdie retort that "the Indian film industry, from Satyajit Rao to Mr N.T. Rama Rao, will no doubt feel suitably humbled by the great man's opinion" (125). Lean also ventured a comment on the Indian character and generalised that Indians are "marvellous people but maddening sometimes" (Rushdie 128). The part of the interview that probably enraged Rushdie most concerns the director's political views: "Forster was a bit anti-English, anti-Raj and so on. I suppose it's a tricky thing to say, but I'm not so much. I intend to keep the balance more. I don't believe all the English were a lot of idiots. Forster rather made them so." Rushdie openly condemned Lean for his part in what he termed a "revisionist enterprise" and maintained that, in his opinion, "Forster's life-long refusal to permit his novel to be filmed begins to look rather sensible" (128). In a further interview in *The Statesman* (with Amita Malik, 20 November 1983), quoted in Bharucha (159), Lean reveals further glimpses of his understanding of Britain's past:

> I think [Forster] was rather unfair to the English . . . except for Fielding they come out a pretty good lot of idiots, and I don't think they were. In those days, colonialism was fashionable, now it isn't. Everybody's trying to make jokes about those people, and I don't know that they were particularly funny. Of course there was a funny side, but in fact I think they did some very good things.

Apart from the grotesque view of colonialism as being in fashion once, Lean's particular argument – that the drawbacks of colonialism are more than balanced by its benefits – has been discredited so often that the

arguments need not be reiterated here.[2] The immediate reactions to the film were somewhat less hostile than to Lean's interviews but gained momentum as time passed and as a result of in-depth analyses. Reingard Nischik, for instance, sides with Rushdie in her reaction to David Lean's film, which was "produced in postcolonial times" and yet "created a revisionist, neo-colonial transformation of the Forster novel" (299). Bharucha is similarly scathing about the film, describing it as "a construction of 'India' that has nothing to do with the actual place," and accusing Lean of having "trivialized beyond recognition" Forster's celebrated vision of the subcontinent, which the critic describes as "compassionate, sharp, and contradictory" (155-156). This host of negative reactions can be supplemented at liberty: Christopher Hitchens complained that the film "has abolished Forster's vital tension, which placed true friendship under the stress of the false, treacherous conventions of colonialism" (215). The critic agrees with analogous conclusions drawn by Nischik when he regrets that Lean's adaptation of the novel "has shrunk India itself to a travelogue background" (215). On similar grounds Graham Huggan condemns the director's approach as an example of the "process by which history, transformed into an exotic cultural spectacle, becomes a packageable commodity for metropolitan consumption" (115).

Dissenting voices belong to film critics such as Neil Sinyard, whose article is essentially a panegyric of the director's achievement, and who appears blissfully unaware of developments in recent postcolonial criticism. Sinyard claims that Lean's interpretation of *A Passage to India* makes sense in terms of storytelling (and not just in film). The critic supports the decision to cast Adela Quested as a heroine and to reshape the story to make her a much more prominent character. Her mysterious experience in the caves is demystified and carefully prepared for by means of her bicycle ride to an Indian temple where she is intrigued by the carved statues in erotic positions until she is chased away by a group of aggressive monkeys. Lean's interpretation thus proclaims that her hysterical accusation of Dr Aziz is induced by hallucinations (Sinyard

---

[2] An early (liberal) critic of colonialism was J.A. Hobson with his *Imperialism: A Study* (1902). One of the best representations in a work of fiction can be found in J.G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip* (1978), where two of the protagonists, the American officer Ehrendorf and Matthew Webb, debate about the effects of colonialism, and Webb lists historical evidence, for instance how railway lines in Africa were merely built to develop "great tracts of land" as plantations for Europeans, and thus proves the harmful nature of the colonial enterprise (426).

