

## **India's "Hundred Voices": Subaltern Oral Performance in Forster's *A Passage to India***

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Both within and without oral studies, scholars have begun to examine the intimate relations between what have seemed to some strange bedfellows: oral theory and critical theory. Mark C. Amodio has recently called attention to these relations, observing that "Oral theory and contemporary critical theory share many basic principles, engage many similar issues, and ask many closely related questions" (1998:97). Amodio acknowledges that this sense of commonality has been slow to emerge, a fact he attributes to two main causes: the narrowness of some oral-formulaic work and ignorance about oral theory among non-specialists (96). A major obstacle to a wider awareness of shared interests has been the long-held belief, among oralists and non-oralists alike, in the "Great Divide": the chasm that supposedly divides oral art and culture from literate art and culture (103). With the bridging of this divide by such scholars as A. N. Doane, John Miles Foley, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, Alain Renoir, Brian Stock, and others, a new perception of the relation between the oral and the literate has begun to gain currency, one "that acknowledges that orality and literacy exist along a continuum and are deeply interrelated and interdependent cultural forces" (96). As a result of placing the oral and the literate upon this continuum, these scholars have encouraged others to see that oral and literate art fall within a common linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural domain to which both oral theory and contemporary critical theory may usefully address themselves.

I would like to push Amodio's argument one step further. I wish to argue that oral theory and contemporary critical theory not only share similar "principles," "issues," and "questions," but may profitably inform each other under these shared headings. As a newcomer to oral studies, I would be presumptuous to say how critical theory might contribute to the development and refinement of oral theory. However, as a student of colonial literature, I see clear ways in which oral theory might enable the practice of one kind of

critical theory—that is, colonial/postcolonial theory: how it might help define its terms, shape its lines of inquiry, sharpen its methodology, and, most important, engage with other kinds of theory in useful cross-disciplinary work. I do not wish to generalize about either kind of theory, both of which, in their breadth, ever-shifting variety, even heterogeneity, defy easy generalization. Instead, I will attempt something more modest, pointed, and concrete, concerning a single, broad theoretical question and a single literary text. The question I will address—a vexed one in colonial/postcolonial circles—is whether the “subaltern” (or subordinate) subject can “speak” in the discourse of the colonial text. The colonial text against which I will test this question is E. M. Forster’s 1924 novel, *A Passage to India*, in which Indian subjects often express their aspirations—indeed, in which the “hundred voices” of the subcontinent clamor for attention<sup>1</sup>—but in which the power of those voices to make themselves heard above the roar of Britain’s discourse about India has been a matter of controversy. Since oral theory focuses with a special closeness on the power of voice (particularly the performative voice in traditional settings), I have chosen to draw upon its insights to revisit this controversy, and if not settle it outright, then at least examine it anew in relation to Forster’s novel.

To those readers who question the relevance of oral theory to a text so distant in time from an English oral tradition, I remind them that the oral and the literate exist together on a “continuum.” Foley and others have noted the wide persistence of the oral—what Walter J. Ong refers to as “residual orality” (1982:160)—even in linguistic performances within literate twentieth-century European and North American cultures.<sup>2</sup> Why should this persistence not register itself in the composition of a High Modernist text? Forster himself enjoined readers to heed the power of the oral in texts: “Listen to the voice of the writer speaking to you; that is the only guide. Listen to him as if he was a man, actually present in the room.”<sup>3</sup> As I will argue below, *A Passage to India* shows vividly Forster’s sensitivity to the capacity of the oral to complicate the form and meaning of literary texts.

I will begin with a consideration of the question of the subaltern voice in the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Benita Parry, two

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<sup>1</sup> Forster 1952:136, 322. All further references to this text will be to this edition and will be cited internally.

<sup>2</sup> Foley 1995:72. See also Ong 1982:160.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Wood 1994:146.

postcolonial critics who have disagreed sharply on this issue and whose work will provide a theoretical context within which to study the question. I will then invoke oral theory, first, to show how *A Passage to India* works to unsettle the authority of Western literacy as embodied in British discourses about India and, second, to evaluate the aesthetic and political implications of three instances of subaltern oral performance that assist in this unsettling. In the first instance, I will draw upon Ong's insights into the differences between oral and literate cultures to reveal that, in the confrontation between the predominantly oral culture of Indians and the predominantly literate culture of Anglo-Indians,<sup>4</sup> the novel often shows the failure of the latter to represent adequately the rich, interwoven complexity of the former. In the second instance, I will call upon Foley's concept of "word-power" to analyze the emergence of an indigenous alternative to British writings about India, an alternative that will reveal the capacity of Indian voices to enact both a dynamic, ever-changing Indian oral tradition and the rise from "below" of an Indian nationalist movement. Although I will focus on a single literary work for much of this essay, I hope to illuminate larger literary theoretical issues in ways that may encourage other scholars to examine the potential for cross-fertilization between oral theory and contemporary critical theory.

### **The Voice of the Subaltern**

In asking the question "Can the subaltern speak?" Spivak sparked a fierce debate inside and outside literary studies about the power of subordinate voices to speak in colonial and postcolonial texts. Although she first posed the question in a seminal 1988 essay, it is fair to say that she had been concerned with it well before 1988 and has returned to it often since then.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in scholarship of astounding range across a number of

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<sup>4</sup> Up until the 1911 all-India census, "Anglo-Indian" referred to Britons living in India. With that census, the government of India declared "Anglo-Indian" to be the official designation for persons of British and Indian descent. This title replaced that of "Eurasian." However, the British in India continued to use the old labels until India gained its independence. To avoid confusion, I use "Anglo-Indian" throughout this essay as Forster's contemporaries would have understood it—that is, in its pre-1911 sense. On the change in meaning of "Anglo-Indian," see Naidis 1963:408.

