

E. M. Forster's A Passage to India : A Tale of Mystery and Muddle

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Abstract

Late 19th century witnessed the spread of 'cultural imperialism' in the European colonies. As part of the colonization, India also became a safe and profitable dwelling place of Englishmen and the East-West encounter became the subject matter of many fictional writers. Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster are two prominent writers who depicted the conflict in the colony but with different attitudes. While Kipling stood for the superiority of the White men, Forster maintained a sympathetic approach. However, Forster's *A Passage to India* depicts India as a land of mystery and muddle.

Keywords: Imperialism, East-West encounter, Myth, Mystery & Muddledom.

Introduction

At the end of 19th century, the entire Europe was under the sweep of a 'cultural pessimism' with expanding cities, mass production, over-population, growing unemployment and sharp political and social polarization. The colonial thinkers in this context considered the projection of imperialism in the countries where they had some control. The spread of imperialism and the establishment of colonies naturally provided them an opportunity to explore and exploit the great resources of these colonies which would support them with a boost in their economy at a moment of crisis.

As part of the colonization, India also became a safe and profitable dwelling place of Englishmen and the East-West encounter became the subject matter of many fictional writers. Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster are two prominent writers who depicted the conflict in the colony but with different attitudes.

Kipling and his school thought that action, courage, drive and adventures, in the face of adversity could be sustained only by creating and fostering myths, images and illusions. Thus the fictional India during the Empire becomes full of self-gratifying myths such as the 'white man's burden', the 'Man of Destiny' and so on to encourage action and adventure in a difficult situation full of challenges. Writers like Kipling were urged by the need of creating a myth of the Whiteman in the colonies through the medium of literature, that would pave the way for the flourishing of the Empire. So, naturally, post-Kipling Anglo-Indian novels began to depict the Whiteman as superior and the native inferior.

Discussion

But after the revolt of 1857, Anglo-Indian fiction entered a new phase, as Allan J. Greenberger calls "the Era of Doubt". The presiding feature of the novelists of this period is questioning not only the permanence of the British Empire but also the beliefs on which the authors had approved it. E.M. Forster stands out as the most striking representative of this English period. As stated by Sujith Boss "Forster's stance was not anti-imperial, but rather one of doubt" (39).

Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is a novel in which the author presents an examination and critique of colonialism and where he questions the rights and principles of one nation in governing another. The novel concerns the relations between the English men and the native population of India during the colonial period in which Britain ruled India. The novel takes place primarily in Chandrapore, a city along the Ganges River notable only for the nearby Marabar caves.

In the novel Forster creates the impression of India as a land where mystery and muddle are juxtaposed. India appears as a strange country with its contradictions. Forster's Fielding, a major and sensible character in the novel, despite his high education, is apparently 'baffled' by



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India's mystery when he says that the Mediterranean is the human norm and when men go beyond it towards India they head towards the 'strangest experience of all'. The novel as a whole portrays India's strange mysterious complexity, her chaos, her lack of form and meaning. The theme of mystery is introduced in the beginning of the novel when Dr. Aziz, Mrs. Moore and Fielding are together introduced to the readers:

'I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddle', Said Mrs. MOORE.

'A Mystery is a muddle'.

'Oh, do you think so, Mr. Fielding?'

'A mystery is only a high-sounding term for a muddle'.

'No advantage is stirring it up, in either case'.

'Aziz and I know well that India's a muddle'. (*A Passage to India* 86)

The India that Forster delineates is both muddled and mysterious. Forster's two lady travellers, Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested, come to India expecting that though the country will prove exotic, it will confirm their belief that they live in an intelligible universe. In this belief they are doomed to disappointment. According to John Sayre Martin "Forster involves the two women in a series of situations that undermine Mrs. Moore's religious faith and hastens her death and leads Adela Quested to realize that the world is more mysterious and complicated than she had believed" (143-144).

Mrs. Moore and Adela are spiritually muddled also. They have been undergoing a spiritual crisis almost since their arrival in India; for Mrs. Moore a crisis of faith, for Adela a crisis of conduct. Under the impress of India, Mrs. Moore begins to doubt whether her simple Christian faith can adequately comprehend the muddle and mystery around her.

Aim of the Study

E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* is a novel in which the author presents an examination and critique of colonialism and where he questions the rights and principles of one nation in governing another. The novel concerns the relations between the English men and the native population of India during the colonial period in which Britain ruled India. This article tries to establish that Forster in his novel creates the impression of India as a land where mystery and muddle are juxtaposed. India appears as a strange country with its contradictions. Forster's characters, even those who are supporting the cause of India consider India with a stranger's point of view. They fail to understand the real worth and noble culture of India. In spite of his proclaimed sympathy with the Indians, Forster has actually depicted India as a land of confusion and disorderliness, the article attempts to establish.

Adela has little of Moore's intuitiveness and openness. A "queer cautious girl" (*Passage* 24), she is decent, inquisitive, and sexually inhibited, a combination virtually guaranteed in a Forster novel to lead its possessor into a first class muddle. According to Allen Greenberger "Adela Quested is not very sensitive, but she does have an honest desire to meet and understand Indians" (153). The world, she believes, is susceptible to observation and intelligent

inquiry; and in the spirit of this belief, she wants to see 'the real India'. Understandably, as she herself declares, she dislikes mystery, for mystery by definition baffles the rational understanding and violates her belief that everything is, in theory at least, comprehensible. Mrs. Moore, on the other hand, dislikes muddle, which violates her vision of an orderly Christian cosmos (69).