151; Broege 51). In fact, the monkeys are a symbolic addition of great effect: in Hindi mythology Haruman, the monkey god, is famous for his loyalty, bravery and, in particular, his trickery, and a number of characters in the film are subjected to his mischievous spirit. Lean introduces this theme with a cheeky monkey that dangles from the Chandrapore Station sign and appears to mock the formal and official welcome of the Collector, Turton, who arrives in Chandrapore on the same train as Mrs Moore and Miss Quested. The last entry of the monkeys is effected by a native, disguised as a monkey, who leaps on the car as Adela is driven to the trial and who somehow appears to push her into mentally linking her earlier experience to her hallucination in the cave (Sinyard 127). Later on, the same or another native in monkey costume leads the jubilant crowd into the courtroom after Aziz has been cleared of the charges against him. However, there is an alternative explanation: Bharucha argues that the Indians disguised as monkeys, who frighten Adela on her way to the court, can just as easily be read as a signal that links the behaviour of Indians to bestiality and sexuality (158). The critic also objects to the scene at the temple because Lean deprives the erotic sculptures of their "spiritual contexts" and presents them merely "as objects of titillation" (158). Another shot that finds praise in Sinyard's eulogy is the one that shows "the Ganges in all its moonlit majesty and then . . . crocodiles plop suddenly to the surface" (155). In Sinyard's perception this exemplifies "the animalistic and the primitive rising unbidden out of the darkness, like the return of the repressed" (155). While he reads this as a "thrilling moment at the heart of the film's meaning" – as foreshadowing Adela's sexuality rising against Victorian moral oppression – the scene may actually be understood as a particularly crass icon for the fashion in which traditional European eyes regard India, namely as alluringly exotic but also home to malicious dangers that forever lurk under the surface.

Apart from moving the setting of the final part to scenic Kashmir, Lean also restages the relationship between Aziz and Fielding – he keeps the dissonances that arise from Fielding's gentlemanly behaviour towards Miss Quested but allows for a scene of reconciliation at the guesthouse on Lake Srinagar and a harmonious farewell. Lean's interpretation of Forster's novel, his *Passage to India*, thus appears to favour an optimistic appreciation of cross-cultural encounters and friendship. However, in the course of changing the setting, the spirit of the literary model is falsified to such an extent that one can speak of travesty. The

film director opts for India as a showcase, epitomised by the grandeur of the opening scenes, the splendid and colourful spectacle of the viceregal welcoming ceremony. Similarly, landscape and people are staged for tourists – the grandiose setting of Kashmir is so unlike the unspectacular view of Forster's Mau. How much Lean perverts the intentions of Forster's narrative is made clear by the fact that the novelist actually denied his protagonist the opportunity to go to the Himalayas: Aziz writes to Fielding that "all hopes of Kashmir have vanished for ever and ever" (277). In the programme note for Santha Rama Rau's dramatisation of *A Passage to India*, Forster noted that he had "tried to indicate the human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds. This aspect of the novel is displayed in its final chapters" (Rama Rau 105). The novelist went on to congratulate Rama Rau on her decision to leave this ending out and to bring "down her final curtain on the Trial Scene" (105). Lean, by contrast, carries on and changes the plot and the setting to such an extent that his film really turns into a revisionist contemplation of a glorious British past.

Victor Banerjee, the Indian actor who played Dr Aziz, acknowledged the film's false ontology. He is on record for having said that Indians would love the film, adding that there was "no poverty, no squalor, none of the suffering of the Indian masses, nothing of that" in Lean's movie. He thus admits that the film has not much to do with reality (quoted in Bharucha 161). As Nischik has observed, Banerjee is also "made to imitate the Indian stage accent in English rather than use his own polished accent" (300). This particularly annoying feature – it confirms Western prejudice about Indians – has a striking echo in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), where the protagonist, who grew up in the suburbs of London, is forced into adopting a similar fake Indian accent when performing in a dramatised version of *The Jungle Book* (147). An additional, even more revealing moment is provided by the fact that Karim, Kureishi's protagonist, has "been cast for authenticity and not for experience" (147). The "authentic" aspect of this comment might just as well refer to Banerjee and the Indian setting of Lean's *Passage to India*, in particular when one considers the most inexplicable casting decision, namely Alec Guinness for the part of Professor Godbole. According to Nischik "Guinness plays the role superbly within its confines, as a sort of fake clown rather than a thoughtful representative of Hindu religion" (301). Yet, as she explains, the choice of Guinness is the supreme instance that demonstrates how Lean's changes

have twisted *A Passage to India*: "Europe has displaced India, also in postcolonial times" (301).

