# The Performance of Race in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

Wenchi Lin
English Department

It would not be exaggerating to state that issues of identity have been the most discussed subject in literary and cultural studies in the United States of America in the past ten or fifteen years. Anthony Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr have argued that the eighties might very well be characterized as "the period when race, class, and gender became the holy trinity of literary criticism" (625). Although there is no indication that academic interest in interrogating identity politics will subside in the near future, there have been relatively few attempts to study the various ideologemes of identity as a general subject. Class, gender, and race have been very productively studied as separate subjects or as overdetermination of a subject, particularly from feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial perspectives. However, what do ideologemes that create identity have in common" How do they differ in formation and function? These questions are seldom asked in most discussions of identity. Although I do not intend to provide a definite answer to these questions, I shall try to formulate a more constructive understanding of identity as "performance" and take E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* to illustrate how race is performed in colonial India.

Why "performance"? My interest in using performancee as a critical term to approach the comple nature of identity is in the first instance motivated by J. L. Austin's notion of "performative" utterances. In his *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin challenges the assumption that language can only be used to state ideas that are either true or false. He proposes the category of "performative" in which "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (6). This active capability of language to do things, i.e., its performative capability, however, is generated not by its intrinsic (locutionary) qualities such as linguistic structure or grammar, but by the extrinsic social conventions or collective wills (the illocutionary acts).

Austin's severe critic Barbara Johnson, however, is bothered by the strange *double entendre* of the word "perform."--which refers to actions supposedly in direct opposition. It is used to describe both concrete reality in daily life, such as completion of a work or victory in a battle, *and* illusory actions that suspend reality, e.g., to take up a theatrical role or to produce a make-believe story on stage. Questioning Austin's view that there always exists a continuity between speaker and speech, John-

son asks, "How is it that a word that expresses most simply the mere doing of an act necessarily leads us to the question of--acting [and performing]" (65)?

To Johnson's deconstruction of Austin's words, 'performative' and 'act', Sandy Petrey replies, "dramatic performances in no way preclude effects that are dramatic in another sense. Speech acts cannot be named without substituting personae for persons, but personae cannot be situated without the potential to function as persons" (*Speech Acts* 120). Words uttered by actors on stage are potential performatives.[1] They surely do not produce social realities in life, if correctly understood as fictional. However, personae in a play differ from real persons not because they speak or act differently. Plays adopt the same languages and depict the same actions familiar to the audience; otherwise they would not be comprehensible at all. Conversely, social life can be viewed as a theatrical space in which individuals enact different roles and relations. An utterance like "I pronounce you husband and wife" may be a make-believe pronouncement or a declaration of real marriage. Whether it performs effectively or not is determined by the speaker's social position (a priest or an official) and the context (a ceremony) conventionally acknowledged.

The ambiguity and duality of the word "perform," which Johnson takes to be the irony of Austin's project, in fact highlights both the performativity of language and the theatricality of social life. Austin's emphasis on the social power that enables words to perform, and the thin line between social life and theatrical performance that Petrey addresses, therefore, show identity's double nature--as both social roles and performative names that produce concrete realities in society. As social roles, identity is ideologically constructed notions of the self and others. It refers to persons as personae, or scripted roles individuals take, willingly or not, on *the stage of life*. As performative names, identity functions as demands for certain appearances or manners to keep, for conventions or decorum, and for social relations or orders.

To see identity as performative exposes the double process through which identity is transformed from descriptive names and ideologies to social realities. Identity is a cluster of apparently descriptive terms that actually prescribe social boundaries and relations. Words used to identify individuals--such as working-class, woman, black, Moslem, Bosnian--are performatives for, in light of the way they are commonly used, they do not so much describe an abstract truth of individuals (e.g. the "womanliness") as situate each one in a hierarchical social order of power relations (woman as subordinate to man). These parameters of identity, for instance, can produce contempt, discrimination, and violence (rape, war, and genocide) against those defined as such, whereas some others--such as white, male, rich, American--bring privilege, respect, and authority to the people with these "names." These cruel realities are produced not because identity describes accurately but because it acts effectively.

