INDIAN VS BRITISH CULTURAL ASPECTS IN E. M. FORSTER'S *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

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Abstract

The present study analyses the dichotomy between the Indian and British cultural aspects in E. M. Forster's 'A Passage to India' focusing on the relationship established between the British colonies and the Indians in Chandapore and highlighting the contrast between the Indian and the European way of thinking. The emphasis is placed upon the main couples of the novel as the action revolves around them and upon the landscape, which has an important impact on the lifestyle in India.

1. Introduction

The novel entitled *A Passage to India* is inspired mainly from E. M. 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, who were a narrow-minded caste of chauvinistic snobs.

A Passage to India is a book that has been balanced by Forster for a long time as it was written in 1913 and not published until 1924 and as Boris Ford said: *'Forster, representing the finest and most human in the liberal spirit, began in "A Passage to India" the tradition of using Indian life as an image of personal experiences'* (1983:319).

Although *A Passage to India* is a highly symbolic or even mystical text, it also aims to be a realistic documentation of the attitudes of British colonial officials in India, primarily in Chandapore, a city along the Ganges River, notable only for the nearby Marbar caves.

Forster spends large sections of the novel characterizing different typical attitudes the English hold toward the Indians whom they control. Forster's satire is harsh on Englishwomen, whom the author depicts as overwhelmingly racist, self-righteous, and viciously condescending to the native population.

Some of the Englishmen in the novel are as nasty as the women, but Forster more often identifies Englishmen as men who, though condescending and unable to relate to Indians on an individual level, are largely well-meaning and invested in their jobs.

For all Forster's criticism of the British manner of governing India, however, he does not appear to question the right of the British Empire to rule India. He suggests that the British would be well served by becoming kinder and more sympathetic to the Indians with which they live.

A Passage to India is an exploration of Anglo-Indian friendship. Forster pays great attention to the description of the two societies that are to be found in India, namely the natives, the Indians, and the new comers, the British, but also to way they interact and to the relationships they establish.

Throughout the novel, the barriers of inter-racial friendship in a colonial context are explored thoroughly: *A Passage to India* is a classic example of how different cultures,

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when forced to intermix, misunderstand each other, and what consequences stern from those misunderstandings. Forster's novel deals with the failure of humans being able to communicate satisfactorily and their failure to eliminate prejudice, to establish relationships.

2. The Indian vs. the European Religion and Way of Thinking

Religion is probably the most definitive factor in the way Indians lead their lives, particularly if they practice Hinduism and this is why the clash between Hinduism and Christanity in *A Passage to India* parallels the conflict between the Indians and the British.

Hinduism is best represented in the novel by professor Godbole, and Christianity is epitomized in Mrs. Moore who comes to India with the kindness and understanding heart of a devout Christian but leaves morose and peevish. Perhaps she is haunted into this state by professor Godbole's strange song. It is this song that forces Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested into emotional cocoons from which they only escape to meet horrible circumstances: Mrs. Moore is terrorized to the point of apathy and Mrs. Quested meets horror in caves.

Another significant aspect is the enormous difference between the English colonial elite and the native population of India. One can see that the English treat the Indians with lack of respect and the Indians seem to expect it.

Cultural misunderstanding is turned into a major theme in the novel. Differing cultural ideas and expectations regarding hospitality, social properties and the role of religion in daily life are responsible for misunderstandings between the English and the Muslim Indians, the English and the Hindu Indians, and between the Muslims and the Hindus.

Aziz tells Fielding at the end of the novel: *'It is useless discussing Hindus with me. Living with them teaches me no more. When I think I annoy them, I do not. When I think I don't annoy them, I do'.*

Forster demonstrates how these repeated misunderstandings become hardened into cultural stereotypes and are often used to justify the uselessness of attempts to bridge the cultural gulfs. When Aziz offers his collar stud to Fielding in an effusive act of friendship, Heaslop later misinterprets Aziz's missing stud as an oversight and extends it as a general example.

3. Dr. Aziz's Relationship with Mrs. Moore

The main character of the novel is dr. Aziz, a Muslim doctor in Chandapore and a widower. After he is summoned to the Civil Surgeon's home only to be promptly ignored, Aziz visits a local Islamic temple where he meets Mrs. Moore.

Although Aziz reprimands her for not taking her shoes off in the temple before realizing she has in fact observed this rule, the two soon find that they have much in common and they immediately become friends. It is almost like they have met in another life or realm.

