

Emilio Salgari and E. M. Forster: Two Indias, Multiple Imaginaries

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Abstract: My comparative analysis of two major texts dealing with pre-Independence India produced by two European writers at the turn of the past century – *I misteri della jungla nera* (*The Mysteries of the Black Jungle*, 1895) by Emilio Salgari and *A Passage to India* (1924) by E. M. Forster – stems from the basic assumption stated in Lisa Lowe’s 1991 seminal study on Forster’s novel, namely the “ruling British perspective that traditionally considered India a colorful backdrop to the central British drama, and Indians as peripheral objects to be colonized and scrutinized rather than as possessing a point of view themselves.” In Salgari’s novel, this perspective will be challenged through the creation of a Hindu hero involved in a passionate love relationship with an English girl gone hybrid, while in Forster’s plot, strictly set within the boundaries of Anglo-India, a Muslim co-protagonist ineffectually woos a forbidden object of desire, a young lady traveler from the mother country.

Since the plots of the two novels proceed along divergent lines and in different historical contexts – Salgari’s on the eve of the 1857 Great Mutiny and Forster’s in the aftermath of the Amritsar massacre of 1919 – both authors conceive and appropriate in a different way the pre-Independence India they want to describe. If we keep in mind that in 1895, when Salgari published his novel, Lord Curzon, viceroy of India, had just passed a code that severely punished any sexual contact between white women and Indian men we can fully appreciate the extent of Salgari’s writing strategy as opposed to contemporary Victorian authors like Kipling, Conrad, and Forster, who adopted by comparison the sexually biased interpretation that forbade interaction between individuals who



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Received: 2024-09-13; reviewed 2024-11-25; accepted 2024-12-14

were considered racially different, a view that considered all 'natives' anywhere in the empire as "niggers", whether they belonged to the Irish whites or to the South African Hottentots.

Two different Indias thus come to life: Salgari's anticipates a postcolonial scenario, while Forster's confirms the existing prejudices and stereotypes contained in Kipling's imperialistic outlook.

Keywords: Emilio Salgari, Edward Morgan Forster, Rudyard Kipling, India in literature, Postcolonial studies

It is the "night of 16 May 1855," and Emilio Salgari's opening lines of his Indian novel, *I misteri della jungla nera* (*The Mysteries of the Black Jungle*, 1895), focus readers' attention on the delta of the Ganges spreading over the gulf of Bengal:

The Gange (Ganges), this famous river celebrated by ancient and modern Indians alike, whose waters are deemed sacred by everyone, after flowing across the snowy peaks of Himalaya and the rich provinces of Sirinagar (Srinagar), of Delhi, of Odhe (Odisha), of Bahare (Bihar), of Bengala (Bengal), divides itself in two branches at the distance of two hundred and twenty miles from the ocean, thus forming a gigantic delta, a marvelous and intricate maze which is probably unique.

The imposing mass of waters divides and subdivides itself in a multitude of rivulets, canals and small channels that give a jagged appearance to the immense spread of lands extending between the Hugly (Hugli), the real Ganges, and the gulf of Bengal. As a result, you can find an infinite number of islands, islets, and river banks that, edging towards the sea, acquire the name of *Sunderbunds* (Sundarbans).

Nothing could be more desolating, strange and frightening than the sight of these *Sunderbunds*. Not a town, not a village, not a hut, not even a shelter; from south to north, from east to west, nothing else than immense extensions of thorny bamboos are to be seen, closely knit together, and whose tall ends move at the blow of a wind which smells horribly from the unbearable exhalations let out by the thousands and thousands of dead human corpses left to rot in the poisonous waters of the canals.

It is rare if you can spot a *banian* (banyan) towering over those gigantic canes; even rarer it is to find a group of *manghieri* (mango-trees), *giacchieri* (jack-fruit trees) and *nagassi* (cannon-ball trees) surging over the marshland, or that the sweet perfume of jasmine, *sciambaga* (champakas) or *mussenda* (dhobi tree) reaches your nostrils, as they shyly peek through such a chaos of plants.