<sup>5</sup> Spivak first broached this question in a 1983 lecture. In a manner characteristic of her restlessly self-interrogating method, she has revised the 1988 essay, in some ways dissenting from its conclusions, in her most recent book (1999:248-311).

disciplinary boundaries, scholarship that has yielded important advances in fields as disparate as deconstruction, feminist theory, Marxism, Continental philosophy, subaltern historiography, nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and Anglophone literature, and contemporary Bengali literature, the problem of the subaltern's voice, subjectivity, and agency has for Spivak been paramount. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern" (from *subalterno*, meaning "subordinate," or "dependent") to refer to those members of the non-elite classes who lack economic and political agency in a society dominated by hegemonic elites. The term was adopted by the Subaltern Studies group, originally a loose coalition of Indian and British historians under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, who since the early 1980s have dedicated themselves to offering a radical alternative to traditional colonial and elite nationalist versions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian history.<sup>6</sup> Whereas conventional histories have typically focused upon the dominant role of elites, whether colonial or nationalist, in the pre- and post-Independence history of India, the historiography of the Subaltern Studies group has concentrated on recovering the voice and agency, largely erased from traditional historical accounts, of members of subaltern groups including peasants, tenant farmers, urban workers, tribals, shudras, untouchables, and women in these groups.<sup>7</sup> As a non-historian, Spivak considers herself a satellite of the Subaltern Studies group;<sup>8</sup> however, despite her laywoman's status, she has contributed actively to the larger Subaltern Studies project, which includes historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and literary critics, and has helped to define the current direction of this ramifying enterprise. More persistently, ingeniously, and scrupulously than any other Subalternist scholar, she has addressed the particular question of the subaltern's voice: its power (or lack thereof) to enunciate its experience meaningfully within colonial and postcolonial texts.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is a subtle, wide-ranging, and at times highly abstruse critique of attempts by elite Europeans and Asians to posit an essentialized subaltern subject who can speak on his or her behalf.

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<sup>6</sup> For an inaugural enunciation of the platform of the Subaltern Studies group, see Guha 2000.

<sup>7</sup> "Shudra" refers to the lowest order within the traditional four-fold division of the caste system in India. Untouchables, technically, lie outside this system.

<sup>8</sup> As Spivak herself puts it (2000:329), "I am hampered . . . by not being a scholar of subalternist work, but rather a sort of subalternist on the fringe of the main movement."

The essay criticizes four groups of writers who err in asserting that the subaltern can speak in any full and straightforward way: the philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, members of the Subaltern Studies collective, contemporary Western feminists, and nineteenth-century British and Indian writers about *sati*, or ritual widow-burning in traditional Hindu India.

We might expect that Foucault and Deleuze, who have reputations as politically progressive thinkers, would write perceptively about the subaltern Asian. Yet Spivak argues that these “best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other” (272) in fact reproduce the expansionist tendencies of a colonialism and neocolonialism they would otherwise wish to repudiate. In blithely asserting that the Asian Other “*can speak and know their conditions*” (Spivak’s emphasis; 283), they posit an Asian subject who sounds and thinks much like the Western minority subjects with whom they are familiar. In doing so, they in effect appropriate the Asian Other to the West, constituting the sovereign Western subject anew and thereby effacing an Asian subaltern subject violently fractured and dislocated by the West. Although these philosophers have often worked to deconstruct the idea of an essentialized, unified European subject, they fail to apply these methods to the Asian subject because they neglect their complicity in the history of colonialism. “The much publicized critique of the sovereign subject,” Spivak writes, “thus actually inaugurates a Subject” (272).

Unlike Foucault and Deleuze, the scholars of the Subaltern Studies project take into serious account the ideological effects of colonialism on the subaltern subject. Spivak is generally more sympathetic to their endeavor than that of Foucault and Deleuze. However, she finds the Subaltern Studies approach hobbled by its own kind of contradiction. Whereas, for the two European intellectuals, “a postrepresentationalist vocabulary hides an essentialist agenda,” in the work of the Subaltern collective, the opposite obtains: “a project understood in essentialist terms must traffic in a radical textual practice of differences” (285). Despite the dissimilarities between the two philosophers and the Subaltern group, “All three are united in the assumption that there *is* a pure form of consciousness” as embodied in the subaltern subject (286). All three, then, are guilty of a false and misleading belief in the idea of an essential, unified, and autonomous subaltern subject that their methods otherwise wish to disavow or complicate. Among major Western intellectuals whom Spivak esteems, only Marx and Derrida are free of this disabling essentialism, this nostalgic belief in a subaltern who can speak in his or her own voice free of the distorting effects of colonialism and neocolonialism.

In her examination of Western feminism, Spivak identifies the subaltern Asian woman as exemplary of the subaltern condition. Confronted by this figure, European and North American feminists understandably seek to make common cause with her. Spivak, however, is wary of “benevolent,” well-meaning First-World feminists who attempt to combat the oppression of women in the Third World only to find themselves participating in the very patriarchal exploitation they wish to oppose. For Spivak, they are no more resistant than their First-World male counterparts to the tendency to condescend to subaltern women, to make of these women self-confirming versions of themselves. In a plea directed as much to herself as to elite women in the West, Spivak urges feminists to speak *to* rather than *for* subaltern women; in this way, “the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* ‘unlearns’ female privilege” (295).

