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Personal Relations in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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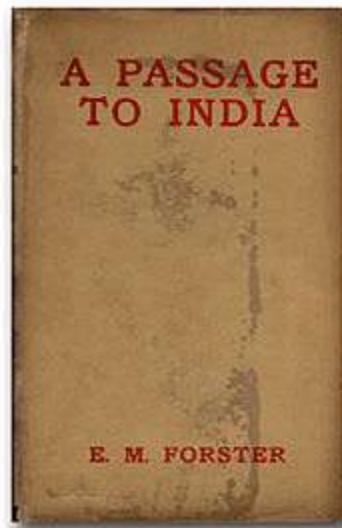
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Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Passage_to_India

E. M. Forster is interested in the study of personal human relationships. F. R. Leavis calls him "pre-eminently a novelist of civilized personal relation" (*Mr E. M. Forster* p.102). All the five novels of Forster are studies in personal relationships. Margaret Schlegel, one of Forster's characters, says:

I've often thought about it, Helen. It's one of the most interesting things in the world. The truth is that there is a great outer life that you and I have never touched--a life in which telegrams and anger count. Personal relations, that we think supreme, are not supreme there. There love means marriage settlements, death, death duties. So far I'm clear. But here is my difficulty. This outer life though obviously horrid, often seems the real one---there's grit in it. It does breed character; do personal relations lead to sloppiness in the end?" (*A View without a Room*, p.134)

Forster is primarily concerned with matters of human conduct and especially with the dark places in the human heart which make for unhappiness and confusion, not only between individuals, but between races and nations:

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas! Passage to you, to
mastership of you, ye strangling problems!

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You strewed with the wrecks of skeletons that, living, never reached you. (Walt Whitman: "Passage To India")

Perhaps Forster's purpose is the lofty aim ascribed by Whitman to the artists of the future:

Personal relationship is an essential Ingredient of his philosophy of 'connecting', As Helen, in *Howards End* writes to her sister: "Personal relations are the important thing forever and ever..." (p. 35)

Fielding in *A Passage to India*, similarly believes that "the world... is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best help of goodwill plus culture and intelligence." (Ch.7, p.64)

Recurrent Theme: Friendship

The recurrent theme in Forster's novels is that of friendship, of intimate relationships between members of different cultures, or communities, or two ideological groups. An intimate relationship between individuals is possible only, when men are able to cross the barriers of culture, religion, and national prejudices. Such an ability can be acquired by the cultivation of goodwill, tolerance, and sympathetic understanding. Forster believes that majority of social and political atrocities and blunders are committed because of the absence of personal relations. Forster attached to personal relationship the seriousness and authenticity of religion. For him personal relationship is not a side issue, rather it is the central issue and solution to the various problems in the modern world. It lies in the establishment of personal relationship as a sacred creed, which when followed sincerely would sanctify men. In the East he felt at home because he found that the Orientals attach great importance to personal relationships.

Problems Encountered

The central issue of *A Passage to India* is friendship, equality and fraternity. In this novel Forster explores in a strong manner the efficacy of personal relationship and the difficulty of realizing it in India, a land where synthesis among different social groups of people is less common, and where life is divided into separate compartments based on social traditions and social hierarchy determined at birth. Forster's central creed meets a tremendous challenge in India because

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it has to combat, not only cultural and religious barriers, but also an insurmountable political barrier - the imperial rule, the antagonism between the subject and the ruling races, between masters and slaves.

The Novel

The novel characteristically begins with the question posed by the Indians: "Whether or not, it is possible to be friendly with the Englishmen". Forster questions the very foundation of the English rule in India. What shocked him most was the corruption of personal relationship produced by imperial rule. He blames the Englishmen more than the Indians. He was against the English attitude of "holding India by force". Such an attitude, he regarded, was a consequence of the lack of valuable human qualities principally 'the developed heart' in Britishers. In his essay, 'Notes on the English Character', he strongly voiced his disapproval of the English character. For him an Englishman is an 'incomplete man' because his heart is not developed, he is 'afraid to feel' and bottles up his emotions. He writes:

And they go forth, into a world that is not entirely composed of public school men or even Anglo Saxons, but of men who are as various as the sands of the sea, into a world of whose richness and subtlety they have no conception. They go forth into it with well-developed bodies, fairly developed minds, but underdeveloped hearts. And it is this under-developed heart that is largely responsible for difficulties of Englishmen abroad. ("Notes On English Characters"-p.3)

Because of such defects in the character of the rulers, the English rule in India became very much complicated. Forster traces back the insensitivity, rudeness and unkindness of the members of the ruling class towards Indians - the defects which make happy human intercourse impossible. In the 'Bridge Party' scene (Ch.5, p.19)

Morbid Superiority Complex

Forster's point of attack is the callousness and the habit of resistance of the English people who suffer from a morbid superiority complex. This scene is full of ironic significance. The chapter begins with the words, "The bridge party was a failure". The failure is mainly caused by-the Englishmen's attempt to keep themselves aloof from the Indians, their suspicion, hatred and lack of sympathy which together act as a confusing 'echo'. The best way of being kind to the Indians, as an English lady suggests, is to let them die. Ronny strongly puts forward his view that India is not a drawing room, and Englishmen are not here to be pleasant and civil to the Indians; there cannot be any intimacy between the ruler and the ruled as between two individuals. He informs his mother "I am not a missionary or a labour minister of a vague sentimental, sympathetic literary man" (Ch.5, p.30).

