



The Hill of Devi in Light of A Passage to India: Retrospective Postcoloniality

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Abstract:

The experiences of Forster in *The Hill of Devi* lend a window in his mind and thought which developed into *A Passage to India*. But what we endeavour to find here is the insights behind these thoughts which ultimately became the plot and character of his novel. We observe that he fictionalises the facts to a certain extent to feed the stereotypes to suit his narrative of creating a sympathetic background for the colonial subjects. Such convergence and diversion would be studied in the following article. Also the application of postcolonial theory retrospectively produces nuanced approaches. We analyse a text keeping mind the context of the text, its history, geography and the system of knowledge of which it is a part. Such systems of knowledge have vehemently been challenged but gained momentum through Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This paper tries to delve into the fact and fiction of E M Forster and record observation through the postcolonial lens.

Keywords: intention, native, colonizer, imperialism.

The Hill of Devi (THD) is the major record apart from *A Passage to India* (API) which sings of the unforgettable relation of E M Forster with India and Indians. Its reading is of great value to anyone interested in Forster and particularly his Indian connections and literary endeavours about India. The contents are literary, informative and interesting at the same time. And its value in the eyes of any researcher on API increases manifold as, although published long after API, it records events and characters which form the skeleton of the classic novel. E.M. Forster's engagement with India is exemplified in both fictional (*A Passage to India*, 1924) and non-fictional (*The Hill of the Devi*, 1930s) works. While the travelogue provides detailed observations of temples, local rituals, and rural life, the novel transforms these experiences into a narrative exploring cross-cultural misunderstandings, colonial hierarchies, and human relationships. Scholarship emphasizes Forster's deliberate selection, omission, and aestheticization of real events when converting lived experience into fiction. Parry has recorded the various forms of initial reaction to the novel API, where we read that the Anglo Indians thought themselves as being caricatured in the novel and threw its copies overboard the ships of Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) (Parry 260). The strained friendship between Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding exemplifies this, dramatizing cultural misunderstandings and the complexities of colonial power dynamics. As Banita Parry (1994) argues, such additions allow Forster to negotiate colonial encounters with literary artistry, turning ethnographic observation into narrative exploration of moral and emotional realities. Laura Chrisman has highlighted that Parry argues that API "approaches Indian forms of knowledge with uncertainty, without asserting the authority of its representations" (Chrisman 167) what Laura tries to establish here is how Forster does not acquire a "metropolitan authority" in forming an opinion on Indian knowledge forms and spirituality and has kept it open ended, just like he finds H.H. the

Maharaja and notes in *THD* his other worldly tendencies towards spirituality and religion (Forster *The Hill* 175). Suleri (1992) notes that Forster's aestheticization mediates between the "real" and the "literary," producing fiction that interrogates cultural and existential questions while remaining attentive to Indian social and spiritual contexts. This negotiation reflects both a postcolonial consciousness and a literary modernist sensibility. Now this is to particularly note that the "real" becomes more informed and personalised 'real' of Forster only when we read *THD* and its account. Suleri also calls the description of the landscape of Chandrapore as "imperial cartography" which is also evident in *THD* but to a lesser extent when we read the description of Dewas and its architecture especially the colour choice of their buildings. (Suleri 144)

V A Shahane has marked the change in Forster's criticism after Lionel Trilling's *E M Forster- A Study* (1943), which now took the turn towards "literary and thematic interpretation, and artistic as well as the moral aspects" from the earlier criticism which focused on "political liberalism" (Shahane xiii). However he also notes that the shift in Forster's criticism was gradual from purely artistic and sociological angle to an understanding of the philosophical aspect (Shahane xvi)

Most studies treat the novel and the memoir separately or compare them only at a surface thematic level. Certainly there is lack of sustained framework that studies how lived experience is transformed into literary form i.e. fiction. This work tries to highlight the aspects which seemed to have influenced Forster and also to foreground the historical and cultural emissions done by Forster in the formation of his India for the novel *API*. The analysis of events and episodes in the context of the contemporary political situation will be helpful in a nuanced approach towards the reading of the Novel.

By retrospective post coloniality what the article tries to convey and foreground is that there must have been some effect upon a reader and a critique when he encounters that a text such as *API* has for its blue print certain ideas and experiences. And such encounters and experiences which later became the plot and characters of *API* are recorded in non-fiction text which in this case is *THD*. This information certainly changed the way how *API* was read and critiqued and certainly gains importance in the view of the fact that *THD* was published after independence. This text which was literally post- colonial keeping in mind the date of Indian independence also gives a window of speculation that Forster might have sensitised certain episodes for the newly sovereign entity (which can be sensed from his measured approach in the preface to *THD*) and here the novel *API* becomes a curious case to provide a direction to the speculation of the unexpressed in *THD*.

