

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ELEMENTS IN E. M. FOSTER'S A PASSAGE TO INDIA

Smaranda Ștefanovici and Anamaria Popa (Dobrescu)

Assoc. Prof., Hab. Dr., UMFST Tîrgu Mureș, PhD Student, Tîrgu Mureș Reformed High School

Abstract: A Passage to India (1924) by E. M. Foster's is a place of cultural clashes and opposite mentalities between East and West. The 1910-1920 time setting was a controversial period when India was under British rule so two different cultures had to learn to live together and overcome their cultural differences. The aim of this article is to present some of these differences from an anthropological perspective and to answer the question whether cultural ethnic connection is possible or not due to these linguistic and cultural anthropological aspects.

Keywords: cultural and linguistic anthropology, enculturation, ethnocentric culture, archetypal societies, passage

A Passage to India (1924) is a modernist and psychological novel in which E.M.Foster uses an unnamed third-person narrator to describe his own experience in British India. The 1910-1920 time setting was a controversial period when India was under British rule so two different cultures had to learn to live together and deal with their cultural differences. For Foster, colonial India is a country where both the English and the Indians struggle to overcome cultural preconceptions and misconceptions; they are people who want to connect and go beyond the stereotypes that have divided the East from the West. Can an Englishman and an Indian be friends? It is challenge that Foster raises, and which this article tries to answer. Even if he was British, he did not agree with colonialism. However, our answer to Foster's dilemma is that there are good signs of overcoming these racial tensions and antagonism through mutual respect as men.

The book includes many anthropological elements, as one of its purposes is to underline the contrast between two cultures with two opposite mentalities. Three English newcomers to India (Miss Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore and Cyril Fielding) and one Indian, (Dr. Aziz) cross their destinies in Chandrapore, India. Miss Adela Quested travels to India with Mrs. Moore to meet Ronny, a British magistrate whom she is going to marry. Fielding, an English educator in India is a friend of Dr. Aziz, a young Muslim doctor in India.

The story revolves around the voyage undertaken by Miss Adela Quested, a young English lady in India, which also proves to be a spiritual quest that challenges her to redefine her identity and her world view. As the title states it, the journey equals a ritual of passage to a different level of understanding the Self and the world. In the character's case the revelations are attained through living experiences, while in the reader's case, through the intermediated experience of reading.

Among the numerous anthropological elements within the book we find: cultural adaptation, multi-ethnic society, archetypal society, enculturation, ethnocentrism, social identity, social behavior, values, perceptions, social interaction, core values, gender roles, marriage and religion.

The first anthropological aspect the book tackles is the presentation of Chandrapore as a representative city for the Indian culture, being situated in the proximity of the Ganges.

Describing with significant details the setting of the action, the author creates the premises for a better understanding of the Indian world and culture and for the extraordinary spiritual experiences one could live there.

The book begins with the presentation of the city of Chandrapore and the river Ganges from an omniscient point of view, but not completely impersonal, because the tone is rather critical and the perspective seems to be of a foreigner familiarized with the location and with the Indian culture.¹ The city doesn't seem interesting, large or beautiful, and the river is low and dirty. Nothing impresses the viewer. In this monotonous and distressing landscape, where "there is no painting and scarcely any carving... where houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting" (Foster: 1). The gloomy perspective of the city changes when we move to the English residential place. Here, Chandapore is described as a "city of gardens" (Foster: 1), with beautiful flowers and filled with sunshine. In this dualistic city vision, a few Indian characters appear. They seem to be often preoccupied with a particular subject: the social interaction between Indians and Englishmen: "they were discussing as to whether or not it is possible to be friends with an Englishman" (Foster: 2).

The movie² *A Passage to India*, (1985) starts with Miss Adela Quested setting off on her journey to India to meet her fiancé, being accompanied by his mother, Mrs. Moore. The two women represent those innocent and curious English persons, willing to discover a new world, being ready to meet the locals and make friends. Initially, they are unaware of the huge gap that lies between the two communities and their cultures. When Mrs. Moore expresses in the film version her wish to meet Indians as friends, Mrs. Turton says they never socialize with the Indians: "East is East...It's a matter of culture". The movie director often uses images that underline the contrast between the two worlds. For example, the image of the train in the background crossing the Ganges and a fragment of an Indian architectural detail on a very old and typical building. Still, at their suggestion, Mr. Turton is going to throw "A bridge party to gulf the bridge between east and west" Foster: 10), which represented a small but important step forward in the relation between the two countries.

