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## **Redefining India: From Forster's *A Passage to India* to Chaudhuri's *A Passage to England***

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### **Abstract:**

In the novels written before E. M. Forster, India has been represented as the “other”. However, this trend changed with the publication of Forster's *A Passage to India* in 1924, which not only received tremendous acclaim and criticism from its Indian counterparts but also from the Britishers, as no one before him criticized against imperialism on India and gave importance to its racial diversity. Forster viewed India as a country of race and religion, imbued with nationalism and orthodoxy. The novel enjoyed a wide readership in India, and established Forster's reputation among middle class Indians not just as a novelist but as a kind of benefactor. In spite of its height of success, both the novel and the novelist have been attacked for some of its misrepresentations of Indians and India.

One of the critics of Forster is Nirad C. Chaudhuri who held Forster responsible for ‘helping to create the mood’ of the English leaving India, and reacted to the canonization of Forster. He, in a celebrated article attacked the Forster for sublimating the brutal realities of the conflict between independence and argued that a history of Islamic ethnicity could have been written, but not a novel on Indo-British cultures. Chaudhuri's concept of India was based on the orthodoxy of Hinduism, but he at times has portrayed veneration for European excellence that, if not carefully weighed against his sense of the folly and failure of their empires, can at the least embarrass one with its affection and at its worst seems monstrous. In his own autobiography, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* has recorded the story of the struggle of a civilization with a hostile environment, comparing the British rule in India. His personal developments about the country are not typical of a modern India of twentieth century and something unique.

This paper shall try to present a comparison of Forster's views of India with Chaudhuri's on India as one tried to represent India from the English perspective and the other on the viewpoint of an Indian.

**Keywords: race, perspective, representations, ethnicity.**

“Passage to India!

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

The earth to be spanned, connected by network,  
The races, neighbours, to marry and be given in marriage,  
The oceans to be crossed, the distant brought near,  
The lands to be welded together.”

-- Walt Whitman

In the following stanza of Walt Whitman’s poem “Passage to India”, India appears to be at a centre of a grand providential design, and it seems to stand forth as a miraculously synthesising form. The synthesis which is hymned here is prophesied as working on many levels -- personal union between individuals is crowned in marriage, international and inter-racial harmony is celebrated as well. A similar echo is seen in Forster’s presentation of India. His portrayal of India as a country of race and religion, imbued with nationalism and orthodoxy is exciting as well as soothing. The novel enjoyed a wide readership in India, and established Forster’s reputation among middle class Indians not just as a novelist but as a kind of benefactor. In spite of its height of success, both the novel and the novelist have been attacked for some of its misrepresentations of Indians and India. They claim his observation of India as biased because of his origin. One of the noted critics is Nirad C. Chaudhuri whose presentation of India reflects an alteration of Forster’s views with his own connotations. This paper shall examine how India is redefined and re-created in the hands of two novelists, one from the English perspective and the other on the viewpoint of an Indian.

Forster in his novels emphasises particularly on the individual search for and achievement of self realization; an attempt to harmonize different life-style and schemes of values, and the individual life as set against something larger than itself – a country, the universe, the human urge for continuance or expansion. The first two concerns carry with them essence of the primacy of personal relation and the inner life; the last sometimes involves the suspicion – as in the mind of the characters in *A Passage to India*, that the individual may be of small accounts.

Forster first came to India during the First World War during 1912-1913 and then again in 1921-22. Forster’s own hope on his first visit to India was that it would somehow provide him material for another novel. As he wrote dejectedly to a friend Forrest Reid: “You ask me about my work. I feel you too sympathetic to keep silent. I am dried up.... I want something beyond the field of action and behaviour: the waters of the river that rises from the middle of the earth to join the Ganges and the Jumna where they join. India is full of such wonders.” (Furbank I 249). This letter suggests some useful clues about Forster’s attitude to Indian realities before his initial journey here. First, his use of the river Saraswati (the invisible river that rises from the middle of the earth) indicates Forster’s desire to somehow capture a metaphysical rather than a historical theme for this novel. Then it offers an idea as to the importance of India for Forster. India was not only thought full of such wonders but to be a means of exploring and expressing these

philosophical truths. Finally, the letter demonstrates Foster's desperate need for something that would ease his inability to write and his belief that India is what he needs to help him deal with this problem. All the intentions are ahistorical, that is, they have nothing to do with history.

