



## E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Walt Whitman's 'A Passage to India': India Connections

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### Abstract:

*In Whitman's poem 'A Passage to India' India is celebrated as an antique land, rich in history and , America is celebrated as a force of modernization but both as caught up in an inexorable thrust toward globalization. While Whitman is typically exuberant, Forster's novel A Passage to India explores the darker side of what one might call Whitman's 'Song of My Global Self'. Forster's exposé of the costs and contradictions of the British Empire reveal that the dream of "lands [...] welded together" could just be the cynical mantra for taking over other countries. While Whitman ends his poem with an invocation to follow the examples of the great explorers – and the great empire-builders – to go on a "passage beyond," to other fantastic discoveries E.M. Forster's novel asks us to question the motives behind such a passage, particularly if it entails subjecting entire peoples to the rule of a foreign power.*

**Key Words:** E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, Walt Whitman, India, England, America

The title of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is a reference to Walt Whitman's poem, "A Passage to India." In the poem, Whitman takes his reader on an imaginary journey through time and space. India is presented as a fabled land that inspired Columbus to seek a westward route from Europe to India, a route that ended up with his discovery of the Americas. While India is celebrated as an antique land, rich in history,

America is celebrated as a force of modernization. Whitman sees both as caught up in an inexorable thrust toward globalization, where all countries are swept up in the same push toward progress. As he writes,

*Passage to India!*

*Lo, soul! seest thou not God's purpose from the first?*

*The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work,*

*The people to become brothers and sisters,*

*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.* (lines 31-35)

Forster began writing *A Passage to India* in 1913, just after his first visit to India. The novel was not revised and completed, however, until well after his second stay in India, in 1921, when he served as secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior. Published in 1924, *A Passage to India* examines the racial misunderstandings and cultural hypocrisies that characterized the complex interactions between Indians and the English toward the end of the British occupation of India.

*A Passage to India* is a novel by E. M. Forster set against the backdrop of the British Raj and the Indian Independence movement in the 1920s. The novel is based on Forster's experiences in India. E. M. Forster borrowed the book's title from Walt Whitman's poem of the same name in *Leaves of Grass*. Long before Forster first visited India, he had already gained a vivid picture of its people and places from a young Indian Muslim named Syed Ross Masood, whom Forster began tutoring in England starting in 1906. Forster and Masood became very close, and Masood introduced Forster to several of his Indian friends. Echoes of the friendship between the two can be seen in the characters of Fielding and Aziz in *A Passage to India*. By the time Forster first visited India, in 1912, the Englishman was well prepared for his travels throughout the country. At the time of Forster's visit, the British government had been officially ruling India since 1858, after the failed Sepoy Rebellion in 1857, in which Indians attempted to regain rule from the British East India Company. The East India Company, a privately owned trading concern, had been gaining financial and political power in India since the seventeenth century. By the time of Forster's visit, Britain's

control over India was complete: English governors headed each province and were responsible to Parliament. Though England had promised the Indian people a role in government in exchange for their aid during World War I, India did not win independence until three decades later, in 1949. Forster spent time with both Englishmen and Indians during his visit, and he quickly found he preferred the company of the latter. He was troubled by the racial oppression and deep cultural misunderstandings that divided the Indian people and the British colonists, or, as they are called in *A Passage to India*, Anglo-Indians. The prevailing attitude among the British in India was that the colonists were assuming the "white man's burden"—novelist Rudyard Kipling's phrase—of governing the country, because the Indians could not handle the responsibility themselves. Forster, a homosexual living in a society and era largely unsympathetic to his lifestyle, had long experienced prejudice and misunderstanding firsthand. It is no surprise, then, that Forster felt sympathetic toward the Indian side of the colonial argument. Indeed, Forster became a lifelong advocate for tolerance and understanding among people of different social classes, races, and backgrounds.

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While Whitman is typically exuberant, Forster's novel explores the darker side of what one might call Whitman's Song of My Global Self. Forster's exposé of the costs and contradictions of the British Empire reveal that the dream of "lands [...] welded together" could just be the cynical mantra for taking over other countries. While Whitman uses interracial marriage — "The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage" — as a metaphor for international harmony, Forster's novel shows how even a hint of interracial attraction, let alone friendship, can inflame deep-seated racial animosities. Whitman ends his poem with an invocation to follow the examples of the great explorers — and the great empire-builders

— to go on a "passage beyond," to other fantastic discoveries. But Forster's novel asks us to question the motives behind such a passage, particularly if it entails subjecting entire peoples to the rule of a foreign power.