In the final part of her essay, Spivak, determined to remain vigilant about her own elite “positionality,” studies the subaltern figure of the *sati*, the woman who, according to Hindu tradition, immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband as an act of piety and fidelity.<sup>9</sup> Spivak analyzes this figure in the context of British attempts to abolish the rite during the nineteenth century—a campaign that she encapsulates in the proposition “‘White men are saving brown women from brown men’” (296). Spivak interrogates the writings of both the “white” reformers and the “brown” (Hindu) defenders of the ritual, finding in both discourses constructions of the *sati*’s intention that miss the mark. The British abolitionists argued that the widows did not want to die but were forced to perish to satisfy the wishes of their hidebound male relatives. For their part, Hindu apologists claimed just as invidiously that the widows wished to die of their own volition without any prompting from or coercion by male relatives. Although both formulations of the *sati* implied the freedom of widows to choose, in both “The dubious place of the free will of the constituted sexed subject as female was successfully effaced” (302). Spivak sees the effacing of the *sati* as paradigmatic for all subaltern women: “Between [Hindu] patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (306). Although Spivak ends her essay with an example of a more modern *sati*,

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<sup>9</sup> In Western parlance, *sati*, or the more archaic *suttee*, is taken to refer to the ritual of female self-immolation itself. As Spivak explains, the substitution of the rite for the woman who performs it rests on “a grammatical error on the part of the British.” In Hindi, *sati* “simply means ‘good wife’” (1988:305).

Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, whose self-destruction may, according to one reading, represent “an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of *sati*-suicide” (308), she implicitly dismisses this interpretation as too hopeful. She sums up: “The subaltern cannot speak” (308).<sup>10</sup>

For Spivak, the subaltern is finally too heterogeneous to the homogenizing textualities of all four groups of elite writers to make its small, distinctive voice heard above the din of these dominant discourses. By insisting on essentializing the subaltern woman, all four miss the radically decentered, particularized, and elusive subjectivity of this figure. Under these circumstances, the female Asian tribal, untouchable, peasant, or urban worker cannot possibly speak in any meaningful sense.

In “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse” (1987), Parry criticizes Spivak for what she takes to be her unnecessarily restrictive and pessimistic account of the possibilities for political resistance embodied in subaltern vocality. Parry considers Spivak together with Homi Bhabha as practitioners of a deconstructive brand of colonial discourse analysis that “either erase[s] the voice of the native or limit[s] native resistance to devices circumventing and interrogating colonial authority” (33-34). Parry finds these tendencies particularly disquieting when they result in “a downgrading of the anti-imperialist texts written by national liberation movements,” thereby “obliterat[ing] the role of the native as historical subject and combatant, possessor of an-other knowledge and producer of alternative traditions” (34). Parry, *pace* Spivak, argues that it ought to be possible to find “traces and testimony of women’s voice” in the enunciations of “healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artizans and artists” and thereby find the vocal subaltern where Spivak reads only silence (35). For Parry, Spivak’s unwillingness to acknowledge the vocal subaltern brings with it a second problem: “the exorbitation [displacement] of the role allotted to the post-colonial woman intellectual” (35). In both instances, Spivak, according to Parry, fails to acknowledge the power of the subaltern voice not only to disrupt elite discourses but to create for itself a vital “counter-discourse” (38).

In this all-too-rapid survey of debate about the subaltern, I do not wish, at this point, to embrace either Spivak’s or Parry’s methods or

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<sup>10</sup> In a 1996 interview, Spivak glosses what she means by “speak” in this formulation. She does not mean “talk,” or “make an utterance.” Rather, she means something more meaningful and efficacious, “a transaction between the speaker and the listener” (1996:289) in which the speaker not only speaks but is heard—heard, moreover, not simply along conventional hegemonic lines but along lines that deviate from the hegemonic into the counter-hegemonic. This definition of speech will be pertinent to the examples of oral performance I analyze below.

conclusions. Rather, I want to establish a set of terms and concepts within which to place my own investigations of native vocality. Using the language developed by Spivak and Parry, I will address this double question: Is the voice of the subaltern inevitably muted by the dominant discourses that seek to incorporate it, as Spivak asserts? Or is the subaltern able, as in Parry's view, to move beyond a condition of silence in order to enunciate a counter-discourse of broad ethical and political agency? In addressing these questions, I will draw upon the insights of recent work in oral studies to aid me. At the intersection of oral and colonial/postcolonial theory, I will offer a reading of *A Passage to India* that, I hope, will shed light on the crux of subaltern vocality.

### **Orality, Literacy, and *A Passage to India***

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* has a long history of being read as a novel about colonialism. Although it has been read thematically in many other ways (as a work of High Modernist art, an investigation of the possibilities of cross-cultural friendship, an exploration of the unconscious mind, an examination of the success or failure of the liberal imagination, a meditation on Indian religion, and more recently a treatment of sexuality with rich implications for feminist and queer theories), it has been most persistently viewed as a text about the British Empire in India. From early charges by Anglo-Indian readers that Forster grossly misunderstood the British Raj to analyses by contemporary scholars working in colonial/postcolonial studies, *A Passage to India* has been seen to refract, fairly or unfairly, the events of the early twentieth century in India, when an increasingly popular nationalist movement began to oppose the paramountcy of the British Indian Empire. Although the novel certainly concerns a fraught political encounter between a colonial power and its subject population, it is also true that it registers a tense *cultural* engagement between a predominantly literate colonizer and a predominantly oral populace. The confrontation between literate and oral cultures as an aspect of colonial relations has been little noted among critics, yet it is a salient feature of those relations, and one that deserves close study.

Some readers may object that my formulation of this confrontation smacks of the very habit of dichotomous thinking that recent work among oralists and others has been trying to overcome. I would dispute this claim. I disagree with those poststructuralist critics who insist that binary oppositions must, in every case, be called into question. In a critical movement that has been hostile to grand narratives, some poststructuralists

are guilty of making of their deconstructive mode the very kind of grand, totalizing method they wish to displace. A more subtle, flexible, and comprehensive model of the relation between the oral and the literate is the one Amodio and others have suggested: “the continuum.”<sup>11</sup> In some instances, the oral and the literate may be poles apart along this continuum; in most instances, they will be more closely associated. Yet even in the latter cases, one aspect is apt to predominate over the other. In claiming that the Indians portrayed in *A Passage to India* live mainly within an oral culture and that the Anglo-Indians move mainly within a literate culture, I do not wish to suggest that Indians in the novel know nothing of writing nor that Britons in the novel lack any experience of the oral; the depictions of both cultures show a mingling of the two phenomena. However, I do stress a difference in emphasis; to that extent, I posit a binary relation between the oral and the literate in my reading of *A Passage to India*.<sup>12</sup>

