



A PASSAGE TO INDIA: A MARGIN – CENTRE PERSPECTIVE

ZULFIQAR AHMAD

Associate Professor, Department of English, YMD College,
MD University, Nuh (Mewat) Haryana



ZULFIQAR AHMAD

ABSTRACT

Literature of the Margin, Dalit and the Subaltern came into existence as a result of the conflicts and clashes between the marginalized, ruled class and the ruling dominant class and as a strong reaction against the imperialistic tendencies, socio-cultural racial and political hegemony of the white British rulers across the entire Europe. The prevailing contradictions, conflicts and paradoxes inherent in the ties between the whites and the non-whites, between the upper caste and the lower one, and between the privileged and the underprivileged are at the core of the margin-centre perspective. *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster, published in 1924, brings into sharp focus the background of multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious landscape that India represented and represents even today. A margin-centre perspective is a quest of the marginalized, colonized, and victimized for real identity, cultural heritage, spiritual strengths and political freedom. In the post-colonial era, especially after the disintegration of Europe, efforts of those at the margin are on at the global level, for assimilation with the mainstream. In fact, the marginalized groups do not endorse the notion of a fixed centre. The centre never acknowledges the margins in the mainstream. In the novel *Dr. Aziz*, an archetypal figure represents the margin and the British ruling class (Major Calender, Turton and Fielding) represents the centre. This perspective explores the possibilities and prospects of establishing cordial ties with the dominant centre of power (Anglo-Indians). The entire journey through the Mosque, Caves and Temple, begins in the Mosque with a ray of hope, staggers at the Bridge Party which fails in its purpose and culminates in the caves with the rape charge and comes to an abrupt end with the disillusionment and despair of Dr. Aziz who is no longer optimistic about intimacy on equal terms with the English until and unless they are forced to leave India forever. The native Indians (marginalized) have every right to assert their identity and rights of equality and liberty. The centre of power (colonizer) can no longer subjugate and suppress the legitimate demands, aspirations and expectations of the marginalized in the fast globalizing set up of today.

Keywords: marginalized, colonialism, imperialism, subjugation, suppression and socio-cultural.

Written within a historical frame work of a narrative and set against the backdrop of colonialism *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster was published in 1924 – an era of pre-independence India when “Congress abandoned its policy of co-operation with the British Raj to follow Ghandi’s revolutionary call for non-violent revolution.” (Wolpert, 301). The novel presents a socio-cultural, religious and political scenario in which too many diversities, paradoxes and contradictions existed. The whole sub-continent was sharply divided along different lines. If viewed in this perspective of socio-cultural, polarization of the native Indians on the one extreme and the superiority complex of the British rulers on the other, the novel reflects a deepening gap between the East and the West. This gap – emotional, religious, cultural etc., is between the colonizer and the colonized, the dominant and the marginalized, the high and the low, the so-called superior race and the inferior one. As Aimé Césaire rightly observes that in a colonized country, there will be “no human contact, but relations in domination and submission.” (Césaire, 177).

E. M. Forster very sensitive to these emotional and cultural issues has tried to suggest a solution to the heterogeneous problem of the colonized India. His way out to the margin-centre problem lies in the creed of a developed heart, tolerance, love and mutual understanding.

Ours is the age of the marginalized, the neglected and the suppressed who have every right to speak out and establish their identities and make their presence felt on all possible fronts. Native Indians can be regarded as the margin and the Anglo-Indian as the dominant centre of power. This centre of power is represented by Turton, Major Caleder, Adela, Mrs. Moore and Fielding to a limited extent. Dr. Aziz most prominently represents the margin. A typical, saintly Brahmin – Prof. Godbole, also belongs to this type.

Dr. Aziz who indulges in glorification of the past, represents Islam and its values. He tries to come to terms with the harsh realities of Pukka Sahib’s morality of the British who have come to India to carry out their divine mission of civilizing the inferior race of the Indians who are too simple-minded, superstitious and tradition bound to

appreciate culture, civilization, governance and so on. Dr. Aziz’s attitude towards Mrs. Moore’s son is that of resistance and suspicion but at the beginning (Mosque Section) Dr. Aziz succeeds in establishing close contacts and rapport with the English, as he is highly impressed by the humane gestures of Mrs. Moore. She removes her shoes before entering the mosque because “God is here”. Aziz is at once attracted towards her for her deep understanding of India. He says,

Then you are an Oriental.’ He unclasped as he spoke, with a little shudder. Those words – he had said them to Mrs Moore in the mosque at the beginning of the cycle, from which, after so much sufferings, he had got free. . (Forster *A Passage to India*, 296).

