Forster's Ambiguity in A Passage to India

AMBIGUITE DE FORSTER DANS A PASSAGE TO INDIA

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Abstract: *A Passage to India* has long been interpreted as a classic anti-colonial text since its publication in 1924. This paper intends to explore Forster's changing impression about India and analyze the ambiguity and contradicted idea of Forster, which makes the novel complex. As a middle-class English writer of the early twentieth century, Forster is anti-imperial in some way, yet he does not entirely give up the idea of the English Empire. This clearly shows Forster's colonial stand in his subconscious mind, which causes his ambiguity in the novel.
Keywords: *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster, Ambiguity, colonial

Résumé: *A Passage to India* a été longtemps interprété comme un texte classique anticolonial depuis sa publication en 1924. Cette thèse a l'intention d'exploiter l'impression changeante de Forster sur l'Inde et elle a fait une analyse sur l'ambiguïté et l'idée contradictoire de Forster, qui fait un roman complexe. En tant qu'écrivain anglais de la classe moyenne dans la première moitié du IIe siècle, Forster est dans certain sens anti-impérial, pourtant, il n'abandonne pas complètement les idées de l'Empire anglaise. Cela montre clairement la position coloniale de Forster dans sa mentalité consciente qui produit son ambiguïté dans son roman.
Mots-clés: *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster, Ambiguïté, colonial

Published in 1924, *A Passage To India* aroused much criticism at the time. Forster admits that he takes the title from a poem of Walt Whitman. The opening of Suez Canal in 1869 generates Whitman's enthusiasm to explore the East. With an optimistic vision, Whitman writes:

> Passage to India!
> Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
> The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
> The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
> The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
> The lands to be welded together.
> …Europe to Asia, Africa joins As Brides and bridegrooms hand in hand.

Whitman shows in the lines his strong will for connecting the East and the West. He believes that the building of Suez Canal will bridge the gap between the West and the East, that the West and the East will hence be firmly united as one just like a bride and a bridegroom in a marriage. Though Forster derives the novel's title from the poem, he is not as optimistic as Whitman in the marriage of the West and the East.

Peter.Childs, who edits E.M.Forster's *A Passage to India*, a book which is a recent ideal sourcebook for studying Forster's A Passage to India, holds the view that Forster uses the line in Whitman's poem as the title of the novel to refer to several journeys to India: the English colonial enterprise in India, Mrs Morre's and Adela's voyage in India, and the train ride to the caves, as well as, metaphorically, the readers' introduction to India by Forster. (Childs, 147)

Forster seems to suggest by the title his ideal of all countries being united; the West and the East, as described in the poem, yet what the novel shows is a quite different picture.

The novel begins with a short description of Chandrapore as the setting of the story, a city along the Ganges that is not notable except for the nearby Marabar caves. Forster establishes Chandrapore as a prototypical Indian town, neither distinguished nor exceptionally troubled. This town can therefore be taken to be symbolic of the rest of India rather than an exceptional case.

At the beginning of the story, Dr. Aziz, a young Indian physician, a Moslem, arrives at a dinner party given by his friend Hamidullah, one of the most educated and wealthier Moslems in Chandrapore and the town's leading attorney. Another guest is Mahmoud Ali, also a lawyer who has a more radical attitude to the British rule. They are having a discussion. The subject of the conversation, whether it is possible to be friends with an Englishman, announces the major theme of cultural communication between the Indians and the

