The mystery and muddle of *A Passage to India*

In *A Passage to India*, India looms as unfathomable, undefinable, or, to use E. M. Forster’s expression: a mystery and a muddle. On his first visit to the country in 1912, Forster’s experience of the ancient city of Ujjain fed his blurry impression of India. Here, he found that:

“There was no place for anything, and nothing was in its place. There was no time either. […] One confusion enveloped Ujjain and all things. Why differentiate? I asked the driver what kind of trees those were, and he answered ‘Trees’; what was the name of that bird, and he said ‘Bird’; and the plain, interminable, murmured, ‘Old buildings are buildings, ruins are ruins’.”

The India of Forster’s 1924 novel spills beyond all order, all comprehension, and the mystery and muddle that characterises what he depicts as an essentially unknowable country leaves the reader of the story with many unanswered questions, and an overwhelming sense of irresolution. I P Fassett, a critic for *The Criterion* (a modernist magazine), complained that the novel was ‘all very vague’. Living until 1970, Forster was plagued by readers for decades with the question: ‘what happened in the Marabar Caves?’ His definitive and immovable response? ‘I don’t know’, he would simply – frustratingly – say. Even the incident at the heart of the novel's plot, therefore, was, like India, maintained as a mystery. In a letter to his friend and fellow author, William Plomer, he connects the plot’s mystery with India’s: ‘I tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an unexplainable muddle – Miss Quested’s experience in the cave.’ In his refusal to give away anything beyond what is contained in *A Passage to India*, more than ever, it is up to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

‘The sense of racial tension, of incompatibility, never left me’

Writing *A Passage to India* was not easy. Forster began the novel after his 1912 trip, but didn’t finish it until 1924, following a second trip to the country in 1921.

After spending time as secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas, Forster returned to his Indian novel. A lot had changed in the decade or so since he’d last worked on it – in India, in England, in the world. The First World War had, of course, had a tremendous impact, and politically, culturally, socially, Anglo-India had significantly, irrevocably changed.

In 1919, Colonel Dyer ordered his British Indian army troops to open fire on a crowd of nonviolent protesters who had gathered for a Sikh festival in north-west India. Over a thousand died in the ten minute ceaseless fire, in what became known as the Amritsar Massacre. Forster had already considered himself anti-imperial, but following this, was deeply, vehemently so. With 70 or so pages of the book written before these events and this time-lapse, he faced a chronological issue. His solution was to write the novel ‘out of time’. He makes no reference to dates or the ferment of contemporary politics, and it is difficult to say with any certainty whether it is post- or pre-war. The tone of the book had certainly changed however, as he wrote in 1922 to Syed Ross Masood (to whom he dedicated the novel), ‘when I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between east and west, but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable’. Like *Howards End*, this is a novel that hopes for connection, but, just as the India of the novel is depicted, the call for connection is ‘not a promise, only an appeal’.

The Twilight of the Double Vision

As with so much of Forster’s fiction, *A Passage to India* is unsettled by binary tensions. The central question of the novel – whether an Englishman and an Indian can ever be friends – is played out in the drama of converging and diverging opposites. In *Passage*, Forster works his philosophical and aesthetic preoccupation with dualism to its climax.

Writing of the condition of modernity, Forster complained that ‘the heavens and the earth have become terribly alike since Einstein’. In *Passage*, there is a sense that he is working to restore that double vision of the earthly and heavenly, the solid and the nebulous. The tripartite structure, repeated images and atmospheric, metaphysical language imbue the novel with a rhythmic, musical quality, suggesting
‘something more’ than can usually be seen or said. Mrs Moore seems to see through the visible, material world to some inexpressible, transcendental beyond. After experiencing the Marabar caves,

“She had come to that state where the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time – the twilight of the double vision [where...] a spiritual muddledom is set up for which no high-sounding words can be found.”

The **echo** has an extraordinary **nullifying effect**. It trivialises the systems and structures that order and reassure, and, in the senseless pervasive reverberation of the ‘ou-boum’, articulation fails, and certainties fall into incomprehensible abyss. In *Passage* the unseen forces trouble and impede resolution.

In answer to the question of whether and Englishman and an Indian can be friends, India replies – in her hundred, undefined voices – ‘**No, not there,**’ ‘**not yet**’.

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[https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-mystery-and-muddle-of-a-passage-to-india#sthash.3CZc1Wfx.dpuf](https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-mystery-and-muddle-of-a-passage-to-india#sthash.3CZc1Wfx.dpuf)

Foster is both **modernist** and **traditional**.

With the **modernist** he shared:

- the inability to believe in accepted values;
- the conviction that reality is elusive and many-faceted;
- the choice of unconventional themes: anti-imperialism and homosexuality.

On the contrary he is a **traditional writer** because he **doesn’t experiment the form of the modern novel**:

- His language and style are clear;
- He doesn’t often use the stream of consciousness;
- He believes in the “story”: he uses complex and melodramatic plots.

**A Passage to India**

The plot revolves around five characters: Dr. Aziz, his British friend Mr. Fielding, Mrs. Moore, her son Ronny, and Miss Adela Quested.

It is divided into three parts that correspond to the main moments of the story and to the three Indian seasons: “**Mosque**”, the cool weather; “**Caves**”, the hot weather; and “**Temple**”, the rains.

This novel deals with human relationships, and the main theme is if it is possible for the Indian and the English people to be friends within the context of British colonialism.