During the day, a funereal gigantic silence, that oppresses with fear even the bravest, reigns supreme; during the night, a horrifying din filled with howls, roars, hisses and whistles freezes the blood in your veins. (*MJN*, 279)¹

Sight and sound – as well as smell – powerfully lead readers towards an overwhelming experience that will change forever their perception of what India *really is*. I would like to set the incipit of *I misteri della jungla nera* against the opening paragraph of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, published almost thirty years later, in 1924:

Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest. Chandrapore was never large or beautiful, but two hundred years ago it lay on the road between Upper India, then imperial, and the sea, and the fine houses date from that period. The zest for decoration stopped in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever democratic. There is no painting and scarcely

1 I have deliberately kept in this paragraph the nouns employed by Salgari to enhance the musical quality of the text, and I have given between parentheses the translation by Vescovi 2019, 8. All translations from Salgari's novel are mine and will be marked in the text with *MJN* followed by page number; all quotations from Forster's novel will be marked in the text with *APTI* followed by page number, and from Kipling's *Kim* with *K*.

any carving in the bazaars. The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. So abased, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye, that when the Ganges comes down it might be expected to wash the excrescence back into the soil. Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life. (*APTI*, 5-6)

Whereas the Sundarbans form the still existing natural habitat of the coast of Bengal and Bangladesh, Chandrapore is an invented city set on the banks of the Ganges, reproducing Bankipur, a suburb east of Patna, in the state of Bihar, up north from the delta. When I wrote my first postcolonial essay on Salgari (see Galli Mastrodonato, 1996) I wanted to measure the way in which two Western authors had inscribed into their novels “the representation and appropriation of India as Other” (Lowe 1991, 122). Although Salgari’s and Forster’s Western affiliations were very different, one writing (very little) in a hegemonic language spreading over the imperialistic occupation of foreign lands, the other writing (very much) in what has become economically a minor and ‘southern’ European idiom, both white writers staged in their Indian narratives a close encounter between a ‘native’ and a young English woman.

Emilio Salgari was born in Verona in 1862 and died by suicide in Turin in 1911. Italy’s great adventure novelist ranks fourth as the most translated author after Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino, and Dante, and is considered among the fifteen celebrities who have distinguished themselves since the reunification of the country in 1861 (see Galli Mastrodonato 2024, Introduction, 1-18). After publishing in 1883 *La Tigre della Malesia* (*The Tiger of Malaysia*), starring Sandokan, the Bornean prince turned pirate, Salgari will devote other fascinating novels to Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, inaugurating a literary cycle that deeply challenges common ideas and stereotypes held during his time about the Orient and the Other.

Although both narrations set their plots around a precise topography, the river Ganges, the effect that the two authors want to convey to their reading publics is diametrically opposed. While Chandrapore becomes *by reduction* a filthy “excrescence” (*APTI*, 6) devoid of any interest, Salgari’s *Sunderbunds* become *by accumulation* a “marvelous” and “unique” (*MJN*, 279) multiplier of signifiers and signified. Where sacredness is taken away (“the Ganges happens not to be holy

here", *APTI*, 5), in the other text an unequivocal marker of a cultural and religious identity is added ("whose waters are deemed sacred by everyone", *MJN*, 279). Where the strange and the different are mimetically represented as a "low but indestructible form of life" (*APTI*, 6) that has to be looked upon with disgust (rubbish, filth), in the other the alien universe ("desolating, strange and frightening", *MJN*, 279) is deconstructed through the luscious semantic explosion of foreign etyma, which plunge readers directly within an all-encompassing sensuous experience (*manghieri, giacchieri, nagassi, sciambaga, mussenda*).

Where Chandrapore acquired some "beauty" only at the time of its colonisation by the British "in the eighteenth century" (*APTI*, 6), the Sundarbans, where the majestic river ends, appeal to "ancient and modern Indians alike" (*MJN*, 279), thus setting a crucially discriminating outlook on the background that will be framed into the different narrations. In Forster's view, we can only expect to encounter "mean" streets and people made of "mud" who worship in "ineffective" temples, while through Salgari's cinematic gaze, readers embrace a wide horizon (immense, gigantic) that proceeds from the "rich" provinces to the peculiar habitat of the delta flowing through the religious immanence of the Ganges. Something is similar, though, and it is the mysterious relationship that seems to exist between life and death carried by the ominous image of "people ... drowned and left rotting" (*APTI*, 6) and "the thousands and thousands of dead human corpses left to rot in the poisonous waters of the canals" (*MJN*, 279). There is some dark secret that cannot be named in both texts, well hidden in the labyrinthine depths of the Marabar caves for the English author and in the black "hissing" jungle for our Italian one.