What was then Forster's real attitude to India before he came out on his first trip to this country in 1912? To begin with, he suffered the unofficial character of his visit. He insisted on the personal aspect of his journey, at least in part because his feeling for India was coloured by two friends, Syed Ross Masood whom he had briefly tutored and Malcolm Darling, a college mate who had gone to the Indian Civil Service which in unlike of Said's notion that the Westerners already assume about the people of the other countries. Of Masood, Forster wrote:

My own debt to him is incalculable. He woke me out of my suburban and academic life, showed me new horizons and a new civilization, and helped me towards the understanding of a continent. Until I met him, India was a vague jumble of rajahs, sahibs, babus and elephants, and I was not interested in such a jumble, who could be? He made me everything real and exciting as soon as he began to talk... (Forster 7-8)

The extent to which Forster rises above the jumble of clichés of which he writes is of course debatable. The very fact that he recognizes such a jumble suggests the level of self-awareness of his personal response to India. This accent on individuality was valuable to Forster for another reason too. Throughout his career as a novelist, he insisted on the need of an artist to engage with people rather than with faceless groups saying that he is a novelist and his business lies with individuals not with classification. Forster's personal relationships helped set Forster's next goal as a novelist. Masood 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 praised Forster's rare power of fathoming in the Indian soul: "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*...." (Furbank I 194)

The greater part of the novel is influenced by Forster's second visit; a belief that the first visit appears as vaguely evocating of a Golden Age before politics blighted personal relationship:

[Hamidullah] was glad that Aziz, who he loved... took no interest in politics, which ruin the character and career, yet nothing can be achieved without them. He thought of Cambridge – sadly, as of another poem that had ended.... Politics had not mattered.... There, games, work and pleasant society interwoven, and appeared to be sufficient substructure for national life. Here all was wire-pulling and fear. (Forster 103)

Forster's chief argument against imperialism in his novel is that it prevents personal relationships. The central question of the novel is posed at the very beginning during a dinner when Mahmoud Ali and Hamidullah ask each other "whether or no it is possible to be

friends with an Englishman.” ( Forster 12). The answer, given by Forster himself on the last page, is "No, not yet.... No, not there" (Forster 317). According to Hawkins:

Such friendship is made impossible, on a political level, by the existence of the British Raj. While having several important drawbacks, Forster's anti-imperial argument has the advantage of being concrete, clear, moving, and presumably persuasive. It is also particularly well-suited to pursuit in the novel form, which traditionally has focused on interactions among individuals. ( Hawkins 54).

This might be a possible reason for Forster’s inexplicable erasure in the fact that of his (1921-1922) visit in the princely state of Dewas as a secretary of its Maharajah. Most of the matter for the ‘Temple’ part in the novel, where Dewas appears as Mau and all the material for *The Hill of Devi* is derived from this visit. The fascinating experience in Dewas gave Forster the ultimate climax for his book only when he had returned from the country it “purported to describe” and it was completed with difficulty and self doubt. The chief consequence of this, historically speaking, is that Forster lived and worked in the state that was even more opposed to progress and the freedom struggle in British India.

