

Knowing the 'real India': Dream, Desire and Disenchantment in Forster's *A Passage to India*

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E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) starts with a rather abominable description of Chandrapore. He writes: "The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. So abased, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye..." (Forster 2006: 3) On the historical level, the novel traces the passage undertaken by two sympathetic British ladies, namely Mrs Moore and Adela Quested, to 'see the real India', to bridge the gap between the East and the West.

A Passage to India portrays a colonial India under British imperialism, before its liberation. For convenience's sake, Western civilization has created an "Other" as counterpart to itself, and a set of characteristics to go with it. An "us versus them" attitude is exemplified in Forster's representation of The Other. At the English Club at Chandrapore, where no Indians are allowed, it is suggested by Fielding, the principal of the local Government College, that in order to see the real India, one has to 'try seeing Indians'. Fielding is sympathetic to Indians and has few friends among them but at the club he is disliked and often jeered at by his compatriots. Fielding's idea however appeals Adela. Adela informs Mr Turton at the tea-party arranged for Mrs Moore and Adela that "She is longing to see the *real* India." (Emphasis mine). We can say that being enamoured, Adela harbours a strange fascination for the exotic India.

Much later in the novel, Aziz bitterly criticizes the impulse of Adela of seeing the "real India". He was seduced by Adela's posture: "This pose of 'seeing India' which had seduced him to Miss Quested at Chandrapore was only a form of ruling India; no sympathy lay behind it..." (Forster 2006: 273) Aziz seems to be anticipating Said. The Englishmen's India was broadly a construct of his 'orientalism'. Orientalism is a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European/Western experience. The Orient is one of its deepest and most recurring images of 'the Other'. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe/the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. (Said 1977: 1-2)

At Mr Turton's Bridge Party –a party to bridge the gulf between the East and the West, Adela meets Mr Fielding, the Principal from Government College of Chandrapore. Turton arranges the Bridge Party in the flower garden of the Club. He invites numerous Indian gentlemen and gentlewomen in the neighbourhood. "The Bridge Party was not a success—at least it was not what Mrs Moore and Miss Quested were accustomed to consider a successful party." (Forster 2006: 30) The reader can hardly resist laughing at the contrast between the actual party and the pleasant party that it was meant to be. The message is clear: the English and Indians are not yet ready for friendship in any sense.

Mrs Moore tells her son Ronny that it is the most 'unnatural' event that she ever attended. This party shows the yawning gap between the 'we' and 'them' rather than the hope to mingle with each other in true sense. It clearly shows that the two nations can never be 'one' as there are people like Ronny who cannot bear the natives at all.

Adela requests Aziz to tell her something about Akbar. Aziz becomes a little surprised that she has heard the name of the emperor Akbar. Aziz describes Akbar in a way that will disenchant Adela: "Yes, Akbar is very wonderful, but half a Hindu; he was not a true Moslem." Adela retorts by asking him "But wasn't Akbar's new religion very fine? It was to embrace the whole of India." Aziz dismisses the idea: "Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing, and that was Akbar's mistake." (Forster 2006: 128) Adela was recommending universal brotherhood which Aziz himself dreamed of, but as soon it was put into practice, it became untrue.

Adela's approach to India has the excitement of a conventional visit, although she assumes herself to be unconventional. The India of her imagination is composed of the usual items of publicized romantic glamour: 'an elephant ride', and 'catching the moon in the Ganges'. Forster chooses to portray a more realistic and complicated image of Anglo-India and race-relations.

Miss Quested fails to embrace India closely in her attempt to know 'real India'. Her disillusion will be complete after her experience of the strange echo at Marabar Caves. Mrs Moore along with others hears echoes of babies' shrieks and Mrs Moore feels suffocated and terrified. The man who helps with the hurricane to make people see the inside clearly, speaks *kawa-dol* loudly, and then it echoes through the Caves for some time. Then, Aziz loudly speaks "Mrs Moore", the word echoes through the Caves for a long time. Now, Mrs Moore cannot bear to hear the echoes. She comes out of the Caves immediately out of claustrophobia, disgust and consternation. Mrs Moore has not expected these terrifying echoes. Mrs Moore abstains from visiting other caves the next moment.

Adela, likewise, is affected by the Marabar Caves, but not as profoundly as Mrs Moore. Her creed or interpretation of Christianity is that "God... is... love" (Forster 2006: 64). She is distinctly on the English team of the "us and them" attitude and though she says she wants to understand Indian culture as Mrs Moore does, she seems to want this only to be trendy or unconventional. Adela seems to share the colonialist, racist attitude of her fiancé Ronny. When he says,

"[...] India isn't a drawing room."