Since the plots of the two novels proceed along divergent lines and in different historical contexts – Salgari's on the eve of the 1857 Great Mutiny and Forster's in the aftermath of the Amritsar massacre of 1919 – both authors conceive and appropriate in a different way the pre-Independence India they want to describe.

If we keep in mind that in 1895, when Salgari published *I misteri della jungla nera* – with the passionate love story between a Bengali snake hunter and the daughter of a British garrison officer – Lord Curzon, viceroy of India, had just passed a code that severely punished any sexual contact between 'natives' and whites, especially sanctioning relations between "white women and Indian men" (Williams 1994, 492), we can fully appreciate the extent of Salgari's writing strategy. Contemporary Victorian authors like Kipling, Conrad, and Forster, as we shall see, adopted by comparison the sexually biased interpretation that

forbade interaction between individuals who were considered racially different, a view that considered all 'natives' anywhere in the empire as "niggers", whether they belonged to the Irish whites or to the South African Hottentots.²

Closing in on the subject of their stories, Salgari and Forster adopted opposite writing techniques. While Forster maintains the Western travel narrative convention – white protagonists who meet non-white characters in a foreign setting they have reached by displacing themselves from the mother country to which they will eventually return – Salgari instead places readers directly into the matter of his narration by using the *in medias res* modernist device. As we shall see, the so called natives and the British are equally part of the picture framing the Raj of the mid-nineteenth century, thus giving consistency to an insightful comment by Lisa Lowe, namely that Salgari critically challenged the "ruling British perspective that traditionally considered India a colorful backdrop to the central British drama, and Indians as peripheral objects to be colonized and scrutinized rather than as possessing a point of view themselves" (Lowe 1991, 103).

Let us consider first Salgari's colored hero as he lies asleep next to a "vast and sturdy bamboo hut," dressed only in "a large *dootèe* (dhoti) of printed *chites* (chintz)," which lays bare an "Indian athletically built" whose limbs and muscles are "overdeveloped," a clear sign of "his uncommon strength joined to the suppleness of an ape":

He was a handsome type of Bengalese, around 30 years of age, of a yellowish hue that was extremely shiny due to the coconut oil which anointed his skin; he had fine traits, his lips were full without being gross and through them you could see that he had admirable teeth; his nose was well formed, his forehead high, and crossed over with ash lines, the specific sign of the worshippers of Shiva. The whole setup expressed a rare energy and an extraordinary bravery, two features that are generally lacking in his compatriots. (*MJN*, 280)

We meet doctor Aziz in the chapter following the first, which was significantly entitled "Mosque": "He was an athletic little man, daintily put together, but

2 Lord Salisbury, in the years between 1885 and 1902, defined as racially inferior all subjects of British dominions, whether referred to the Irish or the Hottentots, and had gone as far as calling "a 'nigger' that black man, a politician from India"; see Henry Wesseling, *La spartizione dell'Africa, 1880-1914* (Milan, 2001), 218, my translation.

really very strong. Nevertheless walking fatigued him, as it fatigues everyone in India except the newcomer. There is something hostile in that soil" (*APTI*, 16).

Although both non-white characters are "athletic" and pleasant looking, Aziz is small-sized and overwhelmed ("fatigued") by the "hostile" background against which he is framed, while the young man asleep in the jungle is transfigured in the living emblem of a signifying habitat that is literally painted on his majestic body. Both are Indian, but, as we shall see, the *emic* difference between them is profound. While Aziz falls victim to the tragic comedy of errors culminating in his trial by an illegitimate colonial court, Tremal-Naik fights against a powerful internal enemy and the British administration at the same time.

