

The Dislocation of Identity and an Elegy for Empire: E. M. Forster and His *A Passage to India*

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Abstract *A Passage to India* is the last and the most successful novel of E.M. Forster, a British middle-class intellectual with liberal humanism ideal expressed in his “only connect” motto. However, Forster’s liberal humanism ideal is incompatible with the imperialism of his time. Forster criticizes the inhuman imperialistic behavior and condemns it for its undermining of the cross-racial personal relations. As a firm anti-imperialist and liberal humanist, Forster’s identity is a dislocated and embarrassing one. Sensing that the empire is “resting on sand” with the inevitable fate of collapse, Forster resorts to the Utopian concept of “democratic empire” as a panacea of redemption. This depolitized ideal reflects the latent empire complex in Foster and his double visions: what he opposes is imperialism, not empire. Instead, he shows his great anxiety and concern to the fate of British Empire. *A Passage to India* is an “epitaph on liberal humanism” and an elegy to the British Empire.

Key words A Passage to India; liberal-humanism; identity; empire;

A Passage to India is generally regarded as E. M. Forster’s masterpiece. When it was published in June 1924, it was regarded as a major literary event and became an immediate success: 17,000 copies sold in Britain and more than 53,000 copies in the United States by the end of 1924. It was regarded by some people as a novel with a political theme. However, Foster declared on many occasions that the novel was not something intended political. In his prefatory note to the Everyman edition in 1957, he said: “In writing it, however, my main purpose was not political, was not even sociological” (Forster 317).

Then what is the novel really about? Forster continued, “It’s about something more than politics, about the search of the human race for a more lasting home, about

the universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the horror lurking in the Marabar caves and the release symbolized by the birth of Krishna” (Ibid.). The truth is that, as his previous four published novels, the novel shares the same theme---personal relations, although it has a strong tint of politics and pessimism.

1. “Only Connect”: Forsterian Utopia

In his *Morgan: A Biography of E. M. Forster*, Nicola Beauman gives a vivid and conclusive delineation of Forster and his ideal, “The very name of E. M. Forster symbolized the importance of personal relations, art, the inner life, the traditions of the rural life, the individual” (Beauman 368).

Personal relations are what E.M. Forster believes and cherishes all through his life. In *The Novels of E.M. Forster*, Virginia Woolf pointed out that: “His concern is with the private life; his message is addressed to the soul... This belief that it is the private life that matters, that it is the soul that is eternal, runs through all his writing”(Wilde 46). Personal relations, expressed in another way, are the famous Forsterian motto “only connect” in *Howards End* (1910) expounded by the central character Margaret.

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die. (*Howards End* 183)

“Only connect” became Forster’s well-known creed since then. Both in his life and his works, he was searching for such a kind of connection, or in other words, a harmony of personal relations. Take *A Passage to India* for example, the theme of personal relations is present everywhere. At the very beginning, Aziz, the Moslem doctor, was spending a social evening with some of his friends, and the question “whether or not it is possible to be friends with an Englishman” was brought up and stirred heated discussion. This question serves as a hidden line in the whole novel and “connection” becomes a central issue. The three parts of the novel, namely, Mosque, Caves and Temple suggest different seasons of a year in India. They also imply the personal relations at different stages: the Mosque part is the beginning of establishing connections, with the acquaintance of Mrs. Moore and Aziz as the typical symbol. The second part, Caves, is the break of the connection yet to be soundly established. It is a disruption of the personal relations with Adela’s accusation of Aziz’s attempted sexual assault. The relations between East and West, between those who are “trying to see India” and the natives, between the rulers and the ruled, are totally destroyed. The

third part, Temple, implies a slight hope of renewed connection. Mrs. Moore died on her return to Europe, Mr. Fielding and Miss Adela returned to Europe, and doctor Aziz abandoned his job to find a new one in a native state. The ending “No, not yet...No, not here” is often quoted by critics as an ambiguous response to the question in the first part: whether the Indians and the Englishmen can be friends, and it also shows the dilemma of E. M. Forster’s “personal relations” creed.

Forster grew up in a transitional period from the late-Victorian to Edwardian period in which his outlook and values were mainly forged. Forster was indebted to Matthew Arnold, the liberal humanist although Forster once said that he himself belonged to “the fag-end” of Victorian liberalism. Arnold’s liberal humanism ideal is reflected in Forster’s life and works. What is more, Forster advocated a universal connection that is both inclusive and transcendent.

