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The Vision of India in *A Passage to India*: Personal Relationships, Rhythm and Pattern

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Abstract

In *A Passage to India,* Forster demonstrates several sets of relationship between man and man, between man and woman, between one race and another, between the orient and the occident. The relationships, racial and religious, are more broad-based than personal, and they are often influenced by political and diplomatic factors. Side by side, the bond of personal relationship is basically cordial and, to some extent, it is ethical as well as psychological. At the first blush, the title of Forster's novel appears to be a misnomer. There is blockage, no passage, in the relationship between one race and another, between one community and another, between one religious sect and another, between one individual and another. A well-organised plot has a pattern of its own. In this connection, Forster introduces two terms: Rhythm and Pattern in his seminal *Aspects of the Novel*. The former, says he, is a matter of recurrence in varied contexts, something repeated along with

variations and the latter suggests structural integrity. This article illustrates how the off-shoot of the novel is that the East and the West must stand apart as long as the East is under the political dominance of the West. But this article also probes how the East and the West may meet, if the level is spiritual rather than political or social.

Keywords

Forster; *A Passage to India*; Pattern; Rhythm; Relationships; Colonial India.

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Introduction

That *A Passage to India* is a fairly realistic novel is beyond dispute. At the very outset, one feels tempted to quote Professor Emeritus Rama Kundu in this connection:

> India was Forster's constant subject. Since 1914, ten out of his twelve publications have been about India and the Indians. He also reviewed books on India. Just as in Whitman's poem, so in Forster's novel 'India' means not just a geo-political identity but rather an idea, or spirit, or vision transcending that identity. Edward Said writes, "I have always felt that the most interesting thing about *A Passage to India* is Forster's using India to represent material that according to the canons of the novel form cannot in fact be represented—vastness, incomprehensible creeds, secret motions, histories, and social forms" (Said 1994: 241). Benita Parry, however, acclaims *A Passage to India* as "the triumphant expression of the British imagination exploring India." (62-63)

It is notable that before composing *Riders to the Sea*, Synge, advised by Yeats, visited the Aran Islands and gathered a first-hand-knowledge of the people living there. Forster too came to India before writing *A Passage to India*, and though his stay in India was a short period he spared no pains to

understand the situation of the sub-continent during the British reign in the 1920s. The novel he subsequently wrote was the product of his on-the-spot experience he accumulated during his short stay in India. The vision of India, as reflected in the novel, is not totally authorial; Forster seeks to know the minds of the Indians and those of the British serving in India under the imperial rule of England. Hence he allows the natives to vent their sentiments and attitudes freely, and the British men and women living in India also express their ideas and prejudices, particularly their 'complex', coloured with a sense of superiority.

Evidently, India comes into view in the novel from three angles: the author's own angle, the angle of the natives of India and the angle of the English people representing the foreign rule. Forster is highly liberal in his approach to India. He has an open view, free from any pre-conceived idea. He introduces the affairs of a particular town in India, Chandrapore, and the town serves as the microcosm of total India.

He shows how the Muslims in the town make a community of their own, having little truck with the Hindus who also maintain distance from the Muslim community. Nevertheless the yoke of bondage affects them equally, and in the question of shaking off the yoke they sink their division, and oppose the English tyrants unitedly. The Nawab, despite being a rich man, shares the sentiment of the deprived natives, and he is keen on driving away the foreigners from India. After all, the loss of political sovereignty binds the natives together, and they, despite their local, religious and economic disparities, stand united, antagonising the British Raj.

The English people living in India have their own community, and to their clubs the natives have altogether no access. They hate natives whom they consider not adequately civilised. Hence they usually shun the natives and believe that their only interest ought to be stabilising the British Empire in India. But Dr. Aziz, an Indian physician, is a broad-hearted youth. He stands

above all shades of prejudice. He does not show any orthodoxy in his approach to his relation to Hindus and Christians. When Mrs. Moore comes to a mosque and meets Aziz, he receives her with open arms, and soon they become friends. Even when Miss Adela does injustice to Aziz and files a delusional case against him, he does not harbour any idea of retaliation. Rather, when Miss Adela Quested is ill-treated by the English community in Chandrapore, and goes unsheltered, it is Aziz who comes forward and provides her security.