So complex is Salgari's deconstruction in the opening paragraphs of his novel of what was perceived as 'India' and 'Indian,' that I shall concentrate again on the protagonist seen lying next to the hut where he lives. His sleep is "not peaceful," his "wide chest" heaves and he perspires, his dhoti becomes "undone," and "his small hands similar to a woman's" tear a turban from the head, which is "perfectly shaved." He mumbles broken sentences with a "passionate tone":

- There she is,- ... Why is she hiding?... What have I done? Is it not the right spot?... Next to the mussenda with blood colored leaves? ...

Ahi... Here she comes., her blue eyes look upon me, her lips are smiling... oh! how divine is that smile! My heavenly vision, why do you remain speechless in front of me? Why are you staring at me?... Don't be afraid: I am Tremal-Naik *the snake hunter of the black jungle* ... (*MJN*, 281)

Some estranging elements are placed at the onset of narration: the protagonist is an oriental man wearing a turban, his hair has been shaved, and he carries on his forehead the marks of one of the three sacred gods of Hindu worship, the lord Shiva. As for the *maharatto* that accompanies Tremal-Naik, Kammamuri, he is an exponent of the longest-lasting Hindu kingdom, the Marathi empire, which successfully resisted British colonial expansion for two centuries before being militarily subdued in 1806, with the last leader, Peshwa Baji Rao II, finally defeated in 1819.

Thus, the Hindu identity of the Indian subcontinent is clearly established by Salgari at the onset of narration, an identity that at the time comprised roughly three-quarters of the whole population, "one quarter being Muslim" as a result of invasions dating from the fourteenth century (Torri 2000, 169, my translation).

Strangely enough, Forster capsizes this proportion by making a Muslim, Dr. Aziz, the 'native' co-protagonist of his novel, while the only Hindu character – albeit a marginal one – is represented by Professor Godbole, a diminutive “Minister of Education,” who goes “barefoot and in white,” wearing a “pale blue turban” and with his “gold pince-nez ... caught in a jasmine garland,” to attend a meaningless religious ceremony, “a frustration of reason and form,” accompanied by “six colleagues” who “clashed their cymbals, hit small drums, droned upon a portable harmonium, and sang” a tedious chant, “Tukaram, Tukaram / Thou art my father and mother and everybody” (*APTI*, 283).

Very recently, a postcolonial critic has defined Professor Godbole as a “good Hindu,” a “mystic” who interprets perfectly Said’s theory of “tolerance”, a “‘force’ enabling the connections between different races, classes, and nations” (Khan 2021, 115, 107), while heavily omitting with dots whole sections of the passage full of ironic contempt and racist reductionism I have just quoted. Conversely, the eminent critic and writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri was outraged at Forster’s depiction of Godbole, represented “not [as] an exponent of Hinduism [but as] a clown” (in Lowe 1991, 132).³ Chaudhuri also criticized Forster’s representation of “Indo-British relations” as a “problem of personal behavior,” since he rightly asserts that India is “not predominantly Muslim but Hindu,” and a character like Aziz would have displeased “many Muslims [as well who] were fiercely anti-British and would not have accepted a subservient role” (in Lowe 1991, 125).

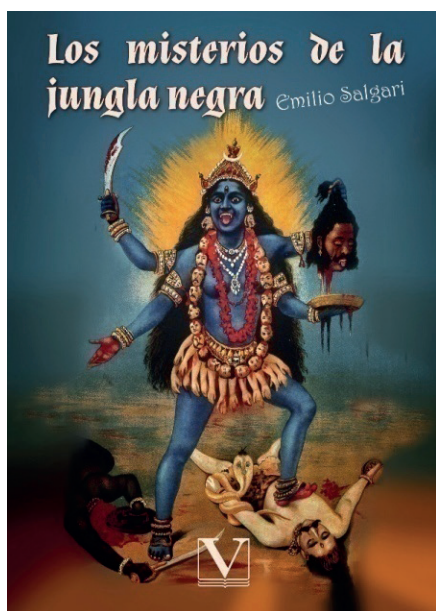
The same awkward and misleading outlook that discriminates against the beliefs of the majority of the Indian people was expressed by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim* (1901), where it is stated that “at least one-third of the population prays eternally to some group or other of the many million deities, and so reveres every sort of holy man” (*K*, 266) and where a Tibetan lama and a Muslim horse trader become the ‘native’ adjutants in the white boy’s epic search for his origins, although Buddhism “had disappeared completely from the subcontinent in the thirteenth century” (Torri 2000, 63, my translation). A final warning is voiced by the omniscient imperial author: “[Hindu] Gods are many-armed and malignant. Let them alone” (*K*, 71).

