

Harish Trivedi, 2024. *100 Years of A Passage to India* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan)

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This well-produced paperback is a sparkling update on the critical evaluations of *A Passage to India*, E. M. Forster's best-known, if not the best, novel. Edited by Harish Trivedi, a familiar name in the field of Forster studies from India, the collection of fifteen essays is a fresh intervention in unpacking a protean text which has attracted a plethora of scholarly assessments since its publication in 1924. Forster's swan song among his five novels became an instant bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic soon after its appearance and has remained a set text in English studies in the Indian subcontinent—perhaps in the rest of the Anglophone world too—over the years because of its wide reach and appeal as one of the most popular books of fiction on India written by a Western writer. Although the author's thematic concerns and ideological predilections instantiated by the centenarian novel have been analyzed in a flourishing body of professional explorations, the volume under review offers arresting perspectives on the novel's signifying narrative transactions.

The essays focus on the filming and stage adaptations of the novel, its translation and international reception, philosophic and religious and political issues germane to the text as well as its ontology and aesthetic underpinnings. Three essays deal with the translation of *Passage* in various languages since its publication. Krzysztof Fordoński tracks down the versions of this novel in the languages of Central-Eastern Europe, formerly part of the Soviet Bloc. Forster gained global fame with the commercial success and critical acclaim of this novel and so it became a tantalizing text for translation even though its subject and characters were not immediately interesting to the readers of this region. According to Fordoński, it was first rendered into Swedish in 1925—only a year after its emergence—and subsequently in Czech and Russian (1926), Finnish (1928) German (1932), Danish (1935), Polish (1938) and Hungarian (1941). Even during the totalitarian dispensation nine editions of the novel in different languages of the area were published. It could have been a case of innocuous response to the book because of Forster's anticolonial slant in his creed of liberal humanism. However, with the ideological hardening during the time of Stalin the second translation (1937) of *Passage* lay in literary limbo. The revival of Russian interest in Forster's masterpiece had to wait until a new edition was published in 2017.

The decline of interest in Forster's novel also brought acute hardship and privation to its translator, Lidiya Ivanovna Nekrasova. She was found guilty under censorship and made to suffer for five years from 1937. Eventually she succumbed to her suffering in 1942. In the climate of regimented and hidebound critical opinion Forster was found lacking in "the necessary historical-materialistic Marxist

perspective” and thus choosing “a mystical religious vision, escaping the social tensions in a period of transition” (49). In Poland too, Forster’s novel evoked mixed response in a string of reviews that followed its successive translations. For instance, while Adam Bar, a noted literary scholar and bibliographer, gave *Passage* a positive appraisal for its author’s “psychological incisiveness” in drawing “a perfect image of the attitude of the English towards the Indians” (53), despite its problematic plot, Zbigniew Grabowski, influenced by the literary trends and fashions of his time, found it insipid and pedestrian. Others, including Andrzej Tretiak, a pioneering Polish academic in English studies, faulted the poor quality of translation, particularly the one by Helena Mysłakowska – indeed a disservice to the fine style of a “serious literary work” (54). Equally, the 1979 translation of *Passage* as *Droga do Indii* (‘A Road to India’) went largely unnoticed, except getting a stray review by Adam Kaska in favour of Forster’s indictment of the imperial hegemony. In Fordoński’s cogent analysis in this essay, Forster’s masterpiece had a tinted and truncated reception in Poland for over fifty years. It has now come into its own, backed by its cinematic adaptations, proliferation of publishing houses in the milieu of literary glasnost, as evidenced by the publication of its another translation by Tarnowska and Konarek in 1993.

Unlike the sporadic curiosity of its readers in Russia, Poland, and around, the French translation of *Passage* in 1927 came into circulation and gained traction in the academic circles of Paris. Charles Mauron’s translation, *Route des Indes*, had Forster’s full approval, notwithstanding the editor’s demand for alterations and revision of the draft. Forster knew some French and so he put his foot down in support of the unrelenting translator. It was not a commercial success but it aroused the interest of French readers with the increasing dissemination of information about Indian culture and its prolonged colonial control by the British. In his contribution to this collection Evelyne Hanquart-Turner notes that David Lean’s film version (1984) of *A Passage to India* boosted the French reader’s appetite for the text. An edited and annotated French version with a preface and supplementary material was put together and published in 2013 to make it more accessible to the readers. The novel’s theme of friendship attracted the better-travelled readers in the age of Internet and emerging avenues of international solidarity. More significantly, the author and the translator forged close bonds of mutual amity, living out the message of the novel as it were. This intimate trust is vindicated by the dedication of Forster’s book, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), to his friend and the French translator of *Passage*, Charles Mauron. In their convivial get-togethers under the sunny sky of Provence in Charles’ Garden, Forster and his friend experienced “real international friendship” which Aziz and Fielding in the novel had been denied in the early years of twentieth century India (41).

