

Hospitality/Hostility in Colonial and Postcolonial Writing: The Guests and Hosts of O'Connor, Camus, Forster, and Rushdie

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Abstract: Several canonical works of twentieth-century literature have dramatized the tension in the host/guest relationship and the question of duty in colonial and postcolonial settings: Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" (1931) and Albert Camus' "The Guest" (1958) explore these tensions in Ireland under British rule (O'Connor) and in Algeria under French rule (Camus), while E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) provide two of the most extensive and complex treatments of the relationship between hospitality and hostility in the context of the British Raj and its aftermath, with the later novel existing in a relationship of both hospitality and hostility to the earlier one. Considering these four works together might help us, in the words of Alberto Fernández Carbajal, "to understand more fully how an ongoing negotiation of friendship against public enmity can find a discursive and ideological bridge between colonial and postcolonial writing" (124). What the O'Connor and Camus stories share with the Forster and Rushdie novels is a powerful indictment of how traditional ideas of duty and responsibility for one's fellows are disrupted by colonialism and its aftereffects.

Keywords: Camus, O'Connor, Forster, Rushdie, colonial/postcolonial

In a memorable article titled "The Critic as Host," published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1977, J. Hillis Miller demonstrates how the words "host" and "guest" exist in a "double antithetical relation": "guest' in the

bifold sense of friendly presence and alien invader" (442). The words "host" and "guest," Miller notes, derive from same Indo-European root: "*ghost-i*, stranger, guest, host, properly 'someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality'. . . . A host in the sense of a guest, moreover, is both a friendly visitor in the house and at the same time an alien presence who turns the home into a hotel, and neutral territory" (442–43).¹ (Hotel, by the way, also derives from the same Indo-European root, and the word "duty" is etymologically related to the word "debt": that is, something one person owes another). Several canonical works of twentieth-century literature have dramatized the tension in the host/guest relationship and the question of duty in colonial and postcolonial settings: Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" (1931) and Albert Camus' "The Guest" (1958) explore these tensions in Ireland under British rule (O'Connor) and Algeria under French rule (Camus), while E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) provide two of most extensive and complex treatments of the relationship between hospitality and hostility in the context of the British Raj and its aftermath, with the later novel existing in a relationship of both hospitality and hostility to the earlier one. Considering these four works together might help us, in the words of Alberto Fernández Carbajal, "to understand more fully how an ongoing negotiation of friendship against public enmity can find a discursive and ideological bridge between colonial and postcolonial writing" (124). What the O'Connor and Camus stories share with the Forster and Rushdie novels is a powerful indictment of how traditional ideas of duty and responsibility for one's fellows are disrupted by colonialism and its aftereffects.

As Miller's analysis demonstrates, the concept of reciprocal duties of hospitality is bound up in the very nature of Indo-European languages, and it is therefore not surprising to find that concept reflected in literature since its beginnings. In classical Indian literature, the Rig Veda extols the virtue of hospitality—"Bounteous is he who gives unto the beggar who comes to him in want of food and feeble. Success attends him in the shout of battle. He makes a friend of him in future troubles"—and the Taittiriya Upanishad advises, "Be one to whom the guest

is a god" (1.11.1–2). Examples of the sacred duty of hospitality are also found in the *Odyssey*, when the princess Nausikaa instructs her handmaidens, "[T]his man [Odysseus] is a castaway, poor fellow; we must take care of him. Strangers and beggars come from Zeus: a small gift, then, is friendly," (105) and in the Old and New Testaments, as when the author of the letter to the Hebrews admonishes his audience, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (*Authorized King James Version*, Heb. 13.2). The sacred tradition of responsibility for strangers becomes increasingly problematic, however, when the alien presence is a colonial power. As Fernández Carbajal writes, "The tensions in endlessly negotiated but unresolved rules of hospitality complicate the relationship between self and other to the point of crisis" (115). Fernández Carbajal is referring specifically to the work of Forster and Rushdie, but the concept can be applied profitably to other works that dramatize negotiations of these unresolved rules in moments of crisis brought about by the pressures of colonialism, such as "Guests of the Nation" and "The Guest."