After all, the religion he pursues has no room for meanness. Side by side, Mrs Moore is a pious lady. She loves India which is for her a place of pilgrimage. Herself a Christian, she has respect for the people belonging to other religious sects, and if she is devoted to Christ, Lord Krishna is equally recognised by her as a divine incarnation. But the other English people in India do not share the liberal view of Mrs Moore. They are boastful and contemptuous in their attitude to the natives. For example, though Aziz is dutiful and efficient, his English boss constantly finds faults with him on one pretext or another, and it is his pleasure to discredit him. Mr Ronny, the District Magistrate, does not want his mother, Mrs Moore, to mix freely with the natives of India. He thinks that the Indians are hostile, treacherous and uncultured. Hence he maintains a measured distance from the natives of India, and doesn't ever show any sincere urge to feel the exact sentiment of the people who are robbed of their freedom. The commissioner's wife has no patience with the natives whom she looks upon as beasts. She thinks that the natives ought to be whipped on the public road. On the other hand, when their minimum demand is ignored by the authorities, the Indian sweepers launch a cease-work movement, and there follows a miserable stalemate, the British rulers, to their awe, realising the exact worth of the sweepers.

Personal Relationships

Salvation can come only through the personal relationships of human beings—this is what forms the basis of Forster's philosophy of life, and in

Howards End he confirms it emphatically. In *A Passage to India* he too demonstrates several sets of relationship between man and man, between man and woman, between one race and another, between the orient and the occident. The relationships, racial and religious, are more broad-based than personal, and they are often influenced by political and diplomatic factors. Side by side, the bond of personal relationship is basically cordial and, to some extent, it is ethical as well as psychological. P.N. Furbank cites *A Passage to India* as illustration of this observation that Forster looked at human life itself in a topographical fashion: "Nothing is more striking in his masterpiece *A Passage to India* than the continual, and sometimes dizzying, shift of viewpoint, so that at one moment we are tête-à-tête with his characters, and the next moment viewing them from the ends of the universe" (166).

Fielding belongs to England. He stays in India. He comes across an Indian doctor, Aziz, whose essential goodness impresses him. In a short time, he makes friends with him, and together they have happy days of deep cordiality. Aziz, a devout Moslem, appreciates the progressive outlook of Fielding whose honesty also evokes his admiration. His attachment to Fielding exposes him to the criticism of his community, but he cares little for that. On the other hand, when Aziz falls ill, Fielding is constantly beside his bed, doing everything for his quick recovery. Even when Aziz is involved in a false case of adultery, it is Fielding who stands by him and does his best to assert the baselessness of the charge lodged against Aziz. But it is unfortunate that the bond of friendship between the two doesn't last long.

Aziz is misled by the rumour that Fielding is going to marry Adela Quested, the lady who has miserably and unduly discredited Dr. Aziz. Moreover, he is under the impression that it was Fielding who secretly followed Miss Adela in the cave and molested her. Again, when Fielding marries Stella, Rony Heaslop's sister, it adds to his embarrassment, for he regards Rony as his enemy. Fielding tries to remove his wrong impressions, but to no effect. Finally,

Aziz declares that as long as India is under the political dominance of England, there can be no true friendship between an Englishman and an Indian.

Mrs. Moore is a pious old lady belonging to England. She comes to India with the mission of finding a 'passage' to the soul of India. Unlike most of her country people she is broad-minded and without any prejudice against the natives of India. So when she finds Aziz in a mosque that she visits, she feels interested in him and Aziz too discerns the innate goodness of the lady. In a short time they become intimate and he agrees to escort her and, her companion, Miss Quested to the Marabar caves.

But something unfortunate takes place in the caves, Adela contributing to the undesirable chaos. Though Aziz is innocent he is accused of attempting molestation on Adela. The matter upsets Mrs Moore, though she sincerely believes that Aziz is not guilty. Anyway, the matter shatters the mind of Mrs Moore who turns her back on India, and starts for England.

Aziz and Godbole belong to two different religions. Godbole is a Brahmin, and he observes the Hindu codes quite devotedly. Aziz has also his steady and unwavering faith in Islam, and he believes that man's perfection lies in the pursuit of his own religious faith. So the two, despite their eagerness to come close to each other and be friends, stand apart, and their relationship can hardly overcome their 'religious hurdles'.