Cultural stereotypes are widely used to emphasize this gap between the West and the East. The English are big eaters vs. the Indians who are humble eaters. Adela highlights the fact that the British are cold and distant. In fact, when she herself tells Ronny she does not want to marry him, there are no emotional moments in those scenes. The British are punctual, neat, elegant, ordered, educated, rigid, formal, cold and distant, use cars, are mannered, marry out of love, but family and children are not as important as for the Indians; although the Indian arranged marriages are not based on love, they respect their marriage vows and children are essential. They are spontaneous, unpredictable, unreliable, but warm and caring; they wear white clothes, no shoes, travel on bikes, tonga, or on foot, are less educated, eat on the floor, etc.

The British women are presented as pompous, overly self-confident, judgmental, ignorant, failures, and physically not attractive. They openly express their repulsion and sense of superiority in form of the Indians. An exception might be Mrs. Moore, who is seen as a decent British woman who, unlike the other British women from the group, enters the mosque to listen to Dr. Aziz's explanations. She cannot understand their unpleasant behavior. Her son, in a cold, unsentimental tone, justifies their attitude: "I'm not a missionary or a Labour Member or a vague sentimental, sympathetic literary man. I'm just a servant of the Government... We're not pleasant in India and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do." (Foster: 20)... "[We] are not here to be pleasant, but to keep the peace." (Foster: 41)... At the other pole, we have Mr. Turton, the British city collector, who openly expresses his repulsion towards the inferior Indians.

¹ The author lived in India in the early 1920s as the private secretary to Tukojirao III, the Maharajah of Dewas.

² David Lean, director

The author presents the difficulties incurred by the Indian population forced to adapt to the oppressive political regime of the English domination in order to survive culturally and to thrive economically. The book also touches the enculturation of the Indian population through the English language use and the imposition of new behaviors, perceptions, values and life styles. Conrad Phillip Kottak, an American anthropologist, wrote in one of his books: "Enculturation is the process where the culture that is currently established teaches an individual the accepted norms and values of the culture or society where the individual lives. The individual can become an accepted member and fulfill the needed functions and roles of the group. Most importantly the individual knows and establishes a context of boundaries and accepted behavior that dictates what is acceptable and not acceptable within the framework of that society. It teaches the individual their role within society as well as what is accepted behavior within that society and lifestyle." (Kottak: 51) An example of enculturation in Foster's book lies in the following lines: "There had been a "case" last year--an Indian gentleman had driven up to an official's house and been turned back by the servants and been told to approach more suitably--only one case among thousands of visits to hundreds of officials, but its fame spread wide. The young man shrank from a repetition of it. He compromised, and stopped the driver just outside the flood of light that fell across the verandah." (Foster: 5) This fragment shows the way how the Englishmen impose a specific behavior to the Indians, who complied with it in order to be accepted. It was not acceptable for the Indians to approach an English house in another way but on foot, which demonstrated their inferior, subordinated status.

The English characters often display the attitude of an ethnocentric culture, convinced of its superiority and political power. In the book, the narrator says: "The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India."(Foster: 5) Some of the characters' lines reflect the typical English perspective on the political situation in India. Mrs. Turton: "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis, and they're on an equality." (Foster: 16), Ronny-Mrs. Moore: "We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly!" "What do you mean?" "What I say. We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them's my sentiments. India isn't a drawing room." "Your sentiments are those of a god," she said quietly, but it was his manner rather than his sentiments that annoyed her. Trying to recover his temper, he said, "India likes gods." "And Englishmen like posing as gods." [...] "I'm going to argue, and indeed dictate," she said, clinking her rings. "The English are out here to be pleasant." "How do you make that out, mother?" he asked, speaking gently again, for he was ashamed of his irritability. "Because India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to each other. God . . . is . . . love." She hesitated, seeing how much he disliked the argument, but something made her go on. "God has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent, even in India, to see how we are succeeding." (Foster: 20-21)

The Indian society was at that time multi-ethnic, being composed of Indians and Englishmen. Politically organized under the British rule, the two ethnic communities shared the same territory without interacting socially too much. The Englishmen, even much fewer than the Indians, represented the dominant class which disregarded and disapproved any personal contact with the Indian subject people. The Indians, on the other hand, despised the members of the British ruling class and accepted them with resentment, being capable of showing respect and some kind of admiration. In the film, there is a sequence when the viceroy and his wife are leaving the ship, with impenetrable faces, while the Indian crowds cheerfully greet them, but among the crowds gathered to welcome the British rulers, in foreground, three Indian girls appear with looks full of hatred.