The short stories of O'Connor and Camus both portray men who, as a result of the dehumanizing nature of colonialism, are forced to negotiate unresolved rules of hospitality. Set in Ireland during the Irish struggle for independence, "Guests of the Nation" is narrated by an IRA soldier called Bonaparte, who along with another IRA man called Noble has been given the task of guarding two English prisoners (the "guests" of the title). Owing to their close association over a period of several weeks, the four men develop a bond, even a grudging admiration for one another. Bonaparte is therefore shocked and appalled when orders come from the IRA command to shoot the English prisoners in retaliation for the execution of a number of IRA prisoners by the English army. But the IRA men carry out the orders, after which the old woman in whose house they have been holding the prisoners falls to her knees and begins telling her beads, reminding readers of her earlier warning that "nothing but sorrow and want follows those that disturbs the hidden powers" (O'Connor 373).

The old woman represents the traditional view of the sacred duty of hospitality: to her, the English strangers are guests. The IRA leaders view

the English strangers as enemies and thus feel they do not merit hospitality (though this perception is further complicated etymologically by the fact that another root of “host” is the Latin *hostis*, “enemy” [Hillis Miller 443]). Bonaparte is caught in between: through his intimate association with the English prisoners, he comes to see them as guests, but in the end he capitulates to the IRA’s view of them as enemies and therefore eradicable. Ultimately, however, Bonaparte comes to understand that in failing to protect their guests, the Irish have violated a sacred trust, one that no political end can supersede. The story ends with Bonaparte expressing the sense of absolute alienation that has resulted from his participation in disturbing the hidden powers: it was “as though the patch of bog where the two Englishmen were was a thousand miles away from me, and even Noble mumbling just behind me and the old woman and her birds were all far away, and I was somehow very small and lonely” (O’Connor 381). As a result of violating his duty to his guests, Bonaparte has become an exile in his own country.

Camus’ “The Guest” similarly dramatizes negotiations over unresolved rules of hospitality in a situation of crisis precipitated by colonialism. The story takes place in Algeria during the Algerian war for independence from France. The main character, Daru, is a French schoolteacher assigned to a remote schoolhouse in the middle of the desert. Though a stranger in a strange land, Daru has come to love the country and its people, so when a French gendarme orders Daru to take an Arab prisoner who has been charged with murder to the nearest police station, Daru wants nothing to do with it. Instead, after feeding and sheltering the prisoner for the night, Daru leads the Arab to a crossroads some distance from the school and explains that one road leads to the police station, and if he takes that road, he will be put in prison to await trial. The other road leads to a camp of Bedouins, who will take him in and feed and shelter him according to their custom. Daru then gives the prisoner some food, water, and money and heads back to the school. From the hill on which the school is situated, Daru has a view of both roads, and he is dismayed to see the prisoner walking in the direction of the police station. When Daru later enters the classroom, he finds written on the

blackboard the words "You handed over our brother. You will pay for this" (Camus 109).

The French title of the story is "L'hôte," which means both "the host" and "the guest" and thus highlights the ambiguity of the colonial situation. Daru attempts to treat the prisoner as a guest, although he himself is the actual stranger or sojourner in Algeria. In allowing his duties as host to supersede his duties as a representative of the colonial government, he has exiled himself from his countrymen. But in attempting to make the prisoner take responsibility for his fate, Daru has exiled himself from the adopted country he has grown to love. As does "Guests of the Nation," "The Guest" ends with a depiction of the utter isolation of the protagonist: "Daru looked at the sky, the plateau, and beyond, the invisible lands stretching all the way to the sea. In this vast landscape he had loved so much, he was alone" (109). The colonial situation renders Daru, as it did Bonaparte, incapable of fulfilling the ethical demands his humanity does not allow him to deny.

