In Pursuit of Liberation: Eastern Thought as a Modernist Challenge to Patriarchy and Empire in
Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, and Zeenuth Futehally

by
Jacob Hebda

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in
The Department of English

State University of New York
New Paltz, New York 12561

May 2017
In Pursuit of Liberation: Eastern Thought as a Modernist Challenge to Patriarchy and Empire in Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, and Zeenuth Futehally

Jacob Hebda
State University of New York at New Paltz

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

Stella Deen, Thesis Advisor
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

Thomas Olsen, Thesis Committee Member
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

Approved on: May 21, 2017

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in English at the State University of New York at New Paltz
Recently, scholars have begun to revisit the assumption that since Modernists rejected "traditional forms of established authority," they also rejected religion in its entirety (A.C. Smith and Cuervas 1). This "exploration of the religious aspect of Modernism" takes different path for every Modernist writer, as each author "engages with religious forms in unorthodox ways, returns to old forms determined to 'make it new,' and seeks to transcend the ordinary and look for something spiritual in the world" (A.C. Smith and Cuervas 1). As Modernist writers, Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, and Zeenuth Futhally remain no exception to this broader Modernist interest in revisiting religion, although their openness to concepts from other religious traditions suggest that a flexible term like spirituality proves more accurate for understanding these authors and their writing. Each of these writers approaches spirituality and Modernist literature through their individual circumstances and personal experiences, including the author's ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and other factors that constitute the writer's identity. In spite of their varied backgrounds, Woolf, Forster, and Futhally all address spirituality by acknowledging the complex intersections between religion, culture, and literature during their times, leading them to craft a Modernist fiction informed by an often mystical understanding of certain Eastern philosophies, especially Advaita Vedānta, Sufism, and Buddhist Modernism, in an effort to reimagine the sacred as means of overcoming imperial and patriarchal structures of power.

Before proceeding, a word on Eastern philosophy and mysticism remains in order. Of course, the philosophical traditions of the East prove wide-ranging and diverse, encompassing the thought of numerous societies that developed over a span of thousands of years. This project concentrates upon only a small sliver of these traditions, largely originating from or associated with South Asia and the Middle East. One of the most important philosophical traditions discussed within this study is Advaita Vedānta, or nondualist Hinduism, articulated in large part
by the influential Indian thinker Śaṅkara (Deutsch and Dalvi 161). Śaṅkara “insists upon nirguna Brahman” or a blissful, divine Reality without attributes and “the absolute identity of man with this distinction-less Reality” (Deutsch and Dalvi 162). Advaita Vedānta’s impulse toward the unity of the individual soul or Ātman with the divine Brahman bears similarities with Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism in the West, and Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw note that there are “parallels and possible influence between Sufism and...the lore of Hinduism and Buddhism” (409). The Sufi state of fana, the “complete passing away of the separate individual self into God,” proves the best example of the shared affinity for unity with the divine present in both Advaita Vedānta and Sufism (Ellwood and McGraw 411). Buddhist Modernism, a Protestant missionary appropriation of Buddhist texts later wielded by South Asians as a means of resisting colonial power, appears alongside Sufism in Futehally’s novel Zohra in a related capacity, bridging the gap between the individual and the greater whole both spiritually and politically (Lecourt 673).

The commonalities between Advaita Vedānta, Sufism, and Buddhist Modernism reveal the general conception of mysticism that guides this interdisciplinary literary study. Although each writer’s approaches to spiritual experience differ, all three Modernists exhibit a tendency toward the expression of a mystical experience that defies easy rational explanation and involves a revelation of wholeness or totality in the face of diversity. The universalist impetus often attributed to Modernist writers likely lends to the interest found in Woolf, Forster, and Futehally regarding this variation of mystical experience and the Eastern traditions that expound it.

Any examination of the role played by Indian and Muslim thought in writing of Woolf, Forster, and Futehally must also include an evaluation of these writers and their work from a postcolonial perspective. A wider geopolitical framework like that which Susan Stanford
Friedman develops to chart the nuances of Woolf’s writing and her context underlies the research presented here on Woolf, and the implications of Friedman’s model extend to this project’s treatment of Forster and Futehally as well (119). After all, a simple condemnation of British subjects like Woolf and Forster for their complicity in the vast imperial system that dominated their personal lives and the production of their fiction remains unable to acknowledge the ways in which these authors infuse Modernist literature with Eastern thought as a means of challenging the imperial paradigm of their time, even if critics find that their work falls short of this goal. Additionally, Futehally’s position as an Indian Muslim supporter of an emancipated, unified India in which Hindus and Muslims coexist peaceably brings a native voice to this project from the marginalized Muslim community of predominantly Hindu India, presenting an even deeper level of complexity that cannot be adequately accounted for in binary postcolonial “models of center/periphery and subject/other” (Friedman 119). As such, this study endeavors to trace the methods by which these authors incorporate elements of the mystical traditions of India and Islam that emphasize an overarching spiritual unity amid the diversity of phenomenal existence in order to reach a qualified understanding of Woolf, Forster, and Futehally’s cultural production in relation to their historical and sociocultural contexts.

Moreover, each of these Modernist authors envisions the oppression of empire differently based on their respective backgrounds. For instance, Futehally’s identity as an Indian Muslim allows her to experience the impact of colonialism on Indian cultural heritage and national identity firsthand, and this leads her to personally identify with the Indian struggle for political independence in ways that neither Woolf nor Forster, as members of an upper-class British intellectual elite, could. As subjects of the British Empire, Woolf and Forster mount their critiques of imperialism from within the heart of empire itself, using Modernist fiction imbued
with elements of Eastern thought as a tool to reinvent a culture of empire into one more inclusive toward colonized peoples. These writers, raised and living within the milieu of a privileged English society, face the challenge of overcoming socialized prejudices against indigenous cultures as they attempt to articulate Eastern ideas through Modernist literature, and their specific approaches to writing also limit the extent of their challenges to empire. For these reasons, the postcolonial critiques advanced in this essay fall most heavily upon the work of Woolf and Forster. Patrick McGee, Susan Stanford Friedman, and a number of other postcolonial critics of Woolf shape the conclusions made regarding Woolf in this study, while the contentious postcolonial debate surrounding Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* presented here remains grounded in the commentaries of Edward Said and Hunt Hawkins.

The awareness of empire present within this analysis also remains tied to patriarchy, in its manifestations among both the colonized peoples and the colonizers themselves. Woolf, Forster, and Futehally all share an investment in breaking down patriarchal constructs through the incorporation of Eastern ideas into their writing, but each author attacks patriarchy from a different vantage point. Woolf and Futehally, two women living in societies that privilege men, hold a commitment to challenging what they see as ideologies of power that reduce their opportunities for personal development and individual achievement, especially when it comes to receiving a quality education and pursuing their aspirations as writers. Woolf contends with English notions of gender difference rooted in both Western philosophy and Christian religious thought throughout her work and is determined to reach beyond these constraints by envisioning a spirituality that bears parallels with the philosophy of Śaṅkara. Futehally confronts the arranged marriages and purdah practiced by Muslim India in her novel *Zohra* primarily through Sufism and Buddhist Modernism. Furthermore, Futehally remains deeply affected by the
inability of an Indian Muslim woman to choose her own husband, and she uses Islamic thought and Buddhist Modernism to challenge traditional customs she believes to be incongruent with Islamic teachings and a threat to the rights of Indian citizens.

Woolf and Forster too share this concern with the freedom to find a partner, except they highlight the possibilities of sexualities outside the heteronormative dictates of patriarchy and also tend toward a spirituality of the flesh to counter the value placed on celibacy in Christianity. Since Eastern traditions like those of India and Islam lie outside the generally negative attitudes toward sexuality found in Christianity, they offer Woolf and Forster possibilities for new approaches to the relationship between spiritual beliefs and sexual desire. Forster in particular joins the critique of patriarchy from his position as a marginalized homosexual man, which permits him to empathize with women and others that suffer from similar social disadvantages and strive to champion the interests of these individuals through the incorporation of Indian and Islamic philosophy into his fiction.

If previous scholarship on Woolf serves as an indication, critics have not given much serious treatment to the possibility of Eastern thought as an important influence on the Modernist search for religious meaning, let alone the capacity that Indian and Islamic traditions have for envisioning a spirituality that resists imperial and patriarchal domination. Most scholars attend to strands of Western theology in Woolf’s mysticism, ranging from Kathy Heininge’s treatment of Quaker mysticism in Woolf’s spirituality to Stephanie Paulsell’s comparative analysis of writing and mysticism in Woolf and Marguerite d’Oingt, “a Carthusian prioress and mystic of the late thirteenth century” (Heininge 20; Paulsell 250). The work of Jane Marcus also addresses the relationship between Woolf’s spirituality and Quaker mysticism, albeit reluctantly, and her infamous essay “Britannia Rules The Waves” approaches, but fails to deliver a sophisticated
examination of the presence of Indian thought in Woolf's masterpiece novel (Paulsell 249). Even though Marcus quotes a Modernist figure as eminent as W.B. Yeats, who understood *The Waves* as akin to other experimental Modernist literature in its expression of "a philosophy like that of the Samkara school of ancient India," she delves no further into the topic than this brief aside (Yeats qtd. in Marcus 156). Julie Kane examines Hindu thought in Woolf's mysticism, but she does this through a study of the teachings of the Theosophical society, which included occult ideas as well as Hindu ones, though the latter remained subject to orientalist tendencies within the society (329). Although she provides many strong insights and comes closer than any other critic to dedicating an entire essay to Indian thought in Woolf, Kane's work suffers from a variety of weaknesses to be explored in further detail in the discussion of Woolf and Śaṅkara.
The Nondifference of Virginia Woolf and Śaṅkara: Woolfian Parallels with Advaita Vedānta

Virginia Woolf remains a controversial figure for postcolonial critics of her work, displaying a marked anti-imperial sentiment while enjoying the benefits of empire. This mixed stance has sparked intense debate, beginning with Jane Marcus’s “Britannia Rules The Waves” and Patrick McGee’s response, paving the way for critics like Susan Stanford Friedman to acknowledge the complexities within the multivalent cultural sphere of twentieth century Britain and the Bloomsbury community occupied by Woolf (McVicker 223). Marcus quotes W.B. Yeats’s observation that The Waves “suggest[s] a philosophy like that of the Samkara school of ancient India,” and even McGee admits that “Marcus’s most productive observation for understanding Woolf’s complex representation” of European culture in The Waves “lies in...Indian philosophy” (Yeats qtd. in Marcus 156; McGee 643). Indeed, undercurrents of Hindu thought inform not only The Waves (1931), but much of Woolf’s work, fictional or polemical writing, and it bears a striking resemblance to the philosophy of Śaṅkara, regarded by “Westerners as well as Indians...to be one of the greatest philosophers” and acknowledged as the founder of Advaita Vedānta, the school of nondualist Hinduism (Deutsch and Dalvi 161). Amid the conflicted attitudes toward Eastern thought in the West at the time, Woolf likely had contact with Śaṅkara at least indirectly, contributing to her critique of science and religion. However, Woolf also echoes Śaṅkara in her exploration of identity, further suggesting an alignment between Woolf’s personal beliefs and Śaṅkara’s philosophical views that can be traced not only to the cultural context of a fading empire, but also the mystical temperament of Woolf herself.

Prior to entering any discussion about Woolf’s similarities with Śaṅkara, it proves beneficial to identify Woolf’s particular form of mysticism. Stephanie Paulsell addresses the question of defining a nebulous concept like mysticism, situating Woolf in relation to William
James’s “four qualities of mystical experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity,” while narrowing this broad understanding of Woolf’s mysticism by including Woolf under R.C. Zaehner’s category of “all-in-one-ism” to differentiate her from Christian and pantheistic mysticism which involves a deity (251-252). She revises these attempts at spiritual taxonomies by describing Woolf in relation to the tradition of medieval mystic women writers, identifying their shared form of mysticism as *scriptio divina*, which is defined as “a moment of convergence in the midst of diversity, a moment which constitutes their response to mystical experience” (252). Julie Kane adds to this understanding of mysticism in Woolf by associating it with a sustained engagement with spiritual themes throughout her oeuvre, including such contemporary early twentieth century spiritual concepts as reincarnation and the universal mind, which betray a distinct Indian influence (Kane 328). Indeed, many Woolf scholars have noticed the spiritual dimension latent within Woolf’s writing, yet few aside from Kane point to the possibility of Eastern thought, especially Hinduism, coloring Woolf’s beliefs and subsequently her fiction.

