

BLOCK INTRODUCTION: *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

In the previous two blocks you have encountered two examinations of colonisation in twentieth-century fiction. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* deals — among other themes — with Britain's colonisation of Ireland and with Irish nationalism. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* analyses the scramble for Africa by various European nations. Now let us look at this theme nearer home in E.M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India*. We shall look at various aspects of the novel in 6 Units, structured as follows:

UNIT ONE considers various passages *to* India — historical and imaginative — made before Forster's first (1912-1913) visit to India, many of which have been analysed by him. A range of critical approaches to the text are discussed in **UNIT TWO**. The changing political face of India is examined in **UNIT THREE**. The characters in the text are scrutinised in **UNIT FOUR** while **UNIT FIVE** explores Forster's treatment of religion. The atmosphere and imagery of the novel are analysed in **UNIT SIX** which also maps various passages *from* India as the text is seen to lead into a play, a film, and of course into Forster's subsequent writings on related subjects.

Try to read *A Passage to India* by the time you finish **UNIT THREE**, since by then you will have a working knowledge of contexts and will thus be able to site or position the text. While I will refer throughout — where relevant — to Forster's other writings and also to various critical schools, I will try to offer detailed quotations so that you can draw your own conclusions. Please work through the exercises at the end of each unit so that you can plot your own course through *A Passage to India*.

1.2.2 Forster's Adaptation

At first glance the distinction between Whitman's opening line and Forster's title seems trivial. All Forster seems to do is to slip in the indefinite article before Whitman's phrase so that it now reads 'A Passage to India'. In reality though he accomplishes a good deal through this apparently insignificant gesture. Tentativeness takes the place of certainty. 'A' passage suggests there may be many more passages than the one taken by the writer or indeed by any one or all the characters. This sense of competing routes also helps decentre the notion of the supremacy of the writer. If no one route is superior to the other, his own imagination can no longer claim hegemony over his territory. We do not then as readers have the passive role of map-readers. You and I might, if we wish, claim the right and indeed the duty of cartographers or map-makers since the writer does not claim he has discovered the only, or even the best route to India. Against Whitman's sense of self-generated and self-sustained romanticism then, it seems to me that this is a more self-examining and self-critical Modernism. This does not suggest the death of Romanticism though, for the title is still built around the ideal of an open-ended journey. At the same time its tentativeness suggests that the title questions its own primacy.

Looking still at the title, it isn't possible for me to say whether Forster himself considers the predicates of race, class and gender which I criticised Whitman for ignoring. I would like though to indicate a few slight parallels between the two writers. Both wrote during the aftermath of wars that revolutionised their societies. Whitman wrote after the American Civil war that ultimately brought the industrialised North and the agrarian south together in the federation that we know today as the United States of America. More than a century down the road the position of Civil Rights in such a society — one of the stated war-aims of the Union — is continually debated. Yet Whitman's own enthusiasm for this democracy led him to write an epic for it, *Leaves of Grass*, of which 'Passage to India' is a part. Forster began writing *A Passage to India* before the First World War and before its publication witnessed both the formation and the emasculation of the League of Nations (the predecessor to the UNO) the decline of the British empire after the war, and the rise of Gandhi. His tentativeness thus is explicable. Thus there are continuities and discontinuities in their attitudes but I'm not sure this argument can be pushed much further. Instead I'd like to look at Forster's attitude to earlier passages to India and to earlier colonialisms and colonists. To illustrate my argument I will use Forster's writings around the time of the publication of *A Passage to India*.

1.3 EARLIER PASSAGES TO INDIA

1.3.1 Babar

In terms of the chronology of conquest the first invader of India whom Forster discusses at any length is Babar, the founder of the Mughal dynasty. At first Forster treats Babar's aggressive foreign policy as being pretty much a practical application of Machiavelli's theory of statecraft. Forster's introduction of Babar though is surprisingly disarming: 'At the time that Machiavelli was collecting materials for *The Prince*, a robber boy, sorely in need of advice, was scuttling over the highlands of Central Asia'. Indeed this seems at first disquieting. Why should the fact of foreign conquest, based only on force and with the sole purpose of pillage and loot be trivialised in this way? I suspect that Forster's sneaking admiration of Babar's love of life, of friends, and also Forster's enjoyment of Babar's prose-style (as seen in the latter's autobiography) have something to do with it. Had this been Forster's only response to an earlier invasion of India, it would have been immature and insignificant.

But Forster's position is more complicated than this. He goes on to use Babar's disparaging account of India as an early model of the antipathy between the conqueror

and the conquered. At first he seems to get a good deal of mileage out of this comparison and to be in agreement himself with Babar's lack of sympathy for India and also with the British residents in India (the **Anglo-Indians** as he calls them) who subscribe to this account: 'His description of Hindustan is unfavourable and has often been quoted with gusto by Anglo-Indians. "The people," he complains, "are not handsome, have no idea of the charm of friendly society, of frankly mixing togetherno good fruits, no ice or cold water, no good food or bread in their bazars; no baths or colleges ...' He has small patience with a race which has never found either aesthetic or moral excellence by focussing upon details. Just as Forster seems to agree with these conquerors — both of time past and of time present — he stands aside from their criticism. He does this not because he suddenly finds some hitherto unsuspected virtues in India. Quite the contrary. He does this because he locates a surprising virtue in Babar that he does not find in the British. This is the ability Babar shows to respond to a value which according to Forster is central to all Indian cultures, the value of renunciation. Babar gives up his life so that his son Humayun might live.

