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The Character of Mrs. Moore in A Passage to India

by

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'. . . We can neither ignore nor respect Infinity.
E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

E. M. Forster was regarded as a classic writer in his own lifetime. He, certainly, lived long enough to have that status thrust upon him and critics began to take him far more seriously than he took himself. It is true that in January 1977 Anthony Burgess picked him as "the most over-rated British writer",[1] yet the denigrators are clearly in a minority. He died in 1970 at the age of 91, but he stopped writing fiction in 1924, That year saw the appearance of *A Passage to India,* which seems to me one of the greatest novels in the English language.

A Passage to India is set in India under the British Empire in the first quarter of this century. It is primarily concerned with race relations—mainly with relations between the British and the Indians but also with relations among the Indians themselves such as between Hindu and Muslim. Forster is also concerned with philosophical matters. These matters are secondary though they are important and integral to the novel.

Of the characters in the novel, the two most important are Fielding and Mrs. Moore. Its central character in social matters is Fielding, in philosophical matters is Mrs. Moore. Mrs. Moore participates in the social theme too and helps to integrate the social and philosophical themes. Moreover, Mrs. Moore is the most subtly-drawn of the characters, more so than even Fielding. I find her the most fascinating of the characters and, though I discussed her character in my book *Developing Countries in British Fiction,*[2] fresh points have struck me when I re-read the novel.

F. R. Leavis writes "The first Mrs. Wilcox, that very symbolic person, and Miss Avery may be said to have their equivalents in Mrs. Moore and Ralph; the son of her second marriage".[3] Certainly, Mrs. Moore's character is a development from Mrs. Wilcox's in *Howards End,* but it is different in important ways: unlike Mrs. Wilcox, Mrs. Moore comes alive as both fully real and richly significant; I wouldn't consider Mrs. Moore a symbolic person; Mrs. Wilcox had a place in society, a place in the English countryside, whereas Mrs. Moore has no social role. In fact, Mrs. Moore is the only character in *A Passage to India* who does not have a social role; she performs only a personal role. She is conscious of personal duties and obligations, she is interested in the marriages and well-being of her two sons, Ronny and Ralph, and her daughter, Stella.

During and after the Marabar Caves episodes, Mrs. Moore becomes an extraordinary character, a person with an unusual perception of things, and I am particularly interested in showing how Forster performs the difficult feat of making such a character convincing. Mrs. Moore enters the novel at the beginning, when Aziz, a doctor and the leading Indian character, runs into her in a mosque at night :

> Another pillar moved, a third, and then an Englishwoman stepped out into the moonlight. Suddenly he was furiously angry and shouted :
>
> 'Madam! Madam! Madam!'
>
> 'Oh! Oh!' the woman gasped.
>
> 'Madam, this is a mosque, you have no right here at all; you should have taken off your shoes; this is a holy place for Moslems.'
>
> 'I have taken them off.'
>
> 'You have?'
>
> 'I left them at the entrance.'
>
> 'Then I ask your pardon.'
>
> Still startled, the woman moved out, keeping the ablution-tank between them. He called after her, 'I am truly sorry for speaking.'
>
> 'Yes, I was right, was I not? If I remove my shoes, I am allowed?'
>
> 'Of course, but so few ladies take the trouble, especially if thinking no one is there to see.'
>
> 'That makes no difference. God is here.'[4]

The introduction of Mrs. Moore is striking and dramatic: there is surprise; she is a participant in a superbly realized scene. Her comprehension of the scene is clear when she later recounts it to Ronny :

> 'So he called to you over your shoes. Then it was impudence. It's an old trick. I wish you had had them on.'
>
> 'I think it was impudence, but I don't know about a trick,' said Mrs. Moore. 'His nerves were all on edge—I could tell from his voice. As soon as I answered he altered.' (p. 31)

Mrs. Moore reacts sensitively to people, whether white or coloured, in this case, to Aziz. She is critical of Aziz: she sees that he has been impudent. At the same time, she is understanding: she sees the cause of his impudence, 'his nerves were all on edge'. And her sense of rectitude is unshaken: she innocently blurts out that Aziz "doesn't care for the Callendars at all" (p. 33) but insists to Ronny that he should not pass on Aziz's remark to Mjaor Callendar despite Ronny's wishes to the contrary. Clearly, Mrs. Moore has a fine broad mind. In that first scene of hers, Mrs. Moore reveals a respect for religion, even for a religion alien to her like Islam, and a spirituality ('God is here'). From the beginning of the novel, her character contains a potentiality for the extraordinary insights she later experiences.