With this understating of Woolf’s mysticism as an effort to achieve unity amid diversity, it now becomes possible to link Woolf’s spirituality with Śaṅkara’s philosophy. Both Paulsell and Kane’s perspectives align with the nondualist premise of Advaita Vedānta in that they encompass a merger of the manifold into unity, but when considering the philosophy of Śaṅkara in particular and the presence of his thought in Woolf’s work, one must add another dimension to the definition of Woolf’s mystic temperament, characterizing her mystic disposition as a reaching beyond the knowledge offered by ritual and the senses in an effort to achieve this spiritual union. Śaṅkara’s ideas, which touch upon these and other spiritual notions, remain yet
another mystic conception Woolf entertains, evaluates, and modifies as she searches for a feminist and posthumanist alternative to a patriarchal, anthropocentric Western worldview.

Any similarities between Virginia Woolf and Šāṅkara presented within the scope of this project also remain tangent upon the historical circumstances of Woolf’s life and writing, and an exploration of the historical context serves to inform how Woolf must have come into contact with Šāṅkara’s ideas. Although she witnessed the decline of the British Empire throughout most of her lifetime, Woolf inhabited an England reaping the fruits of the colonial enterprise, both materially and intellectually. As Edward Said describes it, the Orientalism of Woolf’s time derived “a created body of theory and practice in which...there has been a considerable material investment,” tying the study of Eastern cultures to economic exploitation (1870). One manifestation of this dynamic that reaches England early in Woolf’s lifetime is the Theosophical Society, an organization that seeks to assuage “the spiritual void left in the wake of Darwinism” (Kane 329). Borrowing from Hindu beliefs and practices, the Theosophical Society spread to India in a classic Orientalist strategy to speak for the Other, “introducing many westernized Indian intellectuals to the concepts of their ‘native’ philosophy” (Kane 329). Kane notes that Annie Besant, leader of the Theosophical Society, worked with Leonard Woolf on the project of Indian independence, and Kane also identifies Theosophical and Hindu allusions alongside some of Marcus’s stronger readings of Virginia Woolf (329, 340). Through the voice of Jinny in The Waves, Woolf herself alludes to Besant’s grooming of Krishnamurti as the Theosophical Messiah, referring to him as “a coffee-colored youth” and thus implicitly linking the colonial commodity of coffee with the Orientalist work of the Theosophical Society, illustrating Besant and Woolf’s embeddedness in the culture of imperialism, though Woolf at least seems aware of its material implications (127).
Less problematic than the Theosophical Society, Hinduism entered the Western world late in the nineteenth century through the lectures of Swami Vivekanda, a moment when a Hindu enjoyed an opportunity to speak for his own faith at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (Ellwood and McGraw 114). Vivekanda brought Advaita Vedānta with him, and although his vision of the school was “based on the teachings of the Indian saint Ramakrishna,” the ideas of Śaṅkara followed, especially in light of the philosopher’s foundational contribution to Hindu thought (114). Eliot Deutsch and Rohit Dalvi confirm the influence of Śaṅkara’s philosophy, describing it as “revolutionary in Vedānta” due to its unprecedented view of Brahman as Reality itself and its focus upon saṁhyāsā, or “total renunciation” (162, 161) This new vision of Hindu thought became nothing short of the “dominant philosophical system in the whole of India,” and translations of Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the Vedas appeared in English translation by George Thibaut as early as 1890 (162; 403). Furthermore, by the early twentieth century the Vedānta society had spread beyond the United States, ostensibly including the United Kingdom, propelled by a Western interest in Eastern thought contemporary with what Patricia Laurence calls “an international canvas of modernism” (Ellwood and McGraw 114; 389).

This contact with religions from outside Europe also produced a reactionary response, as many Europeans viewed the faiths of other peoples as a threat to Christianity, as well as to the civilizing mission of empire, and they associated the “defense of the Cross” with resistance to other faiths (Laurence 161). Unfortunately, this prejudice stood unquestioned within European intellectual circles, including much of the Bloomsbury group, and even in transnational literary figures like T.S. Eliot pursued “ancient Indian philosophy at Harvard” (Kane 331). For instance, McGee usefully points out that Western study of Indian philosophy “hardly constitute[d] a critical challenge to imperialist ideology,” and he even notes that an imperialist urge to
“assimilate[e] Eastern thought” in a “vague, imprecise manner” became a common trend in modernist art (632). In spite of their aspiration to “collapse the struggle between East (China) and West (England, America) by adopting the imagery of a third nation (India),” the Beijing-based Crescent Moon group, which possessed connections with the Bloomsbury circle in England, failed to break the preconceptions held by many in Bloomsbury toward India (Laurence 103; 2-3; 181). Aside from E.M. Forster, and to some degree Leonard Woolf, who “held that the ancient civilizations of India...differed from but were not necessarily inferior to those of the West,” many in the Bloomsbury circle subscribed to Orientalist biases (Wilson 105). However, even Leonard Woolf, “champion of Indian political independence,” betrayed disdain toward Indian mysticism in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet whose work inspired the name of the Crescent Moon group (Kane 330; Laurence 103). When reviewing a book on Tagore’s poetry, Leonard Woolf admits “I have never been able to see anything in Tagore’s poetry...which does not seem to me second-rate and tiresome” (L. Woolf qtd. in Kane 330-331).

Virginia Woolf diverged from her husband’s attitude toward Indian culture as she found herself more deeply engaged with Indian experience and thought, but she too remained influenced by the negative attitudes held toward India at the time. According to Kane, the Woolfs differed temperamentally, as “Leonard Woolf...was a skeptic,” whereas Virginia Woolf harbored a mystical temperament associated with the merger of the manifold into the whole, a predisposition that made possible their rift regarding Indian culture (341). Virginia Woolf was exposed to Indian philosophy through its presence in people around her, suggesting glimpses of an alternative to Leonard Woolf’s skepticism (Kane 341). For instance, her “cousin Dorothea Stephen went off to India and penned a book entitled Studies In Early Indian Thought,” which elicited a vehement response from Virginia Woolf for its efforts to win Christian converts, yet
she also reacted with Leonard Woolf’s “resistance…to the ‘fallacies of Buddha’” (Kane 331; Seshagiri 62; V. Woolf qtd. in Kane 331).

Participation in the Hogarth Press brought Virginia Woolf into further contact with alternative modes of thought by restructuring “the history of great men to include international, colonial, and female outsiders,” though Ursula McTaggert correctly argues that it also reinforced her sense of English identity (71). As part of its opposition to British imperialism, the Hogarth Press published works relating to Indian politics, such as D. Graham Pole’s *India in Transition* (1932), and remained concerned with publishing Indian authors as well, with K.M. Panikkar’s *Caste and Democracy* (1933) as a prime example of this effort to include native voices at the Hogarth Press (Woolmer 106, 115). Both of these texts strongly reflect Leonard Woolf’s preoccupation with Indian politics, yet they also provide glimpses into the attitudes espoused by the Hogarth Press regarding India that helped to shape Virginia Woolf’s approach to India in her work, especially since both of these books were published in the wake of *The Waves*. Although Woolf does not appear to have mentioned Pole in her diary or her letters, that does not mean she was not influenced indirectly by his problematic liberal attitude toward India. Furthermore, Woolf does record a meeting with Panikkar, describing him in a way that suggests her perhaps implicit imperial, racial bias.

In his introduction to *India in Transition*, Pole laments the difficulties of getting “the British public to take any interest whatever in India,” and he expresses his intent to present the recent history of India to his English reader by making a well-intentioned effort “to try to see events as they present themselves to Indians” (xii). The cultural challenges Pole outlines may have in part affected Woolf’s decision to reference India obliquely in her writing, and his attempt at sympathy toward Indians may have been shared by Woolf. Pole’s good will, however sincere,
remains deeply riddled with a Western vision that impedes his stated aim. He liberally quotes from Greek philosophy or the Bible to argue for a more equitable treatment of Indians by the British government so as to avoid the revolutions that occurred in America and Ireland (371). However, Pole uses European thought most conspicuously at the conclusion of his book, ending with a quotation from Max Muller, whom Pole describes as "that profound student of Eastern lore and lover of India" (377). This excerpt from Muller showcases a need for Indian thought to serve as a "corrective" for the overemphasis on Greek, Roman, and Hebrew thought in the West, and Muller waxes mystical in his insistence that Indian thought can "make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal...a transfigured and eternal life" (qtd. in Pole 377). Although Pole acknowledges the limitations of European thought by deciding to include this quotation from Muller, the mystical, totalizing language of Muller's passage showcases the imperial belief that Indian thought is needed to round out and make more complete the knowledge "of even those who have studied Plato and Kant" rather than exist as a viable tradition in its own right (qtd. in Pole 377). With this nuanced imperial ideology infiltrating the Hogarth Press, Woolf could easily have been caught up in these attitudes and, consciously or otherwise, reproduce them within her writing.

K.M. Panikkar offers a native voice on the subject of Indian politics in Caste and Democracy (1933), one which echoes of Leonard Woolf's opposition to religion. Panikkar understands democracy as "the conception of society in which men are equal and responsible for their own government," and he asserts that "republican and democratic traditions were strong" in India's past (26). However, these indigenous democratic impulses, which Panikkar links to the "essentially democratic" ideals of Buddhism, remain stifled throughout Indian history by the political and social stranglehold of the Brahmins, the religious and intellectual elite (20).
Panikkar cites other reformers that, like Buddhism, challenged the Brahmins and failed, including Ramanuja, Śaṅkara's chief philosophical opponent (36). Śaṅkara’s thought itself constituted “a sharp contrast to the more conservative Brahminism” of his time, and although Panikkar does not place him among his defeated democratic reformers, Śaṅkara can easily be counted among them (Deutsch and Dalvi 162). Panikkar encapsulates his opposition to what he sees as the religious basis of the caste system when he writes: “never were indeed the religious instincts of man so shamelessly prostituted, nor religion itself made to deserve more clearly the Marxian indictment of being and opiate of the people” (21). In spite of his rejection of religion, Panikkar maintains that “a religious revolution of some magnitude” is necessary to overcome ingrained notions of karma that underlie the caste system and replace them with “the principle of social equality” (39).

Woolf, for her part, does not seem to have had a favorable impression of Panikkar, one that raises the possibility that she participated in the sinister, racialized view of Indians that permeated British society in her day, even as she worked to support controversial publications on India through the Hogarth Press. Two years after the publication of Caste and Democracy, Woolf records a “rather difficult” encounter with Panikkar and E.M. Forster in her diary (4:321). She describes Panikkar as “so bubbling, always talking with a smile, swart & greased, like some animal with a thick pelt & very white teeth” (Diary 4:321). This passage evokes what Vicki Tromanhauser calls “the animalized being” that Bernard identifies within himself and is repelled by in the final soliloquy of The Waves, but Woolf’s diary entry on Panikkar lacks any semblance of the “greener glow to green things” that offsets the negative characterization of Bernard’s inner beast (Tromanhauser 75; The Waves 215). In this manner, Panikkar is dehumanized in Woolf’s diary and turned into “some animal” complete with gleaming, “very white teeth” that brings her
description uncomfortably close to, if not an outright racist caricature. Of course, just because Woolf disliked Panikkar personally in the context of one particular occasion does not mean that she may not have agreed with some of the ideas he presents in Caste and Democracy or possessed a genuine interest learning about in Indian culture as Pole does, even if for reasons related to imperial hegemony. Nonetheless, this glimpse into Woolf’s racialized personal opinions casts a shadow upon Woolf’s efforts to challenge empire through the Hogarth Press, or even through her own writing.

