

**THE CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTER:
INDIAN CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON E.M. FORSTER'S
A PASSAGE TO INDIA**

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Abstract

E.M. Forster (1879-1970) is one of the prominent British writers who have depicted India and fictionalized the Raj in their fictions. Unlike other colonial writers, he does not follow the trails of typical imperialists in his representation of India; rather, he is concerned with the imperial realities in his classic A Passage to India (1924). Deeply influenced by his first-hand experience of India, Forster points to the suppression and repression of the natives that raises doubt on the wellbeing of the British Raj in India. He also projects terrible sufferings of the natives at the hands of the British that places imperialism in doubt. He shows sympathetic attitude towards Indian characters and foregrounds human values in his novel. Notwithstanding the fact that Forster has shown sympathy towards India and Indians, his representation is not devoid of misconception and misrepresentation. Although A Passage to India projects positive and considerable image of the empire, the British-India relationship is characterized by hatred, mistrust and master-servant relationship in the novel. Several Indian critics raise doubt about the authenticity of representation and denounces Forster's A Passage to India. Thus, A Passage to India displays the amazing interplay of cross-cultural understanding marred by chasm, misconceptions and misprojections. His misprojections are reflected in the historical chronology, description of locale and his approach to Indian women, Indian philosophy in the novel.

Key Words: *Cross-culture, orient, west, British Raj, empire, representation, Hindu, India.*

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Colonial and postcolonial India has been the subject of great interest for many writers in the West. This interest is especially reflected in fiction that is set in the days of the British Raj in India. Many writers have celebrated the British colonial enterprise in India; others have represented it as the "White Man's Burden". Some writers have shown their antipathy and others sympathy in the representation of India in their writings. In his book *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism*, Allen Greenberger surveys a plethora of novels and shows the changing attitude to the imperialism with the passage of time as he categorizes the Raj writings¹ into three phases - the Era of Confidence (1880-1910), Era of Doubt (1910-1935) and Era of Melancholy (1935-1960). Three major writers Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), E. M. Forster (1879-1970) and Paul Scott (1920-1978) represent the three periods respectively. E. M. Forster is a renowned colonial writer who represents the British-India in his classic *A Passage to India* (1924) which falls under the preview of second phase i.e. Era of Doubt.

The monopoly of racial superiority dominated British construction of the Indian image. This popular myth of white man's superiority continued to flourish till E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). He is the first British writer who has dismantled the established norms of writing about India. Unlike his predecessors, he deviates from the trend of justifying colonialism and imperialism, and adopts a liberal humanist's perspective in portraying the British-India. He is critical of British antagonism towards Indians and brings to the surface the hard core reality of wrongdoing and vested interest of the British Raj in colonial India. In *A Passage to India*, he does not follow the trail of typical imperialists in his representation; rather, he is concerned with the imperial realities of British Raj. Deeply influenced by his first-hand experience of India, Forster points to the repression and racial discrimination of the natives at the hands of colonial English which not only raises questions about the design of the British mission but places imperialism in doubt. In the article "Passage to More than India", Banita Parry says that "British empire and its

¹ The fictional representation of India during the periods of British Raj in India.(1857-1947)

misdeeds were very much on Forster's mind" (Bose 38). In *Chronicles of Raj*, Shamsul Islam points out Forster's "anti- imperial stance" (p 39). Forster shows sympathetic attitude towards the Indian characters in *A Passage to India* and foregrounds human values in his novels.

A great body of scholarship is available on Forster's *A Passage to India*, as several Western critiques have evaluated *API* from diverse perspectives. By foregrounding the Britishers' misdeeds and projecting the harsh picture of the English characters, he incurred the wrath of his countrymen. Notwithstanding the fact that Forster has shown sympathy towards Indians, Indian critics have expressed their reservation on the presentations of Indians in the novel. Indian critics revisit the novel and evaluate Forster's cross-cultural understanding in his *magnum opus*. As Forster's *A Passage to India* is written against the backdrop of colonial India and is woven into texture of Indian history, Indians are at a privileged position to evaluate their own history, and socio-political and cultural aspects of the novel. But Indian critics also have shown their dual approach to Forster as they applaud for breaking the traditional myth about India but at the same time, they criticize Forster's portrayal of Indian characters. Sometimes they find the portrayal of British-India encounter is authentic and at other times they express their reservations about Forster's projection of Indian characters, religion, and the treatment of the historical account in the novel. That leads Natwar Singh to say that "It succeeded in annoying the British without satisfying the Indian political aspiration" (Shahane 3).