For essentialists, there exists a natural relation between the person and his or her identity. Individuals of certain identities deserve either oppression/violence or respect/privilege because they are *naturally* born inferior or superior. A sexist view of women, a racist view of the Oriental, a Christian fundamentalist view of homosexuals, or a nationalist view of "China," therefore, is for essentialists a given truth about either gender, race, sexuality, or nationality. Identity for them is fixed. The social relations it prescribes are natural relations among human beings stereotypically defined.

Defining identity as performative does not, of course, deny the fact that various identities are received and experienced by many as real and natural. The performativity of these "natural" identities, however, does show that the supposedly common quality of identified individuals is not "reality" or essence of identity, but its ideological effects. Identity is performed because its names evoke the already defined social relations they are situated in. Racial discrimination against blacks, for example, has nothing to do with the skin color described by the constative adjective "black," but everything to do with the racist society that classifies certain groups as inferior and provokes its members to treat them accordingly. With some revision, Louis Althusser's definition of ideology clearly describes this performative aspect of identity: identity "*expresses* a *will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (*For Marx* 234).

The formulation of identity as performative also points to individuals' *real* ization of identity's ideological effects through performing the social roles it prescribes. If identity functions through ideology, its formation can also be described as ideology's hailings or interpellations of "concrete individuals as concrete subjects," as Althusser writes about ideology ("Ideology" 173). However, identity cannot be fully analyzed as ideology. For identity is not merely the process of interpellation, but also fulfillment of the social demands it prescribes. Ideology, among other definitions Terry Eagleton lays out, can be understood as "the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world" and "the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure" (2). Through ideology's medium, then, identity is the actual living out of social relations--or *performing* of social roles.

Why study identity as performative, when identity has been productively examined as constructed instead of a transcendental essence in our post-essentialist and post-colonial era? To see identity in performative terms, as the following chapters will show, foregrounds the paradoxical nature of identity as both fictive and real, representational and effective. It takes into account both the social process that constitutes identity and the production of its concrete effect through each individual's participation in that process. Instead of seeing individuals as dominated by dominant ideology or hegemonic discourse in identity politics, the notion of identity as perfor-

mative stresses the possibility of agency for an undesirable identity to be replaced. If identity is performative, it always relies on its subjects to perform it and is therefore subject to be not performed or performed differently.

Most studies on class, gender, or race convincingly demonstrate these identities' constructedness and their political function as apparatuses of power. The process of identification is shown both to categorize individuals among a supposedly homogeneous collective, and to situate them within an (imbalanced) power relation enabling social, sexual or racial discrimination and deprivation. Its function is both to denominate and differentiate as well as to direct, subordinate, marginalia, colonize, and dominate.

The formulation of identity as "performance" recognizes and highlights the valuable knowledge of identity's construction and deconstruction made available by post-essentialist studies. On the one hand, the theatricality implied in "performance" clarifies the inevitable ambiguity in Teresa de Lauretis's use of the term "representation." For "representation" gives the impression that there is an original identity represented, while "performance" indicates that identity is nothing other than what is discursively constructed and socially performed. Althysser's distinction between the two German words for theatrical (re)presentation, *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung*, succinctly explains the nuances of the difference:

> In *Vorstellung*, one certainly has to do with a position, but one which is presented *out front*, which thus supposes something which is kept *behind* this pre-position, something which is *represented* by that which is kept out front, [represented] by its emissary: the *Vorstellung*. In *Darstellung on the contrary, there is nothing behind*; the very thing is there, '*da*,' presented [*offerte*] in the presence of the representation (the *Darstellung*).(trans. & qtd. by Sprinker, *Imagined Relations* 291)

To specify identity as performance therefore stresses its nature as *Darstellung* instead of *Vorstellung*. The theatrical connotation of "performance" furthermore is capable of vividly describing the effects of identity as self-represented by individuals. I also want to emphasize that the effect of identity is roles within the social relations constructed by ideology. Identity not only differentiates but orders individuals into hierarchical categories. The hierarchical boundaries can exist only when individuals know "who they are," "keep their place," and "do the right thing" to each other. Essentialist views (mis)understand identity as the natural justification for different social positions individuals occupy, such as women's domestic role in patriarchal society, the subordinate role peoples of color occupy in colonial society, or the poor's insignificant role in capitalist society. These roles or positions are performative in both the sense that the substance of identity they purport to express is discursively performed and that identity has no other social existence than concrete individuals' faithful performances of these roles in their collective life.