Right from the preface of *THD* we find an alert Forster, addressing with caution a recently independent nation. Many a critics have regarded Fielding as a mouth-piece of Forster and we find that Fielding as a character is opposed to the sudden ousting of the British from India. He doubts the capabilities of the Indians in self governance. He is also doubtful of balkanization of the subcontinent along the lines of religion, region, language, caste and other such social division. Although India has gained independence the partition of the country must have reinforced Forster's belief in his insights. In this preface we find Forster in a defending tone, which Fielding might have also adopted if he had got to witness India's independence. Naturally Fielding's assumptions and foresights would have made him stand in the line of the 'other' retrospectively. But Forster's tone warrants an unwanted attention. He might have been worried of getting rebuked as Nirad Chaudhary was done to. This might have been because the observant Forster must be aware of the treatment meted out to Nirad C Chaudhary in the elite circles after

his wrongly perceived dedication in his seminal work *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. This would have not bothered Forster but it would have definitely painted an image of his which he truly was opposed to an image of an antagonist of India in any miniscule sense.

Although *THD* was published in 1953 it has recorded events before the publication of *API* in 1924. We shall take Forster's words for granted that the retrospective letters have not been edited in such a manner as to change or hide the contents of the original letters. The real observations of Forster in India as recorded in *THD* are many a times in binary opposition of what he created in *API*, yet at other times they are in synchronization. Such convergence and diversion of facts and fiction need to be looked through tools of literature as when any thought is published it becomes literature and the identity of fact and fiction often blurs. In this paper few events and situations of *API* and *THD* will be examined in light of postcolonial theory. The observations and theories of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Thiongo Ngugi among other will shed light on this work of 'non-fiction'. The two works of Forster when compared with each other and other literature of the time offer a new window in the thought process of the author and one revisits older clichés made over time and discover nuance approaches. *T H D* is not a stand alone memoir of an Indian prince and his state. Stories have been written about Indian Princes and their reign. There have been purely political commentaries portraying the case of one Prince as a stereotype and example for the whole of India and also the personal and private affairs of the princes had been an exciting subject particularly for the European reader. In this regard we can cite example of *Private life of an eastern king* by William Knighton originally published in 1855 and *The Private Life of an Indian Prince*, a novel by Mulk Raj Anand first published in 1953. But what we find in *THD* is certainly more of a true eye witness account with apparently minimum touch of narrative setting by the author. Although when we apply a very high degree

suspicion which has become lately an old school format of postcolonialism, one certainly can see through the text as being another of a colonial representation of the Indian people, society and politics. However, what must challenge a readers thought is that Forster has certainly tried to separate the materialistic details of architecture, petty politics of the native state, the society anthropological minutes and laid focus on something more universal. This universal certainly has its source in the character of Forster himself – that of a humanist among the imperialist. The realism in *THD* is discounted and decorated with higher questions of human relations in the novel *API*.

In the opening letter of 1912-1913 Forster mentions his first meeting with the Maharaja of Dewas in a ‘club’ of Indore, this stands sharply in contrast with the, “Indians are not allowed into the Chandrapore Club even as guests” (Foster-42). The difference in the two situations could be because of many a reason, such as the status of the Maharaja which could not find an equal in the novel or some special occasion like the Bridge party. But we find that we have in Nawab Bahadur who holds a similar status (as he boasts about his friendship with the lieutenant governor)(Forster, 16) in the novel but he is treated just another Indian when it comes to the rule of the clubhouse, “Indians not allowed”. This difference is created by Forster knowingly to sharpen the contrast of the storyline and create a more fore grounded role for the British as anti India. This could not be taken as a method to gain the sympathies of the Indian author, but could be a subtle balance which Forster tries to maintain as his critics have also targeted him for ignoring the cruel and inhuman faces of the Imperialism in India (such as Jallainwala Bagh,1919). Forster’s experiences in his second visit greatly provided the missing ingredient to his masterpiece. And since these experiences are recorded in *THD* its reading enhances the experience of *API*. Quoting Moffat (2011,186) David Jasper writes, “From the muddles that were

both national and personal during his second stay in India, Forster built the complex structure of his novel acknowledging ‘how impossible it was for him to understand India through the lens of his cultural assumptions, however well-meaning’” (Trivedi,2024).