At their first encounter itself, Mrs. Moore takes a liking to Aziz. And Mrs. Moore is not alone in this respect: Miss Adela Quested "Also liked Aziz" (p. 68), so did Fielding. It is established that Aziz is a likeable sort of person and thus Mrs. Moore's response to him is shown as not peculiar but perfectly normal. It is also important to observe that Aziz is not the only Indian to whom Mrs. Moore conceives an instinctive fondness; Mrs. Bhattacharya is another (see the Bridge Party scene p. 43). This suggests that Mrs. Moore's reaction to Aziz is not something highly exceptional, elicited purely because of his personality, but an expression of her basic nature. She is completely unprejudiced and she responds to Indians in the same way as to the British.

Mrs. Moore is a newcomer to India and, partly because of this, she does not share that attitude of the Anglo-Indians. This is dramatically brought out soon after Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested arrive in India, in the scene at the Chandrapore Club. Adela expresses a desire to see Indians and this gives rise to spirited and revealing conversation :

> 'Why, the kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die,' said Mrs. Callendar.
>
> 'How if he went to heaven?' asked Mrs. Moore, with a gentle but crooked smile.
>
> 'He can go where he likes as long as he doesn't come near me. They give me the creeps.'
>
> 'As a matter of fact I have thought what you were saying about heaven, and that is why I am against missionaries',said the lady who had been a nurse. 'I am all for chaplains, but all against missionaries. Let me explain.' (p. 28).

Mrs. Moore dissociates herself from the callousness and exclusive superiority of Mrs. Callendar and the nurse. In a word, she is a liberal and thus she is different from the ordinary Anglo-Indians. Yet her liberalism, though exceptional is not incredible, it is perfectly possible. Other characters in the novel share her attitudes: Adela, another newcomer, is a liberal too; so is Fielding, though he has lived many years in India. In real life, there were liberals among the Europeans who came out East during this period: Forster himself, who visited India twice, was one; Leonard Woolf, who was for several years a member of the Ceylon Civil Service, was another.

Mrs. Moore has something important (her liberalism) in common with Adela Quested and Fielding but her character is far from being identical with theirs. Both Adela Quested and Fielding have the "undeveloped heart" which Forster regards as typical of English people,[5] a contrast to Aziz in this regard. Aziz has the capacity to feel which Forster, in real life, associated with an unnamed Indian friend[6] and with the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior,[7] and which he clearly considers typical of what we may call pre-industrial life.[8] Mrs. Moore shares Aziz's emotional capacity; she has a developed heart, unusual for an English person, and, in this important respect, she is different from Adela and Fielding. When Mrs. Moore and Aziz meet for the first time in that scene at the Mosque, they quickly respond to each other and soon converse as if they are old friends: they begin to talk of private matters without a

sense of incongruity. Their words to each other just before they part, are important :

> 'You understand me, you know what others feel. Oh, if others resembled you!'
>
> Rather surprised, she replied : 'I don't think I understand people very well. I only know whether I like or dislike them.'
>
> 'Then you are an Oriental.' (p. 24)

Mrs. Moore's character, then, is related to others in the novel and resembles people in real life. At the same time, taken as a whole, her character is markedly individual. She does not differ from fellow-humans in kind but she does so in degree. This helps to make convincing her character in the early chapters *and* its later development. We noticed her spirituality, a trait important for the future, and more light is thrown on it later as she argues with Ronny about the role of the English in India:

> '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.........
>
> Mrs. Moore felt that she had made a mistake in mentioning God, but she found him increasingly difficult to avoid as she grew older, and he had been constantly in her thoughts since she entered India, though oddly enough he satisfied her less. She must needs pronounce his name frequently, as the greatest she knew, yet she had never found it less efficacious. Outside the arch there seemed always an arch, beyond the remotest echo a silence. (pp. 51–2)

Mrs. Moore has grown increasingly spiritual, but orthodox Christianity "satisfied her less". Her experience at the Marabar Caves compels her to reduce Christianity to nothing; this does not mark a complete change but represents a development of an earlier spiritual tendency.