As George Orwell writes in his celebrated essay "Shooting an Elephant," "I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys" (217). Neither Bonaparte nor his IRA companion has any desire to shoot the English prisoners, but they ironically find themselves trapped by their role as freedom fighters. And while Daru's actions toward the prisoner can hardly be considered tyrannical, as the representative of a tyrannical colonial government, he finds that his freedom to act according to his innate sense of responsibility has been essentially destroyed. Both stories end with their protagonists exiled from the human family as a result of their inability to successfully negotiate the unresolved rules of hospitality and the proper relationship between self and other. But the stories make it clear that their failure to resolve these tensions is the inevitable result of colonialism. If Bonaparte had refused to participate in executing the Englishmen, he would likely have been executed along with his guests. "The Guest" raises even more troubling questions about hospitality, however; Daru does everything he can to provide hospitality, even conferring his own freedom on the Arab prisoner, and yet the story ends with the suggestion that Daru will

be punished for doing so. This dramatization of the dangers involved in both denying hospitality and providing it is one of many strong thematic and narratological parallels between the O'Connor and Camus stories and the Forster and Rushdie novels.

The point of view in Forster's novel is analogous to that of Camus' story: just as the third-person narrator of "The Guest" tells the story from the point of view of the colonist but with sympathy for the colonized (the Algerian schoolchildren in particular, but also the prisoner), so the third-person narrator of *A Passage* tells the story primarily from a colonial perspective but with a great deal of sympathy for the colonized Indians (especially Aziz). Likewise, the point of view in O'Connor's story is similar to that in Rushdie's novel: the first-person narrator of "Guests of the Nation" (Bonaparte) tells the story from the point of view of the colonized but questions the justification for their anti-colonial actions, and the first-person narrator of *Midnight's Children* (Saleem Sinai) tells the story from the point of view of the colonized but questions the sanity of their post-colonial actions. Furthermore, though Forster's third-person narrative voice is far removed from Saleem Sinai's, both employ narrative strategies that interrogate the concept of hospitality to examine the relationship between colonizer and colonized in British India.

In neither *A Passage to India* nor *Midnight's Children* does the principal action begin with the character who represents the central consciousness of the novel. Rather, both novels begin with a Dr. Aziz, who has gone to Europe to receive a medical education (England for Forster's Aziz and Germany for Rushdie's) and returned to India to practice, only to find himself treated as a second-class citizen in his own land. Both are victims of colonial oppression: Forster's Aziz is falsely accused of attempted rape, imprisoned, and put on trial. Though he is ultimately exonerated, he feels that his reputation has been ruined and ends up in self-imposed exile in the Hindu state of Mau, where as a Muslim he is a complete stranger to the local beliefs and customs. Rushdie's Aziz is present at the Amritsar massacre where British General Dyer's troops shoot thousands of peaceful protesters who are demonstrating for independence; he escapes with his life only because a sneeze causes

him to fall forward, thus ducking the hail of bullets. When he returns home covered with blood after treating the wounded, his wife asks him, "But where have you been, my God?" to which he responds, "Nowhere on earth" (Rushdie 35). Rushdie's Aziz is even more profoundly exiled than Forster's. At the end of his life, he returns to the place of his birth, searching for God, but dies in a Hindu temple rather than the mosque that would be the fitting resting place for a lifelong Muslim. Unlike the exile of Bonaparte, however, (though akin in some respects to that of Daru), the exiles of both Dr. Azizes can be traced not to their violation of their traditional duties to welcome strangers but to their attempts to fulfill those duties. After meeting the English visitors Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested at the home of British schoolmaster Cyril Fielding, Dr. Aziz invites them to his home but then decides that his residence is unsuitable for hosting British ladies. As an alternate plan, he organizes a trip to the Marabar Caves, setting in motion the series of events that result in Aziz's arrest, trial, and exile.