Yet Anna Snaith documents a very different Virginia Woolf in the memoirs of Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand, a Bloomsbury intellectual involved with the Woolfs and the Hogarth Press, revealing not only the mystical tendencies Kane reads in Virginia Woolf, but also connecting them to Hinduism (103). This account offers a Virginia Woolf fascinated with the aspects of Indian culture that Leonard Woolf dismissed. Snaith casts Anand’s essay on Virginia Woolf as “anomalous...for his depiction of her interest in Hindu mysticism and his sense of her as an outsider to Bloomsbury, the latter accounting for the former,” yet the intimations of Hindu thought picked up by Kane, Marcus, and even McGee suggest this possibility (114). Anand empathizes with a Woolf he sees as “crazed by her loneliness in the midst of cynics like her husband,” mirroring Kane’s intuition that Woolf’s disposition toward mysticism was stifled by those around her, yet these pressures do not prevent Woolf from pursuing her interests (qtd. in Snaith 115, Kane 347). Snaith reports that “quickly the conversation turns to Hinduism, with Woolf asking Anand about the androgynous union of Shiva and Shakti,” which Woolf saw as confirming her “feeling that we are male-female-male, [or] perhaps more female than male” (Snaith 115; Anand qtd. in Snaith 115). If this depiction of Woolf does not highlight how her fascination with Hinduism and mysticism became submerged within her writing, Anand next
quotes her as saying: “I am writing a novel, Orlando, to suggest this [androgynous union]” (qtd. in Snaith 115). Woolf’s “desire to see beyond her own cultural [and gender-induced] boundaries” through Hindu mysticism and English literature, even if her writing proves mixed regarding imperialism, culminates in her asking Anand “to introduce her to a Yogi friend of his,” showing that she hopes to learn about Hinduism from Hindus rather than by turning to Orientalists (Snaith 115).

While the “mutually revelatory” episode Anand recounts does not reference Vedânta directly and must exist alongside contradictory accounts like Virginia Woolf’s diary entry on Panikkar, its suggestive portrait of Woolf’s enthusiasm for Hindu spirituality (even if channeled alongside an interest in androgyny), combined with the historical prevalence of this school of Hinduism in the West, make it probable that she encountered Vedânta at some point, as well as the philosophy of Śaṅkara that undergirds it (Snaith 115). Śaṅkara’s reputation among Westerners and Indians alike also suggests his presence behind any Hindu thought that Woolf had access to. Therefore, an overview of Śaṅkara’s philosophy becomes a valuable lens through which to read Woolf’s work, exposing the extent of these ideas as expressed within her writing.

Following Śaṅkara’s reasoning in the introduction to his Commentary on the Brahmasūtras, a work regarded as his finest, one can locate Śaṅkara’s critique of knowledge founded upon sense perception or religious ritual (Deutsch and Dalvi 194). At the heart of Śaṅkara’s argument lies the notion of superimposition (adhyāsa); that is, “how we wrongly attribute to one thing the qualities which belong to another thing” (Deutsch and Dalvi 196). Śaṅkara stresses that “the mutual superimposition of the Self,” or Ātman, with the Non-Self produces Nescience (avidyā), or ignorance (“Brahmasūtrabhāṣya” 197). To fully understand the generation of Nescience and its relation to empiricism and ritual, it remains important to note
that in Indian thought true knowledge is seen “as a gradual recovery” of all knowledge present at
the beginning of history (Deutsch and Dalvi 95, original emphasis). This knowledge proves
authorless, and, like the Hindu conception of revelation, “comes from the world” and “embodies
its laws” (Deutsch and Dalvi 3). Teachers passed on this learning orally across the generations,
because oral scriptures were viewed as superior to written manuscripts that decay over time
(Deutsch and Dalvi 95). Śaṅkara purports to have regained access to this knowledge through
oral transmission, as well as its presence in the world, and his philosophical project is to dispel
Nescience through a blend of reason and revelation.

The concept of Nescience opens out of Hindu epistemology as the central barrier to true
knowledge. By “superimposing particular conditions” upon the Self, Nescience is generated, and
these particular conditions collectively constitute the Non-Self (“Brahmasūtrabhbhaśya” 198). The
Non-Self can include “the erroneous notion” that the Self possesses or is indistinguishable from
the body, but it also encompasses conflating social expectations latent within the caste system
and the scriptures with the Self (“Brahmasūtrabhbhaśya” 197; 198). As Śaṅkara puts it, both
“perception… and the Vedic texts have for their object that which is dependent upon Nescience.”
and since neither of these means of attaining knowledge succeeds in recovering it, Śaṅkara
rejects them both (“Brahmasūtrabhbhaśya” 198). This position leads him to posit “the
relativity… of all empirical experience” (Deutsch and Dalvi 162). He also asserts that “the
knowledge of active religious duty has for its fruit transitory felicity,” and even though Śaṅkara
makes use of scriptural citations in his work, he establishes a firm distinction between passages
he believes to be relevant only to ritual and those with liberation (mokṣa) as their aim
(“Brahmasūtrabhbhaśya” 199; Deutsch and Dalvi 162).
For Śaṅkara, both sense-perception and caste-determined religious rites function as artificial social constructs. He writes that “the fiction of Nescience...originates entirely from speech,” and so these qualities attributed to the Non-Self arise from linguistic distinctions (“Brahmasūtrabhāṣya” 242). Śaṅkara also postulates that “Nescience may be the cause of inequality” brought about by differing mental states (“Brahmasūtrabhāṣya” 245). For this reason, Śaṅkara believes that “duality is the effect of nescience,” and the dualist position he rejects entails the “view that [Ātman] is different [from Brahman]” (“Upadeśasāhasrī” 177; 178). In other words, Śaṅkara articulates the nondualist affirmation that Ātman, the Self, is fundamentally no different than Brahman, the latter referring to the Hindu understanding of the divine as an impersonal “reservoir of being that never dies, is never exhausted, and is unrestricted in consciousness and bliss” (Smith 21). In this manner, Brahman proves “one with Ātman and as the Sole-Existent,” that is, Reality itself; this formulation remains the basic premise of Advaita Vedānta (Ellwood and McGraw 81). Nescience is extinguished through the pursuit of the highest knowledge, or what Śaṅkara calls “the enquiry into Brahman” (“Brahmasūtrabhāṣya” 199). When Nescience passes away, so does the need for empirical evidence and religious rituals, although these avenues remain “appearance[s] of Brahman and so [are] not unreal” (Ellwood and McGraw 81). Nonetheless, it remains important here to note that the realization of nondifference with Brahman does not imply the achievement of “literal omniscience” in the Judeo-Christian sense, but something more akin to “an insight that lays bare the point of everything” (Smith 24). Furthermore, unlike the Christian God that possesses a number of qualities, Śaṅkara understands Brahman to be “without qualities,” and he upholds “the absolute identity of man with this distinction-less Reality” (Deutsch and Dalvi 162).
If all beings prove not different from Brahman, then to limit the capacity for union with Reality to men alone stands contrary to Śaṅkara’s principles. With reincarnation for Hindus beginning with “the souls of the simplest forms of life” and progressing to the “exalted habitation” of the human body, it possesses a penchant for speciesist bias as well, though this belief also engenders an interconnectedness between life forms (Smith 63; 64). Śaṅkara goes beyond this doctrine, attaching it to Nescience through “the rituals...of the sacred thread,” and so concludes that “Ātman is not subject to transmigratory existence” (“Upadeśasahasrī” 178). By collapsing the hierarchy of reincarnation and by extension the caste system itself, union with Brahman theoretically remains the highest reality no matter what form the body takes, human or nonhuman, since Ātman and Brahman are not different. Through this erosion of difference between the Self and ultimate Reality, Śaṅkara and Vedānta set the philosophical stage for an extension of nondifference beyond Brahmin men, even if his philosophy ultimately fails in its critique of religious ritual by remaining “meaningful only to an intellectual-spiritual elite” (Deutsch and Dalvi 162).

In spite of his shortcomings, Śaṅkara holds much in common with what Kathy Heininge understands as Woolf’s “urge to align truth and mysticism, [and] to find such truth without the paradigm of authority” (21). This democratic impulse, as Panikkar would understand it, to recognize all peoples and all forms of life as one with impersonal, all-encompassing Reality emphasizes the very “connections that illuminate Woolf’s efforts to seek for greater meaning in life” (Heininge 20). Woolf certainly seems less willing to claim access to Reality as Śaṅkara does, likely hoping to avoid the pitfalls of authority that Śaṅkara became ensnared by. In a letter to Hugh Walpole, for example, Woolf writes: “who’s to decide what reality is?” (Letters 4:402).
However, these apparently diverging approaches to reality do not necessarily impede a study of the parallels between Woolf and Śaṅkara.

Heinige notes that Woolf participates in a modernist critique of the Christian conviction that “there is only one road to truth,” by viewing this solitary truth as “a truth of privilege” (20). The intuitive quality of Śaṅkara’s realization of nondifference with Brahman, in spite of his liberal emphasis on the highest knowledge, reveals a marked difference from the Christian visions of God’s omnipotence that Woolf surely associates with the patriarchal authority that Heinige and others have seen as stifling her search for spiritual meaning. Furthermore, Śaṅkara’s understanding of Brahman as beyond words also fits with Woolf’s penchant for an “open-ended spirituality without referencing particular faiths” astutely noted by Martin Brick (17). Brick believes this “oblique handling” of questions of religion and ultimate reality in Woolf’s writing serves to “encourage contemplation, and while not offering explicit answers, provide an opportunity for interaction, a venue for attempted re-integration of broken existence, and in that light, a greater present understanding” (18). Vedānta’s focus on nondifference with Brahman proves compatible with this modernist project of “re-integration,” and the quest for “understanding” through interaction fits with Śaṅkara’s overarching concern with knowledge rediscovered from teachers, specific passages of scripture, and from the world itself. For these reasons, Woolf likely saw Vedānta, and specifically the philosophy of Śaṅkara, as a viable spiritual alternative to traditional Christian dogma and the patriarchy it upholds. Similarly, Śaṅkara offers Woolf an Indian perspective that she could deploy to support her critique of imperialism, even if she enacts empire by appropriating Śaṅkara’s ideas without mentioning him in her work.
Whether or not Virginia Woolf read Śaṅkara, his stances on empiricism, ritual knowledge, and identity correlate closely with Woolf’s throughout her work, likely a result of her interest in Hinduism and her mystical temperament. Any connection between Woolf and Śaṅkara, it must be recalled, remains mediated through the British Empire and a longstanding prejudice by many within the Bloomsbury group toward Indian culture. Nonetheless, by taking Susan Stanford Friedman’s approach to Woolf and acknowledging the weaknesses of postcolonial “overreliance on models of center/periphery and subject/other,” one can better appreciate the ways that “the geopolitical axis of Woolf’s life, work, and reception is broader than the politics of imperialism” (119). Friedman’s efforts to account for the intercultural connections within Woolf’s work present a fruitful expansion of imperial and anti-imperial readings of her work (120). Illustrating “how the global is always embedded in the local,” Friedman introduces a valuable critical shift in Woolf studies that helps to situate Woolf geopolitically (120). With this nuanced perspective in mind, Woolf and Śaṅkara’s similar goals can be elucidated through the following examples from Woolf’s oeuvre without recourse to the dualisms imposed by certain elements of postcolonial theory, an activity Śaṅkara would view as an effect of Nescience. This approach serves to introduce the wide-ranging parallels between Woolf and Śaṅkara in regards to their common critique of empiricism and ritual action as products of ignorance, while also acknowledging the inevitable divergences between the two.