Rhythm

Rhythm is a term related to music. Forster uses it to highlight the internal design of the novel. In his book, *Aspects of the Novel*, he introduces the terms, pattern and rhythm, pointing out that when the former is concerned with the external form the latter involves the internal unity of a work of art. When a particular image or phrase or idea is repeated in altered situations, what follows is the impression of rhythm. Technically speaking, it is 'repetition plus variation'. E.K. Brown acknowledges in his book *Rhythm in the Novel*: "Eight pages in E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* led me into thinking about

the various forms rhythm may take and the various effects it may produce. As a preliminary definition of rhythm a phrase of his will serve: rhythm is 'repetition with variation'" (7).

The effect that rhythm produces is very much like the effect that one finds in Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony": when the orchestra stops, we hear something that has never been actually played. What Forster says theoretically about rhythm in *Aspects of the Novel* is practically demonstrated in *A Passage to India*. There is no denying that E.M. Forster makes use of an unfailing Wagnerian leitmotiv system to keep all his themes strumming at the same time: "In *Aspects of the Novel* Forster discussed the possibility of creating within in a novel by means of leitmotifs, although he warned at the same time that "Done badly, rhythm is most boring, it hardens into a symbol and instead of carrying us on it trips us up."" (qtd. in Kundu 204).

To start with, on one occasion Mrs Moore says to Dr Aziz: "I don't think I understand people very well. I only know whether I like or dislike them" (Forster, A Passage 17). Her words impress Aziz so greatly that he cannot restrain his rapture: "Then you are an oriental" (17). Years later, after the death of Mrs Moore, Ralph Moore, her son chances visit India. He meets Aziz and together they talk about many things. Meanwhile, Ralph says that he could tell whether a stranger was his friend. This time too Ralph's words leave a deep impression on Aziz who exclaims, unawares that he too was an Oriental indeed. We find that a single sentence is uttered in two different situations. This is an instance of 'repetition plus variation'.

One may also refer to the wasp episode in the novel. One night Mrs Moore finds an Indian wasp seated on a nail attached to the wall. The sight of the little insect fills the mind of Mrs Moore with a religious feeling. She feels that Christ is also there in the insect. Hence she, instead of disturbing the insect, lets it sleep in peace. Again, two Christian boys talk about man's entry into heaven. One of them says that men and women along with all other

creatures of earth will one day find access to heaven. But the other boy says that perhaps the wasp will be denied entry into the kingdom of god. So the wasp comes to the consciousness of the two boys who have altogether no knowledge of Mrs Moore holding a religious view of the wasp.

Furthermore, in the town of Mau the anniversary of Lord Krishna's birth is being celebrated, with a Brahmin professor, Godbole, presiding over the function. He sings and dances, getting immersed in the thought of Lord Krishna. All at once, an image of a wasp flashes upon his mind. He finds a wasp whirling on and on. Then the wasp image is transformed into an image of Mrs Moore. Godbole visualises Mrs Moore paying her tribute to Lord Krishna. Godbole has no knowledge of Mrs Moore's experience of watching a wasp in her bedroom. Nevertheless, unknowingly Godbole relates the image of a wasp to that of Mrs Moore. After all, the wasp-image occurs in three different situations, and yet it is so used that it makes for the evocation of an orchestra producing an 'unheard melody'.

Now to the affair of the echo in the novel. When Mrs Moore and Miss Adela journey by train, escorted by Aziz, the wheels of the train rolling over the steel track give out a monotonous sound which tells upon the nerves of the two European ladies. However, when they alight from the train and move towards the Marabar caves, the sound of the wheels rolling over the steel track comes echoing to them. Finally, Miss Adela enters the caves, dark and mysterious. She keeps on hearing the echo: “Pomper, pomper, pomper” (Forster, A Passage 120). At this point, Mrs Moore has a vision of emptiness which existed before space, before time even, an emptiness from which nothing can be taken, into which nothing can be put in. The caves contain absolute darkness and endless mystery, and they rouse the memory of something remote and riddling in Miss Adela. So it is the impression of an echo in various shades that fills the canvas and deepens the effect.

Again, when Ralph visits India, it is practically Mrs Moore, his mother, revisiting the holy land. Hence there is also a sort of spiritual echo in Ralph's visit. So Forster exploits the echo-image in diverse contexts and evokes the rhythm which enriches the inner texture of the narratives.