Ronny – An Example of the Ordeal of Englishmen in India

When (in Ch.7) he angrily enters Fielding's house to admonish his mother and Adela, he takes no notice of Aziz and Godbole who are sitting in the same room. Forster comments: "He did not mean to be rude to the two men but the only link he could be conscious of with" an Indian was the official, and neither happened to be his subordinate. As private individuals, he forgot them" (page 87). This failure on Ronny's part explains the ordeal of the Englishmen in India. Since the Anglo Indian officials are themselves dehumanized, they fail to regard Indians as private individuals. This is the root of all trouble. Both Mrs. Moore and Adela are shocked by Ronny's lack of civility.

Fielding

Forster, through Mrs. Moore suggests: "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." (Ch. 5, 50) She opposes the unkind and unimaginative attitude of the English. It is Fielding who tries to translate Forster's ideal of goodwill, tolerance and sympathetic understanding into action and responds to Aziz's longing for kindness and more kindness. What makes him strikingly unique vis-à-vis the Turtons and the Ronnys, is the power to retain, his personal integrity, his capacity to resist the strong tendency to become a typical Anglo-Indian. He firmly believes that the best way of knowing a country is to know its people. He is not partisan or blindly patriotic, rather

he is balanced, rational and objective. As a practical philosopher, he is committed to the cause of truth and justice.

Fielding is a member of the new aristocracy, "an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky" (*Two Cheers for Democracy*). The worth of Fielding's philosophy as it has been demonstrated in the novel lies in its potency for good in human relationship, its capacity to overcome misunderstanding and prejudices without which the establishment of true friendship is not possible.

Aziz

It is Fielding's fundamental goodwill that draws Aziz towards him. The same Aziz who refused to attend Turton's bridge party, fearing humiliation and uncivil words and gestures, responds warmly to Fielding's invitation - because Fielding's letter convinces him. Fielding is capable of true courtesy and civil deed. From this point of the story, the novel takes up a new adventure: the development of genuine friendship between Aziz and Fielding and the contraction of their personal relations. Alan Friedman prefers to describe the theme of personal relations in Forster's novel as a 'marriage of true minds' (the phrase is borrowed from Shakespeare's famous LXVI sonnet).

The maximum satisfaction in Fielding's life comes when Aziz's good name is restored after the trial. The Indians regard him as their savior. Here the progressive current of Aziz and Fielding's friendship reaches the point of warmth of intimacy. After the trial is over a counter current reversal settles which shakes the very foundation of their friendship. This is caused by Fielding's determination to protect Adela; since he regards it his moral duty to protect her; he fails to join the victory procession for Aziz. But this impediment is overcome in that scene where Aziz and Fielding lie down at night, on the roof under the open sky - here their Friendship is almost complete, characterized as it is by trust, restfulness, and peace of mind. The conflicting issues are resolved and Aziz and Fielding's friendship is nearly perfect.

But any further deepening of their friendship is not possible. The narrowing current sets in circumstances and emotional differences which almost destroy this hard-won friendship. Aziz starts suspecting Fielding's motives in protecting Adela; he is almost convinced that Fielding has some devious designs on Adela and her money. They part not as friends but as foes. When Fielding leaves

India their friendship is totally ruptured. Fielding himself thinks, "It was the end of a foolish experiment." His letter to Aziz is cold and unfriendly. Aziz feels he has been badly cheated because he believes that Fielding has married Adela. Though in the last section, Aziz's misunderstanding gets removed and he and Fielding come closer again helped by the memory of Mrs. Moore and the presence of her children, their reunion looks true and warm. The final conclusion "not yet, not here" gives us the impression that personal relations are possible of expansion, but not of completion. Forster himself said. "It is the experience of most of us that personal relations are never perfect, but that, they hint at perfection."

Nirad Chaudhuri in his article entitled 'Passage to and from India' attacks the description of personal relationship between British and Indians. In making this point, however, Mr. Chaudhuri is not attacking Forster's basic positions. But his other argument that it is misleading to see the Indian question in terms of human relationships, carries more weight. It is a practical solution of the Indian problem as it existed at that time.

Foster's Belief in the Value of the Inner Life

"Personal relations," says Dr. Shahane (*Focus On E.M. Forster* p.2) "are almost an article of faith with Forster". Forster's strong belief in the values of the inner life and of the arts gives him an insight into the immaterial and the infinite. Forster's belief that "one is certain of nothing but the truth of one's own emotions" clearly reveals the value he attaches to the inner life and its depth of perception. Helen's words addressed to Margaret truly represent his creed: ... I knew it (union with Paul) was impossible because personal relations are the important thing forever and ever, and not this outer life of telegram and anger." (*Howard's End*, p. 184).

In his treatment of personal relations, Forster's main preoccupation is with sincerity and emotional vitality—with the problem of living truly and freshly. The tone characterizing the treatment of personal relations in *A Passage to India* is fairly represented by this:

A friendliness, as of dwarfs shaking hands, was in the air. Both man and woman were at the height of their powers -sensible, honest, and even subtle. They spoke

the same language, and held the same opinions, and the variety of age and sex did not divide them. Yet they were dissatisfied. When they agreed, 'I want to go on living a bit,' or, 'I don't believe in God. The words were followed by a curious backwash as if the universe had displaced itself to fill up a tiny void, or as though they had seen their own gestures from an immense height - dwarfs talking, shaking hands and assuring each other that they stood on the same footing of insight. (*A Passage to India* p.160)

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