Evidence for Virginia Woolf’s critique of empiricism is scattered throughout her work, from her novels to her sustained argumentative pieces, and this suspicion of perception recalls that of Śaṅkara. In *To the Lighthouse*, where Woolf challenges the imperial empiricism of the male, patriarchal English subject, part of Woolf’s attack on these values is inspired by “her deepening interest in non-Western cultures,” however problematic this interest may be (Seshagiri
63). In this text, Woolf brings to bear many of Śaṅkara’s tools in her presentation of the
perception-based mental flight of Mr. Ramsey. For instance, Mr. Ramsey’s engagement with
knowledge is preceded by the sight of “his wife and son in the window,” which “fortified…his
effort to arrive at a perfectly clear understanding” (*Lighthouse* 36-37). Mr. Ramsey’s
epistemological endeavor emerges from the obligations he holds toward his family, and he is
reminded of them by his perception of their image in the window. Yet in this case his senses do
not pick up his family as they are; he sees a reflection and becomes trapped in the
superimposition of that image upon his family. Thus, Mr. Ramsey begins his search for
knowledge while already tangled in what Śaṅkara sees as the source of Nescience, dooming his
intellectual exploits.

Additionally, Indian thinkers view the mind as a sense organ, and Śaṅkara refers to this
“notion of the Ego” as an “internal organ” that can mutually interact with the Self, resulting in
Nescience (“Brahmasūtrabhāṣya” 198). Thus it remains unsurprising that Mr. Ramsey’s thought
process is not only inspired by perception, but Woolf describes it as such. When introducing his
alphabetical model of knowledge, the narrator describes his intellectual process as “the keyboard
of a piano,” using an auditory way of conceiving understanding, and the narrator even intimates
that the final letters are “scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmer red in the distance”
(*Lighthouse* 37). The limitations of empirical knowledge arise again through Woolf’s use of
sensory simile. When Mr. Ramsey tries to move past Q, “a shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a
lizard, …obscured the letter R” (*Lighthouse* 37). Here an animal sensory organ becomes not only
a manifestation of Mr. Ramsey’s superimposition of bodily traits upon the Self, but also indicates
his method’s failure in the pursuit of the highest knowledge. Amid Mr. Ramsey’s efforts, Woolf
inserts tropes about explorers, showing that Mr. Ramsey associates his epistemological approach
with the Western belief that new knowledge is discovered, not recovered as in Indian thought (*Lighthouse* 37-38). Yet Mr. Ramsey seems to agree with the Indian philosophers in that his alphabet of knowledge remains preexistent in the world, with only “one in a generation” finding Z, but his notion of the individual genius conforms to the elite English male (*Lighthouse* 37).

Lastly, Mr. Ramsey predicates his alphabetical model of empirical understanding upon linguistic referents, and so underscores Śaṅkara’s teaching that the appearance of difference proceeds from speech, as the letters of the alphabet represent distinctions between spoken sounds.

Woolf also levels her indictment of empiricism against the psychologists of her day, and her treatment of these “priest[s] of science” intersects with her attack on the ceremonialism of the Oxbridge elite and the Church of England, all while echoing Śaṅkara’s critique of ritualized knowledge (*Mrs. Dalloway* 94). Superimposition lies behind the cruelty of Sir William Bradshaw, a Harley Street nerve specialist who practices a “science which has to do with what…we know nothing about” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 99). Since his field remains in its infancy, Bradshaw hopes to extinguish the existential despair and the mystical tendencies of Septimus Warren Smith by conflating his patient’s experiences with Western social conventions, leading Bradshaw to declare that “health is a…divine proportion,” blending the sacred with the empirical, Aristotelian mean to reproduce the merger of Judeo-Christian ideas and classical thought that informs European culture (*Mrs. Dalloway* 99). Applying categorical reasoning to people based on preconceptions of proper behavior, Bradshaw’s perspective mirrors the knowledge of ritual action Śaṅkara identifies with caste distinctions. Thus Bradshaw builds a dichotomy between the healthy and the mad, by which he ensures that “England prosper[s]” by using his treatments to make “it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they…shared his sense of proportion” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 99). Woolf’s narrator exposes Bradshaw’s
overreliance on problematic binaries generated by conventional social and medical taxonomies, illustrating not unlike Śaṅkara that even though the role of physiology and environment in Septimus’s condition proves not unreal, Bradshaw’s superimposition of social conventions upon the patient’s Self reflects the doctor’s Nescience and his failure to realize the madness within “his sense of proportion” (Mrs. Dalloway 100).

Yet the Nescience that grips the psychiatric community can be traced to the ritualized pageantry of Oxbridge and the Church of England as well, a subject Woolf tackles in Three Guineas (1938). Despite rooting her critique in the fact that “though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes,” thereby acknowledging differences in gender and body while relying on sensory perception, Woolf emphasizes the world as the source of truth just as the Hindu philosophers did. From this perspective, Woolf hopes to defamiliarize the costumes and ceremonies that perpetuate oppression through their artificial or imaginary construction of difference. Since “every button, rosette and stripe seems to have some symbolical meaning,” the clothing of educated English men smacks of the same superstition Śaṅkara criticizes in the caste-specific rites of India, and these outfits similarly reflect distinctions between classes: “some have the right to wear plain buttons only; others rosettes” (Three Guineas 24).

Furthermore, these costumes possess meaning in relation to “the ceremonies…when you wear them,” and in the way Woolf describes these rituals, they appear comically demystified (Three Guineas 24). For instance, these elite English men “do homage to a piece of painted wood,” all while clad in dress that superimposes these outer conditions upon the Self, convincing the performer of his “social, professional, or intellectual standing” (Three Guineas 24; 26).

Like Śaṅkara, Woolf finds the origin of this ritualized behavior in scripture, and again like Śaṅkara, she makes a distinction between scriptures that support these ceremonies and those
that promote the highest knowledge. Woolf takes on the New Testament as Śaṅkara tackles the Vedas, attacking St. Paul’s interdiction against women prophets through the imposition of a veil “when praying in public,” as this clothing symbolizes a woman’s inability to prophesy (Three Guineas 145). St. Paul’s introduction of the veil, like the rituals of the Hindu castes, becomes a marker of difference that superimposes itself upon the individual Self and prevents it from realizing its nondifference with Reality. Jesus instead “believed that neither training nor sex” prevents access to Christian revelation, the only “qualification was some rare gift...bestowed” on men “and upon women also” (Three Guineas 145). Woolf backs this interpretation of Jesus, aligning herself not only with “the gnostics’ challenge to the Church,” but also exhibiting Śaṅkara’s technique of discriminating between scriptures that promote ritual and those that point toward something beyond the purview of ritual and reason (Froula 282).

Yet for Woolf, this irreducible reality shares more with Śaṅkara’s Brahman than it does with the Christian God, and she explores this mystic identity within her own art. However, Woolf does much, especially in Jacob’s Room, to criticize Western artists that try to use Indian philosophy to inform their work. Kane sees this satire as related to Woolf’s desire to make “fun of her cousin Dorothea Stephen’s travels to India to study ancient Indian philosophy,” but the repeated instances of her critiques throughout Jacob’s Room suggests that Woolf is not solely concerned with her cousin (347). Whether a product of Bloomsbury skepticism and prejudice toward India, an exposure of the appropriation of Indian thought by Western artists, or some combination of the two, Woolf consistently invests her depictions of artists in Jacob’s Room with a failure to understand Śaṅkara’s philosophy.

For example, Nick Bramham’s name comes close to Brahman as he seeks “beauty glowing, suddenly expressive, withdrawn the moment after” in the ever-changing women around
him, but the artist never achieves union with this Reality (Jacob's Room 121). Bramham's hunt for beauty reveals that he remains trapped within the impermanence of Nescience, since "the beauty of women...is like the light on the sea, never constant to a single wave" (Jacob's Room 121). As he struggles to glimpse beauty, Bramham concentrates upon the physical appearances of women rather than attempting to discern the Reality beyond these bodies, believing that beauty is "something flying fast which for a second uses the eyes, lips, or cheeks of Fanny Elmer...to glow through (Jacob's Room 122). Bramham's reliance on sense perception in his quest for beauty leads him to conclude "no one can count on it or seize it," suggesting not a quality-less Brahman, but transient, ever-shifting Nescience born from the ignorance within his own mind (Jacob's Room 121).

Another artist trapped by Nescience, Charles Steele, a painter interested in Mrs. Flanders for his landscape, differs from Bramham in his dependence upon both the senses and religious doctrine (Jacob's Room 4). Steele's paintbrush, "like the antennae of some irritable insect," "trembled" when Mrs. Flanders moves, revealing superimpositions that cloud his ability to reach Reality (Jacob's Room 4). First, the narrator likens Steele's paintbrush to the sensory organ of an insect, illustrating his reliance upon perceptual data while conflating his Self with a physical organism rather than identifying his Atman with Reality itself. Second, Steele reacts to Mrs. Flanders' movement as not only a violation of the order he seeks to impose upon his landscape, but also a transgression of patriarchal norms. The fact that Mrs. Flanders is "moving—actually going to get up," and Steele's exclamation "confound her!" reveals the artist's emotional reaction to any action contrary to his expectations, whether it be a breakage with his ideal landscape scene, or the fact that a woman, acting on her own, does not conform to the expectations he had for her within his mind (Jacob's Room 4). For Śāṅkara, such an outburst illustrates Steele's
inability to access the unmoving Reality beyond the impermanence of life. However, Woolf also links Steele’s behavior to organized Christian religion through the “cross on his watch chain,” implying that Śaṅkara’s critique of ritual knowledge comes into play here too (Jacob’s Room 4). Since Steele remains bound by both perception and convention, he cannot attain realization of ultimate Reality in Śaṅkara’s estimation, and Woolf highlights this failure through Steele’s inability to create art that can tap into higher truth. One measure of this failure comes in the form of Steele’s inability to please the critics; instead, Steele concentrates on winning popularity, as he would be “much gratified if his landladies liked his pictures” (Jacob’s Room 4).

Through both her personal experience and her artistic endeavors, Woolf wishes to avoid the Nescience other artists succumb to by employing innovative literary techniques meant to capture what Mr. Ramsay calls “the nature of reality,” yet she remains critical of the claim that she can access the highest reality personally (Lighthouse 26). In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf describes her life experience in terms much akin to Śaṅkara’s Self and Non-Self, but instead uses her “private shorthand”: being and non-being (“Sketch” 70). Woolf’s moments of being emerge in relation to conscious, positive, and even mystical experiences, like reading “Chaucer with pleasure” or listening to the crashing waves “in such an ecstasy as I cannot describe” (“Sketch” 70; 66). Yet these instances are “embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool” Woolf deems non-being (“Sketch” 70). She finds that “a great part of each day is not lived consciously,” and these unconscious motions arise from physical conditions like “a slight temperature,” as well as social conventions like “writing orders” (“Sketch” 70). Non-being operates much like Śaṅkara’s Non-Self, superimposing particular conditions upon being and preventing a realization of reality, whether it be accessed through Chaucer’s art or the nonhuman world. Again, Woolf’s moments of being occur in a manner congruent with Indian philosophy;
as Śaṅkara took great pains to discern textual passages in the Vedas conducive to the enquiry into Brahman, Woolf’s reading of Chaucer too promotes being. Additionally, Woolf finds being through mystical experiences like listening to the tide, similar to Hindu revelation with its source in the world. Observations like these illustrate how Woolf’s mystical temperament aligns with Śaṅkara’s thought and informs not only her personal experience, but how this experience becomes translated into her writing.