***

The third encounter of cultures in contact on the Indian subcontinent is provided by the title story of Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). A carefully executed homage to both Forster's and Lean's versions of *A Passage to India*, "Interpreter of Maladies" explores the experience of both the hybrid migrant and the locally rooted resident who meet in present-day India and who fail to understand each other as dismally as the characters in Forster's narrative. In a comparison of the novel and Lahiri's short story, Simon Lewis points out that "the plots of both texts hinge on a misconceived tourist excursion . . . during which a male Indian guide and a female visitor misinterpret each other's verbal and nonverbal signals" (219). "Interpreter of Maladies" describes how that tour guide, Mr Kapasi (note the name – it sounds as if the author wanted to imply that the purpose of this character is to "cap Aziz"), who has a second job as an interpreter in a doctor's office (and is thus professionally linked to Forster's Aziz, even though in an inferior position), takes an American family by the name of Das (admittedly a very common Indian name but it is also the name of the judge that presided over Adela Quested's trial), first to the sun temple at Konarak and later to Udaygiri to visit the monastic cells there. During this tour Mr Kapasi notices how seemingly disconnected the Das couple behave, how negligently they treat their three children and begins to imagine that Mrs Das is developing romantic feelings for him.

The difference between the two central characters is, as Noelle Brada Williams writes, beautifully displayed in the scene where Mrs Das asks Mr Kapasi for his address in order to send him a copy of a photograph that her husband has taken (457):

> She handed him a scrap of paper which she had hastily ripped from a page of her film magazine. The blank portion was limited, for the narrow strip was crowded by lines of text and a tiny picture of a hero and heroine embracing under a eucalyptus tree.
>
> The paper curled as Mr. Kapasi wrote his address in clear, careful letters. (55)

Mrs Das' character is further illustrated by means of pointed descriptions. In the course of the tour in Mr Kapasi's car, she sits "a bit slouched" in her seat (47), polishes her nails (48), munches puffed rice (51), brushes her daughter's hair (60), keeps her sunglasses on most of the time and qualifies an amazing accomplishment of ancient technology at the Sun Temple in Konarak with the one-word comment "neat" (59).

At Konarak Mr Kapasi does not only admire her legs but also, with her, the erotic figures carved in stone (a clear tribute to Adela's temple ruin experience in David Lean's *Passage*; however, unlike the director, Lahiri clarifies the temple's spiritual significance). At Udaygiri there is an encounter that takes place in an enclosed space, namely inside Mr Kapasi's car, a bulky white Ambassador, rather than a cave as in Forster's *Passage*, and this cruelly dispels Mr Kapasi's fantasies: Mrs Das confesses that one of her children is not by her husband and that she seeks relief from her feelings of pain regarding this matter. When Mr Kapasi fails to provide the advice she wants from him – a sort of absolution which an "interpreter of maladies" in her understanding is qualified to give and which reveals that she has probably been influenced by Western notions of the Orient – and instead asks her whether her pain is not simply guilt, she lets him feel how utterly unimportant – a paid servant – he is and joins her family. Mr Kapasi's question, "But we do not face a language barrier. What need is there for an interpreter?" (65), clearly expresses one aspect that Lahiri wants to elucidate in her narrative, namely that the gulf between people and cultures is not simply a matter of language or skin colour.

In the scenes at Konarak Lahiri appears to allude to the traditional image that demonstrates the ultimate fear of the colonising British – the rape of a white woman by a native that is recurrent in literature and was also, unfortunately, adopted by Forster in *A Passage to India*. Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* points out that the Mutiny, which might have suggested such images of violated memsahibs, was much further removed from the setting of Forster's novel than the massacre of peacefully demonstrating Indians at Amritsar (80). However, turning the tables, Lahiri demonstrates that the native man may feel desire but is civilised while the female westernised visitor is shown to lack in morals. Mukherjee comments that Mrs Das' problem results from the "predicament of the Indians settled abroad," namely that they feel tied to the

Indian "concept of chastity" while being exposed to Western notions of sanctioned permissiveness (112).

The monkeys, Lahiri's second allusion to David Lean's movie, are as carefully introduced in the story as in the film: they appear early in the narrative as an attractive feature for the children; then, in keeping with Indian mythology and Haruman's reputation as a trickster, at Udaygiri they attack one of the Das boys and give Mr Kapasi the opportunity to save him – but without returning into Mrs Das' good books. Lahiri also reveals her careful reading of Forster in the following passage, which shows Mr Kapasi becoming "intoxicated" with his imaginary passion.