Whitman was greatly impressed by three great engineering achievements: the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), the laying of the transatlantic undersea cable (1866), and the joining of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads at Utah to produce the nation's first transcontinental railway (1869). These events resulted in improved communication and travel, thus making possible a shorter passage to India. But in Whitman's poem, the completion of the physical journey to India is only a prelude to the spiritual pathway to India, the East, and, ultimately, to God.

The poet, in section 1, celebrates his time, singing of "the great achievements of the present," and listing "our modern wonders": the opening of the Suez Canal, the building of the great American railroad, and the laying of the transatlantic cable. Yet these achievements of the present have grown out of the past, "the dark unfathom'd retrospect." If the present is great, the past is greater because, like a projectile, the present is "impell'd by the past."

Here Whitman presents the world of physical reality, an antecedent to the world of spiritual reality. The essential idea in emphasizing the three engineering marvels is to indicate man's progress in terms of space. The space-time relationship is at the heart of the matter. The present is significant, but it is only an extension of the past and, therefore, its glories can be traced to times before. Man has mastered space, but he must enrich his spiritual heritage by evoking his past. His achievement in space will remain inadequate unless it is matched, or even surpassed, by his achievement in time and his spiritual values.

In section 2, Whitman envisages a passage to India which is illuminated by "Asiatic" and "primitive" fables. The fables of Asia and Africa are "the far-darting beams of the spirit," and the poet sings of the "deep diving bibles and legends." The spanning of the earth by scientific and technological means is only part of the divine scheme to have "the races, neighbors." The poet, therefore, sings of "a worship new," a spiritual passage to India.

The poet here identifies time with space and merges them in the realm of the spirit. Modern miracles of science are all part of a divine plan, of "God's purpose from the first." Thus the poet sings of a new religion which will combine the scientific achievements of the present with the spiritual attainments of the past.

Man's achievements in communications are shown in the portrayal of "tableaus twain" in section 3. The first tableau, or picture, is the first passage through the Suez Canal "initiated, open'd" by a "procession of steamships." The second picture is the journey of the railway cars "winding along the Platte" River to a junction of the Union and Central Pacific railroads. These two engineering achievements have given concrete shape to the dreams of the "Genoese," Columbus, "centuries after thou art laid in thy grave." Columbus dreamed of "tying the Eastern to the Western sea"; his ideal has now been fulfilled.

The underlying significance of the two events which Whitman describes here is to show that man's material advancement is only a means to his spiritual progress. The poet seems to master the vastness of space through his visionary power. And his thoughts also span time: modern achievements are a realization of Columbus' dream of linking East with West. His discovery of America was only a first step toward finding a shorter passage to India.

Section 4 tells how "many a captain" struggled to reach India. History seems like an underground stream which now and again rises to the surface. Thus Whitman praises Vasco da Gama, who discovered the sea route to India, and who thus accomplished the "purpose vast," the "rondure [rounding] of the world."

This is a tribute to the courage and adventurous spirit of the West in seeking a passage to India. The poet has a vision of history "as a rivulet running," and this dominates his sense of space. History is conceived of as a progression of continuous events which are like a flowing stream. This stream joins the spiritual sea and the poet's vision endows historical happenings with spiritual meaning.

Section 5 presents the spectacle of this earth "swimming in space," endowed with incredible beauty and power. Since the days of Adam and Eve, Whitman says, man has asked the

meaning of life: "Who shall soothe these feverish children?/ . . . Who speak the secret of impassive earth?" After the scientists and explorers have achieved their goals, the poet, who is "the true son of God," will forge the links of spiritual union. "Trinitas divine" will be achieved through the visionary power of the poet; he will fuse "Nature and Man."

The earth has been spanned by the efforts of engineers and technicians, Whitman says, and now it is for the poet to bring about the unity of East and West in the realm of the spirit. In his general survey of history, Whitman seems to encompass all time. The poet is the "true son of God" because, in visualizing the union of man and nature, he responds to the divine call within him. He is thus a true explorer and a discoverer of spiritual India.

