



A PASSAGE TO INDIA

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A Passage to India is a liberal film. There was a time on the Left when to call something liberal was to condemn it out of hand as weak, equivocating, untheorised, unmaterialist and, of course, bourgeois.

Liberalism is indeed all of those things, but in the age of Thatcher and Reagan we may need to be a little less quick off the mark about it - right now we need all the liberals we can get.

The problem is that there's liberalism and liberalism, or, I'm tempted to say, there's E M Forster's liberalism and there's David Lean's. I don't as a rule much care for looking at a film in terms of

the book it is based upon. A film is a film, good or bad in its own terms and not for the degree to which it matches its literary source - and it is even more important to stick to this principle when the book is, like *A Passage to India*, a 'classic', nay, a 'set text' all the way up the exam system. But there are one or two points where a film-book comparison here does indicate the difference between a valuable and honourable liberalism and a smug, stifling one.

The key incident in the novel is the visit of Aziz, the local Indian doctor, and Adela, a young English woman recently arrived in India, to the Marabar caves. Something happens in the caves, and shortly afterwards Aziz is taken to court on an assault charge. In the book you never know for certain what happened in the caves - Aziz may have made a pass at Adela, or raped her, or she may have imagined that he did, or something else quite other may have happened. Not only is what happened not described, you don't get to know later what really took place. The film too does not show what happened in the caves, but you are never really left in any doubt that Aziz did not so much as lay a finger on Adela. The charm of Victor Bannerjee's playing of Aziz and the fact that the two good-and-truthful characters, Mrs Moore (Peggy Ashcroft) and Fielding (James Fox), believe in him so steadfastly while all manner of blimpish buffoons condemn him, combine to rob what happened in the caves of its disturbing ambiguity. Even if

you never find out what did happen in the caves, at least you don't need to worry that it might have been something sexual.

This shift of emphasis is one characteristic of much white liberalism. We have a problem in dealing with black sexuality - we have learnt well that it is a slur on black people to credit them with a dangerous, rampant, seething sexuality, as so much racist and imperialist thought does. That kind of attitude is itself neatly mocked in the courtroom scene in the film. So anxious are we not to be associated with this attitude however that we then fall back on white-washed images of black sexuality as almost non-existent in its innocence. In other words, in the film, this kind of liberalism cannot allow even the possibility that Aziz may have done something sexual because it must protest that he is innocent - whereas the intriguing and disturbing point about the incident in the book is that Aziz's undoubted innocence may nonetheless include his sexuality. He is innocent of the torrid and sordid sexuality the British ascribe to him, but he may indeed have made love to Adela. We cannot know, because in a sense we are so blinkered by our uptight, upright notions of sexuality that we cannot comprehend the way it is so differently constructed in other cultures.

In the book this also links in with the question of sexual feeling between men. The film plays this down - it's hard even to say whether the shots through the glazed glass of Fielding taking a shower when Aziz first visits him, and of Aziz putting on

eye make-up and magnificent Indian attire when Fielding visits him at the end of the film, are meant to have an erotic charge or not. There is certainly no development of the undertow of gay feeling that you get in the book. This kind of liberalism is happier showing friendship between people of different races if it can leave out of account the confusing, disturbing note of sexuality, especially if, as here, that sexuality is ineluctably caught up in the Western imagination with notions of the deviant and the perverse.

It is not only the trouble of sexuality that is at issue. The caves represent the unknowability of Indian culture. This could just be the old cliché of the inscrutable, inexpressibly exotic and mysterious character of the Orient, and perhaps both book and film do have something of this in them. Perhaps, indeed, it is impossible for Western people to speak, write or film Eastern cultures without getting tied up in this particular rhetoric of 'Orientalism'. In the novel, however, there is also a strong sense of the impertinence of the imperial assumption that one can have any easy access to the thought and feeling patterns of another culture. The film has found no way to convey this, so that the caves come

Sexual identity and cultural barriers explored.





to seem simply meaningless - whereas the point is that they do have meaning, but not one that the British can fathom.

The recognition of an irreducible barrier of difference between cultures also has a political dimension that gets lost in the film. This is most clearly indicated by the treatment of the final meeting in both book and film between Aziz and Fielding. In the book, when the two part there is an image of their two horses swerving apart even as they ride towards each other. The context makes it clear that this symbolises the ineradicable, essentially political gulf that separates the two men, despite their feeling for each other. This is replaced in the film with a touching reunion between the two men and a tearful parting (though neither of them cries, of course) suggesting that, nonetheless, everything is all right now. The book's image of the swerving horses would have made a beautiful film image, and of the kind that David Lean has often used brilliantly in his films. It has been objected that the book was written before Indian independence and that now friendship may be affirmed between the two 'free' nations. Yet not only is the film still set before Independence and thus still under the direct impact of imperialism, but we also still live scarred by that imperialism, as the situation of Indian people in Britain today testifies.

David Lean's film might indeed have affirmed such a friendship against the odds of the politics that would divide it. Many of his best, most searingly moving films - *Brief Encounter*, *Summer Madness*, *Ryan's Daughter* - are just such evocations of love achieved against the barriers that society has put up against it. What is also characteristic of these films is that society wins in the end - love is a brief glorious moment snatched in the teeth of division and oppression. Yet in *A Passage to India*, perhaps in part because Lean did not care to speak the name of the love between Fielding and Aziz, we end with a smug reconciliation between the two men, an easy decent-chaps-together bit and never mind the imperialism. Part of the film's smugness is also in its style. It is of course an extraordinarily accomplished, crafted film. The photography is beautiful (in the very best colour supplement way), ravishingly lovely, with the kind of luminousness that you only get with perfect colour prints on a big screen. The timing of each shot is impeccable, lingering long enough to register the beauty of a landscape but not so long as to hold up the

unfolding of the story. The acting is nuanced, detailed, carefully observed, exquisitely rounded. Everything in the film is in place - which also means that everything in the film is neatly parcelled up.

It is instructive to compare it not with the novel but with the TV version of *The Jewel in the Crown*. This too had lovely photography, superb acting and so on, but what it also had was a kind of awkwardness. Scenes would come to an abrupt end or go on longer than seemed necessary for the story; episodes would end on a disconcertingly sudden freeze frame; there were quite long stretches of dialogue that, when they were over, you realised had been quite opaque as far as understanding quite what had been going on between characters, a feeling intensified by the performances, full of pauses and shifting and sudden loudness and looking away. That sense of a neatly rounded off, unproblematic world of domination and imperialism that comes across in the film of *A Passage to India* was not so with *Jewel in the Crown*, where the sense of the sheer difficulty of the exercise of liberalism and understanding remained uppermost.

One of liberalism's cardinal virtues is tolerance, and it is not one that much of the Left has a good track record on. There is a difference however between tolerance based on a complacent assumption that we're all the same anyway and tolerance that acknowledges the stubborn core of differences between peoples. The first form of tolerance imposes the liberal's own sense of how people are in her/his own world onto other parts of the world (including other classes, minorities, even the opposite sex) - it is this self-satisfied liberal tolerance that assumes Western Marxism is entirely appropriate to the situations of the Third World, or that women or blacks or gays in political parties do not inhabit specific and different situations requiring at least some of the time separate organisation. The other kind of tolerance acknowledges that one cannot just enter and understand difference, and withdraws from judgement or the interference of 'understanding'. The film *A Passage to India* invites us to take up the former tolerance, and this matters. It is not a wrangle over protecting a 'great author's' vision, it is not worrying about a story set in the dim and distant past. In multicultural contemporary Britain, in a world still entangled in imperialisms of many kinds, we need more than ever to foster the real tolerance of real difference.