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History and *Passage to India* - A Study

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Passage to India!

Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spanned, connected by network,
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be crossed, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.

(*Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman)

E.M. Forster has adapted the title of his novel from the poem 'Passage to India' which is from Walt Whitman's epic creation: *Leaves of Grass*. He has deliberately added an indefinite article before Whitman's phrase so that now it reads 'A Passage to India'. Although the title is adapted from Whitman but it is contrasted against Whitman's self-generated and self-sustained romanticism. In Whitman's poem India is seen as a symbol of mystical fulfillment, which has both positive and negative results. While it exalts India it does not analyse it in terms of race, class and gender specificities. Forster's adaptation of Whitman's phrase for the title of his novel suggests a greater self-examination and a move from Romanticism to Modernism. The novel is set against the backdrop of the British Raj and the Indian independence movement in the 1920s. It is inspired mainly from E. M. Forster's own experience as a temporary resident in India and his coming in contact with the Indian people and with the British servants, called Anglo-Indians, who were a narrow-minded caste of chauvinistic snobs. *A Passage to India* is a book that has been balanced by Forster for a long time as it was written in 1913 and not published until 1924 and as Boris Ford said: 'Forster, representing the finest and most human in the liberal spirit, began in "A Passage to India" the tradition of using Indian life as an image of personal experiences' (1983:319). It is rather considered to be a curious palimpsest comprising various layers of fact and fiction about rapidly changing historical face of India. As we go to the depth of the novel we can understand how history is intertwined with philosophy to contribute to the main theme of the novel.

Forster came to India in 1912-1913 and that journey was to enjoy the natural landscape and it was insisted for satisfying his personal desire. His first visit to India was to collect resource for another novel. Let us consider this letter which suggests Forster's attitude to Indian realities before his initial journey:

You ask me about my work. I feel you too sympathetic to keep silent. I am dried up. Not in my emotions, but in their expression. I cannot write at all ... I see beauty going by and have nothing to catch it in... I want something beyond the field of action and behaviour: the waters of the river that rises from the middle of the earth to join the Ganges and the Jamuna where they join. India is full of such wonders... (Furbank I, 249)

Initially Forster's attitude to India was ahistorical and it demonstrates the desperate need for something that would ease his inability to write about his feelings and desires. However despite these emotional gestures there were certain incidents which highlighted the revolution against the British regime and gradually Forster understands the rebellious sentiment of the oppressed countrymen during his stay in India. One of his lawyer – friend one day bursts out while riding with him "It may be fifty or five

hundred years but we shall turn you out” (Furbank, 258) Forster could sense this revolutionary spirit during his first visit to India. Although the period of relative tranquility could be perceived as a point of reference in the novel, the greater part of the novel is influenced by Forster’s second visit. The first visit of appears as vaguely evocative of a Golden Age before politics blighted personal relationships. In Part I of the novel, Chapter 9 there is an evocation of the apolitical life in the novel:

[Hamidullah] was glad that Aziz, whom he loved and whose family was connected with his own, took no interest in politics, which ruin the characters and career, yet nothing can be achieved without them. He thought of Cambridge – sadly, as of another poem that had ended... Politics had not mattered... There, games, work and pleasant society had interwoven, and appeared to be sufficient substructure for a national life. Here all was wire-pulling and fear. (*A Passage to India*, 103-104. Hereafter API)

There can be two amplifications of the above statement of Hamidullah. Initially it seems as if in terms of place an apolitical life is being treated as a luxury which India cannot afford for her people and it also seems as if the time for being apolitical has come to an end, certainly for the Indians and possibly even for the British. In complete contrast to the political dullness and assumptions of 1912-1913, Forster’s second visit took place at a time of intense excitement. The enthusiasm with which they had supported the British war effort during the First World War made Indians hope for a tangible step towards self-government in recognition of their cooperation. Instead the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms which produced the Act of 1919 were draconian measures providing for arrest and trial without any legal cover. After Montague-Chelmsford, another devastating historical massacre of JallianwallahBagh (1919) appeared on Indian soil. With the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi and his coordination of the freedom struggle came the call in 1921 for Satyagraha, or non-violent non-cooperation which meant ‘good ethical and sound politics’ (Nehru, 73). The period has been described as follows:

1921 was an extraordinary year for us. There was a strange mixture of nationalism and politics and religion and mysticism and fanaticism. Behind all this was agrarian trouble and, in the big cities, a rising working- class movement. Nationalism and a vague but intense country-wide idealism sought to bring together all these various, and sometimes mutually contradictory, discontents, and succeeded to a remarkable degree. And yet this nationalism was a composite force, and behind it would be distinguished a Hindu nationalism, a Muslim nationalism partly looking beyond the frontiers of India, and what was more in consonance with the spirit of the times, an Indian nationalism. For the time being... all pulled together. It was remarkable how Gandhiji seemed to cast a spell on all classes...and drew them into one motley crowd struggling in one direction. (Nehru, 75)

Certainly a number of critical assumptions emerge from the historical struggle for Independence and all these assumptions are fictionalized in the novel. Firstly there is a rise of multifaceted struggle: politics, religion, agrarian uprisings and labour revolts. Secondly there appears in the historical backdrop the rise of Indian nationalism and religious fundamentalism. Thirdly there is also a sense that the concept of Indian nationhood, rising above communal loyalties. Finally the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian Freedom struggle movement. All these emerging political thought and historical features appear in the novel. In the novel the common people of the country are considered as the marginalized as they protest against the injustice sanctioned by imperial rule. The exemplary trial scene of Aziz is the best example to realize the rebellious voice of the marginalized class of the society:

...queer reports kept coming in. The sweepers had just struck, and half the commodes of Chandrapore remained desolate in consequence – one half, and sweepers from the District, who felt less strongly about the innocence of Dr. Aziz, would arrive in the afternoon, and break the strike, but why should the grotesque incident occur? And a number of Mohammedan ladies had sworn to take food until the prisoner was acquitted; their death would make little difference, indeed being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting. A new spirit seemed abroad, a rearrangement, which no one in the stern little band of whites could explain. (API, 209)

This extract highlights several crucial aspects of the novel. It throws abundant light on the political turmoil that encompasses the entire novel. If we minutely observe the excerpt, we would see people of all strata, irrespective of their social standard, class and gender unequivocally protest against the injustice of the imperial rule against Dr. Aziz. Here sweepers, untouchables of the society; Muslim women behind the purdah, takes equal voice of protest against law of the country. Foster is 'critical of English racialism. Because his skin is the wrong colour, Dr. Aziz is excluded from the club to which his intelligence and skill give him every right to belong, and the moment an accusation is made about him, the European immediately believe it on the slenderest of evidence' (Thody,1996: 243).The novel aims at the exploration of Anglo-Indian friendship. Forster pays great attention to the description of the two societies that are to be found in India, namely the natives, the Indians, and the new comers, the British, but also to way they interact and to the relationships they establish. The different episodes in the novel revolve around this theme and the subjective analysis of every concept is an offshoot of the main contention. While progressing in the text we observe religious fundamentalism which relates to nationalism in a more problematic way. Aziz initially has a fleeting impulse to respond to the call of Islam over that of national commitment. He says: "...as a calm assurance came the feeling that India was one: Muslim; always had been, an assurance that lasted until they looked out of the door". (API, 119) Aziz's belief and conviction is taunted by Fielding (an Englishman) and then he retaliates in a boisterous way – "...India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Muslim and Sikh and all shall be one! Hurrah! Hurrah for India!" (API, 316) From here it is quite evident how Forster has presented the relationship between Indian nationalism and communalism and between communalism and non-Indian aspirations. The questions of nation and independence have a sparkling hint in Forster's *A Passage to India*. Although the question of independence may appear to be but a marginal issue in a novel, it deals most forcefully and famously with the dilemma of cross-cultural relationship in the colonial world.