Dr. Aziz and Mrs. Moore feel at ease with one another and reveal their souls. While their commonalities may bring them together, their race and background only tear them apart.

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Dr. Aziz explains to Mrs. Moore that the British should not be seen with the Indians, just as it was also true during the 1960s Civil Rights' Movement between the black and white races.

4. Dr. Aziz and Cyril Fielding

Foster is *'critical of English racialism. Because his skin is 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).

Of all the characters of the novel, Cyril Fielding is clearly the most associated with Forster himself. Among the Englishmen in Chandapore, Fielding is the most successful at developing and sustaining relationships with Native Indians. Unlike the other English, Fielding does not recognize the racial distinctions between himself and the native population. Instead, he interacts with the Indians on an individual-to-individual basis. Fielding treats the Indians as a group of individuals who can connect through mutual respect, courtesy and intelligence. Cyril Fielding seems to be the model of successful interaction between the English and the Indians.

A Passage to India begins and ends by posing the question of whether it is possible for an Englishman and an Indian to ever be friends, at least within the context of British colonialism. Forster uses this question as a framework to explore the general issues of Britain's political control of India on a more personal level, through the friendship between Aziz and Fielding.

At the beginning of the novel, Aziz is scornful of the English, wishing only to consider them comically or ignore them completely. Yet the intuitive connection Aziz feels with Mrs. Moore in the mosque opens him to the possibility of friendship with Fielding.

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 treated each other as Fielding and Aziz treat each other – as worthy individuals who connect through frankness, intelligence, and good will.

5. Adela Quested and the Male Figures

Adela, like a true Englishwoman, is an individualist and an educated free thinker. These tendencies lead her, just as they lead Mrs. Moore, to question the standard behaviours of the English toward the Indians.

Adela's tendency to question standard practices with frankness makes her resistant to being labeled – and therefore resistant to marrying Ronny and being labeled a typical colonial English wife.

Ronny's tastes, opinions, and even his manner of speaking are no longer his own, but those of older, ostensibly wiser British Indian officials. This kind of group thinking is what ultimately causes Ronny to clash with both Adela and his mother, Mrs. Moore.

Adela's experience at the Marabar Caves causes her to undergo a crisis of rationalism against spiritualism. While Adela's character changes greatly in the several days after her

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alleged assault, her testimony at the trial represents a return of the old Adela, with the sole difference that she is plagued by doubt in a way she was not originally.

Adela begins to sense that her assault, and the echo that haunts her afterwards, are representative of something outside the scope of her normal rational comprehension. She is pained by her inability to articulate her experience. She finds she has no purpose in – nor love for – India, and suddenly fears that she is unable to love anyone.

Adela is filled with the realization of the damage she has done to Aziz and others, yet she feels paralyzed, unable to remedy the wrongs she has done. Nonetheless, Adela selflessly endures her difficult fate after the trial – a course of action that wins her a friend in Fielding, who sees her as a brave woman rather than a traitor to her race.

6. Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore

When Adela arrives in India with Mrs. Moore, her character develops in parallel to Mrs. Moore's. Both Mrs. Moore and Adela hope to see the *'real India'* rather than an arranged tourist version.

However, whereas Mrs. Moore's desire is bolstered by a genuine interest in and affection for Indians, Adela appears to want to see the '*real India'* simply on intellectual grounds. She puts her mind to the task, but not her heart – and therefore never connects with the Indians.

It is interesting the way in which the action develops which might be supported by the following quote taken from *Longman Dictionary of Modern Literature*: *'The only British who believe Aziz innocent are Fielding, who has long been his friend, and Mrs. Moore, who leaves for England before the trial and dies at sea. As Adela recovers, she has doubts about her charge and considers the possibility of hallucination. At the stormy trial, while giving evidence, she endeavours to reconstruct the critical day's happenings as in a vision, with the result that she declares in court: "I have made a mistake… Dr. Aziz never followed me into the cave". The novel is essentially a tragedy of racial tensions and antagonism, in which the case of Dr. Aziz is a symbolic episode'* (Longman, 2000:410).