Nothing in [Babar's] life was Indian, except, possibly, the leaving of it. Then, indeed, at the supreme moment, a strange ghost visits him, a highly unexpected symptom occurs — renunciation. Humayun, his son, lay sick at Agra, and was not expected to recover. Babar, apprised that some sacrifice was necessary, decided .. that it must be self-sacrifice. He walked ceremonially three times round the bed, then cried, 'I have borne it away'. From that moment...[Babar] ceased to exist ... like the smoke from the burning ghats that disappears into the sky.

I find this remarkable for what it tells me of Forster's understanding of the relationship between a ruler and his subjects. First it suggests that Forster's concern is not with governance as an end in itself but with the way in which the governance of a culture is impossible without an identification between the conqueror and the core-values of the conquered. What makes Babar a sympathetic figure for Forster is his grasping — accidentally or deliberately — of the Indian value of renunciation. I realise that this lays Forster open to the charge of essentialism. Why should he write as if there is only one cultural value-system in India, and why should he so arbitrarily place renunciation within it? Is Forster not guilty of continuing the cliché of the 'spiritual' East? Still, I find the passage worthwhile because it shows how Forster goes along with the mainstream culture of his time — that of the British ruling class — only upto a point. First he shares the criticism of India they make using Babar's own words. Next he goes on to show that Babar developed beyond this point and that he values Babar's later position of appreciation at least as much if not more than his earlier depreciation of Indian culture. Then the episode suggests Forster's own sympathy with the mainstream not of an early coloniser (Babar) nor of a contemporary coloniser (the British) but of the colonised. Finally the simile of the burning ghats shows how the expansion of Forster's political and cultural sympathies translate directly into an increase in the resources of his prose-style.

1.3.2 The East India Company

What happens then when Forster examines the cultural sympathies of the British? For a start he makes the point that as a nation and also as a colonial power the chief vice of the British people is their hypocrisy. By this he means that, as he explains, the British are guilty not of conscious wrongdoing but of what he calls 'unconscious deceit' which has led them to be thought of as '... the island of hypocrites, the people who have built up an Empire with a Bible in one hand, a pistol in the other, and financial concessions in both pockets' (*Abinger Harvest*, 20). Yet again Forster's criticism seems to be directed at the attitude of the coloniser rather than against the political and cultural realities of colonisation. He objects to the unhealthy nexus between empire, religion and commerce. Earlier in this set of 'Notes on the English Character' Forster has already drawn attention to the strong commercial instincts in the British national character which have led to the description of the British as 'a nation of shopkeepers'. The empire was essentially a

He believed in Forster's ability to sympathetically feel for a situation even while analysing it. In 1911, a year before Forster's visit to India Masood wrote to make a suggestion: 'You know my great wish is to get you to write a book on India In you I see an oriental with an oriental view of life on most things Go on improving your imagination and with it your power of physically feeling the difficulties of another. That is what we call *tarass*' (Fuřbank, I, 194). Again I find the assumption that race determines attitude disturbing. But it suggests yet again the way in which personal and novelistic pressures, so to speak, fuel each other to influence Forster's attitude before he embarked on his journey to India.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

A passage or journey from England to India as seen by an earlier writer like Kipling is complex. It denies Indians — the colonised — their right to their own political and cultural destinies. It upholds British culture over non-British cultures, marginalises women and morally exalts imperialists. Imperialism in turn carries contrary implications of exile, guilt and liberation. Simultaneously India is seen in Whitman's poem 'Passage to India' as the symbol of mystical fulfillment, which has both positive and negative results. While it exalts India it does not analyse it in terms of race, class and gender specificities. Forster's adaptation of Whitman's phrase for the title of his novel suggests a greater self-examination and a move from Romanticism to Modernism. It allows the reader her own point of view and requires her to make her own journey through the text. Forster wrote about three colonial regimes before the publication of *A Passage to India*. These were the governments of Babar, the East India Company and the Crown. His attitude to any colonising power is shaped in turn by what he regards as its attitude to its colony, India. So his approval of them declines accordingly in descending order. Finally Forster's own attitude to India was shaped by his personal relationships and his goal as a novelist. His close friend Syed Ross Masood suggested he write a novel about India, while praising Forster's quality of *tarass* or imaginative sympathy.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Anglo-Indians

Forster uses this term to denote British people who lived in India. Please do not confuse this with current usages.

Cliche

A stereotyped hackneyed phrase.

Essentialism

A critical approach which suggests there are truths of universal accuracy and application.

Imperatives

Urgent, commanding requirements.

Interrogated

Questioned.

Modernism

A movement in the arts at the start of the twentieth century which uses devices such as multiple narratives, and points of view to offer a psychologically convincing presentation of reality. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are among the modernists.

Romanticism

A movement in the arts at the beginning of the nineteenth century which suggests that subjective reality (the landscape of the mind) shapes objective reality (the external landscape). Wordsworth and Coleridge are among the early Romantics.

1.7 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. Outline the connotations of a passage to India in late nineteenth century writing. What are the positives and the negatives of such a passage ?
- Q 2. What is your understanding of the phrase, 'the White Man's burden' ? Analyse its implications.
- Q 3. Indicate the possible advantages and disadvantages in Forster's insistence on the personal quality of his response to India.

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Primary material

E.M. Forster.

Abinger Harvest. 1936, repr.
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974

Secondary material

Furbank, P.N.

E.M. Forster: A Life. 1977, repr. (in one vol.) Oxford, 1979.

Images of the Raj. London, 1988.

The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism. London, 1969.

Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A

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