

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* – A Spiritual Analysis

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Abstract

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) was a literary stalwart of the 20th century. *A Passage to India* was published in 1924. Before this novel was published Forster had already visited India twice; which in turn created a deep impact on him. Hence it is easy for him to connect with India and the spirituality of Indian life. This unique connection is evident in the three parts of *A Passage to India* and its character portrayal. Spirituality is the concept of being concerned with the very essence of human being. A sense of connection with something higher than our own selves is the cornerstone of spirituality. In this novel Religion and Spirituality play a primary part and create an ever widening gap between the British Christians and the native Indians. In addition it also divides the Indian society in Chandrapore; which originally is 'Bankipore' in the state of Bihar. Notwithstanding these significant differences, the novel emerges with an idea to connect between the various cultures. 'Love and spirituality' and the value attached to it in Islam, Christianity and Hinduism acts as a bridge between the diverse cultures in the novel.

Keywords: Spiritual, Love, Mosque, Cave, Temple, Seasons.

Introduction

In the words of Swami Vivekananda:

That one eternal religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races. There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways. (Vivekananda, *My Master* 11)

The above mentioned lines speak about the existence of only one eternal and infinite religion for us humans and unity among humanity. These concepts and values find profound

expression in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. This is what Spiritualism is. It is the belief in something which is at a higher plane than us. It is like a strong pillar or foundation on which we can depend and build our lives upon. This is the central belief in which we can find solace.

A Passage to India is divided into three sections. "Mosque" – the first part of the novel, is a thesis proposed. "Caves" – the second part, is an antithesis. "Temple" – the third part, is a union of all the three parts. This portrays a lovely spiritual synthesis. "The cold weather, the hot weather, and the rains" is the symbolic representation of these three parts of the novel, as disclosed by E.M. Forster in a 1949 NBC radio interview.

The first part of the novel "Mosque" stands for the Muslim community of pre-independent India. Forster begins his novel in a joyless, inhospitable and aloof atmosphere. A sense of cold persists. The season in the initial part of the novel is 'cool'. Spurious are its moments of unity and the problems posed by it defy solution. *ABANDONING* (Forster, *Passage* 9) is the first word of Chapter Two. On one hand it epitomizes Dr. Aziz, the young Muslim and on the other it delineates the entire Indian-Muslim community.

Dr. Aziz goes into a mosque to seek refuge after being snubbed by his English superior. "He had always liked this mosque. It was gracious and the arrangement pleased him." (Forster, *Passage* 12-13) Besides being dark and empty, the structure was neither warm nor welcoming. The narrator recounts Aziz's love for the mosque:

A mosque by winning his approval let loose his imagination [...] Here was Islam, his own country, more than a Faith, more than a battle-cry, much, much more...Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and his thoughts found their home. (Forster, *Passage* 13)

There is a fire burning within Dr. Aziz. It is diffused by the cool night air within this cold building. His mind finds solace here as he can relate with the structure and its greater meaning. The spiritual aspect of Islam is highlighted by the above-mentioned passage. Dr. Aziz connects with the mosque innocently and in return it welcomes him. Mrs. Moore is the English mother of Ronny Heaslop, the City Magistrate. In an attempt to escape the stifling atmosphere of the nearby auditorium she enters the mosque in the stillness of the night. It is followed by a small misunderstanding because of Mrs. Moore not having taken off her shoes

and a frosty greeting from the young doctor. The doctor's rudeness and aggression is extinguished by a soft apologetic response from the English woman.

Mrs. Moore is a broad minded woman. Her words, "...God is here." (Forster, *Passage* 14) represents her spiritual outlook and acceptance of the all pervading Almighty. She accepts the presence of God in a mosque despite being a Christian. Dr. Aziz is taken aback. Forster says, "A fabric bigger than the mosque fell to pieces, and he did not know whether he was glad or sorry." (Forster, *Passage* 14-15) Mrs. Moore's open hearted embrace of the Supreme Spiritual Being pleased Dr. Aziz immensely and helped in establishing a strong spiritual connection with the young doctor.

