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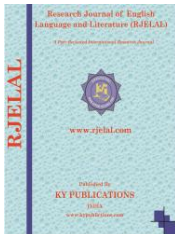
LIFE, ART AND REPRESENTATION IN E.M. FOSTER'S "A PASSAGE TO INDIA"

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Abstract

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* has enjoyed the somewhat paradoxical status being valued without being understood. It is generally recognized of the finest literary productions of this century; it is also commonly thought to be one of the most puzzling. Any representation can either reflect the represented in its entirety or be a marginal representation. Asserting that India can be represented as a 'whole' seems an exaggeration owing to the variety and heterogeneity prevalent here. On the other hand, to represent aspects, true to some part of India and not to other also seems inadequate. The third alternative can be to take up certain aspects common to the 'whole' and represent them. India too has several such aspects common through time and space. Among such factors that appear common to India, three stand out: politics and history; the relationship of the oppressor and the oppressed; and all-pervading religion. E.M. Foster's *A Passage to India* is as pertinent to our times as it was to the period between the two world wars for it concerns no less a subject than man's attempt to find order and a basis for solid, durable ethical values in our disordered universe.

Keywords: representation, a passage to India, orientalism, E.M.Foster

INTRODUCTION

Religion is another pertinent topic of contemporary times, albeit for all the wrong reasons. But religion has been a part and parcel of Indian life for times immemorial. Swami Prakashanand Saraswati asserts that religion is a boon given by God to Indians and this boon is manifest in the form of the divine scriptures that form the roots of religion. He also holds that the English regime tried to destroy the culture and the religion of India and hence deliberately produced such derogatory literatures that confused and misguided the whole world. He asserts that the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and the *Upanishads* are all God written and hence eternal.

E.M. Forster (1879-1970) undoubtedly is one of the luminaries of our age. As Philip Gardner says in *E.M. Forster: The Critical Heritage*, "E.M. Forster is one of the fixed stars of the century's literary firmament. Opinions may differ as to his precise magnitude, but he is to be observed shining alongside such other fixed stars as Lawrence, Joyce and Virginia Woolf" (1973:1). It was *Howards End* that moved one reviewer to call Forster "One of our assets, and . . . likely to become one of our glories". In 1927, Virginia Woolf said, "Mr. Forster is a novelist . . . who sees his people in close contact with their surroundings". However, imagination being valid in defining a nation has its drawbacks as well. Primarily, it exposes a nation to 'non-tribal' scrutiny; people who never were a part of the nation start framing its

national history and culture which is, needless to say, according to their own standards. The image of the Orient, initially restricted to Islam and later to the entire East is a classic example of this manipulation. As Edward Said maintains in *Orientalism* that Orientalism is a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient. Hence, more often than not, it is the West which, owing to its 'superior' status as colonizer, creates a cultural history of the East. Said adds, Orientalism was ultimately a political version of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, us and the strange the Orient, the East, them. This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. Thus, the history of a nation, real or imaginary, has its positive and negative repercussions. However, it still remains an integral part in the concept of a nation.

Politics has become a central part of the lives of people in the modern age. Not only in India but all over the world politics has become pervasive in the context of nations and nationalism. "In our times it is the increasing scope of government and politics in human life that has posed the biggest challenge to man's ingenuity: it is through his capacity to master the art and science of politics that he must find his salvation" (Kothari 1). Politics, hence, has become more and more important in present day life. Moreover, not only the present set-up but even the ones that prevailed in the past have assumed significance in the wake of the impact they have made on politics of today. As Kothari asserts, "Political development, even more than economic development, is essentially a long-term process". Kothari adds, "The context of political development in a new nation such as India... is that of an ancient land slowly seeking to incorporate into its womb the best elements of the culture of the modern world, without at the same time destroying its age-old traditions and diversities". The history of India, then, becomes problematic and several reasons can be attributed to this.

Life and Art in *A Passage to India*

A Passage to India is a novel by English author E. M. Forster set against the backdrop of

the British Raj and the Indian independence movement in the 1920s. The story revolves around four characters: Dr. Aziz, his British friend Mr. Cyril Fielding, Mrs. Moore, and Miss Adela Quested. During a trip to the fictitious Marabar Caves (modeled on the Barabar Caves of Bihar), Adela thinks she finds herself alone with Dr. Aziz in one of the caves (when in fact he is in an entirely different cave), and subsequently panics and flees; it is assumed that Dr. Aziz has attempted to assault her. Aziz's trial, and its run-up and aftermath, bring to a boil the common racial tensions and prejudices between Indians and the British who rule India.

To understand Forster's treatment of temple if we accept as his basic categories the emotional nature, the intellect, and the capacity for love. He has accordingly selected religions to represent his views and each of that offers exercise predominantly to one of these faculties. It is not surprising that India, which, according to Forster, "mirrors the universe" and likewise has no unity itself, should in the history of its religious philosophy have embraced an approximation of each one of these attitudes towards life as a way of salvation.

A Passage to India appeared at a time where portrayals of India as a savage, chaotic land in need of domination were more popular in mainstream European literature than romanticized depictions. Forster's novel departed from typical narratives about colonizer-colonized relationships and emphasized a more unknowable Orient rather than characterizing it with exoticism, ancient wisdom and mystery. Postcolonial theorists like Khan have termed this novel a Modern Orientalist text, meaning that it portrays the Orient in an optimistic, positive light while simultaneously challenging the European culture and society.

