NEW ACADEMIA: *An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*
Online ISSN 2347-2073 **Vol. VIII, Issue I, Jan. 2019**
U.G.C. Journal No. 44829

CAN THE RACES MERGE? ANALYSING *A PASSAGE TO INDIA* AS A NARRATIVE OF CULTURES

Mitra Sannigrahi
Ph.D. scholar
Department of English and Culture Studies
University of Burdwan, West Bengal

Abstract

In the following paper, there will be an attempt to examine and evaluate Edward Morgan Forster's A Passage to India as a text of cultural synthesis. The note of merger and fusion operates on several levels in the text, which deals with the inhabitants of two Indian locales—Chandrapore and Mau, and the backdrop is one of the British Raj. There will be an attempt to follow the storyline of the novel and see how Forster represents the cultural life of India through the depiction of different peoples. His portrayal gains richness as he chooses to provide glimpses of the variegated panorama of the Indian life with two of its most significant sects—the Hindus and the Muslims.

Keywords: races, cultures, site, festivities, synthesis

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) is one of the most important writers who witnessed and played a significant role in the journey of English literature towards high modernism. In his novels and short stories, he has achieved much more than the creation of fictional spaces with imaginary characters. He was a traveler, and in his career as a writer also, he traversed geopolitical boundaries. The novels *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908) are set in Italy, and *A Passage to India*, in India. In terms of the content of his works too, he dared to break boundaries. He dared to analyse the relationships of races and to reveal the truth of the rulers and the ruled in India at a time when the country was under the yoke of the Raj. He threw light on the conflict between cultures in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, and in *Maurice*, dealt with homosexual relationship. *Maurice* was published posthumously, in 1971. In the present paper, the focus will remain on *A Passage to India*. There will be an attempt to elaborate on Forster's depiction of the coming together of races, of cultures, in this novel. Thus, there will be an attempt to analyse the text as a site for the synthesis of cultures. Critics like E.K. Brown, John Colmer, and Lionel Trilling, among others, have thrown light on several aspects of the novel, including the place of religion, the relationships of the different sects of people, the significance of individual sections of the text, the wide universal appeal of the novel, etc. Their works will help us to understand better the dynamics of nations and cultures that operate at the several levels of the text.

Edward Albert notes on Forster,

> He is a writer for the discerning rather than a best-seller. Basically a moralist, concerned with the importance of the individual personality, the adjustments it must make and the problems it must solve when it comes into contact with a set of values different from its own, he is the advocate of culture, tolerance, and civilization against barbarity and provincialism. He studies the complexities of character with a subtlety of insight and an appreciation of the significance of the unconscious which mark him as a modern. (Albert 519)

Culture, well-breeding, justice, an aesthetic side—these, among others, are significant concepts recurring throughout Forster's corpus. And *A Passage to India* has a special place in his career. Forster visited India in 1912. At some point in 1913-1914, he started working on a novel about India. Then came a break, and in 1921, he started working on the novel again, visiting India in the same year. In 1921, he wrote a travel memoir too, *The Hill of Devi*. Finally, *A Passage to India* was published in 1924.

Before moving into details of the novel, it must be mentioned that the text has a brilliant structure. There are three parts, each of which has a broad focus, although they are not exclusively about any one culture. E. K. Brown comments, "*A Passage to India* is in three parts. Their titles—'Mosque', 'Caves', 'Temple'—warn of a meaning which goes behind story, people, even setting. Each part has a curious and beautiful prefatory chapter, and each of these chapters abounds in symbols, abstractions, suggestions" (Brown 104). The novel opens with the section entitled "Mosque". The setting is the city of Chandrapore—not a remarkably beautiful place. This setting was partially suggested by the real Bankipore, where Forster spent some time in 1913. There is a Civil Station, from where, however, the city looks absolutely different: "It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical pleasance, washed by a noble river" (Forster 6). Towards the end of Chapter I of Part I, the Marabar Hills are mentioned—a location to have a profound significance in the course of the novel: "League after league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again. Only in the south, where a group of fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil, is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves" (Forster 7). In 1913, during his first visit to India, Forster went to see the Barabar hill caves in Bihar. The caves in the novel are renamed Marabar.