Since Woolf remains sensitive to being and non-being, she takes pains to grapple with these moments in her art to link her readers with the universal in spite of what Śaṅkara would call the appearances of Brahman, or Nescience. Free indirect discourse, by rooting itself in a narrator unbound by physical bodies or social conventions, avoids the Nescience that generates them, yet also employs diction that recognizes the linguistic origins of difference. In this manner, as the narrator of Jacob’s Room shifts from character to character, Woolf illustrates, without resorting to Śaṅkara’s terminology, how Jacob’s life intersects with the world and those around him. This absence of allusion implicitly produces a critique not of Śaṅkara’s ideas, which, free from particularizing terms, appear universal within the novel, but rather of misinterpretations of them. Jinny Carslake “frequented Indian philosophers” and studies pebbles to witness, “she says, multiplicity becomes unity, which is somehow the secret of life” (Jacob’s Room 137). A young Woolf, immersed in Bloomsbury and its skepticism of religion and bias against Indians, may be performing an attack on Śaṅkara as well as the Westerners interested in him through these explicit examples, while she, consciously or otherwise, challenges these attitudes by appropriating a more precise understanding of Śaṅkara in her own art.

Kane reads this passage as Woolf’s skepticism as a young writer, mocking “a female character whose interests turned to Indian mysticism,” yet Carslake bears Woolf’s childhood
nickname, tying the character to Woolf herself and suggesting an immature understanding of Indian philosophy (Kane 347). Carslake fails to realize union with Brahman, evidenced by her use of “somehow” and reinforced by her continued performance of conventions like dinner etiquette and confiding “to shy young Englishmen” (Jacob’s Room 137). She also takes up Indian philosophy “after her affair with Lefanu the American painter,” suggesting the presence of the Vedānta society in the United States as well as the influence of Hindu thought upon artists (Jacob’s Room 137). Carslake seems entranced by Indian philosophy, appreciating it not as a vital system of belief directly impacting the lives of Indians, but as an imported vogue that she adopts because it happens to be in fashion. This disconnection from the spirit of Hindu thought is displayed through the fact that Carslake’s Nescience comes from speech. The narrator deploys the dialogue tag “she says” followed by “multiplicity becomes unity,” separating Carslake’s voice from that of the narrator, creating a disjoint between the two voices, a technique that approaches nondifference through the written word like Śaṅkara’s favored portions of the Vedas.

Though her use of free indirect discourse conveys Woolf’s concerns regarding art and access to the absolute, her experimental chorus of blending voices in The Waves further develops this effect while expressing Śaṅkara’s philosophy. By presenting six voices interspersed with interludes from the nonhuman world, Woolf crafts a dynamic that engages with the source of Nescience, the spoken word, and of Hindu revelation, the world itself. As each character struggles to articulate her or his experiences, the interludes present an outlook that sometimes corresponds with these voices and sometimes does not. This dynamic functions like Śaṅkara’s views on the Vedas, which, according to Śaṅkara, possess sections devoted to the enquiry into Brahman as well as portions relevant only to ritual, and so continue the effects of Nescience.
Ultimately, a form of written truth seems to emerge from Bernard’s spoken final soliloquy, congruent with Hindu revelation that places value upon oral texts. However, Bernard’s story, like the Vedas, must be a blend of Nescience and knowledge of the distinctionless Reality that arises from the world.

Interestingly, Bernard sounds much like Śaṅkara, even concluding the nondifference of Self and Reality, though in different words. Bernard speaks as though he glimpses a moment of being or a vision of Brahman beyond Nescience, insisting “this difference we make so much of, this identity...was overcome” (Waves 214). He admits that, after a life spent searching for identity alongside the other voices of the novel, “there is no division between me and them” (Waves 214). Echoing the Sole-Existent of a united Ātman-Brahman, Bernard describes his essence as “immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness, yet clear, contained—so my being seems” (The Waves 216). In such a list, Bernard could have easily slipped in “distinctionless” or “without qualities,” descriptors used by Śaṅkara in his discussion of Brahman. Furthermore, Bernard notes “that desire urges it [my being] no more out and away,” another way of articulating the Hindu emphasis upon “relaxation of attachment to physical objects and stimuli” (The Waves 216; Smith 66).

The success of Bernard’s realization of nondifference also appears in his declaration “that he is dead, the man I called ‘Bernard,’” a disavowal of artificial social constructions like an individual’s name in the face of one’s “deep, tideless, immune” being (The Waves 216). This engagement with “the mystery of things” permits Bernard to inwardly explore the world of the nonhuman and the human, first encountering “the hairy, the ape-like” man within himself that brings “a greener glow to things,” then his body moves through space and time to “some cool temple” located “in my serene head” (215) Bernard’s ability to slide into the imagined
experience of other beings and become one with them proves reminiscent of Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse in previous works while also attached to a mystical experience evocative of Vedānta’s characteristic nondifference between Self and Reality, creating a dynamic that at once resists the constraints of traditional markers of identity and points toward a liberation from these potential modes of oppression. When he finally reaches and wonders about “the central shadow” at the heart of this distinctionless reality, Bernard drops language entirely, concurring with Śāṅkara’s contention that speech is the source of Nescience through his simple admonition that “I do not know” (The Waves 216).

Bernard’s realization confronts the reader directly when he challenges his unnamed dinner companion personally with “the blow you have dealt me” (Waves 217). By making the reader complicit in reducing Bernard from “a temple, a church, a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things” to “nothing but what you see,” through perception and convention, Woolf addresses the limitations this superimposition produces, transforming Bernard from “a whole universe, unconfined” to “an elderly man” (Waves 217). This discourse not only encourages the reader to think in terms like Śāṅkara’s, radically envisioning a fundamental unity between the Self and Reality, but it also provokes the reader to seek the world unmediated by Nescience and its effects. As the text approaches its end, India appears again at a crucial place in Woolf’s text, coming up right before conclusion of the novel and recalling the imperial enterprise of Percival, but also implying the commerce of traditions that brought Vedānta to the West (The Waves 220). The knightly endeavor Bernard speaks of in his final moments signifies a lapse back into conventional artificial constructions, but the closure of novel suggests the success of Bernard’s mystical experience. Since the final interlude caps Bernard’s soliloquy rather than being placed on a separate page, this unified arrangement implies
that Bernard succeeds in attaining a glimmer of his nondifference with the world’s Reality while also challenging his lingering conventionality (*Waves* 220).

The parallels between Virginia Woolf and Śaṅkara remain great, even if Woolf never explicitly mentions Śaṅkara in her work, and the historical context demonstrates that Advaita Vedānta was available in the West during Woolf’s day. Woolf likely confronted skepticism from her husband and friends in the Bloomsbury circle regarding her interest in Hindu mysticism, as well as the skepticism of her husband, but she also may have sought to prevent her writing from proselytizing, hoping to tap into universal Reality without resorting to the religious terminology of a specific faith like Hinduism. Nonetheless, deep undercurrents of Hindu philosophy show through in her writing, betraying the personal beliefs of the author no matter her reasons for submerging them. The pervasive presence of this Hindu mysticism must be accounted for in future postcolonial readings of Woolf, and also inform the critical debate surrounding Woolf’s spirituality. Christie Purifoy puts it best when she exposes Woolf’s opposition to the emergent English nationalism replacing the declining empire in *The Waves*, and her fear that this insular worldview would lead the English to “turn their backs on India entirely” (39). Woolf seemed to work genuinely to understand Hinduism from Indian sources, as suggested by Anand’s account, but this does not preclude the power of her imperial context, which made English contact with Vedānta possible. Moreover, Woolf’s passion for Greek culture has long been documented, but her interest in India, a culture which predated and likely influenced Greek thought, raises the possibility that Woolf intuited the connection between the traditions of India and Greece (Murphey 29).
In Pursuit of Liberation: Eastern Thought in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Zeenuth Futehally’s *Zohra*

E.M. Forster has received much scholarly attention for his novel *A Passage to India*, ranging from famous critics like Edward Said to less well-known (but no less insightful) commentators like R. Radhakrishnan and Hunt Hawkins, and his masterpiece has become a source of contention regarding its stance toward empire. However, aside from the work of Ambreen Hai, apparently no scholarship has been done on *Zohra*, a novel by Zeenuth Futehally that Hai describes as “among the very first novels to be written and published in English by an Indian Muslim woman” (“Adultery” 317). According to the preface of *Zohra*, manuscripts of the novel were reviewed by Forster, who offered advice to Futehally as she composed her work (261). The relationship between Futehally and Forster goes beyond an exchange of writing suggestions, however. Futehally’s novel possesses intertextual links with *A Passage to India* through its use of common themes that evoke a discourse between these two pieces. Not only has Futehally received little critical attention, her work has not been examined for its intertextualities with Forster. Additionally, in spite of the fierce debate surrounding *A Passage to India*, reading the novel alongside *Zohra* serves to shed light on how an Indian writer contemporary to Forster responds to his work, offering yet another angle for consideration in the ongoing postcolonial debate surrounding *A Passage to India*.

One of the greatest of these intertextualities remains a shared emphasis upon spiritual concerns, especially through the lens of Indian and Islamic religion and philosophy. In fact, this concentration upon Eastern mysticism functions in a similar manner in both *A Passage to India* and *Zohra*, marking the possibilities these traditions, through the vehicle of modernist literature, present as potential solutions to the oppression perpetrated by Western civilization. Recall that,
for Forster, oppression remains colored by his experiences as homosexual man within a heterosexual English society, and the repression he endured for his sexual orientation allowed him to empathize with other marginalized populations, such as women and colonized peoples. Futehally, on the other hand, offers a view of empire from within India, yet she represents a minority voice due to her gender, her Muslim faith, and her unique Deccan perspective on Indian politics.

However, in spite of their differing backgrounds, both Forster and Futehally turn to forms of spirituality that resist rational explanation in order to specifically combat imperialism and patriarchy. Forster utilizes Indian philosophical traditions like Śaṅkara’s contribution to Advaita Vedānta, which insists upon the location of truth within the world and views language as the source of difference, to expose the limits of language in relation to the totalizing endeavors of religion and empire (Deutsch and Dalvi 3; “Brahmasūtrabhāṣya” 242). This philosophical attack on empire comes in conjunction with his novel’s emphasis upon social relationships as a means of echoing the contemporary Indian nationalist rhetoric of friendship (Hawkins 60) Futehally, however, diverges from Forster’s approach by deliberately naming the Islamic and Buddhist spiritual concepts that inform her life and her novel, permitting her to envision an Indian national identity within the intersection of these religious traditions that questions sexist indigenous customs like purdah and the British partition of India. Although they hold differing strategies in their efforts to challenge empire and patriarchy through modernist literature, Forster and Futehally both find Indian and Islamic thought a crucial component of their respective projects.

In order to best trace Forster and Futehally’s appreciation of Eastern thought within their efforts to dismantle oppression through modernist aesthetics, the critical enterprises of each writer must be adumbrated prior to examining their fiction. Although Zohra contains distinct
references to *A Passage to India* and both novels share a similar concern with Eastern spirituality and modernist art as an avenue for liberation from empire and patriarchy, Forster and Futehally undertake these goals in differing fashions based on their social and cultural backgrounds. As mentioned previously, Forster was a homosexual Englishman with an Oxford education, and he used his personal experience of homophobic prejudice to advocate the emancipation of other minority groups through his writing. He also undertook trips to India and read Indian literary classics. However, he was also a subject of the British Empire, and so there remains a need to acknowledge the debate surrounding Forster’s anti-imperialist project before proceeding with an analysis of his novel. Additionally, since *A Passage to India* precedes *Zohra* and provides Futehally with intertextual material, a study of Forster’s novel should come prior any discussion of Futehally. Futehally represents a well-educated upper-class Muslim woman from Hyderabad. Her work carries autobiographical elements from her life and also reflects the particular political landscape of Deccan India. Most importantly, her Muslim faith informs her work in divergent ways from Forster’s secularism, but Futehally does not abandon the intersections of religion and secular political goals in her steadfast commitment to Indian independence.