In one of his lectures Foster said: “By the time I was writing novels and I remember a section in them, personal relations are the only thing that matters, for ever and ever.” Here, the “section” that Forster referred to was from Helen Schlegel’s statement in *Howards End*. Forster did keep this in his mind, because all his novels are about the personal relations, from his first novel *Where Angels Fear to tread* (1905) to his last one *A Passage to India* (1924). This deep-rooted concept of “personal relations” or, in other words, “only connect”, is the expression of Forster’s life-long faith as a liberal-humanist.

The “only connect” ideal opposes imperialism, hegemony and class hierarchy; it believes in freedom, equability, ration; it emphasizes the importance of personal relations, the harmony between individuals and the cultivation of spiritual world. It also proposes to bridge all the gulfs and barriers between the West and the East, to surpass and transcend the differences of race, class, culture, gender and nation for a universal Brotherhood and friendship. The ideal is a combination of the criticism of the reality and the expression of romantic imagination. This concept of personal relations, in final analysis, is Forster’s political Utopia.

Like many writers in the early twentieth century, Foster expressed his resistance and opposition to the modernity and machine age. Forster’s opposition was strong but he expressed it in a mild tone. His persistent “moral” is that “the life of affectionate personal relations, disengaged from political and religious zeal by means of a tolerant eclecticism,” (Crews 5) is supremely valuable. Forster just withdrew and retreated to his liberal-humanism utopia in the case of any crisis, including the First World War, which “enforced a radical reassessment of all the values Forster had inherited from nineteenth-century liberalism and awoke feelings of fear and anguish for the future” (Colmer 20). Although the War destroyed Forster’s faith in old-fashioned political liberalism, it did not turn Forster away from Utopian politics. In *A Passage to India*,

he thinks that the catastrophic failure of establishing personal relations between the British and the Indians is the ultimate reason for the unsuccessful connection. He also shows his faith through Fielding, a character with liberal-humanism in the novel that “the world, he believed, is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence” (Forster 80).

According to Forster, the solution to human misunderstanding lies in human nature, not in political institutions. In the 1930s and 1940s, he made a lot of speeches, broadcasts and essays defining his liberal humanist position, the most famous is “What I Believe” (1938) in which he declared: “I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country” (Forster 66). Forster held the faith of “only connect”, which is both a utopia and refuge for him in his life-long experience. The neglect of politics in his novels is the latent expression of his utopian ideal.

2. The Dislocation of Identity

As pointed out by Parry in his *The Politics of Representation in A Passage to India* that “Imperialism inflicted a catastrophic dislocation in the world it conquered and colonized, generated new forms of tension within the metropolitan countries and brought the West into a condition of permanent antagonism with other civilizations” (Beer 27). The novel portrays both the dislocation of the identity of the Forster as well as his main characters in the novel.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the ideology of empire and imperialism was dominant. As pointed out by C. C. Eldridge, “the late Victorian and Edwardian world-view was assuredly imperial” (Eldridge 4). Forster, however, saw the ideology with intellectual sobriety. He belonged to the minority of his time who swam against the current. Forster did not brag about so-called sacred cause of empire. On the contrary, he was not confined to the circle of middle classes. He stepped out of it and began to gaze at this circle, at himself, at others and at the world in a critical way, from within and without. As an intellectual with liberal-humanism utopia ideal, Forster hated “the idea of causes”, and hoped that he should have the guts to “betray my country”. The denial of imperial cause means “treason”, in that case, Forster was excluded from the mainstream ideology and identity: he was both challenged and marginalized.

Many of the British writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century showed their pride in the imperial cause in their works, including some serious writers. Among them, Kipling was the most feverous supporter and promoter of the imperial cause. Forster showed his strong distaste to Kipling. In his *Arctic Summer*, he wrote: “Kipling – whom I detest and I am sure you do too?” (Forster 246) The different attitudes of

Kipling and Forster toward imperialism are clearly reflected in their characters in their works, as pointed out by Jeffrey Meyers, “Kipling’s heroes became Forster’s villains” (Meyers 30).

Forster’s strong opposition to Kipling lies in the great difference in their attitude toward the issue of imperialism and the relations between East and West: Forster as a strong anti-imperialist and Kipling as the imperialist. This does not mean that they have nothing in common. As a matter of fact, they share the common idea that there is a great gulf between East and West. However, their discrepancy lies in the way they deal with the gulf. Kipling takes the gulf for granted, regarding it as impassable and does not bother to surpass it, as depicted in his famous poem *The Ballad of East and West*.