In section 6, the poet sings of the "marriage of continents." Europe, Asia, Africa, and America are dancing "as brides and bridegrooms hand in hand." The "soothing cradle of man" is India. The poet perceives India as an ancient land of history and legend, morals and religion, adventure and challenge. Brahma and Buddha, Alexander and Tamerlane, Marco Polo and other "traders, rulers, explorers" all shared in its history. "The Admiral himself" (Columbus) is the chief historian. The poet says the culmination of heroic efforts is deferred for a long time. But eventually their seeds will sprout and bloom into a plant that "fills the earth with use and beauty."

Here Whitman has explored the swift passage of time and has invoked the India of Buddha through the present achievement of the linkage of continents by modern technology. The poet thus becomes a time-binder. He also attempts to fuse the familiar with the unfamiliar and the physical with the spiritual. He stands "curious in time," but he also stands outside of time, in eternity, in his spiritual quest.

Section 7 confirms that a passage to India is indeed a journey of the soul "to primal thought." It is not confined to "lands and seas alone." It is a passage back to the Creation, to innocence, "to realms of budding bibles." Whitman is anxious for himself and his soul to begin their journey.

The language of section 7 is highly metaphorical. The return of the poet and his soul to the East is envisaged as a journey back to the cradle of mankind, to the East, where many

religions had their birth. It is a journey "back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions." The poet and his soul seek a mystical experience of union with God in the realm of the spirit.

In section 8, the poet and his soul are about to "launch out on trackless seas" and to sail "on waves of ecstasy" singing "our song of God." The soul pleases the poet, and the poet pleases the soul, and they begin their spiritual exploration. They believe in God "but with the mystery of God we dare not dally." They think "silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death." The poet addresses God as "O Thou transcendent,/ Nameless," as the source of light and cosmic design and a "moral, spiritual fountain." Whitman "shrivels at the thought of God,/At Nature and its wonders," but he expects the soul to bring about a harmonious reconciliation with these forces. When the soul accomplishes its journey and confronts God, it will be as if it had found an older brother. It will finally melt "in fondness in his arms."

The last two sections of this poem are marked by an upsurge of spiritual thought and an ecstatic experience. The poet and his soul, like two lovers, are united in harmony. They seek the mystical experience of union with God. The poet reflects on the nature of God as a transcendental deity. By comprehending God, the poet is enabled to comprehend himself and also man's complex relationship with time, space, and death. The soul is eternal and establishes its relationship with time. The soul is vast and expansive and thus forms a relationship with space. The soul is alive forever and thus conquers death.

In section 8, the poet and his soul together seek to perceive the Divine Reality. Both eagerly await a mystical experience of union with God, of merging with the Divine Being. God is conceived of as a "fountain" or "reservoir" and this image is similar to the basic metaphor of water, which is necessary to nourish the greenery" of *Leaves of Grass*.

In section 9, the journey which the soul embarks on is a passage to more than India." It is a challenging spiritual journey. Whitman asks the soul if it is ready: "Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?" The passage to the divine shores, to the "aged fierce enigmas," and to the "strangling problems" is filled with difficulty and "skeletons, that, living, never reach'd you" — but it is a thrilling journey. The poet,

fired by the spirit of Columbus, is intent on seeking an "immediate passage" because "the blood burns in my veins." He "will risk . . . all" in this bold and thrilling adventure; but actually it is safe enough, for are they not all the seas of God"? Thus the passage to India — and more — is a journey of man through the seas of God in search of an ideal. It is marked by intense spiritual passion.

This last section presents the final evolution of the symbol of India, which began as a geographical entity and culminated in a timeless craving of man for the realization of God. The words "passage" and "India" both have an evolving symbolic meaning and significance in this richly evocative poem and the growth of their meanings is indirectly the growth of the poem itself.

Each race over the centuries has formed its own idea of what creates humanity, though its definition is now largely universal. For example, the basic rights of happiness, education, progress, and equality have all become accepted tenets that are commonly associated with humanity. But few nations, agree upon how to secure these rights. While some nations use an authoritarian system, other nations prefer democracies. Names aside, all these systems do in the end have the ultimate cause of furthering humanity, and the ways in which they hope to do so is the only point on which they differ. In his novel *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster analyzes two different approaches to this issue; the system of the British, and that of the Indians. In the end Forster concludes that the two systems are simply too different to coexist within the same population and that for this reason, India must be independent.