Analyses of writing about India increases frequently depending on the politics of class and the representation of India in the area covering politics of race, politics of class and the politics of gender. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is an exhaustive exploration of the “discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, socially ... and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.” (Said 4). In other words, Said suggests that just as imperialism means political control in the field of government and economic penetration of markets it implies a certain representative of the East in literature. This stereotypical representation portrays the East as irrational, incapable of self-government and therefore open to the organising imagination of Europe. This is applicable to the portion where Forster describes the residents of Chandrapore, the British visitors to the town and the Eurasian community. The greater part of the chapter one written from the standpoint of a detached Western observer. However, look at the second paragraph: “On the second rise is laid out the little civil station, and viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts.” (Forster 9). Now, this view of Chandrapore wholly determined by race as the Civil station has a population that is solely British. Only British residents therefore are likely to have access to a beautiful view of Chandrapore. To the Indians the town is completely ugly. At the same time, as it is suggested, this sense that Chandrapore is beautiful is a delusion. So, the perspective the British have on Indian reality is one of loveliness, yes, but also one that is false. This is reflected in Adela’s comments: “It [India] was a wonderful when we landed, but that superficial glamour soon goes”. (Forster 28).

In the question of class, Forster’s narrative interrogates colonialism, but it does little to examine class problems. His radical stand on class complicates his position on colonialism. A textual illustration helps to solidify that point: “Houses do fall, people are drowned and left

rotting, but the general outline of the town persists swelling here, shrinking there, like some low indestructible form of life.” (Forster 9). The statement offers an insight to the queer position of the common people. Over the centuries various empires – Mauryan or British – have treated their subjects as people of no importance. Neither the life nor death of such people is of any consequence to their rulers. So life has steadily eroded them and indeed passed from them to the inanimate town which now has the endurance of a low but persistent life-form. Is Forster commenting here a critique of a class-system under empire which takes away the importance of common people? Or is he content to merely note the fact and pass on, without making any commitment on the question of class?

In midst of these, *A Passage to India* orchestrates at a crucial moment the notion of subalterns protest. In other words, group of hitherto marginalized people are sworn to come together against the injustice sanctioned by imperial rule. An excellent example is the way in which minority groups protest against the imprisonment of Aziz on the morning of his trial:

... queer reports kept coming in. The Sweepers had just struck, and half the commodes of Chandrapore remained desolate inconsequence...only half, and Sweepers from the District, who felt less strongly about the innocence of Dr. Aziz, would arrive in the afternoon, and break the strike, but why should the grotesque incident occur? And a number of Mohammedan ladies had sworn to take no food until the prisoner was acquitted; their death would make little differences, indeed being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting. A new spirit seemed abroad, a rearrangement which no one in the stern little band of whites could explain. (Forster 209)

The extract suggests various sidelights on the fact of political struggle. First, it cuts across barriers of class and gender to include sweepers and women respectively. Hitherto both groups have been cut off from the mainstream on account of untouchability and purdah. Faced with the necessity of protest, both groups change their stand. Next – even allowing for the print-of-view to be that of detach British observer – the protest is sworn to be partial. The strike will soon be broken as far as the sweeper’s protest goes, and the impact of the womenfolk on public opinion is thought to be negligible. Precisely because of the sporadic, disorganized nature of the protest it is found to be difficult to predict and hence difficult to control. This makes it new and disturbing.

The Indian landscape as the other like the subalterns is shown to hold out a promise of exoticism it fails to keep. How is this description to be read? On the one hand, it can be said that Forster’s confidence in the power of the Indian landscape is so great that he is ready to run the risk of presenting it to his readers without the conventional trappings of Raj fiction. He is confident that it can make an impact without the glorious sunrise or mysterious snake always associated with stereotypical representation of India. The interpretation will demonstrate to the artistic and political maturity of Forster’s treatment of India which is deluding only to those who approach it with the limitations and mistake of the Western imagination. On the other hand, it might also be argued that Forster’s presentation of a muddled and chaotic India is very much in

keeping with the Orientalist paradigm of an irrational and therefore inferior culture. Elsewhere, Forster wrote of a similar experience that had befallen him in Dewas in which he calls the adventure 'typical' because it is even more difficult in India than in England to get at the rights of the matter. Everything that happens is said to be one thing and proves to be another. The landscape moves the attention of the reader away from the realities of India towards the needs of those who observe her. And these observers, by definition, are Western. They demand that India offer a various things: spiritual healing, order, and exoticism. Once more than the focus of Forster's use of natural landscape is not a passage to India. Instead the focus is on a passage away from India towards Western concerns.