> ... it flattered Mr. Kapasi that Mrs. Das was so intrigued by his job. Unlike his wife she had reminded him of its intellectual challenges. She had also used the word 'romantic.' [. . .] Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, was mildly intoxicating. When Mr. Kapasi thought once again about how she had said "romantic," the feeling of in*toxic*ation grew. (53) [my italics]

In the scene that was mentioned earlier in this essay, namely when Aziz plays polo with a subaltern, Forster's omniscient narrator had commented:

> They reined up again, the fire of good fellowship in their eyes. But it cooled with their bodies, for athletics can only raise a temporary glow. Nationality was returning, but before it could exert its *poison* they parted, saluting each other. (75-76) [my italics]

Thus, in a broad sense, poison can be seen as a metaphor for nationalism that prevents friendship between cultures (as Forster does) or as a metaphor for losing one's grip on reality, which leads to cross-cultural misunderstanding (as Lahiri does). The story ends with the piece of paper with Mr Kapasi's address on it being carried away by the wind – and with it all his dreams of a relationship with this exotic Indian lady from America. The tour guide's familiarity with her country of residence is the result of watching *Dallas* on TV, a show that is so dated that the Das children are not familiar with it.

Lahiri's narrative incorporates both Forster's novel and Lean's film version and she links her story by means of several references to the two models. The fact that the piece of paper ripped from a film magazine is carried off by the wind so lightly can be read as a comment by the author that gives the film less weight than the book. Unlike Lean's film,

"Interpreter of Maladies" is a subtle, intertextual inquiry into transcultural relations, drawing on a different map where the encounter is no longer between coloniser and colonised but between third world and first world, linked by migration and the Westernisation of diaspora communities that sometimes just keep a tenuous link to their cultural origins. Mr Kapasi identifies the Das family as "different" almost instantly: they look "Indian but dressed as foreigners did" (44), "Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow" (44), and Mr Das hides most of the time behind a paperback guide book, "which said 'INDIA' in yellow letters and looked as if it had been published abroad" (44). The last instance, the time that Mr Das dedicates to the perusal of his guide book, demonstrates how estranged he has become from his roots and the paperback acts as a barrier that prevents him from getting to know or even become culturally aware of the people in India.

Lewis, commenting on the influences of Forster's narrative but unaware of the echoes of the film, is intrigued by the fact "that the gulf of misunderstanding between Mr. Kapasi and the visiting Mrs. Das results from cultural rather than racial difference" (219).[3] The critic overstates his case, however, when arguing that "Lahiri thus moves beyond Eurocentric or Oriental images of India to those of a contemporary postcolonial nation more concerned with dialogue with its own diaspora than with its former colonizers" (219). This appraisal is only partly true: one indication in favour is certainly the almost immediate celebration – one might even say canonisation – of Lahiri's short story collection by means of a critical volume published in India and entitled *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller* (2002). Counter arguments are more numerous: the successful Bollywood movie *Lagaan* (2001) demonstrates beautifully how an Indian director is just as preoccupied with the past as certain representatives of the subcontinent's former colonisers – *Lagaan* is clearly intent on creating an Indian counter mythology to the predominant Western perception of Indian history. In a similar vein, the novelist Amitav Ghosh, for instance in *The Glass Palace*, published a year after Lahiri's short story collection, explicitly rewrites history from an Indian perspective by bringing such harrowing experiences as the Indian refu-

[3] When Lewis describes "the tension that Forster creates between the unmarried white woman visitor and her married Indian host" (221), he is mistaken: at the moment of the excursion to the Marabar Caves, Aziz is still a widower (it is only in the last section of the novel, Temple, that Aziz has remarried).

gee trek from Burma in the course of World War II to the public's attention or by pointing out that the Indian population perceived the veteran soldiers of the Indian National Army (who fought for the Japanese) as heroes (Ghosh 479).