What I have discussed in generalized terms so far will find very good examples in E. M. Forster's depiction of racial politics in the last stage of the British Raj in India. Racial identity is depicted as performed in *A Passage to India*. Colonial discourse in India, the novel shows, assigns different social positions to the English and the Indians according to their skin color--white colonial authority and black inferior natives. The main Indian characters in the novel complain about their inferior identity and the oppressive social structure it implies. For their skin color has condemned them to a race inferior and subordinate to the colonialist English, who refuse to recognize any performance by the Indians' that indicates otherwise. As Aziz's alleged rape of Adela shows, it is his identity as "a lascivious Indian" that determines what he does in the cave, instead of the other way around. Unless the colonial stage is changed, it is impossible for Indians to perform a different racial identity in India.

*A Passage to India* foregrounds this close relation between racial identity and the colonial society of India. It exposes the "performativity" of English authority with incidents like the Anglo-Indians' annual theatrical production in the club and Fidlding's joke on their "white" skin color. The English's sense of insecurity caused by their racial identity's performativity is vividly captured in these two incidents in the novel. Early in the novel, Forster introduces the reader to the Anglo-Indians' theatrical performance through the club production of Hubert Henry Davies' *Cousin Kate*.

> The third act of *Cousin Kate* was well advanced by the time Mrs. Moore reentered the club. Windows were barred, lest the servants should see their memsahibs acting, the heat was consequently immense. One electric fan revolved like a wounded bird, another was out of order. (22)

The performance here appears to serve merely as part of the setting, which lays out a thematic contrast between Mrs. Moore and Adela, the newcomers and the Anglo-Indians. Mrs. Moore had just been in a Mosque and had a satisfying conversation with an Indian, Aziz. Adela, who also expressed her wish to "see the *real* India," was advised by Fielding to reach out to Indians (22). The Anglo-Indian mem-sahibs, on the other hand, only hope "to hold sternly aloof," as Mrs. Callendar puts it, "[the native] can go where he likes as long as he doesn't come near me. They give me the creeps" (25-26).

The expulsion of the Indian servants from the club is one of the myriad examples of Anglo-Indians' enforcement of colonial power through social/racial/cultural differences. The Anglo-women's snobbishness and racism towards Indians seem to have explained why their acting should not be seen by their servants. To let the servants watch them perform on stage would be not only a social degradation but a personal insult. On the other hand, it also reflects the Anglo-Indian males' interests.

In patriarchal society women and their body are men's property. The windows have to be barred because, performing on stage, the women would become an object of voyeuristic pleasure for the filthy Indian servants stereotypically known for their (hyper)sexuality. This would degrade the angel in the house to the status of a sexual object.

However, the suffering conveyed through the images of immense heat, closed space, and wounded bird insinuates an anguish not fully explained by the simple cause-and-effect sentence: "Windows were barred, lest the servants should see their mem-sahibs acting...." If the expulsion of servants is an expression of the English's social/racial/cultural superiority, how to explain the anxiety and insecurity implied in the metaphors? Besides, servants were the only Indians to live closely to Anglo-Indians under the British colonial policy of separatism (Kiernan 55-56). If what matters is their sexually charged gaze at their mem-sahibs, they would have their illicit and voyeuristic pleasure all the time. In other words, if they can be tolerated for their service, why does their presence in the club become annoying all of a sudden?

The close connection between performance and identity means that what is clandestinely involved is not so much the *mem-sahibs'* "gendered" acting as the *sahibs'* racial identity. Because identity lacks self-sufficient truth, the social power the English hold depends on both native and English acceptance of physical difference--skin color and other features--as marking authority and superiority. Identity's discriminatory force therefore does not derive from God but has always to be performed, that is, "supplemented" precisely in the Derridean sense.

Derrida's analysis of Rousseau's autobiographical writing points out that it does not reflect the reality of his experience or life. It is rather the effect of a chain of supplements:

> there has never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. (159).

Similarly, identity is nothing but incessant performances pretending to be reality. Instead of being the origin of English authority and superiority, identity is in fact the effect of supplements.

Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry and hybridity exhaustively delineates the ambivalence in the production of identity effects and the threat they face. Mimicry as Bhabha defines it is a double utterance, both the colonialist's "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" and "the sign of the inappropriate...a difference" ("Of Mimicry" 126). Mimicry is therefore resemblance and menace at the same time. Through the native's incomplete imitation, as one that is "almost the same, but not quite," mimicry "poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledge and disci-

plinary powers" (126). In other words, the reformability and the recalcitrance of the native's difference becomes a threat to the construction of racial identity and discriminatory authority based on the visible: color as the cultural/political evidence of hierarchy and natural identity. Mimicry points to the "prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory "identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself" (130-31).

Bhabha later develops his notion of mimicry into hybridity as the repetition and displacement of difference in the colonial discourse of identity and authority:

> Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. . . . It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" ("Signs Taken" 154).

For Bhabha a form of subversion occurs when colonial dominance is supported more by the production of hybridization than by material repression. Since colonial discourse is already split at its origin, the site of hybridity in colonial discourse revealed by the native's mimicry will turn "the discursive sonditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" ("Signs Taken" 154).

Although in Bhabha's theory the agency for the display of hybridity in colonial discourse is the (unwitting) native's mimicry (e.g., the Indians' reform or reading of the Bible), signs of hybridization frequently appear among colonialists themselves. If we apply Bhabha's concept of mimicry to the colonialist's own revelation of the ambivalence, we will find that the Anglo-Indians' theatrical performance would be precisely such a site of hybridity. In this production of the realistic play,[1] in which they tried to "dress up as the middle-class English people they actually were" (40), the Anglo-Indians' identity is doubled. Their servants would see their formidable sahibs appear on stage as someone "almost the same" as the sahibs "but not quite." The authority of their identity, preserved as an immediate mimetic effect, would be exposed as hybridity. In other words, their mimesis of identity reveals their racial identity as mimicry.

Although Bhabha's explication of identity's ambivalence and the agency it allows is very insightful, it seems extremely unlikely that the servants would understand identity's constructedness at such an abstract level. Bhabha's notion of hybridity can be reformulated in performative terms in order to explain the English sahibs' unconscious fear. That is, their performance on stage would show the servants how social relations are likewise performed instead of transcendentally "given". As the English dress up and act on stage as the middle-class English people they actually are, so they act as the mem-sahibs they seem to Indians. Their performance must not be watched by Indian servants, despite the immense heat endured to close the

stage from sight, because the thin line between social life and performance would bring the servants' attention to the performativity of their mem-sahibs'and sahib's superior identity.

The performativity of identity becomes conspicuous in the novel's depiction of Fielding's remark on skin color. Apparently to highlight the uniqueness of Fielding among the Anglo-Indians in Chandrapore, Forster narrates his joke in the club about "white" skin:

> The remark that did him most harm at the club was a *silly aside* to the effect that the so-called white races are really pinko-grey. He only said this to be cheery, he did not realize that 'white' has no more to do with a color than 'God save the King' with a god, and that it is *the height of impropriety* to consider what it does connote. The pinko-grey male whom he addressed was subtly scandalized; his *sense of insecurity* was awoken, and he communicated it to the rest of the herd. (65; my emphasis)

As physical difference, skin color's colonial function operates in racist discourse through the trope of what Abdul JanMohamed calls "Manichean allegory" ("Economy" 61). What are in fact metonymic extensions of the color white become its referent, constative truth assigned with moral significance. In order for racial identity to have its discriminatory power, Indians and the English, too, must be convinced that a chain of supplements is an eternal essence.

Fielding's joke subverts the origin of authority in English racial identity by pointing out ambiguity and hybridizing it. The gap between skin color and the moral ascendancy associated with "white" is what social decorum conceals. Therefore it is "the height of impropriety" to contemplate the denotations of the word "white," which are irrelevant to the social position. When the discrepancy in identity effects is accidentally exposed by Fielding, however, a social interaction is immediately triggered. By sharing his feelings with the rest of the Anglo-Indian community, the "pinko-grey" English, and indeed the whole community can get rid of the sense off insecurity by ignoring Fielding's remark as "silly aside." When his views become dangerous enough, he will be deprived of his Anglo-Indian identity, as he is considered "not a sahib" by the Anglo-Indian women (65); his words no longer their truth. He is literally expelled from the club when his insistence on the fact of Aziz's innocence irritates the Anglo-Indians who have "rallied ro the banner of race" and condemned Aziz on no other basis (183).

