Arctic Summer by Damon Galgut

EM Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, took Henry James to task for what he saw as an over-valuing of design, at the expense of life. Conceding the perfection of design of James's *The Ambassadors*, Forster yet deplores the fact that James apparently believes that "most of human life has to disappear before he can do us a novel." For James, according to Forster, "a pattern must emerge, and anything that emerged from the pattern must be pruned off as wanton distraction." But, "Who so wanton as human beings?" Forster asks: for him, the perfectly structured novel is deficient exactly in it perfection.

Damon Galgut, in *Arctic Summer* (Umuzi), his monumental recreation of a central period in Forster's life, seems to have been led, in this as in other respects, by the example of his subject. He catches, with perfect pitch, the elusive plainness of Forster's style, the unadorned yet elegant phrasing, the understated humour, the quiet authority of the judgments. And his novel, too, leaves us with an impression of not having been subjected to a pre-ordained design or thematic blueprint: we follow Forster's travels with a kind of traveller's-journal minuteness, every stop recorded, every meeting minuted. Indeed, Galgut seems to have drawn on an astonishing array of primary and secondary materials, notably Forster's own journals.

As a novel about the writer's life, Galgut's book invites comparison with Colm Toíbín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author*, both about Henry James. But Galgut's novel is more satisfying than either of these, in being more in accord with its subject: the novel is Forsterian in a way that neither Toibin's nor Lodge's novel is Jamesian. Galgut inhabits his subject, both stylistically and temperamentally, more completely than either.

One of the many pleasures of Galgut's novel lies in its richness of detail, in the sheer promiscuity of the minutiae of travel. But, by the same token, the reader looking for a clear pattern, for a paring-down of detail in the interest of design, may be left dissatisfied, may feel that this *novel* at times reads too much like biography – not unmediated biography, since no biography is ever unmediated, but almost documentary in its painstaking reportage.

This is not to say that *Arctic Summer* lacks art: the meticulously shaped sentences, the careful displacements of chronology, the imaginative recreation of setting and dialogue, are all highly crafted. But what the novel eschews may be artifice, that is, the self-conscious shaping of the material to serve a central notion, a thematic matrix, the pointing of dialogue

to align the characters more definitely with the novel's themes. It is, in short, more Forsterian than Jamesian. This is not a weakness: it is a choice, and a courageous choice, and ultimately becomes the novel's subject.

Galgut's novel is something of a companion piece to Forster's *A Passage to India*, and, though it can stand perfectly well on its own, gains considerably by being read with that novel – if for no other reason than to appreciate the skill with which Galgut has woven Forster's novel into his own and vice versa. Galgut's novel gives us many insights into the makings of Forster's novel, and indeed into the making of his own. Because if the reader of *Arctic Summer* at times feels disorientated, grasping for a substantial subject under the plethora of biographical detail, that, it turns out, replicates Forster own struggle to forge a fiction out of the multitude of impressions he received during his visit to India:

> He found himself noting little moments, or particular people, with an eye to using them later. He didn't really know what he would do with them; only that they were part of a fabric he'd begun to weave. […] But the trouble with Mr Godbole, and all the other bits and pieces he was gathering, was that they remained loose strands – little pieces of talk, or momentary impressions gleaned in passing – with nothing to knot them together. In writing his previous novels, there had always been something at the middle of the narrative, a thickening into solidity, around or over or through which the story had to pass. Everything would lead up to it, and then everything would lead out of it again. Without that obstacle in his way, he couldn't even begin. But although his mind had been preoccupied with his Indian book for quite some time, he still had no sense of what that central density might be.

Forster's search for something "to knot them together" is also Galgut's reaching for a unifying thread in the wealth of material he has assembled. And Forster's quest, in more senses than one, becomes Galgut's subject.

The complex relation of Galgut's novel to Foster's is signalled by his dedication of *Arctic Summer* "To Riyaz Ahmad Mir and to the fourteen years of our friendship," echoing Forster's dedication of his novel "To Syed Ross Masood and to the seventeen years of our friendship." In both instances, then, the novel is in some sense a tribute to a friendship that we assume to be central to the impulse behind the novel.

It may be, then, that Galgut is inviting us to see *Arctic Summer* as his own *Passage to India*. I don't know how far the parallels can be taken, and it would be impertinent to speculate beyond the limits of the novel itself, but the dedication does open up a passage, as it were, between this novel and Galgut's previous book, the masterly (and, in this country, under-appreciated) *In a Strange Room*, with its overtly autobiographical slant. In *In a Strange Room* the protagonist undertook three journeys, one of them to India, in a restlessly circular quest for love, or for the kind of meaning that love is reputed to give to existence.

Forster's own quest, as Galgut interprets it, also represents an attempt to wrest a meaning from emptiness, from the absence of a ready-made significance. The ultimate experience of the protagonist of *In a Strange Room* is that of loneliness; and that, too, is Forster's abiding condition. Both *In a Strange Room* and *Arctic Summer* end by the side of a grave; both dramatise the imperative to turns one's back on the grave and continue the quest.

