

“A Passage to India: Naivety and Reality”

Ramlal Agarwal,
India,
agarwalramlal@gmail.com

In the 1940s and the 1950s there was one novel the students and scholars of English literature in India were taken up with and that was E.M.Forster’s A Passage to India. It was essentially prescribed in all courses in English literature, it was discussed in all highbrow magazines and there could be no seminar without it. It was one book no teacher or student of English literature could afford to neglect. But with the passage of time, like all classics, it receded from the center-stage to the back-stage.

Readers were drawn to the novel because it was about India, a subject close to the heart of the British and the Indians. It connected prose with poetry, it tried to bring people of different backgrounds, education, temperament and faiths together, it was free from racial prejudices and was critical of the style of ruling India and the petulance and peevishness of the ruling class including its women folk. It was all very noble to get discordant elements on one platform and set them to coalesce. However, there is an element of naivety behind all noble endeavors because all noble endeavors are mocked by all powerful reality which finally disrupts them.

Forster knew full well that noble endeavors have an element of naivety ingrained in them and also the disruptive force of reality but he, an indefatigable optimist did not want to give up the game and accept defeat. Hence, he wrote A Passage of India even though it was foredoomed.

The novel unfolds with the arrival of two women- a very senior and mature English lady called Mrs. Moore and a young English lady of marriageable age called Miss Adela and a middle-aged and liberal-minded English gentleman called Mr. Fielding in India around 1920s. Mrs. Moore came to India to attend the talks of possible marriage of her son Ronnie to Miss Adela. Miss Adela was in India to get to know Ronnie, her prospective husband. Mr. Fielding came to India to take up a teaching assignment. They are untouched by the prevalent prejudices between the Indian and the English. They believe in personal relations and civil niceties. In Chandrapur, they meet a young

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Indian called Aziz, a medical doctor and want to get on with him and through him his friends and other members of Indian society. But the English do not want them to mix with the Indians. The English and the Indians had come to believe that it was impossible to be friends with one another. Therefore, the English kept themselves to their camps and the Indians to theirs. Mrs. Moore does not believe in any kind of segregation. She believes in unity and wholeness. Therefore, she does not stop meeting the Indians. Encouraged by her attitude Dr Aziz arranges a party at the famous Malabar caves. Mrs. Moore, Adela and Fielding accept to join the party. Dr Aziz manages an elephant ride and spares no expenses to turn the event into royal celebration. He is rather over excited and wants to see that nothing goes amiss.

Notwithstanding Aziz's frantic efforts to make the picnic a success, it turns into a nightmare. Mrs. Moore is disappointed that the famous Malabar caves turn out to be mere crevices and their famous echo was a mere meaningless bau-baum to every call. Fielding misses his train and arrives late for the picnic and most dreadfully Miss Adela is missing.

In his early draft, Forster wrote that screams echoed from a cave Aziz and Adela were visiting and Adela came out of the cave badly bruised. Her clothes were torn and she was totally distraught. She got into the car of Miss Derek who had just arrived and left the picnic. Forster realized that the incident might prove the dead-end for his liberal rationality so he changed the draft and withdrew Aziz and left Adela to fend for herself.

But the damage was done. Mrs. Moore had heard the echo and was submerged in the horror of double vision- the vision of unity and eternity and the vision of division and fragmentation. Adela accuses Aziz of assaulting her in the cave and the schisms between the English and the Indians become wider and deeper. The dream project of Forster fails. In fact, it was foredoomed because he had bungled in the choice of his characters.

Aziz was a chance acquaintance for Mrs. Moore, Miss Adela and Fielding and they accept him as they find him. One wonders how could Forster choose him to be a protagonist of his dream project when he himself describes him as a high-strung bigoted individual. He considered himself the descendent of Moghul emperors. His favourite Moghul emperor was Babar and his ideal Moghul emperor was Alamgir. He hated his colleague Pannalal, another medical doctor. He would have

only Muslim peers in his party. He arranges the elephant ride etc. to show-off the Moghul splendor. His comments on Adela after his acquittal at his behest show his breeding. If Dr Aziz draws sharp lines, Professor Godbole blurs all. He refuses to discriminate. Forster draws a sharp contrast between the 'here and now' attitude of Dr Aziz and the totally unconcerned and otherworldly attitude of Dr Godbole.

One also wonders at Forster's choice of Mrs. Moore, Adela and Fielding. Either Forster did not develop them to their full capacity or they are just one-dimensional characters. Ms. Moore is presented just as an ideal but not an ideal human being. She leaves for England and dies on the way while the trial of Adela's charge is going on. She does not check with Adela the facts of her plight. Walter Allen in his The English Novel considers Mrs. Moore to be a wholly successful symbol, a symbol of acceptance, of unconscious life going on heedless of the disputes of the passing moment. How many readers would accept Allen's assessment of Mrs. Moore is doubtful. Miss Adela is an insipid character. She has no charm, no vivacity and no feminine qualities whatsoever. Fielding too has little to recommend himself except his lack-luster eagerness to be friendly with Indians.

Forster knew that the ship of his noble intentions had hit the rocks but he was an indefatigable optimist and therefore when Fielding asks Aziz can they be friends, the answer is not "no" but "not yet".