In the aftermath of Aziz’s alleged rape of Adela Quested, Superintendent of Police McBryde reveals the basis on which he judges Indian character. He enjoins the schoolteacher Fielding: “Read any of the Mutiny records; which, rather than the Bhagavad Gita, should be your Bible in this country” (169). McBryde’s reliance on British texts, rather than indigenous song, to understand India reflects the chiefly literate nature of British epistemology about the Indian subcontinent. That the Mutiny records should be “your Bible in this country” implies the sacrosanct authority that, for Anglo-Indian officialdom, inheres in British writings about India. As Bernard Cohn and others have pointed out, from the early days of the British East India Company to the departure of the Raj from India in 1947, the British built up an enormous archive about India comprising a wide range of textual forms of knowledge—legal, linguistic, cartographical, historical, archaeological, ethnological, and demographic. The accumulation of this archive reflected many aims, but chief among them was the desire to master India discursively as a way of ruling it

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<sup>11</sup> In his use of the concept of a “spectrum,” Foley describes a similar model of relation between the oral and the literate (1995:138, 212).

<sup>12</sup> R. Parthasarathy writes: “To the Hindus, the Vedas are divine revelation spoken by God and heard by human beings. The spoken word has greater authority than the written: it is invested with sacred power. No such power is attributed to the written word, which is seen as an interloper. Indian society to this day remains essentially phonocentric rather than graphocentric” (1998:240).

economically, politically, and culturally.<sup>13</sup> The British impulse to know India textually required that Indians be seen to fall clearly into well-defined and easily classifiable categories in an endlessly ramifying taxonomy of human specimens. As a result, Indians in all their human complexity were reduced to a series of types—a reduction that allowed administrators, who consulted the many tables, gazetteers, handbooks, and censuses in which Indians were described, to think of their subjects as readily amenable to arrangement and rule. Implicit in this typing was a binary, us-versus-them thinking that yielded a pernicious racial and political hierarchy: the Britons on top and the Indians on the bottom. The consequence, according to Cohn, was a “reified and objectified vision of India” that justified the rule of its British governors (1983:183).

Ong suggests that it should be no surprise that an empire so driven by the “technology” of literacy should see the world in this way. Whereas oral communication is generally “close to the human lifeworld” (1982:42-43) and is “empathetic and participatory” (45-46), written communication tends toward that reification, objectification, and binary stratification Cohn finds in the British archive about India. According to Ong, the apparatus of literacy, by fixing language in space and time, permits a greater abstractness of communication that aids, on the one hand, the productive manipulation of language through listing, categorization, hierarchization, and analysis, but that invites, on the other, separation from the warm, human-centered, interactive lifeworld within which orality thrives (78-138). In his language (if not in his argument *per se*), Ong corroborates Cohn’s view of the British discourse about India in seeing literacy as an empire of signs when he asserts that “Writing . . . is a particularly pre-emptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate other things to itself. . . . Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever” (12).

*A Passage to India* provides many instances of the close link between literacy and empire that Ong suggests, instances that show the tyranny of abstraction pervading British literate culture in India. We see this will to mastery especially in the conventional Anglo-Indians’ knee-jerk references to Indian types. The callow Ronny Heaslop thinks that he knows Indians like Aziz better than his newly arrived mother, Mrs. Moore, who has just met the doctor: “he knew the type; he knew all the types, and this [Aziz] was the spoilt Westernized” (77). The penchant for disciplinary ordering leaks,

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<sup>13</sup> On the British attempt to control India through various forms of colonial knowledge, see especially Cohn 1996 and Dirks 2001. See also Arnold 1986:138-47; Cohn 1983:182-83; Inden 1990:7-48; Metcalf 1994:113-59; and Richards 1993:1-9, 11-44.

like an enervating poison, into all aspects of Anglo-Indian lives. As Aziz rides on his bicycle toward the British civil lines, he is depressed by their “arid tidiness”: “The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India” (16). Even the liberal, humane, and sensitive Fielding, whose allegiance to English forms is decidedly lukewarm, shows, according to Aziz, a very English tidiness of feeling. When the English teacher scolds his Indian doctor-friend for failing to have emotions “in proportion to their objects,” Aziz snaps, “Is emotion a sack of potatoes, so much the pound, to be measured out? Am I a machine?” (254). The Britons’ cool rage for order culminates, after Adela’s alleged attack in a Marabar cave, in the laughable plan to have the “extraordinary” and innumerable caves “numbered in sequence with white paint” to prevent further trouble (199).

These examples are not meant to suggest that literacy is the sole or even chief reason for the deadening rationalism of the British Raj as seen in the novel. We could easily adduce other reasons: the rising use of calculative reason in post-Enlightenment Europe, the increasing rationalization of the bureaucratic state in the modern West, the introduction of Utilitarian methods into British governance beginning in the late eighteenth century, the turn toward a liberal authoritarianism in British Indian administration after the Indian Uprising of 1857-58, and the spread of pseudo-scientific racial theories in the latter part of the nineteenth century, to name just a few. Indeed, all of these phenomena are, along with the spread of literate culture, of a piece. Literacy, printing, and discursive production have acted as powerful concomitants of the development of Western national and imperial states. Literacy is simply the aspect I have chosen to study here.