The Marabar cave incident unsettles the flow of the novel and the characters and glorifies Forster's intentions. Aziz organises a fantastically elaborate jaunt to the Marabar caves to express his feelings and respect to his new friends, Adela and Mrs. Moore. However the incident becomes an accident and the demarcation between the ruling and the ruled resurfaces. An inevitable change arrives in the situation. The climate of apparent friendliness is transformed to political domination, of deference and condescension. Suspicion and distrust force arises in men confirming their identity by herding in clubs or compounds, and each group inevitably creates its own language. The consequence is that blurring of words into dissonance, the surrender of sense to sheer echo. Words return with new and mocking meanings, with too many, or with none at all. Each character is a way becomes real in a somewhat different dimension of its being. We enter frequently into Fielding's mind, more occasionally but significantly into Mrs. Moore's, only once into Professor Godbole's and then at a moment when he is practicing meditation. The relations between the characters changes drastically. Mrs. Moore who once exclaimed that : " I like Aziz, Aziz is my real friend," ( Forster 93) , after the cave incident became disinterested in Aziz : " She lost all interest, even in Aziz, and the affectionate and sincere words that she had spoken to him seemed no longer hers but the air's ." (Forster 148). Aziz forms the most fully realized character in the book. He occupies that most awkward and anxious place in the structure of Indian society -- somewhere between the ancient mysteries of Hinduism and the administrative modernity of the English. As a Moslem he is more a rationalist in his religion than the Hindu, perhaps even more than a Christian like Mrs. Moore. In a way the caves represent the unconscious in two senses – the repressed elements in the individual life and the survivals in modern man of the pre-historic and the pre-human. It is a time and condition that wipes out distinctions – all the distinctions on which Anglo-India built its culture and empire. The scene in the cave presents the dark, ironic side of pantheism; a God without personality, a God who includes wasps as well as men, crocodiles as well as moonlight, is wonderful and terrible like the Ganges, but ultimately impassive, indifferent, a formless smother.

Adding a twist to this, Fielding questions the value of nationhood in his last conversation with Aziz: "India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!" (Forster 317). Forster here accomplishes a shift from a historical towards a philosophical interest in his

treatment of India. I do not think that this is because he is unconscious of history. Quite the reverse is true. It is precisely because he is conscious of the enormous socio-political changes that have taken place on the subcontinent that Forster is keen to stand apart from the position of a historian. It is his awareness of historical change that makes Forster release that the novel might have become outdated even while he was writing it.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri held Forster responsible at this point for ‘helping to create the mood’ of the English leaving India, and reacted to the canonization of Forster. He, in a celebrated article attacked Forster for sublimating the brutal realities of the conflict between independence and argued that a history of Islamic ethnicity could have been written, but not a novel on Indo-British cultures. From his autobiography, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, it is evident that Chaudhuri has grown up as a product of the Raj but he presents India in an array of contradictions. Through his subtle irony, he criticizes Indian culture, religion and orthodoxy but presents a certain partiality towards the Indian which he refutes in the next moment. This makes him a writer of notable distinction overlooking his contradictions. He, unlike most Indians is happy to declare of his Anglophile tastes. In the very beginning of his book, he makes his purpose clear:

The story I want to tell is the story of the struggle of a civilization with a hostile environment, in which we the destiny of the British Empire in India became necessarily involved....the intention in my mind has become mingled with the hope that the book may be regarded as a contribution to contemporary history. (Chaudhuri ix).