In a sense, Lahiri appears to be as pessimistic about human relationships as Forster – even though her protagonists are both "Indian." Her intertextual allusions create an atmospheric pattern that permits delving into the problematic nature of dealing with meeting and understanding the cultural "other" against the background of the critical poles established by Bhabha and Ahmad. Her text then, could be read as a warning against too overt an optimism as expressed by Bhabha and act as a reminder that high expectations can be raised by the cultural "other" which must almost inevitably be frustrated. It is a supreme feat to surf the crest of conflicting cultural values rather than be gradually coerced into adopting the values of another culture. In terms of anthropology Mrs Das has undergone a process of acculturation and is now caught in a state of dysporia, which is characterised by her feelings of insecurity and unhappiness. Acculturation has successfully transformed her habits, for instance the way she dresses and raises her children. Mr Kapasi has also been influenced by modern ideas: he contemplates leaving his bickering wife and romanticises about a future with Mrs Das. This novel way of thinking could also be the result of a process of acculturation: *Dallas* might well have sparked off his fantasies; after all, people and mentalities change under the influence of another culture. As Paul White states, migration does not only affect "the migrants themselves but also those who directly come into contact with them and those who, indirectly, are affected by social, political and economic changes induced by the structural context in which those agents are located" (1).

Mrs Das and Mr Kapasi clash on cultural rather than racial grounds. This links back to Forster who understood the essence of *Passage to India* as encapsulating "the human predicament." The novelist even rejected the interpretation that he was concerned with cultural dissonances, denying "that he was writing about the incompatibility of East and West. He was really concerned with the difficulty of living in the universe" (Rama Rau 106). Lahiri's protagonists exist in a postmodernist world and find themselves on a quest for a new identity that permits them to shed the skin of their present, unsatisfactory existences. The reader is confronted with these ambivalent and fragmented biographies and observes their shifting identities. These insights indeed appear to support a

vision of life as perpetual migration, characterised by "personal reflections, adjustments, reactions and repercussions" (White 12). "Cultural identity," as Stuart Hall proclaims, "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (394). The figures in Lahiri's story thus simply undergo a process that is typical for postcolonial subjects:

> Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. (Hall 394)

And since this process of reshaping one's identity is painful it appears that Lahiri, on the level of her story, tends to agree with Ahmad and his condemnation of frantic personal readjustment. Lahiri is clearly conscious of this constellation: "As a storyteller, I'm aware that there are limitations in communication" (Patel "Maladies"). By contrast, the author's biography conforms more to Bhabha's optimistic vision:

> . . . the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now. (Anon. "Conversation")

"Interpreter of Maladies," which is sparkling with its author's ironic allusions, is thus informed by her own hybrid identity; she does not reject, among others, the label ABCD (this acronym "stands for American born confused 'desi' – 'desi' meaning Indian"). Authors like Lahiri and critics like Bhabha, who are – in Ahmad's words – fortunate to have a surplus in "cultural capital," are thus in a position to wander between worlds and live in more than one culture. The novelist Amitav Ghosh, married to an American and dividing his life between New York and Calcutta, is a further example; Ania Loomba is another critic in that position. Thus novelists and critics successfully navigate the cultural gap and seem to be the ones who profit in Bhabha's sense. By writing about cultural borders they may help readers become more sensitive towards them and hence, hopefully, create more understanding between cultures.

References

Ahmad, Aijaz. "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," *Race and Class* 36.3. (1995): 1-20; repr. in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory. A Reader.* Ed. Padmini Mongia. London: Arnold, 1996. 276-293.

Allen, Charles, ed. *Plain Tales from the Raj: Images of British India in the Twentieth Century.* London: Futura, 1985.

Anon. "A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri." http://-www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/interpreter_maladies.shtml.

Bala, Suman, ed. *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller. A Critical Response to Interpreter of Maladies.* New Delhi: Khosla Publishing House, 2002.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture.* London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

———. "Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism." *Text and Nation: Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities.* Ed. Laura Garcia Moreno and Peter C. Pfeiffer. Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1996. Reprinted in *Postcolonial Discourses.* Ed. Gregory Castle. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. 38-52.

Bharucha, Rustom. "The 'Boom' of David Lean's *A Passage to India.*" *Before His Eyes: Essays in Honor of Stanley Kauffmann.* Ed. Bert Cardullo. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1986. 155-161.