The problem with British literate culture as it is portrayed in Forster’s novel is that, given its reification, objectification, and binary stratification, that culture misses the human subject—that subject in intimate relation to other human subjects and in close connection with his or her wider environment. When the missionary Mr. Sorley is asked whether the many mansions of heaven contain not only human beings and monkeys but also wasps, oranges, cactuses, crystals, mud and even “the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley,” he balks: “No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing” (38). The expanding perspective of this passage—from the familiarly human to the ever more distantly inhuman—is a recurrent epistemological motif in the novel, one that calls attention to the limitations of British vision: its failure to make sense of a large universe and its inevitable recoil upon the small world of its exclusions. The blinkered quality of British perception is especially acute in

regard to the unseen, to the realm of the spiritual beyond ratiocination. When Adela suggests to Fielding that perhaps telepathy allowed Mrs. Moore to understand what had happened in the caves, the narrator scoffs, “The pert, meagre word fell to the ground. Telepathy? What an explanation! Better withdraw it, and Adela did so. She was at the end of her spiritual tether, and so was he. Were there worlds beyond which they could never touch, or did all that is possible enter their consciousness? They could not tell. . . . They had not the apparatus for judging” (263).

The narrator, who shares with Fielding a liberal belief in proportion, also shares his ignorance about matters beyond the apparatus of reason. “How can the mind take hold of such a country?” the narrator cries out in frustration (136). There is more than a hint of Orientalist cliché in this question. India as a land of immensity, monstrosity, and inscrutability has been a pervasive image within the Western repertoire of representations—or misrepresentations—of the East: the “Orient [as] destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West.”<sup>14</sup> Yet there is more than Orientalist cliché-mongering going on here. Again and again in his novel, Forster points up the fundamental tautology of Western writing about India, including his own: its inadequacy to reflect anything about India other than its own poor stock of received ideas. About the Gokul Ashtami festival in celebration of the birth of Krishna, the narrator comments: “they [the celebrants] did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form” (284-85). The novel exposes its own impoverished cultural and discursive devices here. The parenthetical “as we call it” quietly indicts the narrowness inherent in aesthetic and cultural judgments based solely on an Aristotelian norm. India may strike the Western observer as a “muddle,” but that word points up a Western inability to transcend its own ethnocentric descriptions rather than any Indian failure to make dramatic sense.

Because the novel so frequently undermines its own discursive strategies, Parry has called *A Passage to India* “the limit text of the Raj discourse, existing on its edges, sharing aspects of its idiom while disputing the language of colonial authority.” Claiming that criticism has focused for too long on Forster “as the archetypal practitioner of the domestic, liberal-humanist, realist English novel,” she argues that “it should now address itself to the counter-discourse generated by the text, which in its global perspective refuses the received representation of the relationship between the metropolitan culture and its peripheries, and interrogates the premises,

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<sup>14</sup> Said 1978:244.

purposes and goals of a civilisation dedicated to world hegemony” (1985:30). Parry catches well the self-reflexive, self-unraveling method of the novel. However, I would like to offer one important modification of her claim. She declares that “the counter-discourse” originates in “the text.” This is obviously so. However, it can also be argued that the text ventriloquizes the counter-discourses of India, that it acts as a medium for indigenous voices on the “periphery” that speak through it and against it. Parry is largely silent about these Indian voices, yet they constitute a dense, vital, and potentially subversive polyphony. Godbole’s song to Krishna; the Marabar caves’ echo; the “hundred voices” that speak to Mrs. Moore as she leaves Bombay; the roar of the Indian crowd at Aziz’s trial; the song of the Indian worshipers at Gokul Ashtami; Aziz’s poem to internationalism; Aziz’s cry at the end, when he prophesies that Indians will “drive every blasted Englishman into the sea” (332)—all of these voices show an uncanny power to interrupt the novel’s discourse, to announce not only their intervention but their abiding presence, and to suggest a power, more effective than that of any single British voice or medley of voices, to determine future political events. As this list suggests, these voices are frequently oral. Indeed, the novel shows, with remarkable tact, the capacity of Indian oral performance to unsettle English literate forms—the types, categories, binary hierarchies, and other literate structures that compose the British archive about India. The novel also suggests that, taken together, these oral performances make up an emergent subaltern counter-discourse to the dominant British discourse—a dynamic, indigenous oral tradition that constitutes a cultural and political alternative to a literate tradition of imperial rule.

### **Oral Performance in *A Passage to India***

To identify the particular cultural and political agency of this oral tradition, I will examine three instances of oral performance in *A Passage to India*: Godbole’s hymn to Krishna, the Indian crowd’s chant to Mrs. Moore at Aziz’s trial, and the Hindu devotees’ song to Tukaram at Gokul Ashtami.<sup>15</sup> These are obviously not instances of oral performance per se but

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<sup>15</sup> For a wide-ranging discussion of Indian women’s song and story as oral performance, see the special edition on South Asian Oral Traditions in *Oral Tradition* (12.1), guest-edited by Gloria Goodwin Raheja. On hymns to Krishna in the Indian epic tradition, see Koskikallio 1996:148-51.

are, instead, textually rendered versions of oral performance intercalated within a fictional narrative; however, I would argue that they are still amenable to the concepts and methods of oral theory. To ascertain the nature of agency in these performances, I will draw upon John Miles Foley's concept of "word-power," as developed in his *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (1995). This book represents an ambitious attempt to synthesize recent research in oral art in two areas: "the Oral-Formulaic Theory associated with Milman Parry and Albert Lord, and the Performance/Ethnography of Speaking/Ethnopoetics school linked closely with Roger Abrahams, Keith Basso, Richard Bauman, Dan Ben-Amos, Charles Briggs, Robert Georges, Dell Hymes, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Dennis Tedlock, Barre Toelken, and many others" (xiii). For this synthesis, the idea of word-power is central. According to Foley, "*word-power derives from the enabling event of performance and the enabling referent of tradition*" (Foley's emphasis; 208). Foley is particularly interested here in analyzing the first of these terms. He contends that the enabling event of performance depends on three phenomena: "*performance arena, register, and communicative economy*" (Foley's emphasis; 29). The "performance arena" is not so much a physical arena as "an abstract site or recurrent forum for a specific verbal activity, a place (defined abstractly and ritualistically rather than empirically) where participants go to transact the business of performance" (209). "Register" refers to the dedicated set of metonymic and associative devices immanent within a tradition upon which the oral performer draws for his performance and upon which the audience also draws to receive the performance in the fullness of its authority and power. "Communicative economy" occurs when "both performer and reader/audience enter the same arena and have recourse strictly to the dedicated language and presentational mode of the speech act they are undertaking . . ." (53). Within this arena, "signals are decoded and gaps [in reception] are bridged with extraordinary fluency, that is, economy" (53). The idea of the bridging of interpretive gaps, a concept that Foley borrows from the Receptionalist theory of Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, will be important in understanding the particular agency of oral performance in *A Passage to India*.<sup>16</sup>