Religion is another anthropological aspect that the author considers important in the recreation of the Indian culture. In chapter II, dr. Aziz searches peace and tranquility in his favorite mosque. His ideas about Gods and religion are expressed here: "A mosque by winning his approval let loose his imagination. The temple of another creed, Hindu, Christian, or Greek, would have bored him and failed to awaken his sense of beauty. Here was Islam, his own country, more than a Faith, more than a battle-cry, more, much more... Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and his thoughts found their home." (Foster: 6) and "Some day he too would build a mosque, smaller than this but in perfect taste, so that all who passed by should experience the happiness he felt now. And near it, under a low dome, should be his tomb, with a Persian inscription: Alas, without me for thousands of years The Rose will blossom and the Spring will bloom, But those who have secretly understood my heart-- They will approach and visit the grave where I lie. He had seen the quatrain on the tomb of a Deccan king, and regarded it as profound philosophy--he always held pathos to be profound. The secret understanding of the heart! (Foster: 6) His thoughts also slip some factual information about the fact that there are many religions in India: Muslim, Hindu, Sikhs, Parsee, Christian.

Marriage is another anthropological element presented in the book. Hamidullah Begum first mentions it, trying to convince Aziz to re-marry: "Having censured the circumcision, she bethought her of kindred topics, and asked Aziz when he was going to be married. Respectful but irritated, he answered, "Once is enough." [...] But this was not Hamidullah Begum's point, and having courteously changed the conversation for a few moments she returned and made it. She said, "What is to become of all our daughters if men refuse to marry? They will marry beneath them, or--" (Foster: 3). And she began to say the "tale of a lady of Imperial descent who could find no husband in the narrow circle where her pride permitted her to mate, and had lived on unwed, her age now thirty, and would die unwed, for no one would have her now. While the tale was in progress, it convinced the two men, the tragedy seemed a slur on the whole community; better polygamy almost, than that a woman should die without the joys God has intended her to receive. Wedlock, motherhood, power in the house--for what else is she born, and how can the man who has denied them to her stand up to face her creator and his own at the last day?" (E. M. Foster: 4) The quotation also speaks about the gender role in society, as it is traditionally transmitted from one generation to the other. The author underlines in this way the importance given by the Indian culture to marriage and also offers a stereotype image of the polygamous marriages. Beside Aziz's duty to re-marry, Adela's intention of marrying Ronny is stated. Mrs. Moore has a remark towards marriage, an unconventional one, though. Her observation is still very realistic and profound as she has been married twice in her life: "Too much fuss has been made over marriage. Centuries of carnal embracement, yet man is no nearer to understanding man." (Foster: 58). Adela is also trying to find out the true values a marriage should be based on: trust, security, love, sexual attraction, common interests, common principles, a shared view on life etc. During the process, she spontaneously admits that love should be the basic element; therefore, she renounces her engagement to Ronny because of not loving him.

Archetypal societies and symbols are also important anthropological themes and motifs in *A Passage to India*. One such recurrent motif is the *cave*, in this case, the Marabar Caves. In the book, the caves are mentioned right in the beginning: "Except for the Marabar Caves - and they are twenty miles off - the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary" (Foster: 1). In the movie, the caves also appear in the beginning, when Adela is purchasing her boat ticket and remarks them in a picture on the wall. She also sees them in reality from the train heading for Chandrapore. They become a key element of the plot during the rising action and the climax, representing the place where the novel experiences a turning point and gets a mystical level of meaning. The caves symbolize the human unconscious, being associated

with the maternal womb, and a passage place between the visible and the invisible world. The cave, like the maternal womb, is a place of mysteries, of initiation, a source of endless energy. It is also a place of spiritual initiation and transformation, favorable for the hermits' transcendental experiences. In other words, the cave is a natural, perfect and dual symbol, representing, on the one hand, darkness and chaos, but, also, on the other hand, a place of physical and spiritual regeneration. (Cf. Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1969: 77 & Evseev 1994: 71). The two women, Adela and Mrs. Moore, have extraordinary experience inside the Marabar Caves. The echo affects each of them terribly, in different but significant ways. They both seem possessed by some occult forces which determine them to act strangely, accomplishing somehow a destiny. Still, we have to notice that their reaction is different and so are the consequences. Mrs. Moore feels overwhelmed and tries to escape (or embrace) her fate by leaving. By leaving the place, she somehow interrupts a process, attracting her death, as a consequence. On the contrary, Adela lets herself carried on by some type of a hallucination, accusing initially Aziz of rape, but finding in the end the courage to see and speak out the truth. The consequence of her actions is positive, the voice in her head generated by the mysterious echo stops and she is able to return home in England, remaining single, but in peace with herself.

