

A Song of Water and Fire in A Passage to India

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Abstract

Symbolism is significant in *A Passage to India*, behind which profound connotations could be revealed. The images of water and fire, in particular, convey abundant meanings which could contribute to a deeper understanding of this work. Therefore, this essay is intended to dig into these two quintessential images so as to have a better command of the theme of “unity” in this novel.

Keywords

Symbolism; E. M. Forster; *A Passage to India*.

1. Introduction

A Passage to India (1924) is authored by Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970) who is one of the most prestigious modernists in the literature world of the 20th century. E. M. Forster has paid visits to India twice in total. It was after his first journey to India in 1912 that Forster was intrigued by and simultaneously sympathized with India and subsequently generated his writing inspiration with regard to India. Initially, he wanted to create an inter-racial love story. Nevertheless, having experienced the catastrophically brutal world war and revisited India in 1921, Forster reshaped his writing intention and the final version came into beings as follows.

With the company of Mrs Moore, mother of Ronny Heaslop, Miss Adela Quested, who might get married to Ronny, embarks on her journey to exploring India so as to decide whether she would agree to marry Ronny or not. The whole novel is divided into three parts, that is, Mosque, Caves and Temple, all of which are typical of Indian landscapes full of symbolic meanings. It is in the mosque that Mrs Moore first encounters Aziz who is an Indian doctor and gradually takes to these Indian people. In the first part, two sides, that is, English and Indian, try to improve their relationships through a bridge party. After a small tea meeting with Mr. Fielding, Aziz makes friends with him. The second part begins with a tour to Marabar caves that Aziz arranges for his English friends. However, this well-intentioned travel ends up with a tragedy that Aziz is arrested and accused of his attempt to assault Miss Adela, which aggravates the conflicts between these two races. At the final trial, Miss Adela gives a testimony to the innocence of Aziz who finally harbors hatred against Englishman and departs from India with his son. The scene of the end of the friendship between Aziz and Mr. Fielding is put on the stage in the final part.

It is noteworthy that the title of this novel--*A Passage to India* not only summarizes the main plot--two women's journey to India superficially, but also refers to a deeper philosophy of Forster. The title is virtually named after the poem version of Walt Whitman. In the poem, Whitman advocates the elimination of the segregation and separation between people. To be more specific, he longs for “unity” not just in the physical term through the advancement of technology, but in the spiritual term. It is with the same standpoint that Forster resorts to the same title for reference. As a matter of fact, Forster makes full use of his talents in writing and presents multiple images brimmed with symbolic meanings to illustrate his writing purport, among which, such images as water and fire stand out as an embodiment of his elucidation of his vision of “unity”. Therefore, a more detailed analysis of these two images will be conducted in the following to clarify one of the core themes that Forster touches on in *A Passage to India*.

2. A Song of Water and Fire

When it comes to water, as an emblem of rebirth and purity, it embraces universal meanings in *A Passage to India*. According to Hinduism, history is in a circular development. Actually, this kind of recurrence is in an endless and infinite pattern. Every time, it is by virtue of water that the universe dissolves and disappears. Therefore, water epitomizes destruction and generation in the meantime. Mrs. Moore accidentally dies at sea, whose corpse is integrated into sea and whose spirit becomes the goddess in the culture of Hinduism. It is the existence of Mrs. Moore in the hearts of people alive as well as her ever-lasting philanthropy that ultimately contributes to Miss Adela's awakening and Dr. Aziz's forgiveness. Throughout the text, the image of water in different types recurs, such as in the appearance of the Ganges as a picturesque setting from the beginning. At the end of this novel, in the ceremony, two boats have bumped into each other and all people on the boat fall into the water. The rain goes on falling. This scene related to water can be regarded as a sort of baptism, which washes away their mutual suspicion and hostility. As a result, Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding eventually renew their relationships. The downpour seems to be a kind of blessing. Water is indeed an illustration of purity and regeneration, which could bring hopes.

In addition to water, fire is also a typical image, which is in relation to a certain psychological and spiritual quality. Forster frequently resorts to the image of fire to reveal the inner world of the main characters and then deepen the theme of "unity" in this novel. First and foremost, it is a symbol of friendship. For example, at the first glance of Mrs. Moore, Dr. Aziz has a kind of subtle and special feelings. It seems that fire flares up in his heart naturally, which indicates a sense of proximity and closeness between them. In other words, this is the fire of "friendship". What's more, the kindness of friends to Aziz who is sick in bed is metaphorically compared to the blaze as well, bringing warmth to Aziz. Besides, at the moment when the hands of Ronny and Adela meet by accident, a sense of connection spontaneously emerges, as faint and short as the flashing light of fireflies, which symbolizes a spark of "love" between Ronny and Adela. In addition to the fire of "friendship" and that of "love", it is worth mentioning that the flames in Marabar caves are of meaningful significance as well. On the one hand, it represents the struggle and fight between these two races; on the other hand, it connotes good wishes of people who desire for beauty, harmony and unity.

3. Conclusion

To put it in a nutshell, *A Passage to India* abounds with a variety of images full of symbolic meanings, especially in light of the images of water and fire. Specifically, water epitomizes rebirth and purity. When it comes to fire, it represents not only conflicts between these two races, but also different types of love. Through singing a song of water and fire, E. M. Forster delicately conveys his pursuit of unity and harmony between races, which is still very enlightening and revealing in the contemporary world.

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