3 In a selection of his letters published in 1953, relating to his stay in India in 1921, Forster described “the religious festival of Holi” as “‘the Hindu Dionisia’, a ‘ribald Oriental farce’ [which amounted] to scenic chaos and musical discordance”; *The Hill of Devi*, in Delmas, *passim*. M. K. Naik argues that “Godbole and the Hindu doctor Panna Lal are drawn from stereotypes [and] the description of the Gokul Ashtami ceremony in the ‘Temple’ section is a comic parody” (in Lowe 1991, 125).

As a challenge against such reductionist stereotypes, Salgari places the black goddess Kali at the center of the *Mysteries of the Black Jungle*. Bruno Lo Turco has correctly interpreted Emilio Salgari's breakthrough representation of Indian otherness:

The goddess must have appeared [to the first British missionaries] as the true image of everything they had to fight against. First of all, she displayed the attractive body of a completely naked young woman. At best, a short skirt made of severed arms barely covered her womb. Then, the color of her skin was dark blue or right out black. And, notwithstanding her attractive body, she wore a pair of fangs amidst which hung a long tongue tainted with the blood she had to drink to appease her thirst. Furthermore, she wore a necklace of severed heads. She raised triumphantly with one of her four arms another severed head, much larger. (Lo Turco 2014, 208, my translation)

This is how Kali is represented on the cover of a recent Spanish translation of *I misteri della jungla nera* (Ill. 1):



[Book cover, 2021, by permission of Editorial Verbum, Madrid]

It is highly unlikely that an entity like Kali could make it through Victorian censorship against the worship of statues, naked women albeit black, and the emphasis on blood and death, an explosive anti-Orientalist cocktail that instead shows India as a hybrid, mixed and black world sharply confronting the stereotyped whiteness of the British and the *niggerness* of the so called natives.

The same shocking difference is interpreted by Salgari's unconventional white heroine, the Virgin of the Temple. Whereas Forster has staged a close encounter by constructing Miss Adela Quested at the center of attention between Fielding and Aziz, Miss Ada Corishant is at the heart of the strife between Tremal-Naik and Suyodhana, the ominous leader of the Thugs who had Ada kidnapped as a child, thus deconstructing the basic assumption of a colonial novel, namely that the white woman is a forbidden object of desire for the native/*nigger* and that no durable relationship can unite two racial opposites.

It is useful to recall how Forster envisaged this encounter between his female protagonist and her native counterpart: Miss Quested, betrothed to the British Ronny, "wants to see the real India" and this "desire ... lands her in trouble when, during an expedition to the Marabar caves, Adela has an *hallucination*, and she accuses Aziz of sexual assault" (Khan 2021, 114, my emphasis), thus confirming the colonialist assumption that "the Other is always perceived as a potential danger" and that "fear of being raped [by an Oriental] surfaces as a leitmotif in novels of the period" (Renouard 2004, 74, my translation). The "desire" felt for the two Indian men is the same for both English heroines, but Adela represses it as a forbidden imaginary construct (an *hallucination*), while, instead, Ada becomes a *vision* of beauty and sensual attraction for her oriental viewer, a topsy-turvy change of perspective, which is absolutely unique during Salgari's times.

In the same way, by having the Hindu Brahmin Suyodhana kidnap an English girl, Salgari seems to conform to "the classic story of white women being kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery, ending up in the harem of an Eastern prince" (Wagner 2013, 164), while in fact he cleverly deconstructs this engrained stereotype by having Ada become a *devadāsī*, the vestal Virgin of a Hindu goddess, Kali, in a Hindu temple.