The single most amazing erasure in the novel is that of Mahatma Gandhi. Despite all that can be said about the shifting time-scale that it employs, the fact is that the novel includes indirect reference to innumerable historical events shortly before its publication in 1924. When Mrs. Turton after the deadly Caves episode says that all Indians should be made to crawl as a humiliating punishment, it is possible to observe a parallel with the heinous 'crawling order' of General Dyer in Punjab after the JallianwallahBagh (1919). Aziz's arrest, which comes with a wide glare and despise from the imperial rule, is an event that can takes place only when measures as repressive as the Rowlatt Act of the same year is in force. It is quite astonishing that Forster even though he brings in a parallel with different historical incidents in the novel, he completely forgets or removes the presence of Mahatma Gandhi from his novel. One specific reason for this inexplicable erasure is the fact that Forster's 1921-1922 visit to India was spent by him in the princely state of Dewas as secretary to its Maharajah. In the novel Dewas is represented by Mau and all the material for Forster's next novel *The Hill of Devi* is derived from his visit to Dewas. The chief consequence of this historical speaking is that Forster during his second visit to India lived and worked in a state that was even more opposed to advancement and the freedom struggle movement. In the novel *The Hill of Devi* his narrative expedition explains: "There is no perceptible change here, indeed atmosphere is in some ways less western and that it was nine years ago... There is no anti-English feeling. It is Gandhi whom they dread and hate."(*The Hill of Devi*, 89. Hereafter HOD) Hence when in passage to India Forster narrates the most 'Indian' section of his novel, namely 'Temple' and places it in princely India, it is understandable he cannot write of Gandhi. In such a setting Gandhi as a leader would have no place since the Princes seriously wonder why the British Government does not ask them 'for the head of Gandhi on a charger'(*Abinger Harvest*, 370). Another possible reason for excluding Gandhi from the periphery of discussion is for Forster's intensely ambiguous attitude to the freedom struggle. On one side he is sensitive in a way it records the complex faces of the national movement. On the other hand the author avoids explicit comment on the movement. As Forster says:

Non-co-operation is only one aspect of the wider tendency that envelops not only India in particular but all the globe - the tendency to question and protest... A new spirit has entered India. Would that I could conclude with a eulogy of it. But that must be left to writers who

can see into the future and who know in what human happiness consists. (*Abinger Harvest*, 379)

Thus the novel is treated as a chronicle of historical events. Although Forster tried to explore different other facets also but primarily the main contention of the novel is the historical struggle for Independence.

Another important aspect of the novel is the developing trends of nationalism and internationalism. Fielding questions the value of nationhood in his last conversation with Aziz:

India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she will rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps! (API, 317).

There are many ways of taking this as nationalism. A very hilarious picture is conjured up in the comparison of the country shuffling in like a shoddy late-comer because it is true to the outmoded nineteenth century concept of a nation - state. In this particular excerpt there is a sense of genuine regret. India-which once headed an imperial system as massive as the Roman Empire of old- is now to lose her dignity. As a nation she will be reduced to the insignificance of fellow nation-states such as Guatemala or Belgium. So it is a matter of deep concern as the author here mocks India on nationalistic aspirations. It is observed that Forster views on democracy are mixed and quite confusing. Forster's view that nationalism will demean India or whether India is not fit for nationalism, both the contradictory views are present in the novel. Towards the beginning of 'Temple' there is an interesting insight as the author refers to the theme of Aziz's poetry:

...they [Aziz's poems] struck a new note: there cannot be a mother-land without new homes. In one poem- the only one funny old Godbole liked- he had skipped over the mother-land (whom he did not truly love) and gone straight to internationality. 'Ah that is bhakti; ah my young friend, that is different and very good. Ah, India, who seems not to move, will go straight there while the other nations waste their time. (API, 290)