As Galgut enables us to see, Forster cherished a life-long affection for, even infatuation, with Masood, a heterosexual man who permitted, even encouraged, his love, without reciprocating it physically. It was Masood who urged Forster to write a novel about India; and he, we feel, is at the centre of the novel that gets written. Masood was clearly an immensely important presence in Forster's life. Yet, ultimately, the relationship left Forster unsatisfied: through no fault of his own, Masood could not give Forster what he wanted, which was a full physical relationship. It is also clear from Galgut's vivid recreation of their relationship that Masood, though effusively affectionate, was somewhat dilatory in demonstration of that affection, for example, in a simple matter like helping Forster with the practical details of Indian life that he needed for his novel. Masood is warm, demonstrative, generous – but, perhaps understandably, preoccupied with his practical world.

This account of an affectionate but uncommitted relationship provides a foil to the poignant story of Forster's involvement with the Egyptian tram conductor, Mohammed. Mohammed, too, is in essence heterosexual; but he is more responsive, or perhaps just more obliging or even needy-- in any case, more inclined to submit to Forster's desires. This, the most moving part of the novel, dramatises a mutual need that is yet very differently based: Forster's need is emotional and sexual, Mohammed's perhaps financial but also, arguably, based on the deference of the colonial subject to the colonial master – though that aspect is much more prevalent and explicit in Forster's frankly mercenary relation with the young barber, Kanaya, at the court of the Maharaj of Dewas, whose Private Secretary Forster was for a while. Forster's comment on his own conduct is trenchant: "Buggery in the colonies: it

wasn't noble." With Mohammed, on the other hand, he has a tender, if somewhat inarticulate relationship – the closest he ever comes to a relationship that is both physically and emotionally fulfilling.

Thus, gradually, Galgut's theme takes shape around Forster's struggle to find an own identity in the face of contending claims on his loyalty – notably that of his demanding, cantankerous mother as against the promptings of his own nature. The crossing of the line between those two claims is finely dramatised in Galgut's description of Forster's first sexual encounter, at the age of 37, with a British soldier on an Egyptian beach – and so seamless is Galgut's incorporation of biographical information that the uninformed reader has no way of knowing whether this encounter is fact or fiction. The encounter itself is over in "a few fumbling seconds," but its implications for Forster, or Morgan as he is consistently called, are immense:

> If they could have seen him doing … what he'd just done, his mother, oh how terrible, or Maimie or Aunt Laura, any of the old, powdery, frangible halo of women who encircled him, there would be no words. All of them would understand, as he did now, that he had crossed a line in himself, he had left their world behind, the decent world of tea parties and suburban witticisms. Of *telegrams and anger*.

The last phrase, quoted from Forster's fourth novel, *Howards End*, signals also Forster's leaving behind of his former subject, the foibles and mores of the suburban existence that he despised even while in thrall to it.

And although *A Passage to India* was as reticent as any of his other novels on the subject (except for his overtly homosexual novel, *Maurice*, which was never published in his lifetime), here, at least, he was approaching something elemental, central to his own sexual and emotional life. In the figure of the repressed British spinster, Adela Quested, "dry, earnest, ignorant Adela", who believes herself to have been sexually assaulted in the Marabar Caves, Forster embodied something of his own uncomprehending blankness in the face of sexual experience: "the driest, most sticklike part of her remained Morgan." And through Miss Quested's own imperfect understanding of the meaning of her experience, Forster came to understand that "the lack of an answer was, in fact, the answer": "It was right that there should be an obscurity at the core of events, around which the characters could dance."

That may also be the answer to the reader who demands to know exactly what *Arctic Summer* is about: the lack of an answer is, in fact, the answer. The obscurity at the core of events links this novel with Forster's own troubled history and its connection with the inconclusive experiences of his protagonists.

In this respect the Marabar Caves, under their actual name of Barabar Caves, stand at the centre of Galgut's novel, as they do at the centre of Forster's, as an image of an emptiness that produces an echo of an emptiness, a meaning whose deepest meaning is in its meaninglessness. Forster's famous mantra, *Only Connect*, could serve also as a motto to his search for significance in his Indian experience: how to connect this vast world with his own inner world and its turmoils? If, at times, *Arctic Summer* seems like a novel in search of a subject, it gradually reveals itself as a novel about a novelist in search of a subject, and finding it in his own sexual bewilderment.

Arctic Summer is a tour de force of biographical fiction, and of the recreation of an era and a milieu, and the characters peopling it; but it is more than that: it is the loving yet unsparing anatomising of one novelist by another, an exploration, perhaps, of common ground in the common pursuit of an artistic ideal in the service of a quest for meaning. It is, however one measures it, a tremendous achievement, deserving of the highest accolades.