The Indian servants are barred from the English's performance because dramatic play reveals the performativity of identity. Like the social decorum operating to contain the subversive message of Fielding's remark, the exclusion of his person from the club serves to conceal the truth of identity. This sense of insecurity will become clear by turning to the imperial function of identity in British colonial

history, we find that defensive strategies--moralization, expulsion, education, etc.--cover up the hybridity in identity widely practiced at every level to ensure ideological status and colonial power. Sir Charles W. Dilke and Spenser Wilkinson observe in *Imperial Defence* that English rule over India "rests only to a limited extent upon their own superior force" (101-2). What makes it possible, besides the divisions among the indians, is English moral ascendancy, that is, their "character" and "self-confidence" which produce in Indians an image of Great Britain's omnipresence. The crucial significance of this image is summed up by Dilke and Spenser in the following words:

> For a century the Englishman has behaved in India as a demi-god. He accounts himself a superior being equal in all the works of war and government to hundreds of Indians, and the majority of the inhabitants take him at his own evaluation. Any awakening of this confidence in the minds of the English or of the Indians would be dangerous. . . . (102)

Similarly V. G. Kiernan points out the importance of ideological control of Indians for the English colonizers after the 1857 Mutiny by citing a story about a solitary Englishman confident in the power of his appearance to quiet the angry mob passion of an Indian town. Kiernan further writes that this enormous confidence depends much on "the *studied* remoteness of the English, as of a race more than human in ciril as in military life, capable by divine warrant of that art if government, that 'mystery' which rulers, as James I held, must keep strictly to themselves" (55; my emphasis).

Although the English have a firm belief in the naturalness of their authority, their "studied" appearance betrays an anxiety, often an unconscious one, that the power they hold might not really originate in their skin color. Their superiority therefore has to be asserted by calculated performances, as supplement. In order for this semi-divine identity and power to hold, for example, the English administrators have to retire and leave India at an age long before senility so that "India never [ sees] the giant old and feeble" (Kiernan 55). The significance of this practice is not confined to the discursive level. That Fielding's silly joke on the word "white" can cause such insecurity among Anglo-Indians is due to the fact that when the word does not perform, identity does not perform either. "White" is not just a word designating skin color. It is also privilege, authority, and superior identity. It is not only a noun but a performative of social relations, supporting racial discrimination and colonial domination.

To point out that a "white" with all its allegories in fact does not correctly describe skin color is to disclose the gap between performative capacity and constative truth. The white whom Fielding addresses cannot but feel insecure for, after the constative illusion is gone, he will have to face the fact that the only foundation of

his colonial power is Indians' collective compliance. This threat is immediately felt, since as Sandy Petrey has succinctly put it:

> when we do things with words, we enact not only what we name but also the relationship making the name an act. Language is performative of social being as well as illocutionary force; if words fail to do the things they should, social being has failed as well. (*Speech Acts* 20)

Just as the servants are forbidden to watch the English perform, the English themselves are not allowed to contemplate skin color in the name of "propriety," lest their racial identity and colonial rule should become *insecure* after revealing this knowledge to the colonized.

To see identity as performed thus enable us to have a more complete picture of how racial supremacy to a very significant degree is "acted" out, and to Have a better notion of the insecurity and fear always lurking behind the performance of race. Strategies deployed to conceal the performativity of racial identity are therefore necessary and appear in various forms. I have only shown two as depicted in Forster's *A Passage to India*--barring the native from the English's theatrical performances or forbidding to contemplate the skin color of white and black. Many more will be discovered as the performativity of race is becomes better known. The power relation between the colonial white and the colonized black will then need to be rethought less as domination than cunning performance.

## Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

---. *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Verso, 1990.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony & Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Editor's Introduction: Multiplying Identities." *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 625-629.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1975.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28 (1984): 125-33.

---. "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 144-165.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: U of

Johns Hopkins P, 1976.

Dilke, Sir Charles Wentworth and Spenser Wilkinson. *Imperial Defence*. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1892.

Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*. New York: HBJ Book, 1984.

JanMohamed, Abdul R. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 59-87.

Johnson, Barbara. *The Critical Difference: Essays in The Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.

Kiernan, V. G. *The Lords of Human Kind: Black Man, Yellow Man, and White Man in an Age of Empire*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company P, 1969.

Petrey, Sandy. *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1990.