Ada and Adela are nevertheless enchanting, each in her own way, two English misses deeply enmeshed in the "great, grey, formless" magma that Kipling thought was India (*K*, 134). Adela goes underground in the Marabar caves in the company of Aziz and wonders about the impending marriage to Ronny, stopping abruptly at a question: "'What about love?'" (*APTI*, 149), while Ada finds

love with Tremal-Naik in the labyrinthine tunnels underneath the sacred banyan on Raimangal island, where she is forced to worship Kali by the Thugs. Adela feels that she should not “succumb” to “Anglo-India” but is unable to go hybrid with the “handsome little Oriental,” whom she finally offends (*APTI*, 149-151), while Ada, the cherished daughter of Scottish captain Macpherson/Corishant, wore a sari and played the sitar while singing Auld Lang Syne.

Sankaran Krishna reminds us of the metamorphosis undergone by the Oriental imaginary when it is swept over by colonialism. Those lands that “in 1492 ... were lands of such fabled wealth and riches that they could lure Christopher Columbus and his intrepid crew to embark on a dangerous and uncertain voyage to find them, ... [have become] synonymous with poverty and squalor” (Krishna 2013, 338). According to this view, Kipling conceives the only Indian woman present in *Kim*, the fortune-teller Huneefa: “The room, with its dirty cushions and half-smoked hookahs, smelt abominably of stale tobacco. In one corner lay a huge and shapeless woman clad in greenish gauzes, and decked, brow, nose, ear, neck, wrist, arm, waist, and ankle with heavy native jewellery. When she turned it was like the clashing of copper pots” (*K*, 253). In sharp contrast, once in the underground pagoda, Tremal-Naik recognizes Ada, “the apparition in the *jungla*,” under the “large silk sari” that she lets fall to the ground, in the full light of a sun ray:

That maiden was literally covered with gold and precious stones of an immense value. A golden cuirass encrusted with the most astounding diamonds of Golconda and Guzerate (Gujarat) and that carried the mysterious serpent with a woman’s head enclosed completely her bosom, ending inside a large *cachemire* (cashmere) scarf woven in silver that surrounded her hips; various pearl and diamond necklaces hung on her neck, the gems as large as hazelnuts; large bracelets encrusted with precious stones adorned her bare arms, and a pair of wide pants made of white silk were stopped with coral rings of the prettiest red at the ankles of her tiny and bare feet. (*MJN*, 315)

To Forster, Indians were a “single mess” that exhaled an “indescribable smell,” which felt “disquieting” as Adela rambled lost in the “bazaars” (*APTI*, 229), and notwithstanding the authorial sympathy for the group of Muslim native ladies (they speak Urdu) invited to the Bridge Party at the Club who stand “timid” and with “their faces pressed into a bank of shrubs” (*APTI*, 39),

the general feeling that Mrs. Turton wants to convey to Mrs. Moore is that Indian women can at best be “servants,” and even the few “ranis” present (the equivalent of queens) are “uncertain, cowering, recovering, giggling, making tiny gestures of atonement or despair at all that was said” (*APTI*, 40-41).

It is clear that Forster and Kipling conceived of India exactly in the same terms; there is nothing regal, noble, wealthy, attractive or even decent and clean in the native characters they imagined for their white supremacist plots, while Salgari has created world-famous colored heroes and heroines (among them, the Indian Rani of Assam, Surama) that convey a sense of unending fascination with their looks, their attire, their beliefs, their ornaments, their jewels, their dances, their music, their warlike spirit and their sophisticated plurimillennial culture, which shines through the eyes of its holy men.⁴

Two distinct views of India that, in turn, bring to life two opposing imaginaries. In a selection of essays published by Forster in 1951, the author admits that, prior to his meeting Masood in the early years of the twentieth century, India “was a vague jumble of rajahs, sahibs, babus, and elephants, and I was not interested in such a jumble: who could be?” (*Two Cheers for Democracy*, in Lowe 1991, 133). The Italian Emilio Salgari – almost thirty years before *A Passage to India* – had answered the rhetorical question by producing an interesting *jungle* instead of the indistinct *jumble* mentioned by his British colleague, a view that for the times in which Salgari’s novel appeared remains an undisputable anti-Orientalist feat.