"Your sentiments are those of a god," she said quietly, but it was his manner rather than his sentiments that annoyed her.

[...] he said, "India likes gods."

"And Englishmen like posing as gods." (Forster 2006: 62-3)

Adela only experiences the echoes of the cave, as she later experiences the echo of Mrs Moore in the courtroom. Since Adela does not absorb the full effect of the cave, only the echo, simply a part of her spirituality is changed. Adela realizes a liberating truth about herself, that she does not love her fiancé, Ronny. This challenges the things she has been brought to believe as a result of her English upbringing. Adela then walks the fine line between 'us and them', and loses her identity as she knew it. Attempting to regain that identity, she accuses Aziz of assault, which swiftly moves her back into a position she is familiar with, and a vantage point that can be recognized by her peers. Her accusation separates her clearly from the Indians--it is specifically Adela versus Aziz (*us versus them*), and the trail that ensues thrusts her into a distinctly civilized and English setting: a courtroom. This security is short-lived. The experience of the cave stays with her, as the recently departed name of Mrs Moore is chanted. This chanting is reminiscent of the cave's

echoes, and almost invokes the presence of Mrs Moore. However, echoes are non-tangible and short lived; they do not exist, just as Mrs Moore ceases to exist. Adela is compelled to tell the truth of the situation, and is accused of hallucinating. This suggestion of hallucination implies that Adela has lost her mind, hence no longer existing.

The mystery of the Marabar Caves remains unresolved, so does that of how Britons and Indians can ever reach full understanding between themselves. Dr Aziz leaves town and becomes embittered as a result of his treatment by the British. At the end of the book during their horseback rides, Aziz expresses his view that the British and the Indians will never be friends until the British have left India. Sensing that this is the end of their association, Aziz and Fielding attempt to pledge eternal friendship in spite of their differences, but the path narrows and their horses are forced apart, signifying that such a friendship is not yet possible. Forster concludes by pointing to a deeper reason why this is so, namely that it is the land itself that makes friendship and understanding impossible: "... the earth didn't want it, ... the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House ... They didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet', and the sky said, 'No, not there'". (Forster 2006: 288)

There is dissolution of friendship between Dr Aziz and Fielding in the end of the novel. It is clear that Adela does not again want to take up another mission of knowing the 'real India'. Forster's final vision of the possibility of English-Indian friendship is a pessimistic one, yet it is qualified by the possibility of friendship on English soil, or after the liberation of India. As the landscape itself seems to imply at the end of the novel, such a friendship may be possible eventually, but "not yet." So, the cultural, religious, linguistic, social and geographical barriers cannot be bridged between the English and the Indians.

At a deeper level, the novel builds a passage between the achievements of the west with the wisdom of India, between the physical and the spiritual. The ideals of the West – normality, rationality, personality, exclusion and the ideals of India – impersonality, inclusiveness and love – are juxtaposed. India is the resort of rich spiritual heritage. India is a spirit; she is a mystery. The foreigners feel baffled and lost when they encounter this real India who manifests herself in the form of a shame, a mysterious wild animal, or the cave. Even the best representative of the highly cherished ideals of Western Culture, Fielding, feels that India is a 'muddle'. In the face of this general opinion of the Westerners, Forster stresses that India is a spirit and to understand her one should regard her spirituality.

Fielding, who shares Mrs Moore's respect for the Indians, is faced with a dire dilemma as he is forced to choose between English and Indian culture. Because he chooses India over England, he ceases to exist to the English, but can continue to exist with identity as an Indian. He is an individualist who has no great allegiance to any particular group, but rather to his core set of liberal values and sense of justice. This quality allows Fielding to break with the English who support Adela Quested's charges against Aziz and side with the Indians in support of him. However, the events surrounding Aziz's trial cause Fielding to become disenchanted with India, despite his affection for the nation, and motivate him to leave India and return to resume a different post.