However, Benita Parry also suggests that it also mystifies India by creating an "obfuscated realm where the secular is scanted, and in which India's long traditions of mathematics, science and technology, history, linguistics and jurisprudence have no place." Indian philosophical tradition has fully recognized the different degrees in wisdom to which the three great elements of Hindu scripture approximate. In the first place there is the so called

path of activity, or *Karmamarga*. To this path belong the Vedas, songs to be chanted in public as a stimulus to effort: the anthems of a people engaged in a communal exploit needing for its accomplishment a burning faith in its mission. In the second place there is the so called path of Knowledge or *Inanamarga*. To this path belong the Upanishads, explorations by the mind in secret conclave of that which is permanently knowable behind the world of appearances and illusion. In the third place there is the so-called Path of Devotion, or *Bhaktimarga*. This path belongs to the *Bhagavad Gita*.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Indian political history and its representation largely depended on the power of representation that lay with the ruling authority. The Mughals produced a Mughal dominated history while the Rajputs advocated a Hindu political history. Hence India never seemed to have a history, a pan-Indian political and social history, of its own. Probably that remains a primary reason for the scant historical records of India that have survived to date. As Prof R. C. Majumdar asserts that prior to the Thirteenth century A.D. that we possess no historical text of any kind, much less such a detailed narrative as we possess in the case of Greece or China.

By the very nature of its theme and of the mind that shaped it, *A Passage to India* invited critical appraisal, as noted by Rutherford in the "Introduction" to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Passage to India*, as "at once a historical document, a philosophical statement, and a work of conscious literary art" (1970:1). It has become a modern classic. G.K. Das observes in *E.M. Forster's India* in dealing with its immense theme and purpose, *A Passage to India* attains to a status of creative writing which is livelier than actual history and more meaningful than normal fiction. It presents historical facts with imagination, and tempers imagination with factual observations" (1977:81). "It is certainly true", asserts Bradbury, "that few other novels have produced such a variety of reading and emphasis, such a critical multiplicity of opinion" (1970:12). The range of emphasis has been extraordinarily wide. Some critics have seen it

as eminently a social comedy, others as a religious novel. Some have seen it as eminently a modernist or symbolist novel; others have seen it as a statement of twentieth – century liberal hope, a novel about the joining together of faiths, creeds and races. Some critics have seen it as a profound statement of twentieth century despair and nihilism.

The entire political history of India, then, plays its part in defining India, be it the Aryans, the Mughals or the British. The different sections combine together to form an image of Indian past, a history. In this political history, an important perspective is the presence of the conqueror and the conquered, the ruler and the ruled. The vanquisher shared a specific relationship with the vanquished. Broadly, it is the victor that dictates terms to the defeated who becomes the 'other' to the victorious 'self'. The relationship that the two shared with each other, hence, assumes significance with reference to India. Gender then, becomes another vital issue related to India. Other postcolonial scholars have examined the book with a critical postcolonial and feminist lens. Khan (2016) suggests *A Passage to India* is also a commentary on gender, and a British woman's place within the colonial project. She argues that the female characters coming to the Orient to break free of their social roles in Britain represent the discord between Englishwomen and their social roles at home, and tells the narrative of pioneering Englishwomen whose emergent feminism found form and voice in the colony.

Forster paid three visits to India but the first two visits, before and after the First World War, furnished him with the material for *A Passage to India*, which appeared in 1924. His first visit was in 1912, in company with Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, the second was "in 1921 as Private Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas Senior and the third in 1945, this time as the esteemed author of *A Passage to India*, invited by the All India Centre of the P.E.N. Club to attend a conference of Indian writers at Jaipur.

India too has had her share of the man-woman relationship. The Indian tradition asserts the role of a woman as a perfect daughter, a perfect wife and a perfect mother, subordinate to men who have

manipulated culture to dominate them. The social set-up has put forth the image of the Indian Woman emerging from the Indian mythologies and folk tales as the 'Ideal'. She is a symbol of the sacrificial mother. She has her sexuality but what is highlighted is her stature as the loyal 'caretaker'. "In fact, women have been colonized within the family" (Singh Cham 29). Women have been variously portrayed under this broad umbrella of 'otherness' with several exceptions. She is the *Sita* of *The Ramayana* and the *Draupadi* of *The Mahabharata*, devoted to husband, but she is also *Maneka*, the seductress, but here too she abides by the divine orders to don the role. She is the homely lady but she is also *Kali*, the destroyer, a state where even *Shiva* cannot assert any control over her. However, in case, the 'voice' and 'power of representation' has rarely been allotted to her.

CONCLUSION

Any representation of India raises, first and foremost, the question of the status of India as a nation. However, the concept of a nation itself emerges as volatile and dynamic, susceptible to quick changes. Starting as a synonym to a country with the underlying principle of homogeneity, in the post-colonial terrains, the issue of ethnicity and historical multiplicity take away this relationship of a nation and country based on homogenization. The ethnic multiplicity, religious diversity, cultural variety and linguistic multifacetedness give India the image of a multi-colored land. India, then, emerges as a heterogeneous group: a nation in the post-colonial sense. Representation requires certain common features to be represented. But India seems too large to have such encompassing features. However, there are several such factors and three of the most important ones are: political history, the oppressor-oppressed relationship and religion. The traditional order of India has been largely promoting the masculine, which includes the high castes over the low castes and the males over the females. However in the 20th century, this old social order began to be questioned. Gender order, then, too occupies a central place in India.

A Passage to India is much more than a study of racial contrasts and disabilities. It is intensely

personal and intensely cosmic. Discussing it in 1960, Forster said that it was absurd to say that he had been writing about "the incompatibility of East and West": he had been "really concerned with the difficulty of living in the universe. In a review Leonard Woolf wrote: "... it marches firmly, triumphantly, even grimly and sadly . . . through the real life and politics of India, the intricacy of personal relations, the story itself, the muddle and the mystery of life" (1924:354). The mystery at the heart of *A Passage to India* has been a challenge for many critics. *A Passage to India* has enjoyed the somewhat paradoxical status of being valued without being understood.

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