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Anglo-Indians, the English in India. Their opinions reveal the shifting variety of views held among the Indians. Mahmoud Ali, who is more radical, argues that it is not possible to be friends with the English. He gives examples of Mr. Turton, the top-ranking English official in Chandrapore and his wife, Mrs. Turton, and Ronny, who is called "Red-Nose", a young English magistrate who was once kind to Mahmoud Ali in court but whose liberal ideas are soon lost after a few more months in India. Hamidullah, who remembers the friendship he enjoyed when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge, argues that the friendship is possible in England though not in India. Before they have the meal, Aziz is summoned to the home of his superior, Major Callendar. When he arrives at the house, he finds Major Callendar has gone without leaving a message for him. Worse, Mrs. Callendar and a British friend, Mrs. Lesley, on their way to the club, take his carriage without thanks. Angry and depressed, Aziz goes into his favorite mosque where he meets Mrs. Moore, the elderly mother of Ronny, who has just come to India with Adela Quested, Ronny's prospective fiancée, to meet Ronny. Contrary to what Aziz thinks of her, Mrs. Moore removes her shoes before entering the mosque. Her respect to the customs of Muslim arouses warmth and affection in Aziz's heart. Aziz finds they have much in common and talk pleasantly. On her way back, Mrs. Moore invites Aziz to the Club, the place where the Anglo-Indians meet and have entertainment, but is told that Indians are not allowed in.

Both Mrs. Moore and Adela are anxious to see "the real India". Hearing that they want to meet some Indians, Mr. Turton, Ronny's superior, obligingly offers to arrange a "Bridge Party" for them, to which both nationalities will be invited. The Indians who receive the invitations are much excited, including Nawab Bahadur, a powerful local landowner. The "Bridge Party" is definitely not a success with the British remaining aloof on one side of the Club lawn, and the Indians at the farther side of the lawn, doing nothing. Only Mr. Fielding, the Principal of the little local Government College and a widely experienced man near middle age, who is not what the British ladies call a "pukka sahib"1, "romps" among the Indian guests, and he is popular among them. When Fielding learns that the two new ladies, Adela and Mrs. Moore, are interested in meeting the "real Indians", he arranges a private tea party, planning to invite Adela, Mrs. Moore, Godbole, a Hindu Professor of music from his College and Aziz, Mrs. Moore's newly made Indian friend.

Aziz arrives for the party in good spirit, and the two men, Aziz and Fielding, who have never met before, become friends immediately. The tea party turns out to be "unconventional" but successful, unlike the ill-fated "Bridge Party". In the course of the conversation, Aziz haphazardly invites all the guests to visit him one day, but later changes hastily to invite them to the Marabar Caves when he thinks of his embarrassment if they see his shabby bungalow.

In order to show his British friends that the Indians keep their words, Aziz decides to renew the invitation despite all kinds of difficulties. They get on the train to the Marabar Caves early in the morning, while Fielding and Godbole miss the train because Godbole took too long with his prayers. After a brief rest, the three visit their first cave, where Mrs. Moore has a terrifying experience. The echo she feels in the cave fills her with horror. She loses all her joy in life, and all interest, even in Aziz. Mrs. Moore tells Adela and Aziz that she is too tired to walk, so the two continue on with the guide to the next cave. Adela asks the wrong question to a Muslim that is how many wives Aziz has, which annoys Aziz greatly and leaves her a moment. After Aziz restores his calm, and goes back to look for Adela, he can't find her. Fielding and Godbole arrive later. When they arrive at the city station back to the town after the trip, Mr. Haq, the Inspector of Police, tells them that Aziz is guilty of trying to assault Adela and Aziz is sent to prison.

The Marabar Incident leads to great racial conflicts between the Anglo-Indians and the local people. The English are furious. They are determined to punish Aziz. The Indians believe that Aziz is innocent; as a result, all the different groups are united to fight against the English. Fielding is convinced that Aziz is not a criminal, and tries his best to defend him. His action causes great anger from the Club members and he is considered a traitor and driven out of the group.