Forster shows no tolerance of Kipling over the issue of East and West. With his liberal humanism belief, he proposes a friendship between different races and cultures, and he thinks that the gulf between them can be bridged by establishing and maintaining good personal relations. In *A Passage to India*, Forster shows the possibility of this friendship even at their first meet. In the first part of the novel, Aziz meets Mrs. Moore at the entrance of the Mosque for the first time. Mrs. Moore’s respect for the Muslim’s religion by taking off her shoes before entering the mosque wins Aziz’s friendship immediately. Aziz said: “Oh, can I do you some service now or at any time?” (Forster 42) His heart “began to glow sweetly”, and he expressed great joy and heartfelt wish by saying “You understand me, you know what I feel. Oh, if others resemble you!” (Forster 45.)

According to Forster, the public school types have “undeveloped hearts”, with Ronny in *A Passage to India* as a typical example: “His self-complacency, his censoriousness, his lack of subtlety, all grew vividly beneath a tropic sky” (Forster 96). Forster thinks that they are responsible for the unsuccessful connection between different races and cultures. Whenever Ronny appears, the happy atmosphere and friendship among the Indians and British with a liberal ideal will be spoilt, as in the case of Fielding’s tea party.

The dislocation of the main characters in the novel is expressed in their process of transcendence and return. Forster’s main characters, including Aziz, Fielding, Adela and Moore begin with the good intention of crossing the racial barriers to establish good personal relations, but fail to do so due to some limitations, and return to their starting point with a different outlook.

Dr. Aziz is a Moslem with Western education background. He shows no interest in politics at first. In the opening part of the novel, when the old men “had reached their eternal politics, Aziz drifted into the garden”. He meets Mrs. Moore at the mosque and they become good friends. Aziz wishes to keep good relations with the

English who show their respect to him and his religion. He tries to cross the difference and avoid talking about politics. He just wants to live a calm life under the British rule and continues his job as a doctor, and he shows his unconcern to political affairs. He tells Fielding that the Marabar picnic “is nothing to do with English or Indians; it is an expedition of friends.” Aziz cherishes the friendship so much that he shows his late wife’s photo to Fielding and regards him as “brother”. He believes that their friendship can transcend all the differences. However, the alleged assault against him smashes his dream of “brotherhood” with the British. He is wronged and arrested, and feels that Fielding has deserted him by standing on Adela’s side. Meanwhile, the political consciousness awakes in him, and he is firm in his anti-British stand. Aziz leaves his present job and finds a new one in the native state of Mau. He understands that Fielding has made sacrifice for him, but “it was now all confused with his genuine hatred of the English.” He feels relieved that he is “an Indian at last”. When he tells Fielding that his heart is for his own people henceforward, he speaks that in Urdu, so that his children might understand. He declares that he wished “no Englishman or Englishwoman to be my friend”. National feeling floods in Aziz’s mind, and it has a full show at his last ride with Fielding. He is no longer an ordinary doctor serving in the British civil station; he becomes a fighter for the national freedom and independence, with no illusions to the British and realizing that Indian’s independence is the only way for his complete liberation from the tyranny of the British.

Apart from Aziz, the trace of transcendence and return can also be found in Fielding, Adela and Mrs. Moore, which shows Forster’s awareness of the fragility of his liberal values of “only connect”.

3. An Elegy for the Empire

The title of the novel, *A Passage to India*, originates from Walt Whitman’s poem entitled *Passage to India* in which Whitman enthusiastically praises the building of the Suez Canal and envisages the “marriage of continents, climates and occasions”. Whitman has an optimistic attitude and predicts the possibility of universal brotherhood and global order. However, after finishing reading Forster’s novel, readers will find that it is not a passage to India and the novel is not about the “marriage” of the East and the West. Rather, it is a novel about the failure of the practice of personal relations and the dissolution of the British Empire.

The pride and prejudice of the colonizers about their empire can be sensed almost everywhere in the novel. Their complacency and arrogance doubtlessly widen the already existed gulf between the rulers and the ruled. The British imperialists regard themselves as the ambassadors of the globe, who shoulder the mission of “the white man’s burden”.

