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FORSTER'S TREATMENT OF RACIAL PROBLEM IN A PASSAGE TO INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

E. M. Forster visited India in 1912, and then again in 1921. *A Passage to India* is the outcome of these two visits. It was almost at once hailed on both the sides of the Atlantic as a modern classic and established Forster as one of the 'glories' of modern English literature.

KEYWORDS : Forster's Treatment , modern classic , modern English literature.



INTRODUCTION

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is the finest work, unrivalled in English fiction in its presentation of the complex problems of the relationship between the ruling English and the native of India. Forster seeks to bring about reconciliation between the East and the West, but fails at the end. Forster's writings, especially his early writings, have always revealed a very sublime faith in humanism. But his humanitarian feeling shows a somewhat steady decline down the years. In *A Passage to India* it appears that Forster has lost his faith in human relationships as universal panacea.

Forster's novel is generally well received and viewed in a positive light. He wrote the "for the first time I saw myself reflected in the mind of an English author, without losing all semblance of a human face." (Forster 1985:22) Clare Brandabur remarks that *A Passage to India* "attempt to deal with colonialism with respect to the destructive impact on personal relationships caused by the racist assumptions and psycho-pathology inherent in colonial imperialism" (Brandabur 1993) To Jan Mohamed, *A Passage to India* attempts "to overcome the barriers of racial difference." (Childs 1999:348) To Diane Johnson, one of the novel's theme is "that people from different cultures rarely understand one another." (Johnson 2000) J. B. Priestly also adds, "A novel that requires several readings to be appreciated to the full, undoubtedly Forster's Masterpiece" (Priestly 1960:355)

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. His goal was not to produce a documentary portrayal of India. Instead of drawing a portrait of a country, he was presenting overall impression that continually emphasized the way in which the inner qualities of certain individuals and universal feelings were restricted by social, religious and ethnic codes. Above all, his novel dramatically depicted the deep spiritual tensions of two clashing civilization: the East and the West.

Forster's attitude towards the British Raj in India is critical. He examines the relations between the British officials and the Indians and brings out the underlying causes. In the final analysis, the racial problem is a part of the larger problem of human relationship. The British Raj in India failed to find a *Passage to India*, because of its official bureaucracy that lacked humanity. The British officials in India looked upon the Indians as their

subordinates and subjects, and not as human being.

At the very beginning of the novel, Mohmoud Ali complains that Ronny Heaslop, the young city Magistrate, insulted him. The conversation among Hamidullah, Aziz and Mahmoud Ali turns mainly on the British officials' contemptuous attitude towards the Indians and they soon arrive at the conclusion that "Turtons and Burtons" are all alike.

Aziz believed that the English officers in India treated the Indians as subordinates and inferiors. Hence, every Indian approaching an English Officer, was expected that to behave in a way liked by them.

Of all the characters of the novel, Cyril Fielding is clearly the most associated with Forster himself. Among the Englishmen in Chandrapore, Fielding is the most successful at developing and sustaining relationship with Native Indians. Fielding himself admits that:

"He had no racial feeling-not because he was superior to his brother civilians, but because he had matured in a different atmosphere,.....Flourish."(Forster 62)

Mrs. Moore and Adela made some sincere attempts to find a passage to India. The Mosque, where Aziz, met Mrs. Moore accidentally, held a promise of friendship between two people of two different races, but finally remained on a personal level, without solving the racial issues. Adela Quested had likewise a desire to see 'real' India and meet the Indians. Mr. Turton gave a bridge party at the club to enable her to do so. But the party failed to bridge the gap between the English, who were arrogant and the Indians, who were too weak to assert their independence.

What began promisingly at the Mosque, however, ended in a disaster at the Marabar Caves. The attempt of the people of two different races for social intercourse and understanding only ended in worsening the racial issue, when Aziz, was arrested on the charge of assaulting Adela in a cave.

Aziz's trial divided the English and the Indians into two war-camps, with the sole exception of Fielding, who desperately tried to stand as a bridge between the two. The trial ceased to be a court-room trial between Aziz and Adela and became a trial of strength between the ruler and the ruled. Racial feeling ran high. As an anticlimax to the melodramatic trial, Adela suddenly withdraws her charge against Aziz.

The experiment in racial understanding failed. Aziz became anti-British. The Indians expressed their resentment against their rulers. The prospect of a racial understanding narrowed down only to the possibility of the personal friendship between Aziz and Fielding. This also could not materialize. Aziz and Fielding parted symbolically at the end of the novel. As Aziz said, so long as the English remained in India as rulers, there could be no friendship. In other words, British imperialism in India came in the way of the friendship between the people of two different races.

Through the first half of the novel, Fielding and Aziz represent a positive model of liberal humanism. Forster suggests that the British rule in India could be successful and respectful if only English and Indians treat each other as Fielding and Aziz treat each other- as worthy individuals who connect through frankness, intelligence and goodwill. Forster suggests that though men may be well intentioned, outside circumstances such as cultural differences and interference of others can conspire to prevent their union.

Mrs. Moore, who could understand and love, was turned by the Indians into a demi-goddess 'Esmoor'. Although she herself has human flaws, she comes to symbolize an ideally spiritual and race-blind openness that Forster sees as a solution to the problems in India. The Indians being emotional could appreciate love when it is offered to them. This shows that the passage to India lies through the heart and not through the head. Forster has remarked that the Englishmen in India arrived with a fairly developed head, but with an undeveloped heart. Mrs. Moore tried to convince her son, Ronny Heaslop, that India was a part of the earth and God had put men on earth in order to be pleasant to each other. The desire to behave pleasantly satisfies God and wins His blessings. Forster has put this very clearly in his mouth;

"We are not pleasant in India, and we do not intend to be pleasant. We have something more important to do."(Forster 50)

In Ronney's eyes:

"India is not a drawing room but a political arena."(Forster 49)

It created an acute racial problem, which could not be solved on the surface level of personal intercourse and individual behaviour. As Aziz tells Fielding, the English should clear out of India. The possibility of such a friendship, Forster thought, could only be entertained when Indians were citizens of their own independent nation, a view emotively expressed in the novel's last page by Aziz:

Aziz....cried: 'Down with the English anyhow. That's certain.
Clear out you fellows,
Double quick I say. We may hate one other, but we hate you most....
We shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then-
He rode against (Fielding) furiously- and then.....
You and I shall be friends.' (Forster 317)

The English and the Indians could be friends only when the English cease to be rulers and cast off their imperialism. Forster poses a social problem in APTI for which he has no ready or easy solution, yet in posing it, he has succeeded in making people think about it. On the contrary, Forster suggests that the East and the West shall meet, but only when the Englishman would cast off his "Whiteman's burden" and seek a passage to India through heart.

Finally, in contemplating Forster's place among the twentieth century English novelists, it is worth remarking the series of novels on Indian theme to which he was only one of the distinguished contributors. *A Passage to India* was preceded by Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and followed by L. H. Myre's *The Near and the Far* (1943) and then by Paul Scott *The Raj Quarter* (1976).

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