The next chapter introduces a hearty circle of friends—some Muslim inhabitants of Chandrapore—Dr Aziz, Hamidullah, and Mahmoud Ali. Aziz is a cultured man—a talented, young medical practitioner—a widower with three children. An avid reader of poetry, he himself is also a poet. The characters discuss, among other things, whether one can be friends with the British people. Aziz is summoned with a note from the bungalow of the Civil Surgeon, Major Callendar. But reaching there, he does not find him. On his way back, he enters a mosque to rest. There he comes across a woman—Mrs. Moore. Initially, there is a miscommunication as Aziz thinks she has entered the mosque with her shoes on. But she has not, and then they talk for a while. Aziz learns that Mrs Moore is the mother of Mr. Heaslop,

the City Magistrate of Chandrapore, that she has been married twice and has, besides Heaslop, a son and a daughter, Ralph and Stella. Talking to her, he realises that she, just like him, is not particularly fond of Mrs Callendar, and he talks to her at length about how he was treated by Major Callendar who, having summoned him, himself went out, and his wife took the carriage by which he came there: "He was excited partly by his wrongs, but much more by the knowledge that someone sympathized with them. It was this that led him to repeat, exaggerate, contradict" (Forster 20). It should be noted here that Foster's art of characterisation is extremely nuanced. Aziz, who is one of the most important characters in the novel, is presented with a superb skill that does not allow broad categorisation. None of the principal figures can be neatly summed up in single expressions—good or bad, sympathetic and discerning or otherwise. Aziz, despite his goodness, has his peculiarities and limitations. Thus the novel becomes a layered site, with rounded individuals who appear *real* rather than fictionally *perfect*.

Mrs. Moore has come to India with Adela Quested, a young woman who in all probability is going to marry her son, Ronny. Adela is honest, sincere, and values perfect understanding between a man and a woman, and wants to see Ronny in India before she finally decides to marry him. She is very eager to see the reality of India, of the Indian people—she is curious to know the land. She becomes acquainted with Aziz at Mr. Fielding's tea party. Mr. Fielding is a schoolmaster at the local Government College. Frank and friendly to Indians, he is not popular among the English. Aziz likes him, and during the afternoon when they meet at the tea party, he invites the people present, who also include Professor Godbole, a Hindu Brahmin and an assistant of Mr. Fielding's, to meet him in the Marabar Caves.

Mr Fielding is an interesting character, and very important in the context of the meeting of cultures, of nations, in the novel. An educated man with an open mind, he truly loves India. But that does not preclude his loving people from other lands. From an early phase in the novel, he is projected as an advocate of harmony, of peaceful merger, of a fusion of races and peoples and cultures. And this attitude is evident in his smallest gestures. It informs his talks and actions:

> 'Visitors like you are too rare.'
>
> 'They are indeed,' said Professor Godbole. 'Such affability is seldom seen. But what can we offer to detain them?'
>
> 'Mangoes, mangoes.'
>
> They laughed. 'Even mangoes can be got in England now,' put in Fielding. 'They ship them in ice-cold rooms. You can make India in England apparently, just as you can make England in India.'
>
> 'Frightfully expensive in both cases,' said the girl.
>
> 'I suppose so.'
>
> 'And nasty.' (Forster 67)

Despite all the geniality of his temperament, Fielding was not accepted openly among his countrymen:

> He did succeed with his pupils, but the gulf between himself and his countrymen…widened distressingly. He could not at first see what was wrong. He was not unpatriotic, he always got on with Englishmen in England, all his best friends were English, so why was it not the same out here?....Neither a missionary nor a student, he was happiest in the give-and-take of a private conversation. The world, he believed, is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of goodwill plus culture and intelligence… (Forster 56-57)

On the day the party are to leave for a visit to the Marabar Caves, Fielding and Godbole miss the train, and in consequence, Aziz, Mrs. Moore, and Miss Quested continue on their journey, along with a few other people including servants. Aziz, dejected at first for not having Fielding with them, assumes with all sincerity his responsibility as the host.

Interestingly, Forster's treatment of nature in the text is masterly. At certain points, nature appears in consonance with the course of events in the narrative. As the party reaches Marabar, the sun rises, they having started before the dawn. A natural scene is described with a note of dullness: "The scene was agreeable rather than not in the mild morning air, but there was little colour in it, and no vitality" (Forster 130). An eerie sameness, a mysterious gloominess pervade the atmosphere: "…the plain quietly disappeared, peeled off, so to speak, and nothing was to be seen on either side but the granite, very dead and quiet. The sky dominated as usual, but seemed unhealthily near, adhering like a ceiling to the summits of the precipices. It was as if the contents of the corridor had never been changed" (Forster 131). Nor is there anything very remarkable about the structure of the caves. There are quite identical groups of them, and inside each group there is a circular chamber. Mrs Moore is exhausted, and disturbed, having heard an echo after visiting one group of caves, and sits down to rest. Aziz and Adela continue on their way, but at one point, Aziz leaves Adela for some time, and then loses track of her. Fielding arrives, and Aziz is overwhelmed with happiness. Adela leaves the party in a hurry, unobserved by Aziz, and when they all reach Chandrapore, Aziz is arrested for having assaulted Adela sexually.