Pattern

Elizabeth Heine underpins 'order' both in the execution of rhythm, structure as well as at the level of metaphysical meaning:

> Thus this final development of Forster's consistent 'structure' in *A Passage to India*, where the characters' mental experiences are shaped in mysterious ways beyond the knowledge of psychology, indicates Forster's aesthetic faith in an order beyond 'humanism'. The paradoxical fact that he has created the ultimate order of the novel does not change the reader's conviction that the structure as created reflects a non-human absolute. (296)

In his perceptive book, *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster distinguishes between the story and the plot. He says that while the story is concerned with 'what happens', the plot deals with 'why and how things happen'. To be more precise, the story is a jumble of events with no logical interconnection among them. But not so with the plot, for it binds together the events logically, a thread of reasons underlines the series of events. Here is an example of a story: The king dies. The queen dies. The two sentences stand independent of each other. They stand apart. They have no logical link. But when one says: There was a king. He falls ill. His condition turns serious. The physicians try to cure him, but to no effect. The king dies. It shocks the queen severely. She cannot overcome depression, she dies.

We find what is called a plot in the latter sequence of sentences for the death of the king is adequately accounted for, while why the queen dies also does not go unexplained. Forster thinks that a well-organised plot has a pattern of its own. In this connection, Forster introduces two terms: Rhythm

and Pattern. The former, says he, is a matter of recurrence in varied contexts, something repeated along with variations. The latter suggests structural integrity confirming the Platonic dictum: the beauty of a statue resides in the whole (Santas 201).

Unlike his other novels, *A Passage to India* offers a plot which stands above complication. It consists of three distinct sections: Mosque, Caves, Temple. The opening section projects an encounter between the East and the West. Dr Aziz is there in a mosque. He represents the East. A European lady, aged and humble, enters the mosque, taking off her shoes. In a short time, through intuition, the lady, Mrs Moore, feels her oneness with the spirit prevailing in the holy place, and Aziz too realises the broad attitude of the lady. There follows a cordial understanding between the two, and this is how the friendship between the East and the West develops.

But the section that follows, Caves, marks a contradiction, resulting in the breakage of friendship between the two individuals representing the East and the West. Dr Aziz, an Indian citizen, serves as the escort of Miss Adela, obviously of the West. When in the dark caves, Miss Adela is involved in a terrible bafflement it occurs to her that somebody seeks to molest her. Struck with fear and puzzlement, she starts shouting, seeking help, and when she comes out of the caves, she thinks that none but Dr Aziz was behind the mischief. She takes her guess for a matter of certitude. The matter shatters the nerves of Mrs Moore who remains silent, showing indifference to the whole affair, tough even in her state of exhaustion she believes that Aziz is innocent. At any rate, the second section unfolds a spectacle of chaos and mystery, and it so happens that the conflict between the two individuals assumes the proportion of a racial tussle between the natives of Chandrapore and the bureaucrats of English origin residing in the town.

The third section, Temple, shows a worshipful gathering of Hindus in a Temple. They pay their tribute to Lord Krishna. Side by side, we find another

sight of two boats colliding with each other with the passengers, along with an image of Gakul, floating in water. The passengers, Indian and English, get drenched, and yet they retain their racial apartness. The ending of the novel exhibits a spectacle of a last ride together. Dr Aziz rides on a horse which gallops along with another horse carrying Fielding. Earlier Aziz and Fielding were close friends. But now the bond of friendship is snapped. Fielding tries to renew the bond, but of no avail. Aziz is adamant. He believes that there can be no genuine and lasting friendship between the ruler and the ruled. So the two riders move, side by side, forming two lines running parallel. The novel ends on a note of endlessness. Forster seems to convey the message that at the secular level, with politics going strong, there can hardly be a true understanding between two races seeking to dominate each other.

Mrs Moore and Prof. Godbole find affinity between themselves on the ground of broad-based religion. But Fielding and Aziz, standing on the secular plain, will never sink their differences. In other words, the East and the West, with power-politics holding the stage, have no room for being cordially united. The novel is so structured that the events take place in a perfectly logical order, internal integrity putting together all the items, apparently discordant, into an organic whole, and this is the pattern of a statue finding beauty in its whole.