His preface and prefatory note sprinkled with words from European languages displays his preference of readers. He dedicated the book “ To the memory of the British Empire in India which conferred subjecthood on us but withheld citizenship; to which yet everyone of us threw out the challenge . “Civis Britannicus Sum” because all that was good and living within us was made, shaped and quickened by the same British rule.” People in India took the bait and sent up a howl of protest. However, many discovered to their surprise that there was nothing anti-Indian in the book. On the contrary, he painted the most beautiful picture of Kishoreganj , where the author was born and spent his childhood. However, he sometimes appeared quite detached from his native village in spite of depicting the Durga Puja occasion quite beautifully.

In midst of these, his second book *A Passage to England* records Chaudhuri’s range and intensity of experiences. After his journey abroad he brought the same qualities to the books they wrote about their visits. He wrote in portrait form a series of short essays analysing what he saw and accounting for their own reactions to it. Chaudhuri was fifty-seven when he left India for the first time for an eight-week visit to Europe, five weeks in England, two in Paris and one in Rome. In the “Plea for the Book”, as he charmingly christens the preface to *A Passage To England*, he tells us that he celebrated the three thousandth week of his life at the end of his tour and presents a “Timeless England”. However, he could not do this without setting it against the “Timeless India” in which he had been the rest of his life. Therefore, he says:

In fact, I do not think I had my conscious theory at all: my senses worked below the conscious level in such a manner that one-half of my perception of England was the perception of something *not-India*. I saw things there in doublets – there were the things which were positively English, but there were also their shadows cast in dark mass under the light from India. (*A Passage to England* 11).

It is perhaps this fact of East- West confrontation in his mind that made him call his book *A Passage to England* after Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*.

Chaudhuri's in the beginning of the book presents a concept of India, which is based on the orthodoxy of Hinduism, but he at times has portrayed veneration for European excellence that, if not carefully weighed against his sense of the folly and failure of their empires, can at the least embarrass one with its affection and at its worst seems monstrous. He criticizes the Western view of Hinduism, similar to Forster who portrays it subtly in his the third portion of his novel, in the Kingdom of Mau. Chaudhuri contrasts the Hindu with the Christian Occidental whose belief in a life after death and a transcendental world enables him to exploit this world; the Hindu since he looks upon this world as useful for him in his next birth lets it lie fallow for fear of using it. To him, the Hindus are attached to money and the English people are happily free from this attachment. In this instance, Chaudhuri is partial to the English people in his comparison. He

probes the roots of the chronic Hindu- Muslim antagonism that plagues Indian society even today which is reflected in his autobiography, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. He also observes that the "combination of light and temperature" (*A Passage to England* 23) in the tropics is different from the West and the weather in the West creates "a curious sense of the reality of the third dimension" (*A Passage to England* 24) which in viewed in a comparatively less curiously in India. This gives him the vision: "We see the world as it dictates our way of seeing, we in the East is one, a *rarified* way, and they in the West in another, a *concrete* way. I do not know *whether* these different ways of appearing also correspond to different ways of existing in reality." (*A Passage to England* 29). It is observed that both writers, Forster and Chaudhuri share a conviction that distinctions of temperature have moulded the different outlooks of the eastern and the western personality.

Chaudhuri initially had a belief in the doctrine of synthesis of the best of the East and the West, which made him disagree with Kipling's dictum. However, his visit to the West changed his doubts about the superficiality of Westernisation. In his observation of the cities of England, Chaudhuri converts his sense of the concreteness of European life into an aesthetic theory talking of English painting, architecture and literature and notices a curious solidity and into-the-space movement in them too. Of course, when Chaudhuri talks of this density in English life as a tangible physical reality he is beginning to talk the same language as Naipaul, another novelist, who wrote about his experience in India in *An Area of Darkness*. He, similar to Chaudhuri believed on the tragedy of colonial territories' attempt to reconstruct England using flimsy materials. The difference is that Naipaul believes the colonial imitator has a fantasy England in his mind, one that never properly existed. Chaudhuri finds evidence of its existence

wherever he goes. London really is for him "the Mother Megalopolis of our era" (*A Passage to England* 64).