The composition process of *A Passage to India* serves to illustrate Forster’s concern for various groups shackled by oppression, and thus holds relevance for any analysis of mysticism and modernism as means of overturning these repressive forces in *A Passage to India*. Hai outlines the “torturous efforts” Forster endured during the process of writing his novel about India (“Fantastic” 219). She convincingly posits that Forster’s prolonged writer’s block primarily stemmed from “the inability to write publishable fiction about sexual frustration,” although the unexpected success of *Howard’s End* and various other personal issues also interfered with Forster’s composition (219). After years working to censor his fiction in accordance with British
legislation criminalizing homosexuality, Hai contends that Forster managed to finish “Passage precisely by suppressing its homoeroticism” (220, original emphasis). Such a debilitating process likely led to Forster's abandonment of creative writing.

Yet the difficulties Forster struggled with due to his sexual orientation inspired him to champion other oppressed groups in his fiction. Hai notes that Forster's short story collection *The Celestial Omnibus*, a work Forster wrote while undertaking the arduous composition of *A Passage to India*, included short pieces offering “a critique of homophobic oppression” that “are also more broadly concerned with linking it to oppression based on” race, class, gender, or age ("Fantastic” 224). There seems little doubt that Forster’s aspiration to make “his fiction act politically to change a climate of prejudice and ignorance regarding not only sexuality but also sexism, imperialism, and classism” impacted Forster’s writing of *A Passage to India*, considering his engagement with these ideas in his short fiction written alongside *Passage* (225). In fact, Hai asserts that Forster rewrote “The Story of a Panic,” one of Forster’s earliest published stories, into *A Passage to India*, and this piece includes an exploration of homoeroticism manifested through a “‘scenery’” that “is not just a setting but...a huge body at the margins of his story that will violently disrupt” English systems of order (231). By endowing the nonhuman landscape with agency and linking it to the human body and its sexual impulses through the deity Pan in this story, Forster also expresses his “celebration of nature, body and spirit” (233). This effort to create a corporeal spirituality unfettered by the traditional Western distinction between body and soul lends itself well to the incorporation of nonwestern religious traditions within Forster’s work as he revised in preparation for *A Passage to India*. Furthermore, by identifying his earlier landscape with the erotic desires of the human body through the god Pan, Forster “rehearses the issues that preoccupied his career,” including his later literary
exploration of the mysticism and modernism through the wordless metaphysical experience of union in the Marabar Caves (Hai 234).

In her account, Hai also mentions that Forster turned to the Bhagavad-Gītā, a portion of the Indian epic the Mahābhārata that entails a classic treatment of Hindu philosophy, as he coped with the obstacles he faced in composing A Passage to India (“Fantastic” 225). Hai concentrates on how Forster expresses fascination with “Krishna’s poetic adjuration to Arjuna to fight” in his essay “Hymn before Action,” insisting upon the Gītā’s “implication that words are crucial to impelling action, and may in themselves be a form of action” (226, original emphasis). Mahatma Gandhi similarly recognized the importance of the Gītā for his own “nonviolent struggle against injustice,” and Forster’s turn to Hindu spirituality seems to underlie his use of the modernist aesthetic to critique the language that undergirds various modes of oppression in A Passage to India (Ellwood and McGraw 78).

A discussion of the postcolonial criticism of A Passage to India serves to acknowledge the limitations of Forster’s emancipatory literary project before offering a sketch of how spiritual beliefs, especially those of Hinduism, promote the liberation of social relationships from empire and patriarchy in A Passage to India. The seminal postcolonial theorist Edward Said attacks Forster’s novel. He concentrates on Forster’s use of “India to represent material that according to the canons of the novel cannot in fact be represented,” and the people and landscape of India can be accounted as examples of these non-representable “materials” the text attempts to depict (200). Said remains rightly alarmed by Forster’s stereotyping of India and its people, but Said’s otherwise insightful critique remains weakened by his insistence that “like Conrad’s Africa, Forster’s India is...frequently described as unapprehendable and too large” (201). He reads well the tone of his textual example used to support this statement, but claims that this instance of free
indirect discourse betrays the novel’s emphasis on the “sustained encounter between the English colonials...and India” when it actually expresses the attitude of Ronny Moore, a prejudiced Anglo-Indian character that works for the imperial government (Said 201; Forster 91). Mrs. Turton, another defender of empire in the novel, similarly speaks of Indian women “as if she was describing the movements of migratory birds” and echoes the same offensive, taxonomic language employed by Ronny (Forster 42). However, Forster deploys this language to expose the plight of oppressed groups like native Indian women. With these passages in mind, it remains prudent to read Forster’s India as an effort to challenge empire by resisting the classificatory language employed by colonial agents, even if Said correctly exposes it as a stereotyped construction.

These stereotypes have their roots in Forster’s vision of an India that is both “affectionately personal and...remorselessly metaphysical” (Said 204). According to Said, the personal and spiritual dimensions latent within Forster’s approach to India belie his own “affection (sometimes petulant and mystified) for the place,” and yet Said qualifies his assault on Forster’s emphasis on personal relationships in A Passage to India by recognizing that such a “structure permitted one to feel affection for and even intimacy with some Indians and India generally” (200, 205). Said’s disagreement with this personal approach arises from his concern that Forster does not adequately attend to Indian politics (205). Nonetheless, by examining the political situation of Forster’s day, one can understand the personal dimension of the novel as an attempt at political resistance, though flawed, that proved consonant with Indian Nationalist preoccupations. This challenge to imperial authority can similarly be extended to the supposedly “petulant” spiritual aspects of the novel as well.
For instance, Hunt Hawkins convincingly identifies the thesis of Forster’s novel to be “imperialism is wrong because it prevents personal relationships,” and he reminds critics that *A Passage to India* “took what was at the time a more radical position by declaring that India inevitably had to become free” (58). He further corroborates this link by stating that Forster’s argument against empire based on this “disruption of friendship” was also shared Indian Nationalists of Forster’s time (60). Yet Hawkins also highlights the drawbacks of Forster’s preoccupation with the personal, including the inability of this approach to account for the economic difficulties rising from colonialism and Forster’s skepticism “that friendship can be achieved” even if India achieved independence from Britain (61). Thus, Forster’s emphasis upon character, which Hawkins attributes to “the Bloomsbury aesthetic,” came at the expense of other much-needed avenues of critique (60).

Yet Hawkins doubts the possibility of Hinduism as a solution to the nihilistic meaninglessness he sees in the echo of the Marabar Caves, and he argues that Hinduism fails to offer a political challenge within the text because it “is shown embracing everything, including the British Empire, with equal mindless affirmation” (62). He reinforces this point with an interview of Forster that displays the novelist’s opinion of the Krishna worship associated with the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. In the interview, Forster appreciates the “playfulness and inclusiveness” of Krishna worship, but “was not inclined to believe in the god” (Hawkins 62). On these grounds, Hunt alleges that Forster did not consider Hinduism “a solution to the echo” (62). However, even if Forster was “a nonbeliever,” that does not preclude his having an appreciation for the Hindu philosophy, as Hai demonstrates by Forster’s reading of the *Gītā* (Forster qtd. in Hawkins 62). It remains prudent here to recall the connection between Forster and Gandhi in their shared respect for the *Gītā*, which hints at an association of Forster with Gandhi’s political goals through an
ancient Indian document at once literary, philosophical, and spiritual. Furthermore, a critic must approach interviews judiciously in relation to the text itself. *A Passage to India* more likely offers Hinduism as a partial or imperfect solution in the face of Marabar Caves.

With these postcolonial critiques in mind, an examination of Forster’s use of Eastern spirituality to further his goal of wielding modernist fiction as challenge hegemonic systems of order can proceed. Since Forster’s approach to the liberation of other oppressed groups comes about because of his personal experience of oppression as a homosexual, a study of the Marabar Caves beginning with the conflation of landscape, the human body, and spiritual experience that Hai recognizes in Forster’s earlier work proves the most useful example of his critical technique.

As Forster describes the formation and movement of the Indian subcontinent throughout geologic time, he employs language that deliberately links the earth’s crust to the physical bodies of human beings, all while crafting this sense of unity beneath a backdrop cosmological in scope. One of these passages brings together the dynamic processes of the earth and sun through the term *flesh*. Forster writes: “if flesh of the sun’s flesh is to be touched anywhere, it is...among the incredible antiquity of these hills” (136). Here Forster brings the heavenly body of the sun down to the planet’s surface with an erotic sharing of flesh, and this cosmic union through physical geology continues within the Marabar Caves, where images of “delicate stars” and “exquisite nebulae” can be found within the “evanescent life of granite,” and even the twin flames are labelled “lovers” (137). As if in parallel with the failure of the sadhus and the Buddha to achieve the spiritual experience of the Marabar Caves, the “fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil” possess a skin “finer than any covering acquired by the animals,” suggesting that the experience of the caves also remain beyond the reach of human animals (137).
However, this prospect of a seemingly unavailable mystical union does not preclude the ability to recognize the importance of the caves. One of the most explicit examples of this capacity to intuit the spiritual profundity present in the Marabar Caves finds its expression when “the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim ‘extraordinary’” (137). If birds are taken to evoke the indigenous people of India as the Anglo-Indians like Mrs. Turton do, then this statement not only uses their association to between birds and Indians to refute their imperialist bias, including the proposition that “Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary” from the novel’s opening, but also suggests that the people of India recognize the importance of the caves articulate this significance, albeit imperfectly, through their philosophical and religious traditions (1).

Yet the muddle that occurs at the Marabar Caves offers a challenge to the oppressive, totalizing efforts found in the language of various religious traditions, resulting in a profoundly disturbing mystical experience that complicates Fielding’s conviction that “a mystery is a muddle” (Forster 73). Both Hawkins and Radhakrishnan attribute meaninglessness to the Marabar Caves, but it might be more accurate to assign the caves with a form of revelation beyond that of any particular human religion, but one that remains inspired by Indian philosophy. Radhakrishnan rightly criticizes Forster’s placement of the Marabar Caves within his imagined India, and “the meaninglessness of ‘Oum’ rather than that of the Christian logocentric word,” but it also remains prudent to recall that the Marabar Caves and Chandrapore are fictional places, and Forster does challenge Christian ideas through Mrs. Moore’s revelation that “talkative Christianity” and “its divine words…only amounted to ‘boum’” (Radhakrishnan 469; Forster 166). In this manner, Forster approaches the celebration of “the world as one” that Radhakrishnan believes “need[s] to happen in a site that belongs to no one,” as the Marabar
Caves have defeated Mrs. Moore's Christianity and "smoked out" sadhus "and even Buddha" (Radhakrishnan 470, 471; Forster 136). Although Forster's narrator, in dismissing Indian religious figures like the Buddha at the Marabar Caves, comes uncomfortably close to stating that great Eastern thinkers cannot achieve the "renunciation more complete" promised by the caves, Marabar's resistance to religious language moves toward creating that universal, unclaimed space advocated by Radhakrishnan (136).

Furthermore, since the crisis of the caves takes place in India, Forster seems to imply that the Indian philosophical tradition has come closest to the revelation of Marabar. This suggestion arises not only from the sadhus that approached the caves and failed, but also appears during the journey to the Marabar Caves. Unmistakable references to Indian philosophy emerge as Aziz, Adela, and Mrs. Moore travel to the caves on the back of an elephant. The party encounters "a spiritual silence" in which "life went on as usual, but...sounds did not echo or thoughts develop" (Forster 155). This "spiritual silence" where "sounds did not echo or thoughts develop" infers a meditative state, one in which "life went on as usual, but had no consequences" (Forster 155). These "consequences" refer to karma, "the moral law of cause and effect," and the lack of consequences here implies a release from worldly attachments that can be found in both Hindu and Buddhist teachings (Smith 64). Moreover, Forster's foreshadowing of the echo in this passage firmly associates it with "consequences" and karma, suggesting that the unsettling revelation of the Marabar Caves proves disturbing in its promise of "complete personal responsibility" that results in "everybody get[ting] exactly what is deserved" (Smith 64).