The unexpected turn of events initiates a turning point in the narrative. Adela—exhausted, disturbed, hearing the echo continuously—lies in the bungalow of Mr. McBryde, the district Superintendent of Police. She lies as if in a trance—not sure herself whether Aziz actually did what she accused him of. The event also constitutes a significant point in terms of the relationships between the British and the Indians. Adela was not famous among her countrywomen, interested as she was in the natives and tried to mingle with them freely. But after her experience at the caves, almost every English lady becomes sympathetic to her. And people are prejudiced against the Indians, the racial hatred raising its ugly face. Fielding keeps himself apart, and joins the Indians, taking Aziz's side. Most of the Chandrapore British are either out rightly condemning of the natives, or they insist on distinctly separate

existence for the natives and themselves in the country. The Collector, Mr. Turton talks to Fielding, who feels Aziz to be innocent:

> '….I have had twenty-five years' experience of this country'—he paused, and 'twenty-five years' seemed to fill the waiting-room with their staleness and ungenerosity—'and during those twenty-five years I have never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indians attempt to be intimate socially. Intercourse, yes. Courtesy, by all means. Intimacy—never, never" (Forster 153)

And when Fielding insists on visiting Aziz in the prison, Mr McBryde tries to point out to him that it would be best to keep himself apart from the natives: "Innocence or guilt, why mix yourself up? What's the good?" (Forster 160)

When she is relatively better, Adela is brought to Mrs Moore by Ronny. Yearning for Mrs Moore's companionship, Adela finds her in a detached, aloof state of mind. Mrs Moore does not want to take part in Aziz's trial, and wants to be left alone. Ronny makes arrangements for her passage back to England. The trial starts, under an Indian judge, Mr Das, and though initially it proceeds in favour of the English, Adela confesses that Aziz did not follow her into the cave, and withdraws the charges—leading to a victory on the side of the natives.

Adela is now held in contempt by the British, except by Mr. Fielding, who provides a shelter to her at the place where he lived at the Government College, himself living in other parts of Chandrapore. Adela is expected to pay a huge sum of money to Aziz as compensation, but Fielding persuades him to accept only the costs of the trial. Meanwhile, Mrs Moore dies on her journey back to England. But by this time, she has become somebody that the Indians look up to, and love and adore, because during the trial Mahmoud Ali had extolled her as a person on the side of the Indians. Adela leaves India, and Fielding does so too. Some time later, the news of Fielding's marriage reaches Chandrapore. Aziz never bothers to know for certain who it is that he married, but thinks it to be Adela. He is devastated, feels betrayed, and is quite enraged with Fielding.

Professor Godbole goes to Mau, a Hindu region from where he originally hails. He holds an important position at the palace of the Rajah, and also takes upon himself the charge of spreading education there. Leaving Chandrapore, Aziz also goes there, and is engaged by the Rajah as a doctor. This section, entitled "Temple", where the narrative shifts from Chandrapore to Mau, is predominantly about the Hindus, just as the section entitled "Mosque" had been predominantly about the Muslims. It brings the narrative full circle, as many of the important characters cross paths here. The backdrop is the Hindu ceremony of Gokul Ashtami, the celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna. There is a minute description of many of the festivities associated with the event, and a sincere, discernible attempt on the writer's part to understand the spirit lying behind these festivities.

During the festival, Fielding reaches Mau on an official visit along with his wife and brother-in-law, Ralph and Stella—Mrs. Moore's children. Aziz comes across Fielding, and learns the truth about his marriage. He comes to like Ralph, who strikes him as someone

close to the spirit of India. During the festivities around and in the water, Aziz's and Fielding's boats happen to collide, throwing the people on them into the water, which is not very deep. And from this point onwards, the tensions between Aziz and Fielding disappear, and they become friends again. John Colmer notes,

> The plunging of the characters into the waters of the tank at Mau suggests a form of spiritual baptism, a form of purification. The sources of misunderstanding…are scattered on the waters. The rain here—and indeed throughout the last section of the book—suggests the release of the forces of imaginative love. However, Forster deliberately avoids any careful rounding off, stressing the lack of an emotional centre to the day's events and the difficulty of saying what precisely had happened. (Colmer 59-60)

The last pages of the novel poignantly depict the gap that inevitably lies between the Indians and the English, even if there are sincere attempts on both sides, at an individual, personal level, to maintain a friendly, open, accepting relationship. Aziz and Fielding go on a horseride, and during their talks, Aziz tells Fielding that the day must come when the Indians will drive the British out of the country, and after that, they will be friends:

> 'Why can't we be friends now?' said the other, holding him affectionately. 'It's what I want. It's what you want.'
>
> But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there.' (Forster 306)

Rober McCrum sees this as a "…bleak but prescient conclusion".