Justifiability of the Title

At the first blush, *A Passage to India* appears to be a misnomer. There is blockage, no passage, in the relationship between one race and another, between one community and another, between one religious sect and another, between one individual and another. While such is the situation, how can there be a question of finding a passage for union, for mutual understanding, for inter-racial bond? The story that Forster narrates is the inter-relation between the ruler and the ruled in India in the 1920s. He makes a significant comment: "The fissures in the Indian soil are infinite" (qtd. in Kundu 71). But what he says about the Indian soil is also true of other soils, the soil of England

included. Division or rift is inherent in man. Hence the novel that Forster composes about the relationship between two races is involved more in conflict than in coherence.

In 1960, in his "Programme Note" to Santha Rama Rau's dramatized version of A Passage to India Forster explained his intention behind the title: "[…] taking the title from a poem of Walt Whitman's—I tried to indicate human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds" (qtd. in Kundu 55). One can hardly find a passage. Where they are led to is but a paradise of concord. Collision rather than cohesion is supposed to be the central theme of human drama. So if the English people intend to pave a passage to the heart of India, it can hardly lead to a happy consequence. After all, the East is East and the West is West: do they ever meet?

At a deeper level, the title of the novel does make sense. As the novel opens in the town of Chandrapore, we come across two British ladies. They are Mrs Moore and Miss Adela Quested. The former is aged and the latter is in the prime of her life. Unlike the average Britishers in India, they are broad-hearted and open-minded. They nourish no hatred for the natives of India. Instead they prefer looking upon the Indians as human beings, as the children of god. They stand above colonial corruption. They sincerely strike to explore a way, a passage to the soul of India. Their honesty is unalloyed. But their integrity notwithstanding, what eventually occurs runs contrary to their mission.

Mrs Moore and Miss Adela Quested make friend with Dr Aziz, an Indian, and the amiable behaviour of the man impresses them greatly. One day, it is decided that escorted by Dr Aziz they would go to Marabar Hills. Accordingly they start. But the journey proves highly tedious and strenuous. Mrs Moore cannot stand the strain. She turns physically upset. As a result, instead of watching the caves she sits alone and apart, losing all her zest and zeal. However, Adela and Aziz enter the caves, but in the dense dark of the caves something mysterious occurs. Adela loses sanity. A queer fit of passion

overtakes her. She goes under an evil spell, and the result is that she comes out of the caves crying for help. She accuses Aziz of immodest behaviour. She even goes to the extent of declaring that she was at the point of being seduced by Aziz.

Her gesture, as described in the "Pattern"-section of this article, not only perplexes Aziz but also hurts him. Though innocent he is branded as a savage. However, a legal case is filed and Mrs Moore, totally disheartened, leaves India, and in a few days she passes away. The English people in India, most of them, support Miss Adela while the Indians stand beside Aziz. The personal affair assumes a gigantic proportion of conflict between two races. When the matter comes to a head Miss Adela comes back to sanity. She realises her fault. She withdraws the case. But the sweet relation between the two, Adela and Aziz, is not restored. Aziz, frustrated to a great extent, ceases to be open-hearted to the British, and even his trusted friend Fielding cannot change his mind. Aziz makes no secret of his idea that Indians and British will not be friendly to each other till India becomes free from the shackles of British imperialism. So the passage to India is blocked.

Conclusion

It is professor Godbole, who in a state of trance towards the fag end of the novel, has the apocalyptic awakening of his mind that a Hindu and a Christian do not stand apart as Krishna is identified with Christ. So the East and the West may meet, if the level is spiritual rather than political or social. Adela Quested may have missed her quest but Mrs Moore ultimately—posthumously to be precise—finds her mooring, her passage to India being discovered. On the other hand, one cannot deny a personal disappointment or two bearing on the author while fashioning *A Passage to India* too. On September 17th, 1922 Forster wrote to Masood:

> When I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West, but this conception has had to go, my

> sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable. I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not. Not interested as an artist; of course the journalistic side of me still gets roused over these questions. (qtd. in Furbank 106)

To conclude, the off-shoot of the novel is that the East and the West must stand apart as long as the East is under the political dominance of the West. Aziz, at the end of the novel, tells Fielding point blank that he cannot be Fielding's friend until India is free from the British rule. The spectacle with which the novel comes to a close is the spectacle of two horses running parallel. It is well-known, the two parallel lines, however close to each other, do not ever meet. Aziz, the East and Fielding, the West are so close and yet so apart.

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