In order to justify this, Forster presents a series of situations which are chaotic and confused. The major turning point in the plot is the trip of the heroine Miss Adela Quested in the company Dr. Aziz, a prominent Indian, to the Marabar Caves. The catastrophic expedition to the caves is preceded and followed by chaos and confusion. Godbole fails, Fielding delays, Mrs. Moore falls into a half-swoon, Adela's dreams are shattered, Aziz's heart is broken and emotionally crushed – that is what India does to them. The caves with their echo appear to be full of emptiness, waste, negation and futility. They terrify shock, overwhelm and undermine Mrs. Moore's hold on life and she gets lost in a spiritual muddledom.

Just as the echo is an objective correlative for Mrs. Moore's crisis of faith, so it is the same for Adela's crisis of conduct. Unable to decide whether to marry Ronny, whom she does not really love, she has also become muddled. She has failed to face honestly her own desires and instincts, and so suffers that favourite Forsterian malady, muddle; a muddle that the caves simply objectify. Considered objectively, the hills and caves suggest a disordered universe in which man nevertheless tries to discover order, and to order his own life accordingly.

That the universe may be without ulterior meaning and value is conveyed through the richest and most elusive of Forster's natural symbols, the Marabar Caves. Identical in size and structure and virtually indistinguishable from one another, the caves baffle man's instinct for order- a fact that Ronny, with typical impercipient, fails to recognize when he declares that the Government intends to number them in sequence with white paint to prevent future incidents (199). Although there has been a great deal of dispute as to the meaning of the Marabar Caves, Virginia Woolf has proposed a very satisfactory answer: "The Marabar Caves should appear to us not real caves, but it may be, the soul of India" (108).

Lack of organization, good sense and credibility is further exposed at the Bridge party, where, the Bhattacharyas invite Mrs. Moore and Adela to visit them the next Thursday morning, when at that time they are actually due to be in Calcutta.

'Thursday....'

'Most certainly'.

'We shall enjoy it greatly, it would be a real pleasure. What about the time?'

'All hours.'

Everything pleased her, nothing surprised. She added, 'We leave for Calcutta to-day.' (44)

Forster, in his excellent, ironic, funny description of the Bridge Party, describes the odd gestures of Indian women caught between tradition and modernity, the old and the new in Indian social contexts:

The shorter and the taller ladies both adjusted their saris and smiled. There was a curious uncertainty about their gestures, as if they sought for a new formula which neither East nor West could provide. When Mrs. Bhattacharya's husband spoke, she turned away from him, but she did not mind seeing the other men. Indeed all the ladies were uncertain, cowering, recovering, giggling, making tiny gestures of atonement or despair at all that was said, and alternately fondling the terrier or shrinking from him. (43)

The bodily movement of the ladies and their puzzling gestures are an index of their confrontation with the modern society of emerging cultural values.

The social image depicted in the novel is basically one of schism and division. The English are little gods and they create their own heaven in the exclusive Anglo-Indian club. Hindus and Moslems are entangled in various forms of social and communal relationships and create their own little world. Friendships are formed and forged, but misunderstandings and alienation cast a dark shadow over the world of human and social relationships. Bitterness replaces affection, hatred comes in the place of love, and the ways of man towards men are strewn with thorns.

Though Forster is sympathetic to India and a serious critic of English governance, to him India is a muddle. India appears before him as a mysterious irrational spirit. A Passage to India is replete with instances of this confusion. When Ronny and Adela Quested fail to identify a bird, the failure is attributed to the mysterious India- "nothing in India is identifiable; the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else" (84).

Forster uses the archetype of the caves to project the image of India as a land of mystery. In fact the novel itself can be called a mysterious novel difficult to comprehend and baffling critical minds. "Because of such difficulties", says Benita Parry, "A Passage to India is so difficult and intricate a book, critics will continue to debate its meaning. But it does seem important to single out, . . . one important feature- that the book is an interpretation of its impact on those who live in it and on the aliens who come to it" (67).

Adela's own experience is also shrouded by an element of mistiness. Darkness, vacuum, mystery, mist, hallucination, echo-these extend throughout the novel from Marabar to Mau, with multiple layers of ambiguity representing the Indian scene. Darkness, uncertainty, vagueness, mystery – the 'caves' are enshrouded in layers of all such ambiguities. Thus Forster has created an India as a land of mystery. In this context it is apt to quote the words of Bhagban

Prakash: "As the ridiculous and the sublime are mingled, confusion reigns supreme. The mystery and muddle continue to interweave patterns of incomprehension and wonder" (109).

The landscape of the Marabar Hills when Aziz, Adela and Mrs. Moore visit it at the start of summer is baked and cactus-ridden, a land suggestive of sickness and death. To the visitors, everything seems "infected with illusion" (140). Life-sustaining and life-denying, blending tropical luxuriance with mud, cactus, flies, snakes, leopards, hyenas, and dust, the landscape of Forster's India defies man's instinct for order and clarity. The very mud that cakes Chandrapore seems redolent of muddle.

Conclusion

The novel is everywhere pervaded with a sense that we inhabit a universe beyond which is only darkness and nothing. Forster's description of sky in chapter one clearly suggests this:

The core of blue persists, and so it is by night. Then the stars hang like lamps from the immense vault. The distance between the vault and them is as nothing to the distance behind them, and that farther distance, though beyond colour, last freed itself from blue. (9)

Thus it becomes clear that in spite of his sympathetic approach to the natives, E. M Forster has presented an India in his classic work as a land of ambiguities and the union between the East and the West is not an easy affair. The novel fails to project a correct image of India. But it must be reckoned that Forster was an enlightened liberalist who tries to explore the conflicts between the rulers and the ruled, perhaps for the first time in the history of the Anglo-Indian fiction.

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