The entrance into the mosque opens up the possibilities of bridging the gap – emotional, cultural and social, between the margin and the centre, the civilized and savage. It seems that the margin and the centre can meet each other. It is possible for the native consciousness to mingle with the so-called powerful and dominant community. But with the traumatic experiences of the Marabar Caves (Second Section) everything goes to topsy-turvy. Adela hears the strange echo and gets confused. She feels as if Dr. Aziz were chasing her in order to rape her. Mrs. Moore also hears the echo. That was too much for Aziz who had developed a soft corner towards the English. He is accused of a rape attempt. With the Marabar experiences all positive qualities and values of life are converted into the negative ones and nothingness of life comes to the fore. Mrs. Moore loses grip on life. Adela undergoes similar experiences. These experiences (the Caves) negate everything and make the possibility of harmonious personal relations and friendship with the English quite faint and blurred. The caves stand for nothingness and meaninglessness. The possibility of the margin –the neglected and the uncared-for, joining hands with the ruling class, is pushed into the background. This was a major stumbling block in the path of bridging the gap between the East and the West and between the dominant and the subjugated. The echo plays a symbolic role and instantly shatters the whole world of emotional

integration and cordial relationship. This is because of the arbitrariness, illusions and arrogance of the snobbish English class. For Mrs. Moore "Everything exists, nothing has values." The second section points to the limitations of life. The margin is unable to grapple with the self-proclaimed superiority of the dominant class.

The third section (temple) of the three-fold structure of the novel illustrates the limitations and inadequacies of the Hindu-festival. This section is symbolic of a new hope and a new awakening which brings the chaos of life in the order of human life. *A Passage to India* is a full expression of the paradox of man's predicament and gives a new direction to man's struggle and leads to the birth of a new hope that in spite of multiplicities of cultures, castes, traditions, superstitions in the Indian sub-continent, there can be a possibility of the margin-centre friendship. It also deals with the Hindu concept of the Absolute that man is a part of the Absolute and his chief goal is to unite with it. Metaphorically Lord Krishna stands for the Absolute and the Gopis for the individuals. Mrs. Moore serves as the central element or as a unifying link between the native Indians and the English. She realizes the truth and Adela suddenly revokes the charge against Aziz, Mrs. Moore plays a symbolic and mystic role. Thus the novel presents a paradoxical situation in which class and caste distinctions are dominant and cultural chauvinism of the English is deep-rooted – a typical situation of the colonized India in which no single person is absolute or adequate in his or her ideology in the pre-independence Indian context. It is a context in which one set of values is constantly neglected by another. Forster has offered an insight into the complex and contradictory situation in which mutual interpersonal relations between the superior and the inferior hardly reach the point of cordiality. Metaphorically and symbolically the novel conveys the message that given the arrogance, snobbery, status-consciousness of the British community, it is rather difficult task to bring the two extremes of the East and the West close to each other. The novelist sees a ray of hope for this situation, provided that one should have a developed heart and tolerance of each other's faith and socio-cultural ethos and heritage.

Forster also shows the ritualistic aspect of the Hindu festival, Lord Krishna's birthday celebration in which Dr. Aziz refuses to participate. He is a bit intolerant of Prof. Godbole's creed. Godbole, a comic and mystic figure, has a creed which brings about the union between the Absolute and individuals. This is the final appearance of the festival.

Thus, after Aziz has been acquitted of rape charge he turns away from the British towards the Indian perception. Finally Aziz has been shown in his native state and is bringing up his family writing poetry and reading Persian. He is visited by his friend Mr. Fielding. They discuss the future of India and Aziz's prophesy is that only, when the British are driven out, can he and Fielding be friends, it means that only when British quit India, the cordial relations can be established with the British. Discussion between Dr. Aziz and Fielding reflects the discord aroused between them: "Look at you", attacks Fielding, "forgetting your medicine and going back to charms." (305) Aziz retorts very bluntly; "Clear out, all you Turtons and Burtons. We wanted to know you ten years back – now it's too late." (Forster, *A Passage to India* 305).

Thus the novel is an attack on colonialism and the imperialism of the English and it shows the overall impact of imperialism which does not let the native consciousness and the foreign consciousness meet each other. With pessimistic attitude Forster realizes that all the attempts to bridge the cultural gap only serve to strengthen 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. (Forster, *A Passage to India*, 127)

Foster is 'critical of English racialism. Because his skin is of 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 margin-centre perspective on the novel reminds one of the prominent poet, Langston

Hughes who, having been a victim of racial discrimination in America, searches for unity, community and identity in history beyond America by highlighting the history of slavery of the black race and by referring to their achievements in his poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*:

I bathed in Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy

Bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (86)

Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Frank Fanon (1925-1961) in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and many other writers have stood for the noble cause of the suppressed, neglected and exploited under the impact of colonialism.

The novel gives a deep insight into the margin – centre relationship. Dr. Aziz very closely represents the margin, neglected, suspected and isolated by the centre, the dominant English class. Thus, the centre-margin dichotomy operates at multiple levels – socio-cultural, ideological and political. The perspective analyzed here, aims at shaking off all kinds of dichotomies, gaps and gulfs between the superior and the inferior race, between the ruler and the ruled and opens up new possibilities and prospects for those placed at the margin. It is the outcome of the awakening and assertiveness of the margin which has made India's independence possible in 1947.

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