In the first instance of oral performance, Professor Godbole sings a hymn to Krishna, the god and divine lover, at the end of Fielding's informal party for Adela and Mrs. Moore. The song mystifies the Forsterian narrator and the Anglo-Indian guests (79):

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<sup>16</sup> For a fuller analysis of the uses of Receptionalism in oral studies, see Foley 1991:espec. 38-60.

At times there seemed a melody, at times there was the illusion of a Western melody. But the ear, baffled repeatedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of noises, none harsh or unpleasant, none intelligible. It was the song of an unknown bird. . . . The sounds continued and ceased after a few moments as casually as they had begun—apparently half through a bar, and upon the sub-dominant.

The hymn, a Hindu song of *bhakti* (or devotion), supplicates the god to come so that the worshiper may unite with him, but, as Godbole explains, ““He refuses to come”” (80). Indeed, although Krishnavite devotees never cease to invite him, he never deigns to come. The performance represents another instance of that “frustration of reason and form” that Gokul Ashtami embodies for the European. But the problem, as the text makes clear, is not with the song itself but with a Western sensibility that fails to make sense of it. Unlike their British counterparts, the Indian auditors apprehend the meaning of the song instantly: “They began to whisper to one another. The man who was gathering water chestnut came naked out of the tank, his lips parted with delight, disclosing his scarlet tongue” (79). The scene bears all the signs of an enabling performance: the quasi-sacral performance arena, the dedicated register of words and tones that constitutes the matter and meaning of the song, and the communicative economy that unites performer and audience in a full sharing of an immanent oral tradition. Through deep familiarity with the ancient conventions of the Hindu song of *bhakti*, the Indian listeners are able to overcome those indeterminacies of interpretation that stymie the Western auditors and apprehend the rich word-power of the tradition.

Although disturbing to Western aesthetic norms, the hymn shows little overt subversion of British political orders. Though the political ramifications of the *bhakti* tradition have been heatedly debated, the song here seems to bear little of the political freight that is sometimes associated with *bhakti* devotionism.<sup>17</sup> It can be more plausibly argued that the hymn holds a particular political significance within Forster’s vision of queer coalition-building. The implicit homoeroticism of the song’s reception (the servant’s scarlet tongue)—a homoeroticism underscored by the later

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<sup>17</sup> An extensive literature exists on this subject, for which I can offer only a partial survey. On the *bhakti* tradition as expressing the political aspirations of the subaltern for freedom from caste and/or colonial oppression, see Bayly 2000:123-24, Clarke 1998, Gokhale-Turner 1981, Hay 1988:130-39, Lele 1981, and Pandey 1982:169. Conversely, on the *bhakti* tradition as a religious sublimation of political aspirations, see Embree 1988:342-43, Ishwaran 1981, and Guha 1997:39-55.

appearance of another genre of sacral-erotic Indian song, the ephebophilic *ghazal*—suggests Forster’s promotion of a same-sex cosmopolitanism as a substitute for imperialism.<sup>18</sup> However, in itself Godbole’s song adumbrates only faintly the potential power of a subaltern anti-colonialism. Only in the context of later oral performances will the intimations of political subversion in Godbole’s recital grow clearer.

The crowd’s chant during Aziz’s trial brings the political ramifications of indigenous oral performance immediately to the fore. When the lawyer Mahmoud Ali shouts out the name of Mrs. Moore during the trial, the throng outside the courtroom takes up an Indianized version of her name as a prayer and a rallying cry (225):

“Esmiss Esmoor  
 Esmiss Esmoor  
 Esmiss Esmoor  
 Esmiss Esmoor. . . .”

As in the case of Godbole’s hymn, the English audience is befuddled, even maddened, by the chant. Ronny thinks: “It was revolting to hear his mother travestied into Esmiss Esmoor, a Hindu goddess” (225). The impotence of the British extends beyond their failure to interpret the nature of the chant adequately to include their inability to control its noisy reception within the courtroom: “In vain the [British-appointed] Magistrate threatened and expelled. Until the magic exhausted itself, he was powerless” (225). Caught up in the word-power of the chant, the crowd is able to find an inspiring meaning in their collective performance that the British can neither fathom nor stop.

Although this chant is a crude, evanescent example of oral performance, it has a lingering effect on the people of the town: “The death [of Mrs. Moore] took subtler and more lasting shapes in Chandrapore” (256). A legend arises about an Englishman who had killed his mother for attempting to save an Indian’s life. Also, “At one period two distinct tombs containing Esmiss Esmoor’s remains were reported. . . . Mr. McBryde visited them both and saw signs of the beginning of a cult—earthenware saucers and so on” (256-57). As the narrator observes, in the history of British India it has not been unusual for deceased Britons to become minor deities—“not a whole god, perhaps, but part of one, adding an epithet or gesture to what already existed, just as the gods contribute to the great gods,

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<sup>18</sup> On the ephebophilic associations of the *ghazal*, see Rahman 1988. On Forster’s vision of a queer alternative to empire, see Bakshi 1994, Bredbeck 1997, Malik 1997, Suleri 1992:132-48, and Touval 1997.

and they to the philosophic Brahm” (257). Here, the narrator downplays the historical significance of Mrs. Moore’s deification by stressing its mythological overtones. Elsewhere, however, the text emphasizes the historical resonances of the phenomenon, and the chant that marks its origin, by linking them to a series of events that reflects an incipient nationalist movement within Chandrapore. Before the trial, “a new spirit seemed abroad, a rearrangement, which no one in the stern little band of whites could explain” (214). Both elites (a group of Muslim women who refuse to eat until Aziz is released) and subalterns (the lowly sweepers of the latrines, who go on strike) are part of this “new spirit.” After the trial, the insurgent spirit spreads: the native police strike, the Nawab Bahadur gives up his British-conferred title, and Aziz, embittered by the injustice with which the Anglo-Indian authorities have treated him, departs British India to live in the Native State of Mau.