Some further examples will clarify my interpretation. In Forster’s *A Passage to India* set in the 1920s, is also absent the rising political opposition and “ferment” of a budding nationalist party, resulting in a fake vision of history strongly

4 In the enlarged edition of the *Mysteries* published in 1903, a secondary role is assigned to Vindhya, a *ramanandy*, belonging to one of the several groups of “saintly men” correctly mentioned by Salgari (*MJN*, 566-568), such as “*porom-hungse, dondy, saniassi, nanek-punthy, biscnub, and abd-hut*” (from Hindi and Sanskrit Paramahansa, Dandi, sannyasins, bišnawī, Nanakpanthi, abdhūt; see Mancini, in Galli Mastrodonato 2024, 341). The festival of *madace-pongol* in honor of Vishnu (from tamil māṭu poṅkal), the “feast of cows,” is described in detail, while a “handsome and imposing Brahmin” met by Tremal-Naik inside a pagoda where he had sought shelter, voices the view that “Brahmins hate the English because they are India’s oppressors, and they hate as well the sepoys who ... have become the allies of the cursed white race” (*MJN*, 535). The *bajadera* Surama, a dancing girl who in reality is a dethroned princess, recovers her kingdom thanks to Sandokan and his Portuguese partner Yanez de Gomera leading their Malaysian fighters, in *Alla conquista di un impero* (*Conquering an Empire*, 1907), while in *Il Bramino dell’Assam* (*The Brahmin of Assam*, 1911) a fakir belonging to a “pariah” sect causes havoc in the Rani’s kingdom by subjugating Surama with the “powerful magnetic fluid” emanating from his eyes (see Galli Mastrodonato 2024, 327-328).

censured by the influential critic Kunwar Natwar-Singh, the construction of a “pre-1914” India that had no objective relation to the “real” country in which the novel’s plot took place (Lowe 1991, 132). As we have seen, not only the few Hindu characters are diminished and ridiculed, but the essence of India as a country on the verge of an upheaval is reductively minimized in the dramatic refashioning of the struggle between the British occupiers and the inhabitants of the subcontinent as a farcical confrontation in the colonial hall that hosts the trial against Aziz, the native who was accused of attempted rape of a European woman.

While in *Kim* there is almost no echo of the major event that shook nineteenth-century India to its foundations, the Sepoy Mutiny,⁵ even more striking is Forster’s silencing and guilty omission of what had happened “in Amritsar, in the Punjab province of India, in April 1919.” Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, known as “the Butcher of Amritsar,” had his troops fire “1,650 bullets” over a period of “ten minutes” on the crowd that had gathered to protest inside an enclosure called Jallianwala Bagh, killing “379 civilians” and wounding “more than twelve hundred.” The protest had been organized as a response against the “notorious ‘crawling order,’ which required Indians to drag themselves on the ground along the street where the British missionary Miss Sherwood had been attacked during the anti-British riots” of a few days before, an act of insubordination that according to Dyer had to be “punished” (Wagner 2016, 194-95 *passim*). Forster thus constructs Mrs. Moore as a sort of double to the occulted Miss Sherwood, an “apostle of love and goodwill,” whose “endeavours to establish friendship and connection with the Indians end in failure,” and notwithstanding the Amritsar massacre of which there is no trace, the episode in the Marabar caves “shatters her,” so that “devastated and defeated ... she dies on her way to England” (Khan 2021, 115).

As for Salgari’s hero and anti-hero, Tremal-Naik and Suyodhana, they cannot possibly exist in Kipling’s and Forster’s fictional renderings of India since they counteract the stereotypical and racist statements that defined all Indians as a “mass of incompetent copycats of the English” (Williams 1994, 483). Being the subjects of their enunciations, they subvert what the Italian writer had reproduced ironically from his racist sources, namely that their “compatriots” are “generally lacking”

5 The Mutiny is masterfully inserted by Salgari in the plot of *Le due Tigri* (*The Two Tigers*, 1904); see my *Emilio Salgari*: 296-301. For an in-depth analysis of Salgari’s masterpiece, *I misteri della jungla nera*, see also 225-290.

in “rare energy and extraordinary bravery,” “two features” that instead will shine through Tremal-Naik and his fierce antagonists in the plot of Salgari’s Indian story.