Forster, in order to avoid this subtle form of bigotry that comes from the generalization of a race, presents in his novel several types of Englishmen whose views on humanity initially seem to differ radically. His first example is that of Fielding. In the beginning of the novel, Forster develops Fielding as a rational character; one who, rather than having an allegiance with any one race, acts out of the firm convictions of logical reasoning and the belief that everyone is equal. This character is first seen at the Bridge Party held to help 'integrate' the Indians in their own country. Forster states about Fielding that "When the moment for refreshments came, he did not move back to the English side, but burnt his mouth with gram"

(Forster 36), indicating that Fielding is a highly open-minded character who is not afraid to learn about the Indians. He is also portrayed as a reasonable and practical character during his first encounter with Aziz, where he gives up meaningless social conventions in order to build a more open relationship with Aziz. Furthermore, Fielding even goes against his own Englishmen during the trial, only because he has known Aziz long enough to be sure that Miss Quested is mistaken in her accusations. Thus it appears that in Fielding's eyes, open-mindedness and strong personal relationship are the two ways in which the humane attribute of equality is to be achieved in India. Mrs. Moore, however, presents a different point of view on the issue. She believes that "God put us on earth in order to be pleasant to each other" (Forster 43), clearly indicating that she feels it is goodwill shown by individuals that can create a sustainable respect for humanity. However, Mrs. Moore believes that this goodwill is a product of religious fervor rather than one of personal virtue. As indicated by the quote, she feels that goodwill is to be performed out of a sense of duty to God, not out of personal will. This feeling of obligation and religious duty is, in fact, substantiated by many of Mrs. Moore's actions throughout the whole novel. As literary critic Edwin Nierenberg points out, one example is the fact that Mrs. Moore arranges the marriage between Ronny and Adela not because they love each other, but because she feels it necessary to "act the dutiful matchmaker" (Nierenberg 2). He further concludes that Mrs. Moore is motivated by a "sense of duty in a universe of obligation and due reward" (Nierenberg 3). For this reason, while Mr. Fielding believes personal relationships and open-mindedness are the keys to attaining equality, Mrs. Moore feels that individual goodwill, motivated by religious duty and possible reward, is the solution.

However, Forster does not settle for superficial differences of opinion between the British characters of his novel, and as Mrs. Moore and Fielding are developed both of their views on humanity grow more and more alike. As mentioned before, Fielding is initially portrayed as an open-minded character, due to his mixing with the Indians and disregard of social convention. However, upon further examination it becomes clear that Fielding's freedom of action is not due to any love for Indians, but rather out of an ignorance

of their 'true nature.' As Forster states, Fielding "knew little of the district and less against the inhabitants, so he was in a less cynical state of mind" (Forster 36). This clearly indicates that Fielding's open-mindedness is not a testament to his loving character, but rather to his ignorance and inexperience in India. Though his belief in equality as a principle tenet of humanity still stands, as shown by the fact that he sides with Aziz during the trial, it is clear from the outset that Fielding eventually reaches the conclusion that open-mindedness and personal relationships lead only to disappointment, as they did for him in his relationship with Aziz. By the end of the novel this fact is more than clear, as evidenced by Fielding's new belief that the "British Empire really can't be abolished because it's rude" and his statement that the British had "no further use for politeness" (Forster 292). Seeing that politeness is the very quality upon which Fielding's former virtues of personal relationships and open-mindedness were built upon, it is clear that Fielding has altered his beliefs. Rather, Fielding now feels that it is reason and order that create humanity, as shown by the fact that as Aziz calls for independence at the end of the novel Fielding continually points out the flawed logic of Aziz's desires, and states that Indians, in general, are not orderly or disciplined enough to form their own governments. But this idea of the necessity of order is not confined to Fielding alone—Mrs. Moore undergoes the same transformation. As stated in the novel, the echo of the Marabar Caves leads Mrs. Moore to the revelation that "Everything exists, nothing has value" (Forster 134). In the face of this new knowledge, Mrs. Moore's belief that God has given a purpose everything in this world is shattered. Because her prior beliefs rested on the idea that there would be an eventual reward for service to God, the realization that 'nothing has value' renders her old beliefs obsolete. She too, like Fielding, begins to believe that humanity will come from order and reason. Though she does not state it openly, this belief is seen by how Mrs. Moore, after having her idea of a reasonable and orderly world ruled by God crushed, becomes so inhumane as to be jealous of the attention Adela gets from her rape. In other words, the fact that Mrs. Moore was humane when she believed in a fundamental order and inhumane when she lost that belief shows her opinion that order is necessary for humanity. It is stated at the end of the