During the ensuing trial, Adela recants her accusation against Dr. Aziz. Aziz is released, but becomes a firm nationalist against the British rule in India. Mrs. Moore hurries back to Britain but dies in the Indian Ocean on her way back; her spirit never crosses the line that devides the East and the West. Ronny abandons marriage with Adela. Fielding shows a great sympathy to Adela and takes care of her before she leaves for England, which causes misunderstanding between him and Aziz. Fielding also returns home after the Marabar Incident, finding it hard to keep sincere friendship with Aziz. Two years later, Aziz and Fielding meet in Mau, a place outside the British rule, where a great Hindu ceremony is going on celebrating the Indian god, Krishna. All the misunderstandings between Aziz and Fielding disappear. At the end of the novel, Aziz no longer feels bitter and cynical over the events at Chandrapore. They feel like friends again but are aware they will meet no more. Aziz cries "down with the English" and then states only then will he and Fielding be friends again.

Judith Scherer Herz, one of the most influential critics of E. M. Forster, writes in her A Passage to India: Nation and Narration (1993) that for Forster as for Whitman the marriage metaphor functioned on both the political and personal levels, but in Forster's case with a more unsetting ambiguity, and in Forster's text, optimism is treated at the very least ironically, for there "the Suez marks the break between East and West". (Herz, 59) The two ladies come to India with good

intention of knowing the East, but the trip turns out a failure. Mrs. Moore dies in the Indian Ocean on her way back, and her soul never crosses the line between the West and the East. Adela retreats from India after the Marabar Incident. And finally Fielding, the most sincere friend of the Indians and the only Anglo-Indian who is sympathetic to Aziz, goes back to England. Though he returns at the last part of the novel, he acts as a British official on a visiting tour to see what the remoter states are doing with regard to English education. In the end Aziz and Fielding know the friendship between them will end at last. The development of the novel's plot suggests that the theme of the novel is in fact alienation rather than unity.

A Passage to India was written at the time before India won independence. What is interesting is that Forster even predicts India's independence during the Second World War (India became a independent country in July, 1947). The Indian doctor Aziz says to his English friend Fielding at the end of the novel that when the Second World War breaks out, they will have their chance to drive the British out of India. Though aware of the Indians' fierce opposition against British rule in India at the time, Forster avoids writing the novel from the political angle; instead he put more emphasis on the description of the personal relationships between the Indians and the Anglo-Indians in the novel.

Forster's interest in India began in 1906 with his friendship with an Indian friend Masood. Engaged as his Latin tutor, he was to help prepare Masood for entrance to Oxford. Their relationship had grown very close at that time. Indeed, Forster had fallen in love with Masood. The friendship remained deep and affectionate. We may even say it was Masood who introduced Forster to India and to whom Forster dedicated A Passage to India. Forster once writes:

> "My own debt to him is incalculable. He woke me up out of my suburban and academic life, showed me new horizons and new civilization and helped me towards the understanding of a continent. Until I met him, India was a vague jumble of rajahs, sahibs, babus, and elephants, and I was not interested in such a jumble: who could be? He made everything real and exciting as soon as he began to talk, and seventeen years later when I wrote A Passage to India I dedicated it to him out of gratitude as well as out of love, for it would never have been written without him."(Childs, 25)

Under Masood's influence, the ancient civilization of India aroused his interest and stimulated Forster's initiation of writing a novel about India. However, even Forster himself hadn't expected that the writing of the novel would take a long time and great effort. Forster's changing impression about India makes the novel complex. He visited India twice before completing A Passage to India. After his first visit in 1912-13 to see Masood, he returned to England and began working on the novel, but he reached an impasse and put the book aside for nearly ten years. In 1921 he returned to India and worked as the private secretary to the Maharajah of the Hindu Princely State of Dewas; he wrote about this experience in The Hill of Devi8: "I began this novel before my 1921 visit, and took out the opening chapters with me, with the intention of continuing them. But as soon as they were confronted with country they purposed to describe, they seemed to wilt and go dead and I could do nothing with them. I used to look at them for an evening in my room at Dewas, and felt only distaste and despair. The gap between India remembered and India experienced was too wide."(Childs, 21) This gap between the organized memory and the chaotic experience was never resolved; indeed, it became itself the new center of the completed novel.