Mrs. Moore publicly expresses her love for all living beings. During a one on one conversation with her son Ronny, Mrs Moore says:

Because India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to each other. God...is...love. [...] God has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent, even in India, to see how we are succeeding. [...] The sincere if impotent desire wins His blessing. I think everyone fails, but there are so many kinds of failure. Goodwill and more goodwill and more goodwill. (Forster, *Passage* 42-43)

Her spiritual vision helps her in accepting India's identity and existence despite being an English woman. She has a firm belief that the omnipresent God symbolises Love and there exists no discrimination whatsoever in His love. God admires even a small earnest effort. Being a well-wisher by nature, Mrs. Moore wishes good for both the British as well as the Indians. She spiritually connects with India. She stands apart owing to this spiritual standpoint. She wholeheartedly embraces the all-loving God.

The second part of the book "Caves" presents an idea of destruction and the season is 'hot'. It mainly revolves around the erroneous accusation of molestation inside the caves on Dr. Aziz by Adela Quested. As a result everything here is reduced to the nihilism of an echo in the caves. The ancient Marabar Caves is planned as a picnic spot. Spirituality is evident in the journey to the caves. Dr. Aziz – a Muslim man leads English Christian women to the "Caves" – which were most likely of Hindu origin. Curiously the caves have the most potent impact on the two Christian women. Both Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested are affected by the 'echo' in the caves. Despite the effect being different on either of them it has a lasting impact.

The young doctor Aziz is accused of attacking Adela inside one of the caves and he is arrested after returning home from the expedition.

During the course of a discussion regarding Dr. Aziz's guilt and innocence between the wise Professor Godbole and Mr. Fielding; Godbole remarks:

[...] All perform a good action, when one is performed, and when an action is performed, all perform it. [...] Good and evil are different, as their names imply. But, in my own humble opinion, they are both of them aspects of my Lord. He is present in the one, absent in the other, and the difference between presence and absence is great, as great as my feeble mind can grasp. Yet absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence, and we are therefore entitled to repeat, "Come, come, come, come." (Forster, *Passage* 157-158)

Professor Godbole holds that all of us are in a state of action. And as we all are God's creation, hence both the good and evil action is the aspect of God. On a similar note both absence and presence imply the same. Absence is not absolute absence. Rather, it is the non-existence in a place where we are searching for a particular person or thing. The professor's spiritual worldview 'includes' rather than 'excludes'. He implores the Almighty to come to us. Owing to this, he establishes a successful connection with all the beings. Professor Godbole carries within him a broader spiritual mindset.

Sitting by the card table with Ronny and Adela, Mrs. Moore clearly states that she does not concur with Adela's accusation on Dr. Aziz. She says:

Of course he is innocent [...] When shall I be free from your fuss? Was he in the cave and were you in the cave and on and on... and Unto us a son is born, unto us a child is given... and am I good and is he bad and are we saved?... and ending everything the echo. (Forster, *Passage* 181-182)

Mrs. Moore believes in Dr. Aziz's innocence. She is of the opinion that a trivial confusion has been the basis of all the blame game going on and that it should have been set right at the onset. She is deeply troubled by the continuous efforts of putting everyone else's desires before her own and added to it her duty of finding a suitable wife for her son Ronny. Her all-embracing spiritual conviction is evident as she brings into the conversation, the birth of Jesus Christ along with the echo in the Hindu caves in order to prove the innocence of a Muslim man. Mrs. Moore firmly puts forth her spiritual belief. Through these lines Forster

establishes a significant spiritual connection between the Marabar caves and the Christian conviction regarding caves – the absence of Jesus' body in the cave after crucifixion as He had already risen. (*The Bible* Luke 24. 1-7)

Mrs. Moore's statement full of emphasis heals Adela. Its soothing impact makes her feel relieved of the haunting sound of the echo in the caves. Moreover she had been shouldering a burden for quite a while regarding marrying Ronny. It also clears this confusion of her. Miss. Quested was about to get married to someone whom she did not love and Mrs. Moore was into the habit of needlessly serving her sufficiently grown up children. The echo in the Marabar caves act as a spiritual trial by fire and cast away these presumptions. The stage is prepared for the concluding part of *A Passage to India* by this act of spiritual cleansing.