In *A Passage to India*, Forster presents a wide range of experience of the British-India during 1920's. Several critics consider Forster's *A Passage to India* is a "sociological treatise" as it vividly records the Britishers' racial attitude towards Indian natives during the period. D.C.R.A Goonetilleke states that *Passage* is "a macrocosm of society in India under British empire in the first quarter of the century" (Goonetilleke 91). N.C Chaudhuri says that "One is almost forced to appraise the novel as a political essay on Indo-British relations" (Chaudhuri 20). But several Indian critics express their dissent and raise question over the authenticity of the historical account in the novel. In his article K.Natwar Singh quotes Rose Macaulay's argument that "some confusion is caused by the book's doubtful chronology." Forster commenced writing *A Passage to India* in 1912 and completed it in 1924, a period of important historical events.

The First World War broke out in 1914 and Indians supported the British with vigour and enthusiasm. India's support played a significant role in the British victory in the First World War. Satisfied with the Indians' help in the World War I, the British declared dominion status for India. After two years of War, they passed Rowlatt Act² against Indians and the

² Under this act, the authority could arrest any natives/ Indians on the suspicion of sedition.

promise of the dominion status was not fulfilled. A massive protest was organised against the Rowlatt Act in India against the British. In 1919, the British troops fired on unarmed civilians who were protesting in Jalianwallahbagh, leaving 1200 injured and 379 killed. These historical events of the period provide the background and structure for the fictional characters and happenings in *A Passage to India*, but political aspects have been left untouched in the novel. In the novel, there is no direct reference to the historic Jalianwallahbagh massacre and Gandhi's Non-Co-operation Movement, in 1920s. Indian critics raise question how could a novelist like E.M. Forster turn a blind eye to the serious political happening of the period he is writing on? In his article "Only Connect... E.M. Forster and India", K. Natwar Singh affirms that Forster's representation of early twenties British-India is not true as "It depicts a pre-1914 India and by the time it was published in 1924, events had taken it. It appears as anti-national book since it makes no mention of the political ferment that was going on in India in the early twenties" (Shahane 3). A liberal humanist like Forster ought to have mentioned the Jalianwallahbagh massacre and it was a heinous crime against humanity. Gandhi also does not find any mention and important aspects of the history as Civil Disobedience Movement, Rowlatt Act, nor do such Khilafat Movement, and Muslim League's active participation in the national struggle against the British. M.K. Naik says that it presents "misleading pictures of the period of time and the characters it represents". He further says that "Considered as historical document or a picture of race relation, the novel is inadequate in conception and lopsided in the presentation of the material." (Shahane 68) Another critic Nirad C. Chaudhuri denounces Forster and finds the novel to be "...a vehicle for the expression of his own violent prejudices and eccentric opinions." In the article "The Marabar Cave in the Light of Indian Thought", Chaman. L. Sahni observes the narratives of the novel to be politically motivated. Chaudhuri says that "even intrinsically the novel had a political drift" (Chaudhuri 19).

Some critics praise Forster's representation of India and the treatment of British-India relationship in the novel. K.Natwar Singh lavishly praises Forster's portrayal of Indian characters as he says "Forster was the first serious English writer to portray Indians as human beings and not merely as caricatures or doubtful and shifty natives" (Shahane 2). But other critics argue that Indian characters do not find the adequate representation in the novel. In his article "On Understanding the Hindus", Nirad Chaudhuri argues that the "novel presents all the Indians in it either as perverted, clownish or queer characters. There is little delineation of the Indian characters which are more importantly condescending to self-respecting Indians than those of the book" (Chaudhuri 24). The character of Aziz has been severely criticized as his character does not feature the nationalistic concern of 1920s. The Indian critics also point out that the character of Dr. Aziz as the hero of the

novel is inadequate as Forster created a timid, feeble and unquestionably charming character, devoid of the consciousness of the national upheaval and unrest of the time. Although an educated Muslim, Aziz does not play the role of an active nationalist; rather he is rendered as a diffident and submissive character. In his article "Passage to Less than India", M.K Naik asserts that "Aziz does not represent average educated Nationalist Indian youth of the period" (Naik 65). Turning back to the medieval glory at the time national crisis is something unrepresentative of Indian mind.