They do not think the process of colonization is a one with conquest and for material gain. Rather, they regard their behavior as responsibilities and duties: they are bringing order, civilization and light to the chaos, savage, ignorant and Dark Continent of the subjected races. They have the irresistible duty to rule. The pose of “maintaining peace and keeping order” reminds us of Ronny Heaslop in the novel. Ronny says that “we’re not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly! ... We’re out here to do justice and keep the peace... I am out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched country by force” (Forster 69). Ronny holds high the banner of civilization as an umbrella in his mission. He does not think that he and the other officials are bullying the Indians and exploiting India for material gains. On the contrary, he thinks that they are there for India’s good, because they are intending to bring civilization, order and law to this chaos and “wretched country”. The Anglo-Indians are so proud that they can define and describe everything in India in their own terms. They are so complacent and confident that they never consider that their representation of “the other” may be a false one. The mission of civilization does not always have a civilizing effect on either the rulers of the ruled, but the Anglo-Indians do not care. They are always in the glorious dream of the white man’s burden.

The novel is based on Forster’s two visits to India in 1912 and 1921 respectively. During these two visits, the situations in India change a lot, and the First World War brings serious effects on Forster, who has to make alteration in his draft and original plan for the novel. Forster witnessed the crisis faced by the empire and he showed his anxiety to the fate of British Empire with a complicated emotion.

In *A Passage to India*, Forster gives a portrayal of the crisis. He sensed much about the gulf between the British and the Indians. Even with good intention of the main characters, the gulf still exists and becomes “impassable”. For example, in the trip to Marabar caves, Aziz tried to show his hospitality and humor as an oriental as well as a host. He hires an elephant and plays a joke by telling one of his servants to let go the end of the elephant’s tail when another servant is climbing by it. Aziz intends to amuse his British friends by doing this, but his Western friends, Mrs. Moore and Miss Adela, “both of them disliked practical jokes”. In their eyes, the joke “was a little piece of court buffoonery, and distressed only the ladies” (Forster 152). Forster, the omniscient narrator in the novel, concludes Aziz’s behavior: “like most Orientals, Aziz overrated hospitality, mistaking it for intimacy”. Forster tries to show that there are gaps between the East and West, including a cultural one. The result is always disappointing when one makes efforts to bridge it, as in the case of Fielding. After Aziz is arrested, Fielding “was throwing in his lot with Indians, he realized the profundity of the gulf that divided him from them”. The cultural gulf between Aziz and Adela is the immediate cause of the Marabar Caves incident, which not only

damages the established relations, but also strikes the confrontation of the rulers and the ruled.

As an intellectual with the liberal humanist ideal, Forster showed his great concern and anxiety about the fate of British Empire. “Democratic Empire” is the direct expression of Forster’s ideal in the crisis, and it was regarded as the redemption of the crisis. Forster suggested of a common humanity on which the foundation of a democratic empire might have been well and truly laid. Forster believes that mutual incomprehension and personal misunderstanding is the root of colonial problems, and that without friendship between the races the British Empire “rests on sand”. It is the “ill-breeding” that brings the crisis and dissolution of empire, as Forster points out in *Reflections in India – too Late*, “never in history did ill-breeding contributes so much towards the dissolution of an empire”. In the novel, when Ronny tells Mrs. Moore that he comes to India not for the purpose of being pleasant, but for the purpose of keeping peace by force, his words reminds her of his “public-school days”, and “the traces of young-man humanitarianism had sloughed off”(Forster 70). It is clear that Forster regards public-school system as the very reason for the loss of humanism spirits in the British middle-class with Ronny as one example. Forster continues in the novel to show his concern for the fate of the empire: “one touch of regret – not the canny substitute but the true regret from the heart – would have made him a different man, and the British Empire a different institution” (Forster 70).

Can “one touch of regret” really make the British Empire a different institution? At least, in Forster’s eyes, it can. Forster’s “democratic empire” is the concrete political attitude of his “only connect” ideal. To put it simple, Forster hopes that the British Empire is an institution in which British and Indians can live as social equals. Forster’s tries to use democratic empire as a measure to keep the empire from collapsing and dissolution, which reflects the latent empire complex in him. What he opposes is imperialism, not empire. As a matter of fact, *A Passage to India* shows signs of Forster’s empire complex. In the whole novel, India is portrayed as a “muddle”. When one leaves India and enters Europe, the muddle is also left behind and the world with order emerges. This is experienced by Adela, Fielding and Mrs. Moore. For Fielding, Europe is the place where “the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form”. Forster continues with his famous verdict in the novel: “The Mediterranean is the human norm”. If Mediterranean is the human norm, then India must be the deviation.