As a Westerner in India, his frustration, implicit in these remarks when meeting with the East, a different culture from the West, quite clearly reflects his contradictory attitude to India. Forster recorded while he was in Dewas, 'I could never describe the muddle in this place. It is wheel within wheel.' Of the festival of Gokul Ashtami he wrote, 'The noise which sucks one into a whirlpool… music has never existed.' And in a letter to Dickinson he confessed that he found the Hindu character 'unaesthetic' (Childs, 91).

Though Forster doesn't write the novel from the political point of view and claims that his novel is not about politics, it is something larger, it doesn't mean he is not concerned with politics. During both of these visits Forster observed the deleterious effects of colonialism and the governing Anglo-Indians on Indian society. He became dissatisfied with the clichéd and self-assured descriptions of India, which appeared in contemporary English novels.

At the same time, Forster followed the political situation very closely. In 1920, he publicly entered the debate on the question of self-government for Egypt in a pamphlet that he wrote at the urging of Leonard Woolf. It is an interesting document to read alongside A Passage to India, for while it is anti-imperial; it does not entirely give up on the idea of empire. In a letter to Leonard Woolf, the husband of Virginia .Wolf, he made his idea clear:

> "The best severely practical solution that I can see is that Egypt should be nominally and forcibly but not uncomfortably part of the British Empire."(Herz, 26)

These are precisely the attitudes that underlie Forster's portrayal of the British in India. For all that he unmasks their hypocrisies and pretensions; the analysis is complicated by a residual reluctance to give up on his side, on Britain, entirely. Indeed, as he wrote in a letter to his mother from India in 1921, after he had left Dewas to spend the remaining time with Masood, India is a place "where we have done much good and have

rights, and where our sudden withdrawal would be a disaster" (Herz, 27).

Just as Herz points out that although Forster has seen communal harmony and self-realization as necessary first steps toward political independence, he seems not to want to name that position or explore its consequences in fiction. He was certainly anti-imperialist throughout this period, but as suggested earlier, these views were complicated by his sense that British withdrawal might produce political and social disaster. (Herz, 56)

Thus it is not a surprise when we see in the novel a negative result of the friendship between the Indians and Anglo-Indians considering Forster's ambiguous attitude to India. Greatly disappointed at the failure of the effort to know India and bridge the gap between the West and East, yet unaware of his imperial stand, Forster blames faults on both sides in the Indian and British relationship as Childs tells us:

> "When I began the book,' he (Forster) wrote in a letter to Masood, 'I thought it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West, but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable. I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not." (Childs, 22)

Forster himself firmly believes that he is writing the novel fairly, since he has no prejudice against the Indians. His own judgment on the description in the novel can be seen in the following:

> "I have almost always felt miserable in a Club, and almost always felt happy among Indians, and I want to go back among them. They won't like my book, I know, because they don't like fairness; dislike it fundamentally." (Herz, 46)

Forster indicates here that if any Indians don't like his novel, which he considers fair enough, it is that the Indians don't like fairness by instinct not that he is not fair. This clearly shows Forster's colonial stand in his subconscious mind, which causes his ambiguity in the novel. Though Forster knows his contradictions and limitations in his intellectual stand as an English bourgeois, he is not aware that it is clearly reflected in the novel. He writes: " 'I know very well how limited English freedom is. It is race-bounded and it's class-bound… I am actually what my age and my upbringing have made me— a bourgeois who adheres to the British constitution, adheres to it rather than supports it'"(Beer, 43). On the one hand, just as Parry concludes, the approach to the component meanings of the text's systems of representation is, however, profoundly ambiguous, moving between responsiveness and rejection, making the myth and subverting it. On the other hand, the ambiguities and contradictions in Forster's vision notwithstanding, we can see in the novel "a rare instance of a libertarian perspective on another and subordinated culture produced from within an imperialist metropolis" (Herz, 39).

Note: Pukka sahib is what the local people of Indians call the Europeans. Sahib is similar to the meaning of Sir. Pukka sahib means a real European.

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