Anthropologically speaking, the meaning of these facts could be that the characters were possessed by some occult forces or energies, experiencing a mystical phenomenon. The author's choice for imagining these situations could be his intention to present an exotic facet of India along with the realistic aspects of the local reality, in order to render a complete image of this fascinating oriental country. From a literary point of view, the facts symbolism could also be interpreted from a modern, psychological perspective. All Adela's doubts about her relationship with Ronny, about her feelings towards him and about her marriage beliefs attained a crucial point when she ran into the ruins of the Hindu temple. The images of the gods embraced in sexual positions questioned her inherited preconceptions about marriage, love and sex. The Indian world seemed to offer her some archetypal truths, a new perspective of seeing the world, a more authentic way to relate to herself and to the others. The old Indian culture provided a favorable context for everybody meeting his/her true inner self. There is an archetypal need to experience the alterity in order to attain unity. The echo in the caves identified with the inner voice of the unconscious, activating the deepest needs and some healing energies. Adela never married because she had a too free personality. She discovered that in India and she learned how to accept herself as she was. Even her name is symbolical: Adela was originally a short form of names beginning with the Germanic element *adal* meaning "noble"³ and *Quested* suggesting the nature of her voyage, a quest for her true social and spiritual identity.

Both the book and the movie transmit an important positive message to the world. In spite of any differences and political interests, the trust in the human nature and the power of the universal values finally prevail. The need to discover new places and cultures and the need to truly connect with other souls always find a way to be satisfied. However, there cannot be cohabitation without mutual respect. Moreover, although some friendships are made, there are signs that they will not endure the passage of time, because they are based on personal interests; maybe, it is too early for a "Bridge Party" between the East and the West.

Although *A Passage to India* is, in many ways, a symbolic and even mystical text, it also claims to be a realistic documentation on the attitudes of British colonial officials in India, a place of cultural encounters and conflicts between the white rulers and the colored natives, which seem unsolvable. The anthropological themes of friendship and marriage contribute, paradoxically, to this cultural misunderstanding and final retreat. This multi-

³ <https://www.behindthename.com/name/adela>

ethnic, pluralistic society encourages and strengthens stereotypes, social, and racial discrimination. Nevertheless, the dual symbolism, as a favorite narrative technique used by Foster, strikes the reader with dual meanings and interpretations, which is also the case of the dilemma regarding whether an Englishman can befriend an Indian. They interact, relate interracially, face racial tensions and antagonism. Everybody and everything operates on two levels. Aziz and Fielding want to be friends. Mrs. Moore wants to be open-minded towards Indians and testify to Dr. Aziz's trial. Adela wants to marry Ronny. Both the English and the Indian sides seem to be willing to eliminate prejudices and stereotypes. Is it possible to pretend what you are not, or what you are not ready to change yet? No, it is not. Although the characters on both sides struggle to overcome their differences and prejudices, the moment they seem to succeed, Foster raises barriers and events that put even the strongest inter-racial friendships under pressure and suspicion. To this pessimistic interpretation, we add a positive interpretation, which relates to the definition of 'passage', i.e. an allegory on the theme of the passage from ignorance to knowledge. The time has not come yet for successful 'Bridge Parties', but, at least, both the English and the Indians have grown to an awareness with impact on their beliefs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Foster, Edward Morgan, *A Passage to India*, PDF version, 141 pag., 1924.
- Chevalier Jean, Gheerbrant Alain, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol 3, Editura Artemis, București, 1995.
- Evseev, Ivan. *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale*, Editura Amarcord, Timișoara, 1994.
- Heider, Karl G., *Seeing Anthropology. Cultural Anthropology Through Films*, Pearson Allyn and Bacon, 2007.
- Kottak, Conrad Phillip, *Window on Humanity: A Concise Introduction to Anthropology*, McGraw-Hill, 2007.
- A Passage to India*, the film, directed by David Lean, 1984.