This karmic universe and the reincarnation it produces are viewed as Nescience, or ignorance, by Hindu nondualist thinkers like Śaṅkara, who assert that the soul or "Ātman is not subject to transmigratory existence" ("Upadeśasāhasrī" 178). For this reason, Forster shows that
“everything seemed...infected with illusion” on the path to the caves, and *illusion* corresponds to the common English translation of the Hindu term *māyā*, a word that functions in a similar manner to Śaṅkara’s Nescience (Forster 155). Unlike the English word *illusion*, however, *māyā* holds “a qualified, provisional reality” (Smith 70). Eliot Deutsch and Rohit Dalvi emphasize the role *māyā* plays in generating the false understanding of the world as distinct from Brahman, or Reality, leading them to translate *māyā* into English as “creative illusion” (156). Indian philosophers in the tradition of Advaita Vedānta often demonstrate *māyā* by using the metaphor of a rope that “remains a rope while being mistaken for a snake” (Smith 70). Śaṅkara deploys this example to specifically illustrate how the “world-illusion” brought on by *māyā*, likely corresponding to Forster’s phrase “everything...infected with illusion,” is “not more substantial than the snake for which the rope is mistaken” (“Brahmasūtrabhāṣya” 225).

Forster employs a variant of this metaphor in his novel when Aziz sees “a black cobra” where there is only “the withered and twisted stump of a toddy palm” (Forster 155). This passage connotes that the echo of the Marabar Caves and the resulting meaninglessness of religious language remains a revelation of *māyā*. Therefore, when Forster writes that the Buddha and the sadhus failed in their effort to enter the caves, he illustrates what he must see as the near impossibility of overcoming illusion. In addition to the inability of religious adepts to access the mystical experience of the Marabar Caves, the echo also accounts for the difficulty of overturning the oppression perpetrated through the use of language, including the religious language that Radhakrishnan discusses. The Marabar Caves provide a solution to these systems of order by offering access to a numinous, unnamed Reality not unlike the Hindu Brahman; however, this realization remains extremely challenging and nearly impossible to achieve. By recognizing the immense difficulty of reaching beyond the constraints of language, one can see
how Forster’s reservations about the possibility of friendship between Indians and the British, criticized by Hawkins, arise at the novel’s end.

Zeenuth Futehally, in her novel Zohra, revises Forster’s interest in Eastern philosophy and modernist literature as a means of promoting liberation from oppressive systems of order, producing her own unique conclusions regarding these themes. By exploring Zohra’s experience with arranged marriage and purdah, Ambreen Hai, one of the only critics to write on Futehally’s work, astutely outlines a “tension between Zohra’s desires and a cultural context that both fosters and dampens them” (“Adultery 324”). However, she fails to note that Zohra’s desires stand in conjunction with mysticism to produce a modernist challenge to limitations of these social conventions. In particular, Zohra relies upon the iconoclastic impetus latent within the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism to defend her adulterous attraction to her husband’s brother Hamid, and Edwin Arnold’s poem The Light of Asia (1879) proves another important spiritual source for Zohra and Hamid’s resistance to oppression. Arnold’s colonial text, reappropriated by native peoples, serves as the cornerstone for Zohra and Hamid’s epiphanic experience in the caves of Ajanta. Clearly alluding to Forster’s revelation of the Marabar Caves in A Passage to India, Futehally directs her characters’ merger of personal nature and mystical experience within a particular Indian context to create a basis for women’s emancipation from purdah and national independence from Britain.

Zohra’s spiritual desires pervades the course of Futehally’s novel, and this sense of personal identity proves bound up with a respect for the individual inspired by Western attitudes toward gender, but remains most deeply informed by Islamic thought, disrupting the supposedly religious basis of repressive cultural practices like purdah and arranged marriage. To demonstrate the embeddedness of Islamic spirituality in Zohra’s character, one need look no
further than her name. Zohra’s father, the Nawab Sahib, “decided to call her Zohra—Venus—the brightest star in all the heavens,” and Zohra’s name alludes to a constellation of Islamic thought that celebrates women and exposes the patriarchal norms of Hyderabadi society as incongruent with the spirit of Islam (Futehally 104). In order to begin charting this network of allusions, one must try to approach the Qur’an, “the central position...in the elaboration of any Islamic doctrine,” with an emphasis on symbolism similar to that used by Sufi mystics (Smith 235; 262). Interestingly, the Qur’an devotes an entire Sura to “The Night-Star,” which Lex Hixon, an American that trained under Sufi masters, alternatively titles “Morning Star” (Koran Interpreted, “The Night-Star,” 86.1-15; Hixon and Douglas-Klotz 66). Hixon’s interpretation suggests that Zohra’s name bears a direct reference to this specific Qur’anic passage, while also pointing to a more general symbolic association between Zohra and the stars that seems supported by Futehally’s text. For example, Zohra’s husband by arranged marriage, Bashir, contemplates whether or not Zohra “would...have chosen this [married] life if she had the power to choose” beneath “a sky brilliant with stars,” not only tying Zohra to the stars, but also raising the problem of arranged marriage and the constraints it places upon women (Futehally 108).

Even more explicitly, Futehally echoes Sura 86 of the Qur’an by introducing the story of Zohra’s name before Zohra herself experiences “an ecstasy of completeness” when gazing upon her newborn child, thus symbolically introducing a spiritual meditation upon a woman’s power to bring new life into the world that recalls Zohra’s personal desires and unsettles patriarchal norms (Futehally 109). The Qur’an draws its reader, or more properly its reciter, to the lessons brought by the night-star, and the heart of the Sura insists: “let man consider of what he was created / he was created of gushing water / issuing between the loins” (Koran Interpreted, “The Night-Star,” 86.5-7). This clear reference to the process of birth is coupled with a reminder that
the gendered male reader/reciter reflect upon his birth, seemingly implying that Allah creates
new life through the womb, and by extension this passage necessarily involves the presence of
women. Bashir, thinking about Zohra beneath the stars, participates in a form of this reflection,
as does the Nawab Sahib when he remembers his decision to name Zohra.

However, Futehally remains aware of the patriarchal slant of the Qur’anic language in her
text, and she works to prevent an understanding of woman reduced solely to procreation. This
revisionist approach is best showcased in the Nawab Sahib, who “prayed fervently for a son”
prior to Zohra’s birth, only to find that his new daughter Zohra “entered my heart, and instantly I
forgot my disappointment” (Futehally 104). Zohra’s father seems live up to his claim that “I have
never once been sorry that she was a girl” when he articulates his hope that his daughter “might
become a great scholar, even a poet,” a radical statement in a society that believed women “unfit
for high learning” (Futehally 104; 11; Ellwood and McGraw 423). As the birth of Zohra’s child
approaches “before the first light of dawn” when “the brilliant morning star shines forth,” the
Nawab Sahib signals that he has received the egalitarian teaching of the night-star (Hixon and
Douglas-Klotz 66). Yet Zohra enters into her arranged marriage with Bashir against her wishes
because “any deviation from the accepted norm would deeply wound her parents,” suggesting a
limit to the Nawab Sahib’s insight (Futehally 36).

However, Sura 86 offers an additional “spiritual secret revealed by this star,” one that
Futehally subtly links to Western notions of the freedom to choose a marriage partner in what
appears to be a deliberate effort to produce a hybrid of Islamic and Western thought aimed at
overturning patriarchy by endorsing Zohra’s personal desires (Hixon 66). The first teaching the
Qur’an attributes to the night-star is the revelation that “over every soul there is a watcher,” and
Hixon understands this “watcher” to be an “angelic being” (Koran Interpreted, “The Night-Star,”
86.4; Hixon and Douglas-Klotz 66). If Hixon is to be believed, then it seems conspicuous that, when Zohra is explaining to her aunt Rashedah that she is “in no mood to marry” because she is pursuing art lessons with Miss Woods, her aunt remarks “Oh, I see. Now Miss Woods is the angel” (Futehally 30). By placing the word angel in Rashedah’s discussion of marriage with Zohra, Futehally symbolically links Miss Woods with the angelic spirit from the Sura Zohra is named after, forging a fusion of Islamic scripture with Western mores in Miss Woods, who, according to Zohra, “did not marry because she didn’t want to” (Futehally 30).

Interestingly, Zohra’s desires become conflated with those of Miss Woods when she blurts out “why marry unless one is really fond of someone?” (Futehally 31). This sharing of desires between the watching angel and its soul appears to be consistent with Hixon’s interpretation of “The Night-Star,” since the light of the angel “penetrates all veils...as witness to every thought and action” (Hixon and Douglas-Klotz 66). Zohra’s anxiety that “maybe I’m not made for marriage” only further serves to align Zohra with Miss Woods, a “now-greying lady” that has refused to marry in her lifetime (Futehally 49; 31). In this manner, Miss Woods functions as a foil and a beacon to Zohra, mediated through the symbolic net of allusions to the Qur’an, in which both characters share not only a passion for painting, but also a similar stance regarding marriage and gender equality. Yet Zohra herself is later called “an angel” by her sister-in-law Safia, showing that Futehally hopes to offer an inspiration for the liberation of Indian Muslim women through her protagonist (238).

Just as Miss Woods and Zohra develop a spiritual bond through their similar desires, Zohra’s attraction to Hamid also reflects their shared interests in art and spirituality, leading Zohra to dismantle social conventions yet again through her adulterous love for her husband’s brother. Zohra sees herself and Hamid as “companions drinking from the same fountain of
familiar beauty,” and she empathizes with Hamid’s desire for “no limitations,” including his resistance to marriage (Futehally 143). This love relationship, when viewed through the lens of Sufi mysticism, binds together the quest for emancipation from oppressive institutions like marriage with the desire “to encounter God [Allah] directly in this very lifetime” rather than wait until the union promised in the hereafter (Smith 259).

As devout Muslims who also repeatedly express an interest in Sufi poetry, Zohra and Hamid subscribe to the convention-breaking thrust of Islamic mysticism as a means of combatting repressive traditions. Hixon encapsulates this view in his remark “how superficial is the understanding of those whose religion remains conventional” (Hixon and Douglas-Klotz 76). Furthermore, the passage of the Qur’an that Hixon refers to involves parents that “strive...to make thee associate with Me [Allah] that” which is not Allah, and in this case the Qur’an urges “do not obey them” (Koran Interpreted, “Spider,” 29.5-10). Zohra articulates this conflation of the power of social convention with that of Allah when she states that “a Hyderabadi girl would no more think of questioning her parents’ right to arrange her marriage that she would think of questioning God’s right to dispense birth and death” (Futehally 191). Zohra’s parents, in arranging to have her married, confuse these marital customs with religious obligation, thus diverting Zohra “from commitment to the One Source [Allah] by” mistakenly insisting on the “false values” of marriage, forcing Zohra to disobey her parents by embracing her desire for Hamid (Hixon and Douglas-Klotz 76; Futehally 155).

This impulse to break convention through “an emotion as deep as ours” is reinforced by Hamid, who links his love for Zohra with “Sufi philosophy” in its mystic goal of achieving “oneness with the Divine” through “the beloved” (Futehally 199). Huston Smith outlines three different strands of Sufism, which he terms “the mysticisms of love, of ecstasy, and of intuition,”
and the variation of Sufism that Hamid refers to can be none other than Smith’s mysticism of love (259). Particularly associated with the Sufi love poetry, this approach to mystical experience “dwelt on the pangs of separation to deepen their love of God and thereby draw close to him,” a spiritual theme no doubt evoked by Futehally’s decision to separate Hamid and Zohra in her novel (Smith 259). This merger of poetry and spiritual yearning recalls some of the earliest elements of the Sufi tradition in Islam, one originally aimed at reinvigorating the faith by overturning “the luxury and corruption” associated with the caliphates emerging after Mohammad’s death, and this impulse certainly remains compatible with Futehally’s critique of patriarchy in Muslim India (Ellwood and McGraw 409). Hamid begins to negotiate this attack on arranged marriage when he agrees with Zohra that “there is nothing wrong with love,” an emotion that Zohra describes as “spiritual exaltation” and links to the encounter with the divine found in the Sufi mysticism of love when later she says “I have not seen God, but I have seen you” (Futehally 198, 211). Hamid, through his desire for Zohra, aligns himself with her stance against “the darkness of purdah,” and wonders whether Muslims who practice purdah are truly “following the laws of the Prophet” (Futehally 203). In this manner, Futehally uses the Sufi mysticism of love to craft the desires of Zohra and Hamid into a means of disrupting the religious legitimacy of arranged marriage and other patriarchal social practices.