Thus, the development of Mrs. Moore's character during and after the Marabar Caves episode is carefully prepared for. The Marabar Caves episode was to be the "major event" of the novel when Forster conceived the book[9] and remains so when he completed it. It generates the most momentous experiences of the novel. In the course of the action Forster refers to Western Europe (to a Scotch moor, to an Italian Alp, to Venice and the Lake District) to show how different India is by comparison, and he employs this tactic when he introduces the Marabar Caves. As Mrs. Moore and Adela wait for "the supreme moment" of sunrise and it does not come, they console themselves by remembering Grasmere :

> 'Do you remember Grasmere!'
>
> 'Ah, dearest Grasmere!' Its little lakes and mountains were beloved by them all. Romantic yet manageable, it sprang from a kindlier planet. Here an untidy plain stretched to the knees of the Marabar. (pp. 136–7).

The crucial word is "manageable". The Marabar is disruptive.

Symbolic suggestions begin to converge on Mrs. Moore as she undergoes unsettling experiences at the Marabar Caves :

> A Marabar cave had been horrid as far as Mrs. Moore was concerned, . . . she had always suffered from faintness, and the cave had become too full, because all their retinue followed them. Crammed with villagers and servants, the circular chamber began to smell. She lost Aziz in the dark, didn't know who touched her, couldn't breathe, and some vile naked thing struck her face and settled on her mouth like a pad. She tried to regain the entrance tunnel, but an influx of villagers swept her back. She hit her head. For an instant she went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic. For not only did the crush and stench alarm her; there was also a terrifying echo.
>
> Professor Godbole had never mentioned an echo; it never impressed him, perhaps. (p. 145)

It is a European, not an Indian, who is prone to have experiences of this kind. On a realistic level, Forster renders the reactions of an elderly European woman. At the same time, he suggests symbolically a surreal sense of the unreality of the world of fact.

> The echo in a Marabar cave is . . . entirely devoid of distinction. . . . . .
> . . . .
> The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, 'Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value.' If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same—'ou-boum'. If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo whatever their opinion and position, and however much they dodge or bluff—it would amount to the same, the serpent would descend and return to the ceiling. Devils are of the North, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticize the Marabar because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind. (pp. 145-7)

For an instant the prose here deteriorates into false rhetoric ("Devils are of the North and poems can be written about them"); devils are found in the mythology of cultures at least as far south as Sri Lanka and Bali. This apart, the nullity and pettiness of life are presented with power and particularity. The echo is real and, at the same time, a recurring symbol of negation. In fact, it is an outstanding characteristic of this phase of the novel that the real and the symbolic interpenetrate and Forster thereby succeeds in the difficult task of rendering philosophical considerations with the concreteness of immediate experience. From one aspect Mrs. Moore reflects the depressed sense of an absence of solidly accepted or acceptable system of values which haunts the modern European mind.

The experience at the Marabar Caves, then, is conveyed to us as a kind of crucial experience that could jolt a character like Mrs. Moore to new insights and could wring a significant change in personality. It is tempting at this stage to call Mrs. Moore a symbol and, in fact, Walter Allen regards her as "a wholly successful symbol".[10] But she herself is not a symbol of anything. The truth is that through her Forster intimates symbolic suggestions and she herself experiences deep insights. This extraordinary dimension of Mrs. Moore's character is convincing partly because it is linked with completely ordinary facts: that she is weary at the Caves, that she is elderly and that she is a foreigner.

Forster goes on to describe precisely the kind of vision Mrs. Moore experiences at the Marabar Caves and its effects on her ;

> But suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from 'Let there be Light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'boum'. Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul, the mood of the last two months took definite form at last, and she realized that she didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with anyone' not even with God. (p. 148)

Mrs. Moore's vision is humanistic; in it, her religion is reduced to nothing. She loses all interest in people and things outside her; it is not that she becomes selfish in the ordinary sense of the word but that these things are reduced to total insignificance and cease to matter to her in her state of heightened awareness. Adela gets into a neurotic state after the experience at the Marabar Caves and Mrs. Moore was "the only visitor she wanted" (p. 189), but Mrs. Moore kept away. Mrs. Moore knows instinctively that Aziz is innocent of the charge of assaulting Adela and even says so openly to Adela and Ronny :

> 'I have heard both English and Indians speak well of him, and I felt it isn't the sort of thing he would do.' (p. 201)

But she does not bother to influence Adela or testify on Aziz's behalf at the trial. This may disappoint some readers but this is not a flaw in Forster's characterisation; this is fully in character. Though this is important in the light of the action of the novel, this is not important to Mrs. Moore in her present state when she sees deep into the nature of things and comprehends life in its totality. She is not callous or self-centred, but it does not occur to her that, if she were to intervene on Aziz's behalf, it would be decisive and significant, at least in the ordinary world.