Moreover, Forster invites critical attention of Indians for making a Muslim the protagonist in the novel. They assert that Forster made a blunder by making a Muslim the protagonist in the predominant Hindu India. As Nirad Chaudhuri bitterly criticizes Aziz's character in the novel:

Aziz would not have been allowed to cross my threshold, not to speak of being taken as equal. Men of his type are a pest even in Free India. Some acquired a crude idea of gracious living or have merely been caught by the lure of snobbism, and are always trying to gain importance by sneaking into company of those to whom this way of living is natural (Chaudhuri 21).

Chaudhuri's argument could be refuted that there is nothing wrong in making Aziz the protagonist of the novel. One should not forget that the novel is not written in the post-Partition India but British-India of 1920s when Muslim League was actively participating in the anti-British struggle alongside Hindus. During that period Muslims were significantly contributing to the National Movement against British imperialism. Besides Muslim League, Muslims were also associated with Congress in the Nationalist Movement. Among many Muslim leaders, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a prominent member of Congress in 1920s and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was the president of Indian National Congress in 1923. At that time, there was a possibility for Muslims to become the leaders of India and could be conceived as a national leader.

Further, the character of Dr. Aziz could be defended and the charge against his being an anti-national could be refuted that he has been represented here as an Indian in the context of the race relation in the novel. Aziz displays his nationalist character as he says that "India shall be a nation! no foreigner of any sort! Hindu and Muslim and Sikh all shall be one."- this single statement substantiates his being a nationalist. Aziz also voices pluralistic society in the Independent India, not only the Muslims. He also says that "we may hate one another but we hate you the most" (API p 306).

Some Indian critics often denounce Forster for the elevated representation of Muslims and derogatory image of the Hindus in *API*. In the novel Forster presents Hindu characters as a foil to the Muslims and Muslim characters are presented in much more intelligible ways than Hindus. N.C. Chaudhuri says that "Forster shares the liking the British in India had for Muslims and the dislike for Hindu." (Chaudhuri 22)

All the three sections of the novel *Mosque, Cave and Temple* reflect Forster's acquaintances with three religions- Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Forster adequately presents his understanding of the major religions in the novel. He presents Islam in a most comprehensible manner through the character of Aziz who is created after his friend Syed Ross Masood (1889-1937), a Muslim aristocrat in India. Forster's intimate friendship with Masood helps him understand Islam which he considers "a new horizon and a new civilization". His liking for Islam is manifested in the *Mosque* section where he describes Islam "...more than a faith, more than a battle cry...Islam an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and thoughts found their home (*API* p16). Aziz describes mosque as an "abode of peace" and tranquillity. Although the protagonist of the novel is a Muslim and a host of other Muslim characters are also present in the novel, hardly any Muslim character, several critics argue, mirrors the true image of Islam. Critics also point out that Forster hardly did justice to Christianity. M. K. Naik says that "Forster has been less than fair to Christianity". He depicts Mrs. Moore's "Poor little talkative Christianity" with the edges of irony in the novel. The echo sound "bou-oum" or "ou-boum" of Marabar Cave "...undermines her hold on life" and her Christian faith provides her little comfort to overcome the difficulty. Except Mrs. Moore, no other Christian in the novel adheres to the principles of Christianity. As Roney Heaslop refuses to be pleasant with the natives and does not like the Christian principles when it influences his life

Forster has not projected a positive image of Hinduism in the novel and often gives a very derogatory image of their rituals. Forster seems to have formed his opinion about Hinduism from the experience during his stay in the state of Dewas and Chattarpur. Forster represents his understanding of Hinduism through its rituals and Godbole's queer song. Forster delineates the mystery and mysticism of the festival of *Gokul Ashtami*. He describes the entire festival as a "muddle". Hindu gods, myth, forms of worshipping and its philosophy are projected with irony. G.K. Das in his book *E.M. Forster's India*, says that "Hinduism is alluded in a more directly or indirectly, in a rather disparaging, and essentially non-serious and whimsical vein" (Das 95). Forster's scepticism towards Hinduism is also found in the description of Godbole's religious ecstasy in the festival. Forster's portrayal of Hinduism is unsympathetic in the novel.