Thus, how did white writers *contemporary* to Salgari, such as Kipling and later Forster, inscribe into their texts real-life Indians or anti-orientalist and anti-racist utterances? Lisa Lowe had already identified in the early 1990s a serious setback in *A Passage to India*, since “what becomes accepted as Indian life is the textual product of British viewing and scrutiny,” the practice of “British imperial tradition ruling, and misunderstanding the Indians,” a practice, moreover, that was openly subscribed to by 28 Indian literary critics on a total of 30 (Lowe 1991, 110, 129).

On the other hand, when *Kim* came out in 1901, many Indian intellectuals and political activists – from Rabindranath Tagore to Sarath Kumar Ghosh and Mulk Raj Anand – considered it nothing short of an “invective” hurled against them (Lowe 1991, 108). Writing for “a ‘garrison’ readership” of Anglo-Indians, today’s critics consider Kipling and his novel guilty of a “moral blindness” that made him consider other humans in terms of “ethnic stereotypes,” an unequivocal value judgment that nevertheless Harish Trivedi transcends in assuming that, before Indians writing about India in English, only “Kipling’s depiction of India carried conviction” (Trivedi 2011, 193 *passim*).

I shall therefore review some major points of critical awareness I have so far identified in Salgari’s complex although fictive redistribution of signifying categories pertaining to the India of his times, and I shall do so by concentrating on the protagonist of his marvelous oriental tale, Tremal-Naik. Unlike his Bornean counterpart, the Muslim prince Sandokan turned pirate, of our Hindu Indian hero, we will never learn the exact origin or family belonging. He defines himself as the snake hunter of the black jungle, and as such his identity is fluid and deeply referential at the same time. We see him placed by Salgari in a precise habitat that is simultaneously geographically determined and mythically evocative, a jungle hunter living in the metamorphic, aquatic world of the Ganges delta, and a Shiva devotee who, similar to the Hindu god, is “dark” skinned and linked religiously to the “indigenous, tribal beliefs” of the god’s cult through the worship for the main totemic attribute of Shiva, the sacred snakes (Mohan 2016, 1596). By comparison, Forster’s native protagonist – Dr. Aziz – is almost plastered against an “hostile” environment according to the “Lamarckian notions” that considered India “physically enervating and morally sapping” (Mohan 2016, 1616), a widely held stereotype that is still alive and well in modern and contemporary Western views of tropical climates and locations.

Moreover, the name that Salgari chose for his hero – Tremal-Naik – is taken from a dynasty of rajahs coming from the city of Madurai, in southern India, and conveys a feeling of innate superiority to his character, a princely status that is confirmed by the subordinates that live with him, both servants and followers – including the tiger Darma and the dog Punthy – who regard him as a master and a spiritual leader. He is such an exceptional character for the times that saw his birth – not a “good savage,” not an “uncle Tom,” as Michelguglielmo Torri, a history of India professor remarks (Torri 2012, 55, my translation), that we can consider our snake hunter of the black jungle the other side of the Indian coin created by Forster, the evidence that Emilio Salgari was the “most honest, the most true,” as filmmaker Roberto Rossellini stated in 1959, when he directed the documentary *India Matri Bhumi*, thus linking inextricably the century-long love relationship uniting Italians with Indians.⁶

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6 The passage—“Forse Salgari è il più onesto, il più vero”—is extracted from an interview given by Rossellini in 1959 and related to the making of his documentary film on India; in Dalla Gassa 2016, 340, my translation. Rossellini left Ingrid Bergman for Sonali Dasgupta, whom he had met in India, and Indian actor Kabir Bedi interpreting Salgari’s Sandokan in Sergio Sollima’s celebrated 1976 movie is a national hero, awarded the Commendatore title by the President of the Republic.

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