Brada-Williams, Noelle. "Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle." *MELUS* 29:3 (Fall 2004): 451-464.

Bradbury, Malcolm. *A Passage to India: A Casebook.* London: Macmillan, 1970, repr. 1987.

Brantlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Broege, Valerie. "The Journey Toward Individuation of Adela Quested in E.M. Forster's and David Lean's *A Passage to India.*" *Heroines of Popular Culture.* Ed. Pat Browne. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987. 41-53.

Farrell, J.G. *The Singapore Grip.* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978.

Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace.* London: HarperCollins, 2000.

Gowariker, Ashutosh. *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India.* Aamir Khan Productions, 2001.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora. Identity: Community, Culture, Difference." Ed. J. Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. 222-37; repr. in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader.* Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. 392-403.

Hitchens, Christopher. "Busted Blue: *A Passage to India.*" *Grand Street* 4:3 (Spring 1985): 215-217.

Hubel, Teresa. "Liberal Imperialism as a Passage to India." *Whose India? The Independence Struggle in British and Indian Fiction and History.* London: Leicester University Press, 1996. 95-108. Excerpt reprinted in *Post-Colonial Theory and English Literature. A Reader.* Ed. Peter Childs. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. 351-362.

Huggan, Graham. *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins.* London: Routledge, 2001.

JanMohamed, Abdul R. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory." *Critical Inquiry* 12:1 (1985). Excerpt reprinted in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader.* Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 18-23.

King, Russell, John Connell and Paul White, eds. *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration.* London: Routledge, 1995.

Kipling, Rudyard. "The Ballad of East and West." (1889) *Rudyard Kipling: The Complete Verse.* London: Kyle Cathie, 1990. 190-193.

———. "The White Man's Burden." (1899) *Rudyard Kipling: The Complete Verse.* London: Kyle Cathie, 1990. 261-262.

Kureishi, Hanif. *The Buddha of Suburbia.* London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Interpreter of Maladies." *Interpreter of Maladies.* London: Flamingo, 2000. 43-69.

Lean, David. *A Passage to India.* Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 1984.

Lewis, Simon. "Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies'." *The Explicator.* 59:4 (2001): 219-221.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism.* London: Routledge, 1998.

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Morey, Peter. "E.M. Forster and the Dialogic Imagination." *Fictions of India: Narrative and Power.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000. 53-79.

Mukherjee, A. K. "Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*: A Study." *Writers of the Indian Diaspora.* Ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige, 2001. 108-116.

Nischik, Reingard M. "Where Literary and Cultural Studies Meet: The Example of Film Adaptation (Or: E.M. Forster Discovers India, David Lean Recovers the Empire)." *New Worlds: Discovering and Constructing the Unknown in Anglophone Literature.* Eds. Martin Kuester, Gabriele Christ and Rudolf Beck. Munich: Vögel, 2000. 293-303.

Patel, Vibhuti. "Maladies of Belonging: an Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." *Newsweek International* 20 September (1999).

Prusse, Michael C. "Towards a Cosmopolitan Readership: New Literatures in English in the Classroom." Paper given at the ASNEL Conference, *Transcultural English Studies*, on 22 May 2004 in Frankfurt/Main (to be published in *ASNEL Yearbook*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

Rama Rau, Santha. "Remembering E.M. Forster." *Grand Street* 5:4 (Summer 1986): 99-119.

Rushdie, Salman. "Outside the Whale." *Granta* 11 (1984): 123-40.

Schlögel, Karl. "Lob des Nomaden: Die Migranten als Avantgarde der globalen Modernisierung." *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 30 December (2004): 41.

Sinyard, Neil. "'Lids Tend to Come Off': David Lean's Film of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India.*" *The Classic Novel: From Page to Screen.* Eds. Robert Giddings and Erica Sheen. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. 147-162.

Stallybrass, Oliver. "Editor's Introduction." *A Passage to India.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984. 7-28.

White, Paul. "Geography, Literature and Migration." *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration.* Eds. Russell King, John Connell and Paul White. London: Routledge, 1995. 1-19.

Whitman, Walt. "Passage to India." (1881). *Leaves of Grass. A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems.* Eds. Scully Bradley, Harold W. Blodge, Arthur Golden and William White. New York: New York University Press, 1980. 563-574.