Hindu characters are also portrayed in negative light. His own acquaintances with the Maharaja of Dewas and Maharaja of Chattarpur contributed significantly to the character of Godbole. In his novel *Hill of Devi*, Forster presents the character of *Maharaja* of Dewas "...with a mixture of affection, suspicion, sympathy and a praise but he never fully comprehends." (Das 94) Critics also comment that he has created the character of Godbole after the Maharajas. The character of Godbole is portrayed as a foil to Aziz and also an ambivalent and mysterious character in the novel. On being asked by Fielding about Aziz's culpability in the Marabar cave, Godbole offers this prevaricated answer: "According to our philosophy, because nothing can be performed in isolation. All perform a good action, when one is performed, and when an evil action is performed, all perform it" (API p166). Godbole's mysteries are further delineated by Forster when he says that "good and evil are different, as their names imply. But, in my own humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my love" (API p167). He is a person with vested interest and some dark sinister side is evident in his character. He is projected as the cause of all evil, as he did not inform about the mysterious echo of Marabar cave, otherwise entire tragedy would have been averted. The character of Godbole is ridiculed in various ways as Forster describes Godbole's attention to food: "...he only ate- ate and ate, smiling, never letting his eyes catch sight of his hand." (API p66). M.K. Naik is of the opinion that Forster represented Godbole as stereotyped unfathomable Brahmin rather than as a living character" (Naik 67). Other Hindu characters Dr. Panna Lal, assistant of Major Calender and Ram Chand are portrayed as contemptible and unscrupulous fellows in the novel. The flattery of Mr. and Mrs. Bhattacharya, an educated Hindu couple, is portrayed in much negative light in the novel. Their treachery to the Adela and Mrs. Moore reflects the "flabby moral character" of the Bengali Brahmin couple.

Unlike Kipling, Forster, a liberal humanist, believes that English and Indians could meet on equal terms in India. But in his book *Attitudes to Imperialism: Kipling, Forster and Paul Scott*, Sujit Bose complains that "throughout Forster's *A Passage to India*...Anglo-Indian relationship is characterised by the attitude of hatred and master-servant relationship" (Bose 59). Hamidullah's speech to his friends corroborates: "...it is impossible to be friends with an Englishman" (API p8). Critics also flay the *Maa-Baap* ideology/mentality manifested in *A Passage to India*. This belief is very popular since Kipling that Indians are the children and English are *Maa-Baap* i.e. parents. While talking about the English Banister family to his friends, Hamidullah pays homage to them and says that "...the reverend and Mrs. Banister, whose goodness to me in England I shall never forget or describe. They were father and mother to me" (API p10). The British theory of *Maa-Baap* does not convey the genuine relationship between English and Indians, rather the *Maa-Baap* mentality violates humanity as it demands loyalty from their subordinates and

considers Indians as inferior to the English. Forster also endorses this ideology which creates obstacles and hampers a genuine human relationship.

Forster's endorsement of *Maa-Baap* mentality raises doubt about his attitude towards the future of British imperialism. Being children, Indians are incapable of self government and they need parental guidance from the British. In *API*, on their way to Marabar, Fielding and Godbole missed the train due to the latter's prolonged worshipping in the morning, the British officials says that "Indians are incapable of responsibility" (*API* p123). In *Chronicles of Raj*, Shamsul Islam points out that "Forster is not anti-imperialist" and favours the need of British imperialism in India. He further points out that Forster shows inclination for the continuation of the Raj but that should not be based on authoritarian imperialism. Moreover, he believes that Indians are politically immature and are incapable of self government. He says in *API* that "Most inhabitants of India do not mind how India is governed" and do not know the difference between good government and bad government (*API* p104). Through the character of Hamidulla, Forster acutely emphasizes about the irresponsibility of the Indians. In *E.M.Forster: Our Permanent Contemporary*, J.M. Scott conveys this impression on Forster's representation:

The Indians are shown for hopelessly at odds and incompetent among themselves but very living; the British as much better as administration... and yet the effectual picture *A Passage* presents as a whole is a land where people cannot be expected to make a sufficient success of self-direction and for whom, a British Raj is necessary. (Scott 158).