7. Mrs. Moore's Way of Perceiving India

As a character, Mrs. Moore serves a double function in *A Passage to India,* operating on two different levels. She is initially a literal character, but as the novel progresses she becomes more a symbolic presence. On the literal level, Mrs. Moore is a good-hearted, religious, elderly woman with mystical leanings. The initial days of her visit to India are successful, as she connects with India and the Indians on an intuitive level. Whereas Adela is cerebral, Mrs. Moore relies successfully on her heart to make connections during her visit. Furthermore, on the literal level, Mrs. Moore's character has human limitations: Her experience at Marabar renders her apathetic and even somewhat mean, to the degree that she simply leaves India without bothering to testify to Aziz's innocence or to oversee Ronny and Adela's wedding.

After her departure, however, Mrs. Moore exists largely on a symbolic level. 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.

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Mrs. Moore's name becomes closely associated with Hinduism, especially the Hindu tenet of the oneness and unity of all living things. This symbolic side to Mrs. Moore might even make her the heroine of the novel, the only English person able to closely connect with the Hindu vision of unity. Nonetheless, Mrs. Moore's literal actions – her sudden abandonment of India – make her less than heroic. These sudden changes the characters experience come in favour of E. M. Forster's wish that *'the novel could be something different and less primitive than a story – wish to belong, in James's figure, to a guild of tailors who recommended the use of thread without a needle'* (Duff, 2000:160).

8. The Impact of the Landscape on the Indian Lifestyle

A novel like *A Passage to India* stands alone and it can be admired for its complex study of people who interact in an unfamiliar landscape, a landscape that ignores humans entirely. There are numberless watery images that mark in almost every crucial moment of the action the indissoluble bond between the human factor and the primordial element, the water that gives life. These images also suggest the ceaselessly, irrepressible flowing, the changeable forms and phenomena and the permanency of this dynamics of nature develops listless, although it is sometimes complementary to the human actions.

Forster spends time detailing both Eastern and Western architecture in *A Passage to India*. Three architectural structures – though one is naturally occurring – provide the outline for the book's three sections: *Mosque*, *Caves* and *Temple*.

Forster presents the aesthetics of Eastern and Western structures as indicative of the differences of those particular cultures as a whole. In India, architecture is confused and formless: interiors blend into exterior gardens, earth and buildings compete with each other, and structures appear unfinished or drab. As such, Indian architecture mirrors the muddle of India itself and what Forster sees as the Indians' characteristic inattention to form and logic.

Occasionally, however, Forster takes a positive view of Indian architecture. The mosque in Part I and the temple in Part III represent the promise of Indian openness, mysticism, and friendship. Western architecture is described during Fielding's stop in Venice on his way to England. Venice's structures, which Fielding sees as representative of Western architecture in general, honour form and proportion and complement the earth on which they are built. Fielding reads in this architecture the self-evident correctness of Western reason – an order that, he laments, his Indian friends would not recognize or appreciate.

9. Conclusions

Coming closer towards the end of our journey in the depths of the novel, it should be stated that there was a big difference between Forster and the authors of his time. While their kind of fiction was going out of the literary fashion, his was coming into it. *'He rejected from the first any idea of being a solid chronicler of a society, of filling with realistic detail a broad of canvas, of making his narrative acceptable and convincing by accumulating representative characters and events. He works in brilliant flashes, sudden revelations of character, glimpses of heights and depths, action that is not realistic and typical but symbolic. Loading everything in a scene with meaning, this*

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evocative method, closer to poetic creation than to ordinary prose narrative, makes unusual demands upon a novelist' (Priestley, 1960: 355).

A Passage to India, which adds racial relationships (though these are not its subject) to the intricate pattern, is even more elaborate: a novel that requires several readings to be appreciated to the full, undoubtedly Forster's masterpiece' (Priestley, 1960: 355).

Foster ends his novel *A Passage to India* with the reconciliation of Aziz and Fielding. The final message of the novel is that though Aziz and fielding want to be friends, historical circumstances prevent their friendship. Even if the final lines of the novel are pessimistic, Forster does leave open the possibility of a cross-cultural friendship between Fielding and Aziz at a certain moment in the future.

Forster's message has changed throughout the course of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, characters such as Fielding and Aziz are evidence of Forster's belief that with goodwill, intelligence and respect, all individuals can connect. But, in the final scenes, the natural landscape of India itself seems to rise up and divide Aziz and Fielding from each other. Forster suggests that though men may be well-intentioned, outside circumstances such as cultural difference and the interference of others can conspire to prevent their union.

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