novel that Fielding "had hardened since Chandrapore" (Forster 292). Due to the experiences mentioned above, Fielding becomes so 'hard' in his opinions that he completely rejects all forms of politeness as a means towards the end of equality. He, as well as Mrs. Moore and the British in general, begins to feel that reason and order are the only things that can sustain a lasting equality, and that they should therefore be instilled in all people if equality is to be reached. The British feel that equality is not something that naturally exists, but is something that must be created, and that by being in India and keeping order between the various sects they are in fact promoting equality. Rather than accept every man, woman, and race as inherently equal, the British seek to achieve equality through the standardization of all races under the virtues which they deem necessary in furthering humanity.

The Indians, on the other hand, hold a concept of equality that goes much deeper than that of the British, and eventually come to the conclusion that equality is in fact an inherent virtue. For the Hindus, equality stems from the belief that every living thing, human or animal, has a soul. Though this idea is common to many religions, Hinduism goes even farther to say that the soul is, in essence, part of God, and that therefore every living thing is a part of God. It is this belief in the godly nature of all living beings that puts everyone and everything on the same level in Hindu philosophy, and creates the idea of inherent equality. Because the soul is inherent, and all living beings have equal souls, equality is inherent as well. This idea is mirrored by Professor Godbole's actions, as well as in the Hindu festival in Mau. In the very opening of the final section of the novel, Godbole is depicted imagining himself as Mrs. Moore, then as a wasp, but is unable to imagine himself being a stone. Because of the essential link in souls between all living things, Godbole is able to imagine a unity between him, the wasp, and Mrs. Moore, but not between him and the rock, which is ultimately an inorganic, soulless substance. Furthermore, during the Hindu festival the Hindu's, while re-enacting the life of lord Krishna, act not in any abstract manner, but instead as normal people would, leading Forster to state that "God can play practical jokes upon Himself" (262). Because the Hindu's act as humans when re-enacting the life of a God, it becomes apparent that they believe human action can

be godly and that humans are, essentially, but manifestations of God.

This Hindu, and thus essentially Indian, view of inherent equality and humanity leads to a disregard for the systems of order and reason that the British feel are necessary. Because the Indian's regard humanity to be a quality as eternal as God, they do not feel the need to 'protect' it like the British do. As such, India is portrayed throughout the novel as a place of disorder. This is best seen after the trial, when the Indians form their mob. This being the greatest concentration of Indian's at any point in the novel, it is also the height of disorder and confusion. Forster even poses the question "Where was the procession going?" (Forster 211) in order to show the overall sense of confusion. The disorder of India is also mirrored by the country's geography, as literary critic Roger L. Clubb points out. He shows that the Caves can be seen as representing the "riddle of life itself" (2); a riddle that is "unsolvable" (3) and as such cannot be explained by the British's rational and orderly worldview.

The final conclusion of the novel is best rationalized by the great Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda who once said that "each nation, like each individual, has one theme in this life which is its centre, the principal note round which every other note comes to form the harmony. If any one nation attempts to throw off its national vitality, the direction that has become its own through the transmission of centuries, that nation dies." In the novel, the 'national vitality' of the British is order and reason, while for the Indian's it is spirituality. And true to Vivekananda's hypothesis, Forster concludes at the end of the novel that the only solution to the British occupation of India is independence. This is seen by the fact that at the end of the novel Forster goes into a description of how the very nature of India, nonliving and living, all strive for independence from the British. Though independence may seem like a radical thing for a British writer to suggest, Forster's conclusion can be justified by the fact that "was a liberal" and was "of the liberal tradition" (Epstein 2). To Forster, independence seemed like a natural solution to the unnatural conflict of races created by English Imperialism. For while both the Indians and British wanted equality, the methods by which they sought it were too different, and subjugation to one method would mean the

subjugation of the whole identity of a race; a problem to which, Forster concludes, independence is the only natural solution.

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