Mrs. Moore's wisdom is appreciated neither by the Indians nor by the British. Aziz is attached to her emotionally, but she is "nothing" to him in an intellectual sense. Her apotheosis as "Esmiss Esmoor" by the mass of the Indians reflects a spontaneous religious reaction, which is primitive. Adela thinks that "the old lady had turned disagreeable and queer" after the episode at the Caves (p. 212) and, on one level, this is perfectly true :

Ronny had emphasized to his mother that Adela would arrive in a morbid state, yet she was being positively malicious.

'Mrs. Moore, what is this echo?'

'Don't you know?'

'No—what is it? Oh, do say! I felt you would be able to explain it ... this will comfort me so ...'

'If you don't know, you don't know; I can't tell you.'

'I think you're rather unkind not to say."

'Say, say, say,' said the old lady bitterly. 'As if anything can be said! I have spent my life in saying or in listening to sayings; I have listened too much. It is time I was left in peace. Not to die,' she added sourly. 'No doubt you expect me to die, but when I have seen you and Ronny married, and seen the other two and whether they want to be married—I'll retire then into a cave of my own.' She smiled, to bring down her remark into ordinary life and thus add to its bitterness. 'Somewhere no young people will come asking questions and expecting answers. Some shelf.' (pp. 195-6)

Ronny and Adela react to Mrs. Moore at the ordinary social level and cannot understand her at the level to which she has risen. Even in her state of heightened awareness, there survives in Mrs. Moore a sense of personal duty; at the same time, she knows that her duties will end. She is preparing herself, not for death, but for peace and salvation.

Forster's view of the fate of a person such as Mrs. Moore has become—the reaction of others to her and her own behaviour—is critical and realistic. As Mrs. Moore leaves India, Forster defines her vision precisely :

> 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 in which so many elderly people are involved. (p. 202)

Yet Forster seems to be uneasy about the convincingness of his portrayal of Mrs. Moore after her vision and tries to allay possible doubts in the reader:

> Visions are supposed to entail profundity, but wait till you get one, dear reader! The abyss also may be petty, the serpent of eternity made of maggots ... (p. 203)

Forster thus suggests that Mrs. Moore's vision is not of the kind conventionally associated with wisdom and *that* she is not a sage in the conventional sense. Her vision comprehends *profundity* as well as a perception of the horror of the universe, the pettiness and *nullity* of life. She dies soon after her vision :

> Dead she was—committed to the deep while still on the southward track, for the boats from Bombay cannot point towards Europe until Arabia has been rounded; she was further in the tropics than ever achieved while on shore, when the sun touched her for the last time and her body was lowered into yet another India—the Indian Ocean. (p. 249)

This sentence, confirming her death, is subtly different from the staple prose of the novel which is conversational, sometimes incisive, and good-tempered. It has a rhetorical cadence, unobstrusive yet distinct, in keeping with her increased stature after her vision.

Characters like Mrs. Moore are rare in English literature and it is no wonder that, among the things in the novel, it was her character that impressed Leonard Woolf most when he reviewed *A Passage to India* soon after its publication.[11] Some readers may wish for a more extended portrait of Mrs. Moore after her vision. But such a portrait could be drawn perhaps only by another such as Mrs. Moore and such people by virtue of what they are, are not interested in writing novels.

Notes

1. *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 January 1977, p. 67.
2. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, *Developing Countries in British Fiction*, (London: Macmillan, 1977), especially pp. 140–142.
3. F. R. Leavis, *E. M. Forster : The Common Pursuit* (London: Penguin, 1962 ed.), p. 273).
4. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London: Penguin, 1959 ed.), p.21. All subsequent quotations from this novel are from this edition and their page numbers are noted in my text.
5. E. M. Forster, 'Notes on the English Character' : *Abinger Harvest*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1967 ed.), p. 18.
6. Ibid., pp. 15–6.
7. E. M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi* (London: Penguin, 1953 ed.), p. 43.
8. Compare the contrast between English frigidity and inhibition, on the one hand, and Italian impulsiveness, on the other, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View*.
9. E. M. Forster, 'The Art of Fiction': *The Paris Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1953, p. 31.
10. Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (London: Penguin, 1970 ed.), p. 339.
11. Leonard Woolf, 'Arch Beyond Arch': *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, 14, June 1924, p. 354,