Forster further minutely takes notice of the internal conflicts among Hindus and Muslim but does not mention about the Britishers' "Divide and Rule" policy. He observes that Hindus and Muslims cannot live in harmony in this country. Forster endorses the need of British presence to maintain the "peace" and "order" in the sub-continent. The recurrent communal riots during *Mohurram* necessitate the presence of a British officer like Roney Heaslop in Chandrapore, as Forster says:

Muharram was approaching, and usual the Chandraopore Mohammedans were building paper towers of a size of too large to pass under the branches of certain peepul tree. One knew what happened next; the tower stuck, a Mohammedan climbed up the peepul tree and cut the branches off, the Hindu protested, there was a religious riot, and Heaven knew what, with perhaps the troops sent for....There had been disputations and.... all the normal works of Chandrapur are hung up....The Collector favoured the Hindus, until they suspected that they had artificially bent the tree nearer the ground. But Rooney had not disliked his day, for it proved that British were necessary to India; there would certainly have been bloodshed without them. (*A Passage to India* pp87, 88)

To keep “peace” and “order”, character like Rooney Heaslop wants to “ hold this wretched country by force”(API p45). Forster’s justification for the need and continuation of the British Raj has attracted criticism from Indians.

Another criticism is that Forster has not given any representation to Indian women in *A Passage to India*. The women appear in the novel as housewives, prostitutes or confined within a picture frame. Hamidulla’s Begum plays her role as a house wife against the backdrop; never actively participates in anything in the novel, rather remains behind the veil. Aziz’s dead wife only finds mention in the novel as he shows his wife’s photograph to his select friends. Mrs. Banerjee appears only to dupe Adela and Mrs. Moore in the novel. The prostitutes of Calcutta, whom Aziz would like to visit with his friend Fielding does not appear physically in the novel, rather they are alluded to by Aziz.

Forster’s preconceived notion of the superiority of English is manifested in his description of Chandrapore bazaar and Chandrapore civil station inhabited by Indians and the English respectively. Forster displays the binary good and bad in his description of Chandrapore bazaar and Chandrapore civil station. He describes thus the Indian side of Chandrapore:

...never too large or beautiful...so abashed, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye... Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible forms of life (API p 5).

On the other hand, Forster gives a description of the neat civil station of Chandrapore:

...appears to be a totally different place. As for civil station itself, it provokes no emotion, it charms not, neither does it repel. It is sensibly planned, with a red brick club on its brow, and further back a grocer’s and a cemetery and the bungalows are disposed along roads that intersect at right angles. It has nothing hideous in it, and only the view is beautiful (API p 6).

Like other British writers, Forster thus, endorses stereotypical binary centre and periphery -English are at the centre and Indians at the periphery in his description. Forster’s binary elicits severe criticism from Indian critics.

Critics and scholars have devoted centuries to understand the relationship between East and west. The last three centuries are particularly worth mentioning in discussing the relationship between two different cultures – the culture of India and Britain. Several prisms like philosophy, politics, religion, linguistics and sociology have been applied to understand the fundamentals of this incompatible relation of the Orient and the West. Much literature has been written on that and several writers have also attempted to

explore the traits, cultures, irreconcilable ideals of India and England. In their writings, more often than not, their endeavour to understand the complex relationship proved to be biased because of their lack of genuine understanding of the culture. The writers' ingrained beliefs of the superiority of one culture over the other lurk behind their writings.

Like other British Writers, Forster deftly represents his cross-cultural understanding in *A Passage to India*. Forster has a sympathetic attitude towards India/ Indians, but the narration and description of the novel betray streaks of negativism. By breaking the colonial myth of white man's superiority in the novel, Forster must have experienced the "anxiety of influence" and "anxiety of difference" in his approach to British-India. But his novel displays the amazing interplay of cross cultural understanding marred by chasm, misconceptions and misprojections. His misprojections are reflected in the historical chronology, description of locale and his approach to Indian women etc. in the novel. Although he follows the liberal humanistic approach in *A Passage to India*, yet few prejudices get reflected in his representation of India. Indian critics take on Forster's cross-cultural understanding/ mis-understanding and castigates for his double standards in the novel. Despite huge success of the novel, these prejudices and misprojections reduce *A Passage to India* into "A Passage to less than India." The Indian critical perspective has significantly contributed to the postcolonial debate on the novel.

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