G. K. Das in his essay "Through 'The Ruins of Empire': *A Passage to India* and Some Later Writings about India" opines that Fielding had illusions about a relationship with India and Indians within the continuity of Britain's imperial presence in India, which Forster himself had not. Forster had understood that the empire was no longer a tangible reality, and that a bond with

India and Indians must be sought independently irrespective of any imperialism within the terms of the real situation. (Das 2006: 346)

Mrs Moore exists in a state of limbo between two worlds, between England and India. In many ways Mrs Moore is neither East nor West as traditionally defined. Her pursuit, simple as it may sound, is to be one with the universe. Her initial approach to this seems to suggest a more Eastern view, finding worth in people, places and experiences without trying to quantify their value, and believing in universal love as the highest governing power. The Marabar experience, however, puts her in another sphere entirely. When she goes to the caves, her experience is a spiritual one. She loses her faith in Christianity entirely, thus losing her identity. She doesn't exist. She is exiled by her son to England, where she cannot possibly exist because of her affinity for Indian spirituality. She dies in transit between these two worlds, as she cannot hope to exist in either of them. Her counterpart, Fielding, who shares Mrs Moore's respect for the Indians is threatened with identity destruction as he is forced to choose between English and Indian culture. Because he chooses India over England, he ceases to exist to the English, but can continue to exist with identity as an Indian.

Mrs Moore does not look at India with Adela's naïve eyes for anything superficially curious. "As for Miss Quested, she accepted everything Aziz said as true verbally. In her ignorance, she regarded him as 'India', and never surmised that his outlook was limited and his method inaccurate, and that no one is India." (Forster 2006: 60-1) Rather Mrs Moore applies her own sagacious knowhow: "India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to one another. God...is...love...god has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent even in India to see how we are succeeding." (Forster 2006: 42)

Mrs Moore's departure from India is described in the novel with a sense of pity, pathos and irony. She arrives at the end of her journey in Bombay and is filled with regret that her visit to India has been incomplete. Her old longing for India is revived when she is to sail back to England.

Stella and Ralph too cannot embrace anything in its entirety. They "like Hinduism, though they take no interest in its forms". Actually, there is not one single India but multiple '*Indias*'. The geographical scale of the novel is noticeable. Forster attempts a structure regarding the range of India, and the judgements of the novel is reinforced by the festivals and rituals of the three religions (i.e., Hinduism, Muslimism and Christianity), by the heterodoxy—racial, political, cultural, religious and mystical—of this nation and by the physical landscape of the country which both invites meaning ("Come, come") and denies any meaning ("Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing") We find Forster's social comedy through inter-national and intra-national encounters when one value system collides with another and confusion and muddle issue forth. But his other aim is to call up the ironies lying within the forces of mystery and muddle in Nature, for here too are deceptions in the absence of beauty, which is traditionally a form of beauty, so that the very discourse of Romanticism is negated under the hot sun. (Bradbury 2006: 36-7)

Forster in this novel uses India to represent something that according to the canons of the novel genre cannot in fact be represented—vastness, incomprehensible creeds, secret motions, histories, and social forms. Fielding experiences India's complexity but then returns to familiar humanism, as after the trial, he comes home through Suez and Italy to England after having faced shattering presentiment of what India could do to one's sense of time and place. One cannot deal with the difficulties in India. Once when Ronny and Adela are together early in the novel, they watch a bird disappear into a tree, yet they cannot identify it, since, as Forster adds for their

benefit and ours, "nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else." The crux of the novel is therefore the sustained encounter between the English colonials and India. (Said 1994: 200-01)

Mrs Moore wants to penetrate the heart of India, but she is ultimately succumbed to her vision. She tries to come to terms with India's nationalist sentiment but she cannot fully recover from the encounter. She has an experience of India but she does not make out the whole of it. On the flip side, though Fielding superficially understands but does not have the deep experience. He understands that India is too baffling, too vastly incomprehensible and that a Muslim like Aziz can be befriended only up to a certain point. Aziz also lets himself be seduced by jejune nationalist sentiment.

As Adela approaches the Marabar Caves, she notes that the train's "pomper pomper", which accompanies her musings, has a hidden message that she cannot fathom. She is gradually getting disillusioned about India with nothing remarkable about it: "How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble. She knows of the whole world's trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls 'Come' through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal." (Forster 2006: 120-21)

Famous Postcolonial critic Benita Parry acclaims that "*A Passage to India* is a triumphant expression of the British imagination exploring India." (Parry 1972: 274) Not a single English character of this novel can grasp the full meaning of the vast and myriad India despite hoping to do so. Their dream about India leads to a strong desire to know the inscrutable India which ultimately boils down to deception and disenchantment. In an attempt to gel human reality with transcendent reality, Forster resorts to mystical philosophy, a poised contemplation on the ultimate truth of life and universe. It is indeed a passage to the enigmatic mystery and the 'muddle' of India, which, in turn, leads one to the deep-seated mystery and muddle of the whole universe.

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