The narrator admonishes us not to exaggerate the importance of this new “rearrangement”: the incident of the Marabar caves “did not break up a continent or even dislocate a district” (237). However, the details of the novel’s depiction of Indian protest—especially the *hartals*, or work stoppages—closely parallel those associated with Gandhi’s Non-cooperation Movement of the early 1920s, of which Forster was able to catch a glimpse when he was in India. In its mixture of spontaneity and provisional organization, of the carnivalesque and the purposeful, the anti-colonial activity of the fictional Chandrapore mirrors that of many towns and villages of India during this time, as scholars of the Subaltern Studies group have documented.<sup>19</sup> In its reliance upon the oral, particularly as a part of religious practice, the insurgency in Chandrapore replicates the wave of unrest that accompanied Gandhi’s emergence as leader of the Indian nationalist movement. The fictional chant to Esmis Esmoor is *mutatis mutandis* an aesthetic and political correlative of the hymns to a divinized Gandhi sung by Indian protestors in the 1920s.<sup>20</sup> Despite its deflating irony, Forster’s novel renders sensitively the integral function of orality in the political protest that arose among both elite and subaltern townspeople in early twentieth-century India.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> On subaltern militancy in Indian villages during Gandhi’s Non-cooperation Movement, see Amin 1984, Guha 1997:122-31, Pandey 1982, and Sarkar 1984.

<sup>20</sup> On the singing of hymns to Gandhi at this time, see Amin 1984:16.

<sup>21</sup> I am not interested here in analyzing the relevance of Forster’s novel to disputes among historians on the question of subaltern agency in modern Indian history. Nationalist histories tend to ignore the role of subaltern agents in the rise of Indian

In the third and final instance of oral performance, Godbole leads the celebrants at Gokul Ashtami in a song of devotion to Tukaram, the great seventeenth-century *bhakti* poet whose *abhangs* and *kirtans* to Krishna remain immensely popular today not only in his native Maharashtra but throughout India.<sup>22</sup> The devotees sing (283):

“Tukaram, Tukaram,  
Thou art my father and mother and everybody.  
Tukaram, Tukaram,  
Thou are my father and mother and everybody. . . .”

Two other outbursts of song—a repetition of this apostrophe to Tukaram and a snatch of song to Krishna—punctuate the narrative of Part III, reminding us of the centrality of oral performance in the depiction of the temple rituals at Mau. Non-Hindus in the novel can make little sense of these songs. We have already seen the Western narrator’s puzzlement at a ceremony that to him lacks any recognizable form. Even Aziz, a Muslim, fails to comprehend the proceedings. But the word-power of the hymns communicates itself to the temple worshipers, all of whom share in the dissolution of personal boundaries that the song to Tukaram invites. When they behold the image of Krishna, “a most beautiful and radiant expression came into their faces, a beauty in which there was nothing personal, for it caused them all to resemble one another during the moment of indwelling. . . .” (284). For them no gaps of interpretive uncertainty impede their understanding, and within the performance arena of the temple, the enabling tradition of *bhakti* comes to life.

The inclusive spirit of Tukaram, a shudra poet who sang the virtues of a divine love beyond caste, pervades the festival. The statue of Krishna cannot emerge from the temple until the band of untouchable sweepers, “the spot of filth without which the spirit cannot cohere,” plays its tune (305). Even those outside the caste system, the British *mlecchas* (or foreigners)

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nationalism. Subaltern histories emphasize that role but note its repeated appropriation by elite political organizations. We could hardly expect Forster’s novel to advert directly to these opposing historiographical traditions; he was a fiction writer of the Modernist period, not a historian of today. However, it is worth noting that, in the interplay between high and low political forces during and after Aziz’s trial, *A Passage to India* offers a broad depiction of political events, one that points to that “rounded history” of which C. A. Bayly writes (2000:121), a history that would study the potential convergences of rival elite and subaltern historiographies.

<sup>22</sup> On the popularity of Tukaram, see Jordens 1975:269. On the life and faith of the singer-saint, see Ranade 1994.

unwittingly participate in the festival. In his ecstatic vision of “Completeness,” Godbole seeks to embrace Mrs. Moore in addition to the “stone” of the Marabar caves (286). The climax of the festival (if there is one) incorporates another set of non-Hindus. The boat carrying Aziz and Ralph (Mrs. Moore’s son) collides with both the floating tray bearing the toy village of Gokul and the boat carrying Fielding and his wife Stella. The boats and tray capsize, and in the waters that unite gods, Indians, and Britons, “the oars, the sacred tray, the letters of Ronny and Adela, br[eak] loose and [float] confusedly” (315). The drowning of the letters is emblematic of the feeble power of the literate: “Books written afterwards” speak of the success of the festival, but “How can it be expressed in anything but itself?” (288). In this concluding section of the novel, we exist not in the realm of the literate, which is powerless to capture the experience of Gokul Ashtami on the grid of its clearly demarcated categories. We exist instead inside the world of the oral, the warm, communal, interactive, participatory arena defined by the devotees’ songs to Tukaram and Krishna, in which all opposed terms—divine and human, elite and subaltern, and British and Indian—for a moment melt into each another.<sup>23</sup>