The exile of Rushdie's Dr. Aziz is also associated with his attempt to fulfill the duty of hospitality. When the poet Nadir Khan, who is being hunted by pro-Partition extremists, requests sanctuary at Aziz's home, Aziz grants it and allows him to live in the basement for several months. Aziz's daughter Mumtaz falls in love with and marries Nadir Khan, but when after two years of marriage her mother discovers that she is still a virgin, Nadir Khan is driven from the house and Aziz is excoriated by his wife Naseem: "Whose head was full of every incomprehensible thing. . . . [W]hose brain was so softened by fancy foreign ideas that he could send his child into such an unnatural marriage? Who had spent his life offending God . . . and on whose head was this judgment? Who had brought disaster down upon his house . . . ?" (64). Naseem Aziz's words might be dismissed as hysterical hyperbole, if not for the fact that the house is later destroyed by a bomb during the First Indo-Pakistani war. In both novels, invitations to strangers fulfill traditional social and religious obligations but result in social ruin and religious uprooting. And in both, the colonial situation renders the act of traditional hospitality ruinous—the British prejudice against Indians in *Passage* and the British partition of India in *Midnight's Children*.

Other scenes of problematic hospitality run through both novels—*Passage* features the awkward “Bridge Party” at the Turtons’ residence and the misunderstanding over the Bhattacharyas’ invitation to Adela and Mrs. Moore, while in *Midnight’s Children* Amina Sinai offers refuge to Lifafa Das and Picture Singh makes a similar offer to Saleem Sinai. The concept of invitation extends beyond the mundane in both novels. In *Passage*, the Hindu Professor Godbole explains that in a raga addressed to Lord Krishna, the singer invites Krishna over and over to come, but he refuses to do so. Likewise, Aziz recites a poem by the Muslim writer Ghalib, upon which Forster’s narrator comments, “Less explicit than the call to Krishna, it voiced our loneliness nevertheless, our isolation, our need for the Friend who never comes yet is never entirely disproved” (Forster 114). And in *Midnight’s Children*, though Naseem Aziz is convinced that she has the Call of God, her husband mistakes the terrorist Joseph Acosta for God and therefore refuses to go to Pakistan “because that was a country built especially for God; and in the remaining years of his life he often disgraced himself by stumbling into mosques and temples with his old man’s stick, mouthing imprecations and lashing out at any worshipper or holy man within range” (Rushdie 317). The invitations to and from God in *Passage* are not answered, but neither are they rejected outright as they are in *Midnight’s Children*.

In a 2012 address at the Hay Arts Festival, Rushdie recounted meeting Forster while studying at Cambridge and identified *A Passage to India* as an impetus for his masterpiece *Midnight’s Children*:

I was a great admirer of *A Passage to India*. But when I started to write *Midnight’s Children*, in some ways I wrote it against the Forster project—that very cool, controlled, Forsterian language, which I admired but which wasn’t like the India I knew. India isn’t cool, it’s hot, and I began to wonder what the language might sound like that was not cool but hot, that was noisy and vulgar and crowded and sensual. Sometimes you find your voice by trying to write like people, and sometimes you find it by trying to write unlike people. And trying to write unlike Forster was the way I found mine. (qtd. in Singh)

A comparative examination of the two novels, however, suggests that Forster's influence on Rushdie may not have been entirely counter-reactive. Surely it is no coincidence that both novels begin with a Dr. Aziz, and even Rushdie's justly celebrated linguistic play finds antecedents in Forster's language, which while seldom if ever "vulgar" is often noisy, crowded, and sensual. As Fernández Carbajal notes, "the conflicted hospitality articulated in Forster's colonial text" and the "the persistence of heated confrontations in postcolonial India expressed in a violent and intimate clash" in Rushdie's text are "discursively connected . . . despite Rushdie's misgivings about Forster's 'classical' and 'cool' prose" (122). Fernández Carbajal provides few specific examples of this "violent and intimate" language in Forster's work, but the ambiguity about divine hospitality in *Passage* is perhaps reflected in Forster's most extended use of "hot" language in the novel, the description of the Hindu festival of Gokul Ashtami that opens the "Temple" section:

Where was the God Himself, in whose honour the congregation had gathered? Indistinguishable in the jumble of his own altar, huddled out of sight amid images of inferior descent, smothered under rose-leaves, overhung by oleographs, out-blazed by golden tablets representing the Rajah's ancestors, and entirely obscured, when the wind blew, by the tattered foliage of a banana. (Forster 319)

Chapter XXXIII of *A Passage* is replete with similar "noisy, crowded, and sensual" language— "Noise, noise, the Europeanized band louder, incense on the altar, sweat, the blaze of lights, wind in the bananas, noise, thunder" (321)—and the entire chapter is stylistically not so far from the stream-of-consciousness meditation that concludes *Midnight's Children*, a single sentence that occupies two full pages, a part of which runs as follows:

[B]ut now I see familiar faces in the crowd, they are all here, my grandfather Aadam and his wife Naseem, and Alia and Mustapha and Hanif and Emerald, and Amina who was Mumtaz, and Nadir who became Qasim, and Pia and Zafar

who wet his bed and also General Zulfikar, they throng around me pushing shoving crushing, and the cracks are widening, pieces of my body are falling off, there is Jamila who has left her nunnery to be present on this last day, night is falling has fallen, there is a countdown ticktocking to midnight, fireworks and stars, the cardboard cutouts of wrestlers, and I see that I shall never reach Kashmir, like Jehangir the Mughal emperor I shall die with Kashmir on my lips, unable to see the valley of delights to which men go to enjoy life, or end it, or both. (Rushdie 533)

Such stylistic affinities call into question Rushdie's claim to have found his voice in writing against Forster's.

Miller examines the connection between texts that have been deemed parasitical in some sense and observes that "the relation between any two contiguous elements in this chain is that strange opposition which is of intimate kinship and at the same time of enmity" (444). Fernández Carbajal explicitly links the kinship and enmity between the work of Rushdie and Forster to colonial/postcolonial trauma:

Rushdie's overall postmodernist and magic realist style may depart more explicitly from Forster's reluctant modernism, yet . . . Rushdie also inherits from Forster obliquely a language of hospitality, of blended intimacy and violence, which is the hallmark of Forster's exploration of the failed politics of friendship in *A Passage to India*. . . . The partial clues which Rushdie offers in the shape of names from Forster's novel ask us to look under these textual layers . . . in order to understand more fully how an ongoing negotiation of friendship against public enmity can find a discursive and ideological bridge between colonial and postcolonial writing by using a language of hospitality linking the subject's individual trauma to the troubled fortunes of the postcolonial nation. (124)

All four works of fiction examined here are informed by negotiations of friendship against public enmity: the friendship that momentarily

overcomes the public enmity between the IRA soldiers and English prisoners in “Guests of the Nation”; Daru’s ultimately unrewarded acts of friendship toward the Arab prisoner in “The Guest”; the genuine but thwarted friendship between the colonist Fielding and the colonized Aziz in *A Passage to India*; and the divisive forces of colonial and postcolonial fragmentation that threaten all forms of friendship in *Midnight’s Children*. Despite the evident stylistic, tonal, and structural differences in these works that represent the polarities of the colonial situation, all four use a language of hospitality that links the individual trauma of the subjects to the troubled fortunes of colonized Ireland, Algeria, and India—a language that can also assist in forming a bridge between the often-inimical spheres of colonial and postcolonial writing.

Notes

- 1 In addition, some scholars have related *ghost-i* to Sanskrit *ghasati*, “consume,” and as Liberman observes, “If this sense can be connected with the idea of offering food to guests, we will again find ourselves in the sphere of hospitality.”

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