The Sufi spirit also shines during Zohra and Hamid’s argument with Bashir regarding Islam and the politics of India, reflecting the traditional tension in Islamic thought between the boundary-breaking impetus of Sufism and the forces that oppose compromising established teachings (Smith 264-265). Zohra and Hamid, by acknowledging their love and its sacredness, enact the Sufi tendency to assert “an authority derived directly from” Allah (Smith 264). These claims to divine authority held “dangers for those who are unqualified for its teachings.”
especially when it came to “the faith of the typical believer” (264). For this reason, a dedicated “opposition to Sufism” developed “within sections of the Islamic community” (265). Bashir articulates this counterpoint to mysticism when he argues that “Islamic Law, the Shariat, accords women more rights than any other religion” (Futhehally 203). According to Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw, shari’a, or the use of the Qur’an as a source for “practical regulations covering such matters as marriage,” remained an integral part of the resistance to “dubious figures who have claimed special divine calls” (385). Certainly, characters like Zohra and Hamid, with their belief that “there is no sin in loving,” would be seen by Bashir as representing the excesses of the mystical tradition, as even without knowledge of their adulterous love, he insulsts Hamid for his tolerance of Hindus, saying “you have no right to call yourself a Muslim!” (Futhehally 199; 205). By defending shari’a and the social customs supposedly tied to it, Bashir demonstrates his commitment to “unambiguous principles” that Smith links to the anti-mystic strand of Islamic thought (264-265). Futhehally, however, exposes the hypocrisy in Bashir’s position on the rights of women in Muslim society through Bashir’s ironic assertion that Muslims, unlike the Hindu caste system, do not “shut up human beings in tight-fitting compartments in the name of religion,” when purdah constitutes just such an oppressive structure (Futhehally 202, 203). By subverting Bashir’s stance, Futhehally takes the side of the mystics and claims divine authority for her critique of the indigenous patriarchal social conventions she insists “have no place in authentic Islam” (Ellwood and McGraw 424).

However, the argument between Hamid and Bashir illustrates not only Futhehally’s support of the Sufi position in this ongoing tension in Islam, but also merges it with an anti-imperial stance. Hamid reflects this approach when he says that “you cannot uproot anything so firmly embedded as Imperialism with a single wrench,” suggesting that the diverse spiritual
traditions of India must play a role in achieving national independence from Britain, especially since “religion is now being exploited only for power politics” (Futehally 202; 204). Echoing what Hixon believes to be the Qur’anic affirmation of “the diversity of human religions and the underlying unity of them all,” Hamid contends that “the differences are more provincial than religious” in India, articulating a nationalist political statement through language associated with mysticism (Hixon and Douglas-Klotz 91; Futehally 204). Furthermore, Hamid associates Bashir’s defense of “Muslim genius” with the British “policy of divide and rule,” and Hamid predicts the bloodshed of partition when he says that dividing India territorially “sounds like a graveyard” (Futehally 202, 204, original emphasis).

In order to surmount these attitudes engendered by centuries of empire, Hamid articulates Futehally’s unique Hyderabadi position on Indian independence, insisting that Muslims and Hindus must unite behind Gandhi. (Futehally 204). For Futehally, as well as Zohra and Hamid, this message of acceptance and unity better fits the Islamic ideal of religious tolerance, and it echoes the words of Sufi love poets like Jalal Ad-Din Rumi, who write “I am neither Muslim nor Christian, Jew nor Zoroastrian” (qtd. in Smith 264). Zohra agrees with Hamid’s vision of tolerance when she stands up to her husband, revealing to Bashir her alignment with Hamid and their shared beliefs regarding the Indian independence movement by declaring “I shall be influenced by whomsoever I like” (Futehally 205). Zohra’s actions in the argument demonstrate that “legally I am tied to him; but my soul and spirit are free,” and Futehally reaffirms a Sufi-inspired conviction that undermines the supposed religious basis for not only repressive patriarchal customs, but also the political divisions that grip India, when through Zohra’s voice she writes: “it is those who have a larger understanding who are the truly religious ones” (Futehally 229).
During the argument with Bashir, Hamid mentions that “only the land of the Buddha could have produced the Mahatma,” and so it remains unsurprising that the scene of revelation at the Ajanta caves marks a merger between the spiritual liberation promised by the teachings of Islam and Buddhism and the love between Zohra and Hamid as a means of gesturing toward the possibilities of a modern world free from patriarchy and empire (Futehally 202). The Ajanta caves immediately evoke parallels with Islam in that they are located “on the edge of a crescent-shaped range of hills” that literally form the traditional symbol of Islam, and that Hamid’s reflections on ecstatic Sufi poetry “far transcending human passion” tie the Buddhist paintings of the caves to later Indian art (Futehally 167, 169). In this way, Hai correctly reads the scene as an epiphanic realization “of an Indian heritage that explicitly reaches back to pre-Islamic history and that enables” Zohra and Hamid “to articulate their hopes for India’s independence” (“Adultery” 337).

Furthermore, Futehally’s decision to place her revelation scene within the Ajanta caves also offers a revision of Forster’s treatment of the Marabar Caves. Unlike Forster, Futehally does not create a revelation of illusion based on sexual assault in the caves of Ajanta, but instead delivers to Zohra and Hamid “a secret recognition of” their true feelings for each other in way that is both spiritually affirming and consensual (“Adultery” 337). This burgeoning love is accompanied by religious iconography in a modernist effort at once seeking to rehabilitate “old forms determined to ‘make it new,’” while also pointing toward a “recognition of an Indian heritage” (Smith and Cuervas 1; “Adultery” 337). In a move away from Forster, who seeks to transcend the limitations of religious language and reach beyond particular spiritual traditions, Futehally explicitly uses an ancient Buddhist site complete with human works of art in order “to transcend the ordinary and look for something spiritual in the world” (Smith and Cuervas 1).
Hamid gestures in this direction when he says that “a true artist longs to attain oneness with nature... whilst an ascetic seeks unity with the divine,” but his statement also reveals Futehally’s “larger understanding” of religion by affiliating nature with religion, Indian Muslim characters with Buddhist paintings, and her depiction of Indian Muslim experience in modernist English fiction (Futehally 168).

Interestingly, Zohra and Hamid turn to a work of colonialist art, Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879), to inform their understanding of Buddhism and their effort to overturn imperialism and the “state of bondage” that Indian cultures themselves adopted throughout history (Futehally 173). Hai is correct to read these Buddhist paintings as “inspir[ing] a critique of British imperialism,” and she writes that Hamid believes that Arnold, unlike most Englishmen, “understood the Buddha’s spirit of caring for the oppressed” (“Adultery” 337; Futehally 172). However, Hai fails to account for Arnold’s role in creating a Buddhist modernism that led to the Western image of Buddhism “as a nondogmatic creed of mindfulness and self-cultivation” by relying on anti-Buddhist Protestant missionary sources (Lecourt 669). Sebastian Lecourt traces the complexities that arise even from an English text based on biased missionary sources, which ultimately backfired by providing Arnold with the material for a poem that Western intellectuals critical of Christianity read as promoting “Buddhism as a kind of model religion for modernity” (669). Even more interestingly, Arnold’s poem presented the opportunity for another interpretations based upon the comparison of Protestantism and Buddhism by the missionary enterprise of his source material, empowering Sinhalese Buddhists to become “critics of imperial power” just as the Buddha is depicted as “bucking Hindu tradition” (Lecourt 673; 672).
Although Zohra and Hamid are Muslims, the revelation of the Ajanta caves shows how Futehally’s characters personally identify with the story of the Buddha and subsequently wield this meaning to “inspire oppositional politics” in modern India (Lecourt 673). At the moment when Hamid realizes his love for Zohra, he sees the reflection of the Buddha’s wife in Zohra’s eyes, thus symbolically linking her with the “sense of deep spiritual love” that the Buddha feels for his wife in contrast with “the passionate ardour” he felt for her prior to his enlightenment (Futehally 170). The deliberately spiritualized romantic feelings Futehally paints in the Ajanta caves undergird not only the romance she develops within her novel, but also the character of Zohra herself. Futehally writes that Zohra reciprocates Hamid’s feelings with “a faint smile of recognition, as if a figure from one of the frescoes had been imbued with life” (Futehally 170). This aestheticization of Zohra also occurs when Jacques paints an “ethereal, mystic” picture of her during Zohra’s visit to Paris, but Jacques’s love drives him to impose his desires upon her, as if in an enactment of both patriarchy and the colonial endeavor (Futehally 221). Hamid, however, responds later with a confession of his feelings and ultimately a renunciation of them as he commits himself to Satyagraha, undertaking a Buddha-like conquest of his sexual desires for Zohra even though he admits “I have not the Buddha’s strength” (Futehally 210).

Immediately following the episode in the Ajanta caves, Hamid and Zohra discuss Arnold’s poem The Light of Asia. In this manner, Futehally pivots from a romance built on shared personal interest and spiritual insight to a reflection upon the role that this love and its religious foundation can play in challenging constructions of patriarchal and imperial power. In other words, the love of Hamid and Zohra remains bound up with their attitudes toward faith and politics. Hamid’s recitation of verses from Arnold’s poem becomes the basis of a contrast that Zohra and Hamid outline between “the so-called great men of the world” and the Buddha’s
decision to turn away from worldly power (Futehally 171). At this point, Zohra suggests the possibility that “Gandhi is a reincarnation of the Buddha sent to cure the ills of India” (Futehally 172). Lecourt notes that Arnold’s poem had “a major impact on Mahatma Gandhi,” and it remains altogether likely that Zohra and Hamid, as supporters of Gandhi, are similarly influenced by The Light of Asia (674). Zohra and Hamid’s adaptation of Arnold’s Protestant appropriation of the Buddha’s story to promote the Indian independence movement thus takes part in a process of “creative reinterpretation” similar to that which Lecourt describes the Sinhalese Buddhists participating in by using Arnold’s imperial text “to defend Buddhism’s integrity” in the face of colonial encroachment (673). The fact that Futehally caps Zohra and Hamid’s revelation of mutual love in the Ajanta caves with an affirmation of an Indian national identity in the form of the Buddha’s narrative demonstrates the importance of identification with an interwoven ethnic and religious identity for Futehally’s characters. This “epiphany sparked by the cultural heritage that they [Zohra and Hamid] recognize as their own,” as Hai aptly puts it, has at its heart a spiritual dimension as potent as that which underlies the love between Zohra and Hamid (337).

Both Forster and Futehally make use of Eastern philosophy in their quest to use modernist fiction to subvert empire and patriarchy. In spite of the longstanding postcolonial debate plaguing A Passage to India and the lack of academic attention given to Zohra, Forster and Futehally’s works offer critiques of repressive social forces that incorporate modernist attitudes toward religion and art in their respective attempts to achieve freedom. Forster emphasized the extreme difficulty of overcoming religious language, and the oppression tied to linguistic constructions, in order to gain access the universal experience latent in the nonhuman world through the Marabar Caves, although his text implies that Indian philosophy comes closest
to this goal. Futehally, on the other hand, presents an emotional and spiritual alliance between two lovers that becomes manifest through the aesthetic revelation of a shared Indian identity in the Ajanta caves, one which threatens purdah, imperialism, and other forms of oppression. Qualified readings of these modernist novels present visions of alternate approaches to human relations through Eastern philosophical traditions that further Zohra's hope for the "unity of East and West—that much-desired synthesis," even if some of these texts, especially that of Forster, remains problematic from a postcolonial standpoint (Futehally 173).
Works Cited


Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. Harcourt, 1924.