The incident of the promise of sending a carriage for the guest, not being kept by the Maharaja of Dewas, is mentioned without mentioning any possible reason or contingency on the part of the Maharaja. This might build an impression that value of a promise that too by a person of high standing is not a question of etiquette among the Indians. But we see Nawab Bahadur being seen in good light for keeping his word. Here we assume that Forster has no mala fide intentions and is being honest. He may have experienced similar instances, which led him to deliberately mention this episode—something he might otherwise have ignored when shAPIng his characters for *A Passage to India*. But such difference of narrative often unsettles many a critic such as Nirad Chaudhary who see Forster’s inclination towards the Muslims protruding in a ugly way in his life and work. Nirad further writes in his article ‘Passage to and from India’ in V A Shahane’s *Perspectives on E. M. Forster’s a Passage to India: A Collection of Critical Essays* and finely highlights the difference in the Hindu sensibilities of the subjects of the British India and the princely states. Since Forster mostly stayed in princely states, he had only a more conservative and fundamentalist experience of the Hindu philosophy. The renaissance and the revivalist movements such as that of reformers such as Swami Vivekananda and others and its modern approach is not reflected in the Indian (Hindu) characters. The protagonist of the novel being a Muslim is also a case for mindful consideration and Nirad finds this love of a Muslim protagonist as nothing more than the general liking of the British for the Muslim subject, who were now not at the riding position of the national independence movement , after the route post 1857.

The mention of *sultanas* in a Maratha court by a British is evidence of the culture developed in the aristocracy of India, which showed an amalgamation of the cultural experiences of the Turkish, Iranian, British and Maratha royalties of the time. This commonality found out by Forster hints in some ways to the approach of the ‘brethren of the aryan race’ as proposed by the likes of James Mill and Charles Grant. On the other hand we have Frantz Fanon who would see such practice at a native court as imitation of the colonial master’s culture, “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Fanon, p 9).

At the incident of the bomb being hurled at Lord Hardinge, we find a reference that the high English officials were anxious that the ‘Tommys’ could have opened a fire at the crowd if they would have got the better reason in Viceroy’s death by the bomb. This clearly acknowledges that there was a class of soldiers and officers who wished for reasons to carry out massacre of Indians. And this was unfortunately realized in the deathly event in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. An unintentional and unacknowledged prediction of colonial rule could be seen in this observation of Forster. The urge to kill the Indians en masse was still lingering with the British army, which originated in the famous chant of ‘remember Cawnpore’, to keep the flame of revenge burning and exact retribution for the ‘bibighar massacre’. These feelings did not survive for so long naturally but were revised in the memory through literature and press, the Gazetteer being the prominent among them. “ In the aftermath of the rebellion, the revised edition of the Gazetteer had to represent another building in Cawnpore, the notorious building where the British “women and children... helpless prisoners,” were “slaughtered, and their bodies...thrown into a well (Hancher 56). Since nationalist forces are prima facie responsible for the bomb episode mentioned earlier, hence on the level of ideology the imperialists did see nationalism as

a force to reckon with, a force which can replace them in India. We find Paarth Chatterjee delving into the intricacies of ideologies in his work *Nationalist thought and the colonial world : a derivative discourse?* (1986) , he says, “nationalist thinking is necessarily a struggle with an entire body of systematic knowledge” and “its politics impels it to open up that framework of knowledge which presumes to dominate it, to displace that framework, to subvert its authority, to challenge its morality” (Chatterjee 42).

“Every European traveler or resident in the Orient has had to protect himself from its unsettling influences”. (Said,1978, p 166). In describing the first glimpse of the kingdom of Dewas senior, Forster compares the situation there as comparable to the opera of Gilbert and Sullivan, known for their comical situations and mockery in the British society. Hence, we find that he has a first impression of humour and comical situation in the respectful mutual coexistence of two branches of dynasty in the same city. Certainly, peaceful coexistence of two sovereigns was not a trait of the British in their colonies and at home. Certainly this paragraph can be looked with the lens of postcolonial examination and we might also find a hint at the subconscious grip of monotheism in being astonished at mutual co existence of two sovereigns. Leela Gandhi talks of *Orientalism* in his book *Post Colonial Theory A Critical Introduction Leela Gandhi* and says, “*Orientalism* series as a whole elaborates a unique understanding of imperialism/colonialism as the epistemological and cultural attitude which accompanies the curious habit of dominating”. Edward Said notes in his *Orientalism*, “The Orient was overvalued for its pantheism, its spirituality, its stability, its longevity, its primitivity, and so forth. Schelling, for example, saw in Oriental polytheism a preparation of the way for Judeo-Christian monotheism”. (Said,1978, p150)