Forster shows his anxiety to the fate of the British Empire, and at the same time, he feels that the Indians are not capable of self-government though they will be free from British rule sooner or later. On their last ride, Fielding tells Aziz that “the British empire really can’t be abolished because it’s rude” and he believes that

“away from us, Indians go to seed at once”. That the India will fall without the British Empire is Forster’s belief. The British Empire brings benefits to India, “the reason and orderliness spreading in every direction, like a most health- giving flood”. Forster has the pride of empire deep in his soul, but not in an arrogant way. “Democratic empire” reveals both the ideal and dilemma of Forster as a liberal-humanist. Forster’s overt anti-imperialism and latent empire complex are combined in the depolitized concept of “democratic empire”.

Virginia Woolf once commented that “there is something baffling and evasive in the very nature of his gifts”, especially in *A Passage to India*. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said has no reservation about Forster’s solid stand against imperialism, but he also questions the “absence of national resistance” (Said 241) to imperialism in the novel, particularly the ending part “not yet”, “not there”. Both “evasive” and “absence of national resistance” indicates that Forster was trying to avoid something. Forster’s denial of the novel as a political one may provide part of the answer. The direct reason is that Forster faces the dilemma of his liberal humanism ideal and the imperialism reality. The incongruity between the ideal and reality makes Forster realize that the practice of “only connect” in India under imperialism is out of context. “Only connect” fails to function with imperialism. Forster finds that liberal humanism is just ineffective in the imperial discourse, and he feels that imperialism has dug its way to the grave by spoiling the personal relations between races. He also senses that the British Empire would come to its end and its days are numbered. In this sense, *A Passage to India* is an elegy for British Empire and “epitaph on liberal humanism”.

Forster’s anxiety over the doomed fate of the empire goes hand in hand with his sense of the bankruptcy of liberal humanism ideal. He draws a cause and effect conclusion: because the imperialism refuses and fails to establish good personal relations, the dissolution and collapse of the empire is inevitable. However, Forster does not clearly declare it. Instead, he tries to show this indirectly through his main characters in the novel.

In the imperial frame, “only connect” ideal is an illusion. To quote T. S. Eliot’s words in *The Waste Land*, “I can connect; Nothing and Nothing”. Liberal humanism and imperialism can not coexist and imperialism can never be redeemed by liberal humanism. “Resting on sand”, the collapse of the empire is unavoidable. In this sense, *A Passage to India* is both an elegy for empire and an “epitaph to liberal humanism” (Wilde 174).

4. Conclusion

E. M. Forster belongs to the few who can keep fully awake in the Victorian optimism

and the “strained optimism” of Edwardian period. His “only connect” motto remains to be unchanged throughout his life and his works, and he seems to develop the capacity to adapt to his social environment without adopting its values. As a member of the Apostles at Cambridge and later at Bloomsbury Group, he prefers to hover at the margins of such cliques, and this “habitual location on the fringes of groups” (Edwards 185) enables him to preserve his independence. Forster is an insightful writer as well as a firm fighter against imperialism. *A Passage to India* which is not meant to be political is the combination of the two sides of him. Forster reduces history to personal relations, and his “only connect” ideal wrestles with imperialism all the time. He envisages the failure of the imperialism, but his liberal humanism ideal as a weapon seems to be invalid during the battle. Forster finally realizes that the ideal of personal relations is not panacea for all the English ailments. Seeing clearly that the British rule in India is not on a safe footing and it can not escape the fate of dissolution, Forster is full of anxiety for the fate of the British Empire. As pointed out by Winston Churchill, “the loss of India would mark and consummate the downfall of the British Empire”.

As a fighter from the inside of the empire, Forster is a solitary one. While criticizing the imperialistic behavior he is estranged by the British middle-class who has “undeveloped hearts”. At the same time, he can not fully enter the camp of the ruled because of the empire complex deep in his soul. His identity is a dislocated one, as in the case of Fielding in the novel. Forster comes to realize that his “democratic empire” is just an illusion, but he has to seek shelter in it. He also foresees the independence of India from British rule, and he is right in predicting that the conflicts between the Hindus and Moslems will bring trouble to the integrity of India. The partition of India in 1947 proves his prediction right.

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