The third part of the novel "Temple" celebrates the season of 'monsoon'. It is that time of the year when everyone is full of life both young and old; all things are happy. The tanks are full, so they dance and enjoy themselves; this is the real India. We are in the village named Mau after a time lapse of two years. "Some hundreds of miles westward of the Marabar Hills,". (Forster, *Passage* 253) This time-gap and added to it the distance helps in settling the dust which emanated from the Caves. Professor Godbole has opened up a new school here and has been joined by Dr. Aziz. Forster tells us:

God is not born yet- that will occur at midnight- but He has also been born centuries ago, nor can He ever be born, because He is the Lord of the Universe, who transcends human processes. (Forster, *Passage* 253)

"Thou art my father and mother and everybody." (Forster, *Passage* 253) Narayan Godbole speaks while standing in the presence of God. While celebrating Krishna Janmashtami it is noteworthy to point out this spiritual acceptance of God in every form. It aids in connecting us with the divine Reality. Everyone eagerly awaits the birth of the Eternal Being despite knowing full well that He can never be born as He is omnipresent and ever-present since time immemorial.

Parallels can be drawn between the birth of Shri Krishna at the stroke of midnight and the birth of Jesus Christ at midnight. The God worshipped by Hindus connects us with the Almighty of the Christians; a spiritual connection. God is one – is the message sent far and wide. Within the temple premises we find people from all walks of life gathered with utmost

eagerness to witness the enactment of the birth of baby Krishna. This spiritually connects everyone in Mau. The narrator tells us:

Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI KRISHNA, and saved the world. All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear. (Forster, *Passage* 257)

The Supreme Being, taking birth as Krishna dispels sorrow and fear of all; both animate as well as inanimate. Immense unwavering faith has the power to break all mortal barriers. With the spiritual message that everyone is equal in the eyes of God a sense of connection among all the creatures of God is demonstrated. “God is Love.” (Forster, *Passage* 255) God is Love personified and can easily be attained through unselfish love and pure devotion. “... he remembered a wasp seen he forgot where, perhaps on a stone. He loved the wasp equally, he impelled it likewise, he was imitating God.” (Forster, *Passage* 255-256) Professor Godbole loves all without any discrimination and spiritually embraces everything be it big or small and young or old. The universal warmth of God is signified by Godbole.

Mr. Fielding and his wife Stella also join in the celebration of Janmashtami, which is taking place during the monsoon. In India, rains delineate a new beginning as well as a spiritual cleansing. In the last part of the novel a general tone of love and happiness, faith and affection, integration and reconciliation is set by the much awaited rainy season.

Conclusion

In *A Passage to India*, Dr. Aziz signifies emotion, Fielding and Adela stand for intellect, and Godbole represents love and universalism. While a fusion of all these aspects can be observed in Mrs. Moore; hence she denotes synthesis. Forster personifies every single character to a certain extent. During an interview to BBC in 1958 Forster said, “I really only got down onto paper three types of people: the person I think I am, the people who irritate me, and the people I’d like to be”. (BBC)

We observe in the novel, the newly born Krishna partaking in the boundless joy and innocent jubilation of his disciples. This inclusion of merriment proves that God is one amongst us. A deeper meaning of *A Passage to India* surfaces through Aziz’s assertion, “Kindness, more kindness, and even after that more kindness. I assure you it is the only

hope.” (Forster, *Passage* 100) Kindness has the capability to act as a bridge across diverse cultures. Forster explicitly conveys that neither nationality matters nor religion. All that matters is the spiritual connection with every single being established through unrestrained love and kindness.

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