India appears as mysterious, ultimately beyond easy comprehension at every level in the text, but a balance, an undulating pattern can be sketched through the writer's treatment of his subject. To put it after Kate Symondson, "The tripartite structure, repeated images…and atmospheric, metaphysical language imbue the novel with a rhythmic, musical quality, suggesting 'something more' than can usually be seen or said".

A Passage to India is a *cultural text* on several levels. On the surface, it is about two nations—the Indians, and the English. This level operates on the dynamics of the relationships between the ruled and the rulers. There are different sorts of Indians, just as there are English people of differing mindsets. And the novel brings them together and explores the unexpected consequences that such encounters lead to. On a secondary level, it is about the variegated, immensely complex divisions between inhabitants of India—the Hindus, the Muslims, and to go one step further, to move into the intricate structures of Hinduism, there is also a hint of the sects, the branches of Hinduism—the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins, and so on. From another angle, the text can be seen as a *cultural* one because it deals elaborately with the cultures, rituals, practices of one festivity of the Hindus, and

throws light on the cultural mindset of the Muslims, mainly through the character of Aziz. Aziz is shown to be a refined, intelligent, cultured man for most of the time. He reads and writes poetry, and in the course of the narrative, develops into one open to the notion that "The song of the future must transcend creed" (Forster 253). In the opening section of the novel, there is the description of a mosque, where Aziz meets Mrs. Moore for the first time. The mosque is an important site. It is significant that the meeting at the mosque develops for Aziz into a sacred relationship—a solemn, friendly attitude to Mrs. Moore, whom he will value and hold in great reverence for the rest of his life. And interestingly, he feels somewhat the same about Ralph, her son. The readers are informed that Ralph and Stella like Hinduism, and thus there is a trace of Mrs. Moore's approach to India—a continuance of the circle. And there are references to Mohurram and the Muslim procession—around which tensions build up between the inhabitants of Chandrapore. However, the trial of Aziz and their victory bring the Hindus and the Muslims together for a time, opening possibilities for an understanding and a relationship of acceptance.

The Hindu festival of Gokul Ashtami at the palace of the Rajah of Mau is described quite meticulously. The songs and dances leading to the moment of the birth of the Lord Krishna, the decorations for the ceremony, the devotion of the Hindus, the rituals with butter, with children who are caressed by the people, with the jar containing rice and milk, the procession of the Lord, the immersion of the clay model of the village of Gokul—everything is narrated vividly. Thus, the Hindu culture breathes through the novel alongside the Muslim. Pankaj Mishra remarks on Forster, "The third and last section of *A Passage to India*,…shows him moving beyond the sonorous clichés of the Grand Tour, revising his European notions of reason, form and harmony, and offering, if still a bit tentatively, a new basis for human relationships" (Mishra xxii). In fact, religion is shown to be a living force for people belonging to diverse races in the novel. Though there is not much talk about Christianity, Adela is shown to pray daily in the morning when faced with a crisis, the trial with Aziz as the accused.

A Passage to India, thus, effects a synthesis of cultures on several levels. It brings together different peoples on the same plane, analyses the numerous and sometimes unexpected results that such encounters may lead to. And on the other hand, it vividly presents aspects of the cultural life of the two major sects of the Indian population, with religion providing a fundamentally significant backdrop to the human drama. It talks about a fusion—a fusion of peoples—but is too honest not to depict the difficulties and hurdles that lies on the way towards such a harmonious coexistence of men and women of various races. So, the final picture that emerges from the text is etched with a brilliant hue of truth. It is not only about India. In its attempt to address issues that can very well be called global, it has a wide, universal appeal. To put after Lionel Trilling, "Great as the problem of India is, Forster's book is not about India alone; it is about all of human life" (Trilling 161).

Works Cited:

Albert, Edward. *History of English Literature*. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. Print.

Brown, E.K. "Rhythm in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*." *E.M. Forster: A Passage to India: A Casebook*. Ed. Malcolm Bradbury. London: Macmillan, 1970. Print. Casebook Series.

Colmer, John. *E.M. Forster: A Passage to India*. London: Edward Arnold, 1967. Print.

Forster, Edward Morgan. *A Passage to India*. Ed. Oliver Stallybrass. London: Penguin, 1936. Print. Penguin Classics.

McCrum, Robert. "The 100 Best Novels: No 48 – A Passage to India by EM Forster (1924)." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 18 Aug. 2014. Web. 18 May 2018.

Mishra, Pankaj. Introduction. *A Passage to India*. By Edward Morgan Forster. Ed. Oliver Stallybrass. London: Penguin, 1936. Print. Penguin Classics.

Symondson, Kate. "The Mystery and Muddle of *A Passage to India*." *British Library*. The British Library Board, 25 May 2016. Web. 18 May 2018.

Trilling, Lionel. *E.M. Forster*. Norfolk: New Directions Books, 1943. Print.

New Academia