From this excerpt we would conclude that nationalism (the motherland) is important only to the extent that it makes people feel 'at home' here on earth. It also explores the idea that nationalism is important not in itself but because it is a preparation for internationalism, or a sense of human community. The sense of community is to be held together by a sense of oneness or devotion (the idea of bhakti) which is to be its chief defining feature. Finally there is also the feeling that India's apparent political stagnation will turn out surprisingly to be her chief advantage. India will pass over or skip the stage of nationhood and move straight ahead to claim her place at the centre of internationalism.

There is another very significant interpretation of the text. History and philosophy are enmeshed in the thematic construction of the text. There is a direct influence of history and philosophy in *A Passage to India*. As he writes in 1960:

I began to write the novel in 1913, but the First World War intervened and it did not get published until 1924. Needless to say, it dares. The India I described has been transformed politically and greatly changed socially. I also tried to describe human beings; these may not have altered so much. Furthermore-taking my title from a poem of Walt Whitman's -I tried to indicate the human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds. (Forster, 1960)

Here Forster accomplishes a paradigmatic shift from a historical towards a philosophical interest in his treatment of India. It is precisely because he is conscious of the enormous sociopolitical changes that have taken place on the subcontinent that Forster is keen to stand apart from the position of a historian. It is his awareness of historical change that makes Forster realize that the novel might have become outdated even while he was writing it, and not his ignorance of historical process. Therefore he draws attention to what considers the organizing theme of the novel : "... the human predicament in universe...not...comprehensible to our minds" (API, 335) To understand the philosophical quest of the novel we need to understand the metaphysical quest that is at the heart of *A Passage to India* very much when he claimed :

...the book is not only about politics, though it is the political aspect that caught the general public and made it sell. Its about something wider than politics, about the search of the human race for a more lasting home, about the Universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky...it is - or rather desires to be - philosophy and poetic. (API, 25)

So we can say, Forster's interest is not primarily in a historical representation of India as an end in itself. The fact that the novel deals with a historical problem of its own time-the gradual dissolution of empire - has ensured its hold on the popular imagination. Both history and philosophy do not act as oppositional forces in the novel but as cooperating to construct various representations of India.

Coming closer towards the end of our journey in the depths of the novel, it should be stated that there was a big difference between Forster and the authors of his time. It is said:

Here rejected from the first any idea of being a solid chronicler of a society, of filling with realistic detail a broad canvas, of making his narrative acceptable and convincing by accumulating representative characters and events. He works in brilliant flashes, sudden revelations of character, glimpses of heights and depths, action that is not realistic and typical but symbolic. Loading everything in a scene with meaning, this evocative method, closer to poetic creation than to ordinary prose narrative, makes unusual demands upon a novelist. (Priestley, 1960: 355).

A Passage to India, which adds a dimension to racial relationships (especially among the British and the Indian) to the intricate pattern, is even more elaborate: 'a novel that requires several readings to be appreciated to the full, undoubtedly Forster's masterpiece' (Priestley, 1960: 355). Forster ends his novel *A Passage to India* with the reconciliation of Aziz and Fielding. The final message of the novel is that though Aziz and Fielding is eager to become friends, historical circumstances prevent the development of their amicable relationship. Even if the final lines of the novel are pessimistic, Forster does leave open the possibility of a cross-cultural friendship between Fielding and Aziz at a certain moment in the future. Forster's message has changed throughout the course of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, characters such as Fielding and Aziz are evidence of Forster's belief that with goodwill, intelligence and respect, all individuals can be connected and can form good friendship. But, in the final scenes, the natural landscape of India itself seems to rise up and divide Aziz and Fielding from each other. Forster suggests that though men may be well-intentioned, outside circumstances such as cultural difference and the interference of others can conspire to prevent their spiritual and mental union.

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