Cromer quotes Sir Alfred Lyall “Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind. Every Anglo-Indian official should always remember that maxim.” The flag of at the temple of devi was flown at half-mast as agreed upon by the two branches of dynasty. This apparent overlooking of the global concept of mourning as depicted by the position of flag also confirms the comparison to the opera. It might be a casual display of finding such substandard practices among the natives as it would be more in line with the subconscious image of the native. Although Forster’s humanist and rational approach throughout his life can be taken as a token of fairness of his intentions when we as ‘subjects’ judge a European we tend to take a Fanonian approach in postcolonialism. Said says in *Culture and Imperialism*, “ The imperial European would not or could not see that he or she was an imperialist and, ironically, how it was that the non-European in the same circumstances saw the European *only* as imperial”. (Said,p162) As also Fanon points, “For the native objectivity is always directed against him”(Fanon,p 37). Forster might be under the influence of the notion which Gramsci calls ‘cultural hegemony’ and Said comments in *Orientalism*, “In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*”.(Said, 1978 p 7).

We find further in *THD* that Forster is acquiring the habit of rising early in the morning, most probably the effect of the general practice of the place. It is to note that the time period is 1912 and the habit of rising early is present in the royal household of one of the native princely states. This fact becomes interesting when we read Partha Chatterjee’s ‘Our Modernity’ and also the fact that we hear through oral traditions in a tone of castigation that when Clive (Robert Clive) rode his horse for 20 km each day before sunrise and marched along with his soldiers and our rulers the Rajahs and Nawabs were in deep sleep till late mornings. This incidence does not

remain mere another anecdote when we read the following observations of Partha Chatterjee. Partha quotes Rajnarayan Basu in distinguishing about the ways of the ‘anglicized’ old man and ‘vernacular’ old man highlighting the difference of morning habits of the European and native mind. He quotes, “The anglicized old man has aged early. The vernacular old man wakes up when it is still dark. Waking up, he lies in the bed and sings religious songs. The anglicized old man, on the other hand, has dinner and brandy at night and sleeps late;”(Chatterjee, Partha. *Our Modernity*. 1997). What we observe from these diverse examples related to the habits of daily life is the different interpretation of the observer which emerge from the cauldron of imagination, assumptions, sense of superiority or inferiority as the case may be. The toiling of Clive now seems worth it because of the results produced by Clive in consolidating the English rule in Indian else one could easily dismiss it as a trait of the lower classes not fit for the leisure loving ruling class as demonstrated by the comparison that Rajnarayan makes.

The mention of the Devi at the hill and its description are unmistakably the foundation of the description of the Marabar Hills of *A Passage to India*. Critics observe that in *A Passage to India*, he deletes or condenses ethnographic details, streamlining the narrative to foreground universal human and ethical concerns (Furbank, 119-126). For instance, the Marabar Caves episode, central to the novel’s symbolic structure, has no direct equivalent in his travelogue but reflects Forster’s experiential encounters with Indian landscapes and sacred spaces the British is not presented as being regulative and normative. The court room and its trial is further from reality and is a ‘fantasy’ (Said *Culture* 75-77).

The incident of the Raja getting ‘purified’ after a train journey shows us the prevalent superstitions of the native princely state. These practices are not a standalone evidence but evoke

a connection with certain idiosyncratic habits as depicted in the character of Godbole in the novel. But to the keen eye it is also a waste of the efforts of great Indian reformers, whose enlightenment didn't reach certain parts of the Indian subcontinent, particularly the native states. Hence their efforts are more fruitful under the 'modern' British government. The absence of any active political organisation in Chandrapore is also an example how Forster has omitted almost completely the effects of a national movement in his novel, particularly the omission of Gandhi. Also, on the part of the British tutored Raja we may consider his situation as the head of a native state influenced heavily by religious orthodoxy and he has to maintain an image suitable to the culture, which is source of legitimacy for his unquestioned rule, may with it come some amount of superstition. June Perry Levine comments on the trends of criticism of *API* and he notes, "Earlier commentators, closer to the world of the British Raj, were more concerned with Forster's political and social views than with his metaphysics", and "they were often caught up in the debate about imperialism which is no longer a live issue". The thing to note here is that he is putting these views in his book *Creation and criticism: A Passage to India* which was published in the year 1971 and we find that he is of the conclusion and rightly may be that 'debate about imperialism is no longer a live issue', however with the advent of Edward Said it can be safely assumed that the issue of imperialism gained nuanced insights and further analysis of it was done by post colonialists. Thus we find that even Forster's non-fiction should not remain untouched by the criticism based on the methodology of contextual analysis and using the yardstick of postcolonial theory. Such a textual analysis of *THD* with historical, social and cultural contexts develops further the relation of the fact and fiction in Forster's *API* and helps to better understand the open ended approach of Forster towards spirituality, philosophy and interpersonal relations which ultimately are results of lived experiences.

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