It is hard to attach any overt political meaning to the oral performance in the temple at Mau. It occurs in a Princely State outside the direct governance of the British Raj and bears no discernible relation to the anti-colonial protests beginning to ripple through British India. The festival’s rendering seems to support the view that the *bhakti* tradition works to divert social and political aspirations into harmless religious forms rather than to channel them toward protest and reform. The sweepers will be no better off and Indians no closer to freedom after the festival. However, given the larger context of the novel, which shows the increasing politicization of the Chandrapore community as part of a proto-nationalist movement, we would be remiss in not looking at the depiction of Gokul Ashtami for signs of political change. Here we must look at political agency broadly, focusing not just on the historical period in which the novel is set but on the future that events of this period seek to presage. Shortly after the festival, Aziz, speaking to Fielding, declares that any friendship between them must await independence. The ending does not foreclose the possibility of amity, as some critics think.<sup>24</sup> Instead, invoking once again the device of expanding perspectives, it looks beyond the present to the future. As the “hundred

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<sup>23</sup> On the power of the oral to erode binary oppositions, see Goody 1977:105-6 and Ong 1982:164-65.

<sup>24</sup> See Said 1978:244.

voices” of India cry, “No, not yet,” and “No, not there” (322), the narrative anticipates a day when, Britain and India having become political equals, friendship will be possible. For Forster, whose political views were often couched in social terms, the future of Indian independence is envisioned here as a utopian fraternity beyond race and nation, a fraternity embodied most clearly in Aziz’s poem to “internationality” and “bhakti” (293). To the extent that Gokul Ashtami dissolves the boundary between Briton and Indian, it participates in this vision of future international love. The lyric to Tukaram, with its allusions to family union across caste lines, functions as an important component of this at once social, religious, and political dream of equality and mutuality.

### Conclusion

May we say, then, that in *A Passage to India* the subaltern *can* speak? Some readers might object that Godbole, who figures in two of the three oral performances I cite, cannot be considered a subaltern. However, as Guha (2000:7) reminds us, the subaltern is not a monolithic but a variable and differential category, and relative to the Anglo-Indian elites who rule, Godbole can indeed be considered a subaltern. Spivak’s thoroughly marginalized *sati* is only the most subordinate of subalterns on a spectrum that conceivably includes a brahmin teacher like Godbole. Other readers might object that, even if we consider Godbole a subaltern, he cannot really be said to speak in his own voice. If one is persuaded by Spivak, the voice of the subaltern is always already appropriated by a Western discourse that only seems to enunciate it in its “pure” tones. However, here I side with Parry in finding in Spivak too grand a view of the self-consolidating Western Subject and too limited a view of subaltern vocality. Europe is neither as homogenized in its own aspect nor as homogenizing of Asian heterogeneity as Spivak claims. The hundred voices of India are, I would argue, heterogeneous and resistant to the Western discourses that seek to represent them. Whenever Indians sing or chant in the novel, they disrupt not only Western aesthetic and epistemological norms but also Western means of social and political control. By foiling any attempt at appropriation, these songs and chants constitute oral phenomena that stand within their own traditions and pronounce themselves in their own terms. Indeed, they compose a subaltern counter-discourse in Parry’s sense of the term, a counter-discourse embodied in the “sacred songs” she mentions as

one potential source of colonial subversion.<sup>25</sup> Forster's narrative facilitates the transmission of these counter-songs. In its quiet awareness of the limitations of its own writing—an awareness it conveys through its continual failure to “take hold” of India—it opens itself up to moments of self-effacing ventriloquism, moments in which a native counterpoint announces itself with barely a trace of authorial mediation. These contrapuntal voices “sing” most emphatically in those instances of spiritual upwelling that the narrative finds itself least able to convey or define.

It is possible to deny a strong political significance to these counter-songs, particularly as articulated by the oral performances I have studied. In support of this view, one could argue that the oral tradition that enables these performances is inherently conservative and implicitly resistant to political change. However, with increasing attention to the diachronic features of oral performance, scholars within oral studies have been led to stress the power of this tradition to embody creative, dynamic change, whether on the part of individuals in a lineage of performers or on the part of entire oral communities in history.<sup>26</sup> In both cases, changes in the tradition can bear political overtones.<sup>27</sup> For example, in the chant of Mrs. Moore's name at

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<sup>25</sup> In arguing for the potency of the subaltern in *A Passage to India*, I disagree sharply with Barbara Harlow, who has made precisely the opposite argument about subalterns in the novel. On the power of Indian subaltern song, see the essays collected in Raheja 1997b. In her introductory remarks about the power of resistance in Indian women's song, Raheja implicitly concurs with Parry (and dissents from Spivak): “The idea of resistance has been an enticing one to anthropologists and folklorists: it provided us with one kind of language with which to think about the diversity of narrative traditions within a folklore community; it allowed us to think about relations of power and challenges posed to them in ‘traditional’ expressive forms; [and] it allowed us to begin to counter the colonial and postcolonial representations of the silence and the passivity of Indian women” (1997a:6).

<sup>26</sup> On the fluid, dynamic quality of oral traditions, see Amodio 2000:193-94, 205; Finnegan 1992:51; Foley 1985:59; and Foley 1995:xii; 46, n. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Recently, oral studies has paid increasing attention to the political contexts and implications of oral art. In her assessment of current trends influencing anthropological research into oral traditions, Ruth Finnegan sees “an interest in the potentially political, contested, or contingent nature of much that had in the past been regarded as fixed and essentially definable as verbally-transcribed texts” (1992:52). In contrasting traditional, colonial and recent, postcolonial studies of Indian folklore, Gloria Goodwin Raheja notes of current scholars in the field: “We began to see then that we could not understand oral traditions without grasping the power relationships that informed the lives of the tellers and singers, and that songs and stories might either uphold or challenge the ideologies that sustained those relations of power. We could no longer accept the decontextualizing



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