Chaudhuri praises the official standoffishness of the Englishman in comparison with the Indians. In India "a craving sympathy in widest commonality spread." (*A Passage to England* 84) which is prevalent in the character of Aziz when he narrates about the death of his wife. Chaudhuri is particularly unkind to Indians when he says that the heartiness of Indians is found more in the public intercourse of men than in private social relations. He analyses the Englishman's concept of love and gives an unlikely comparison between a Westerner and a Hindu, rather than a Westerner and an Indian. In his descriptions, it is seen that he criticizes Hinduness more than Indian-ness. Chaudhuri has seen evidence of conquest everywhere when he looks on India. In England he experiences on a national scale a massive fusion of cultures has taken place which results in an aesthetic and temperamental unity. However, that does not make him see his own people as philistine or imitative. "Never before, except in the intimacy of my family life, had I been so happy as I was during my short stay in England. It was the literal truth, and the happiness has lasted" (*A Passage to England* 235). Though these experiences are quite opposite, and Chaudhuri journeyed with two similar intentions, to know own selves more fully and to discover what one could bring about under the imperial inheritance as it conditions the minds and psyches of those who have been affected by it.

Following the above abilities of Chaudhuri, Khuswant Singh's praise of Chaudhuri is noteworthy. "There are not too many people I am in awe of, the most knowledgeable person I have known as Nirad C. Chaudhuri, I haven't come across any person with such deep knowledge of just about anything...No Indian, living or dead, wrote the English language as well as he did." (Singh 65-66).

Comparing the views on the two societies, both Forster and Chaudhuri had been trenchant not caustic, sometimes provocative and sometimes perverse. A comparison between the two writers, masters both of the imperially endowed language in which they write, has more than a tenuous racial vindication, for if their casts of mind are often different they share an abiding awareness of their cultural origins. Both are obsessed with the fact of empire, neither is impressed by modish points of view, and together they have provided not just in their travel writings but in the body of their work a collection of observations which make them unsurpassed among others. Chaudhuri, on the other hand, draws upon Indian history with every breath he takes. At the end, however, one comes back to themselves. For both of them their journeys were essential stages in self-knowledge.

Forster and Chaudhuri share many common traits, but differ on one aspect. Forster criticises imperialism, Chaudhuri supported it. In his second autobiographical book, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952* Chaudhuri emphatically rejected the idea that empires were opposed to human dignity, because he held that it really sustained the dignity. He felt that the true antithesis between imperialism and nationalism, in which the latter, if both were evil, is now to be the greater evil of the two. He felt that "all Hindus are traditionally imperialists, and they

condemned imperialism only in so far as British imperialism made them subjects to an empire instead of its masters.” (*Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952* 774). He attacked the notion of historians, both Indians and English that they have a tendency to falsify history.

Finally, it can be concluded that two different perspectives of India are seen vastly through the eyes of two novelists, one of Indian origin and the other of English origin. Forster, among the two is more interested in India because he is an objective outsider who wants to really learn more about Indian culture and explores the environment to maximize his knowledge; whereas Chaudhuri being an Indian compares his country to a foreign land and criticises India vehemently. If the positive side of Chaudhuri’s criticism is seen, it can be easily understood that he encouraged the countrymen for a better India. Chaudhuri’s scholarship and his capacity to examine two cultures simultaneously undoubtedly make him the foremost man of letters in modern India. Not lacking in irony or skepticism he nevertheless establishes in *A Passage to England* a note of uncynical enthusiasm which testifies not only to the enduring inheritance of empire but to his own grandness of heart, which in a way questions Forster’s views of India, as in Forster a subtle demarcation is viewed.

Observing the present condition of India, its people, class, gender the question remains that whether we are progressing from Forster’s and Chaudhuri’s India towards an improvement or are we still where we were in pre- Independence era. A certain instance can be pointed out that in a 1957 note on the novel, Forster writes: “The India described in *A Passage to India* no longer exists either politically or socially. Change had begun even at the time the book was published in 1924 and during the following quarter of a century it accelerated enormously...” which instills a hope of progress.

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