

Nirmala Sharma, 2016.
Unraveling Misconceptions: A New Understanding
of E. M. Forster's A Passage to India
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Nirmala Sharma was educated at Dharma Samaj College, India, and received her BA in Hindi and English Literature. She continued her studies in the United States and earned an MA in English from the University of California, Riverside. As a Hindu researcher, the main emphasis in her approach to *A Passage to India* is on religion; she focuses on critical analyses of E. M. Forster's descriptions of Hindu characters and festivals, and on his perception of Hinduism itself. Although Sharma appreciates the innovative aspects of *A Passage to India* in comparison with earlier literary works on India, which do "not reflect upon the imperialists' loot of India and their inhumane treatment of the natives" (4), she critically points out that the conventional aspects of the colonial English literature still linger in the novel; that is, the literature reveals "its prejudices toward Hinduism" (4). She further comments that "the sentiments Forster expresses about the discomfort of the festival are similar to those of the imperialists on Indians," and that "his reflections are imbued with feelings of superiority" (138).

Sharma's analysis highlights the fact that Forster's liberal view underlies his "censure of the British imperialists and high castes in India" (2), but at the same time, it leads to "his persistent derision of Hindu religion and philosophy" (5). She asserts that "Forster cannot appreciate the myths because they are transcendental and intuitive as opposed to physical and empirical" (138). She goes as far as to say that Forster "is more qualified for probing the head than the heart" (138), exemplifying that his analysis of the minds of the pragmatic imperialists is far superior to his account of Gokul Ashtami, namely, the celebration of the birth of Krishna. Sharma ascribes Forster's prejudiced presentation of Hinduism to his inability to understand "the unknown" and sarcastically states that "the festival remains a muddle only

to pragmatic Forster, not to the unsophisticated and illiterate masses of India" (138). She argues that the devotees of Krishna see the festival as "an artistic, profound, ecstatic, and absorbing experience", because "their emotions have not been blasted by an industrial civilization and because they seek union with God in terms of human relationship" (138).

Sharma's argument that Forster is more adept at probing the "head" than the "heart" seems to be very unique and different from the interpretation of many critics thus far. Forster emphasizes the importance of bridging the gap between "head" and "heart" to overcome the hostility and lack of communication between the two sides. He states that it is the "undeveloped heart that is largely responsible for the difficulties of Englishmen abroad" (Beer 1962, 189). In this sense, it can be said that the head of Adela failed to see real India, the head of Fielding failed by his disregard of mystery, and the heart of Mrs. Moore failed by her dislike of muddles.

It should be noted here that, by focusing on Aziz, Godbole, and Fielding, Sharma seems to have failed to see the importance of the role of Mrs. Moore, who remains spiritually in Indian people's mind as a Hindu goddess, "Esmis Esmoor." Sharma appears to use the term "heart" in a broader meaning than Forster and earlier critics did in that she extends the meaning to include the ability to understand or feel religious "emotions," or "union with God." She might have gone too far in arguing that "Forster represents Krishna's birthday celebration as unintelligible, unaesthetic, inelegant, and repulsive [...], constantly ridicules the Krishna rites [...], apparently found India to be a mysterious country where things were indistinct, unidentifiable, incomprehensible, and confusing" (101).

However, it might also be true that Forster's humour and sarcasm in his descriptions of characters and settings sometimes appear overboard and result in disgracing the local people, for example in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), in which the local Italians at the Monteriano opera house are depicted sarcastically as being too relaxed and light-hearted through English eyes. However, even if that point is taken into consideration, it might not be fair for Sharma to criticize Forster for regarding India as a mysterious country. For example, it is quite common for Japanese people to refer to India as a country of mystery, although Japan is a country of Buddhism, which originates from India and shares some basic values with Hinduism.

Sharma's new approach to *A Passage to India* offers us hints on expanding and deepening our insights into the echo in "Caves," the Hindu festival

in "Temple", and the Hindu characters, especially Professor Godbole. In her opinion, cave worship is an ancient practice in Indian tradition, and there are many Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain cave resorts and temples throughout India. The Marabar Caves depicted by Forster in *A Passage to India* seem to be modelled after them and can be considered to be Hindu cave shrines that are dedicated to Shiva. She considers that it is "the dancing Shiva," or "the representation of the creation and dissolution myth" (78) that Forster wants to describe in the caves, through the depiction of appearance and disappearance of "snakes of light and sound" (81), which illustrates "the unceasing wheeling of the aeons, which have occurred numerous in the past and will continue to occur in the future" (82).

However, Sharma argues that Forster represents this only in partiality, distorting other symbols as well as the philosophical implication of this cycle. The Hindu philosophy demonstrates the belief that "creation, duration, and dissolution are the manifestation of the same energy [...]. Good and evil are both part of life on earth [...]. Life is both good and evil" (84). By making limited use of the myth of creation, which "partially implies that life is evil" (84), Forster describes the caves only as "the embodiment of the evil" (85), and expresses the evil by the sound of "ou-boum" (or "om"), which is regarded as the most sacred syllable for Hindus, or the "symbol of God" (86). In addition, with tones of sarcasm, the effects of the evil that arises from this sacred sound "engulf all the important characters" (87), generating "a sense of futility in the lives" and weighing "heavy upon them" (78).

The problem of his interpretation of Hinduism is that Forster does not seem to be aware of its fundamental philosophical presupposition that all living beings are in the cycle of reincarnation. Sharma explains that although "the Hindu creation myth represents life as a cycle of countless rebirths," "there is a way out of this cycle," which is demonstrated by Shiva in his dancing posture: "the lower right hand of Shiva teaches [...] Do not be afraid [...] way out is through me" (82–83).

Sharma points out that many critics have noted the evil emanating from the caves. For example, Malcolm Bradbury regards Mrs. Moore's reaction to the caves as "the moral nihilism" (88), and James McConkey asserts that she accepts "a total negation" (88). Considering Sharma's argument thus far, it can be said, however, that the Hindu philosophical concept of "life as mirage," which is "first adumbrated through the song of Godbole" (92) and then

reiterated as “the evil symbolized in the caves” (91), is essentially different from the Western philosophical concept of “nihilism” or “apathy”.

Sharma’s exploration of Forster’s conception, or “implicit derision” (106), of Hinduism is carried out, with great passion for her own culture, by the careful analysis of “methods of his rhetoric and a comparison of his account with other accounts of the novel” (106), such as in *The Hill of Devi* (1953). Sharma’s argument suggests, especially to non-Hindu readers, that a more in-depth understanding of India and its underlying values is necessary in order to evaluate the novel without prejudice. Her argument, however, would have been more persuasive and clarified further on the theme of reconciliation if it included a more thorough analysis of Mrs. Moore as a Hindu goddess, or if it proposed a possible go-between the two sides.

Works Cited

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