Crucially indeed, amid this pervasive translation traffic the eponymous novel of Indian provenance has not been rendered into the primary language of the world inhabited and used by its characters. While two Bengali translations, *E paysej to Indiya* (1960) by Rabishekhhar Sengupta, and *Bharatpathe* (1995) by Hirankumar Sanyal, were published from Calcutta and Dhaka respectively, a Hindi version is still awaited.

Interestingly enough, Rupert Snell's essay in this collection assesses the resonance of the six samples of unpublished Hindi translation of the opening paragraph of *Passage*, and points to the challenges of catching and matching Forster's language. The translation excerpts closely collated with the source are by eminent two-way hands, including Harish Trivedi, Gopalkrishan Gandhi, Kunwar Narain, Rohini Chowdhury, Sara Rai, and Rakesh Pande. The spectrum of transfers in these Hindi renderings shows some of these draft translators using the original text as the conduit for their own independent and foregrounded creativity and others seeking to capture the sense components with tentative textual engineering. Snell argues how these translation specimens add to, or subtract from, the source. The Hindi versions have some highly expressive equivalents of the compressive, allusive and "brilliantly ominous" (14) poetic prose of the original. By demonstrating a measure of competent translation through varied nuances of the fragmentary Hindi equivalents of a stylistically well-crafted passage of the source organically related to the novel, Snell's essay looks forward to a compelling textual transfer of Forster's masterpiece in Hindi.

Snell rightly points out that an opportunity for Hindi translation of the dialogues in *Passage* was missed when the iconic Indian film maker Satyajit Ray desired to film it in the 1960s but he could not get the screen adaptation rights. As it happens, the novel has gained global fame following David Lean's production of *A Passage to India* (1984), fourteen years after Forster's death. Some deviations are inevitable for rendering a verbal text into a visual medium. They tighten and improve the narrative. Madhu Singh's essay in this compilation, "Visualizing *A Passage to India*: Reimagining Forster's Classic on Stage and Screen", is focused on the fidelity of these adaptations. She is of the view that though some aspects of the source have been altered necessitated by the change in perspective due to the time lag between the published story and its filmed version, Foster might have resisted the changes, given his firm reluctance to release the rights to film the novel. Of course, this classic had been adapted for the stage during the author's lifetime by Santa Rama Rau in 1960, and was modified for television in 1965, but John Brabourne and Richard Goodwin could buy the film rights only in 1981 and then select David Lean as director. The film's tidy narrative trajectory wedded to the centrality of the Marabar Caves and the prominence given to Adela Quested in the adaptation is a faithful rendition of the novel's theme as well as catching the imperial landscape. As in the case of Santa Rama Rao's stage adaptation, Forster, who died in 1970, might be equally pleased by David Lean's screen version, which cites as its source the play as well as the original text of the novel.

Madhu declares in her estimation of the cinematic narrative that on balance there is no "inevitable disparity between literature and film" (69) here. The essay includes another adaptation of the novel for analysis: Martin Sherman's *A Passage to India* produced by *Shared Experience* in 2003. By making Narayan Godbole, the Hindu mystic "a central character and 'linking narrator' in the Hindu state of Mao" (70), Sherman wanted to highlight what had not been covered in earlier adaptations.

According to him, the “Temple” section had been reduced and downplayed, and so the novel had not been well-served in the past adaptations, in that it is not just about the mystery of the caves of Marabar. Thus “most visual adaptations of *A Passage to India*,” Madhu Concludes, “were successful and brought Forster closer to the public” (73). It would seem that by resisting the appropriation of his novels for screen, Forster denied himself “a full theatrical meal.”

The novel’s genesis, its long gestation and the seminal role of its dedicatee, Syed Ross Masood, in begetting the book have been recounted in several biographical accounts of Forster. The details are now well-known to his readers. What is then the justification for David Lelyveld’s essay “Syed Ross Masood, Author of *A Passage to India*” in this florilegium on Forster’s final opus? As one reads the cogent piece between the lines, its significance becomes notable for two reasons: first, it dispels the facile likeness between Aziz and Masood – suggested casually by the author – in light of a posthumous tribute to his friend that Forster wrote, as well as the letters published after Forster’s death; second, for a tantalizing nugget of information about the friendship between Masood’s father Syed Mahmood and G. E. A. Ross, with whom he lived for many years, before the latter left India. He married at last in 1888 and named his son Ross born in 1889. The friendship between Masood’s father and Mr Ross was cited “as symbol of British-Indian friendship” (82) – a salient thematic concern of the novel.

The well-crafted drama in Forster’s subtle and sensitive novel has been analyzed from disparate points of view by the contributors to this well-culled critical collection, especially by Rukmini Bhaya Nair in her incisive essay engaging with the tension between Forster’s critical formulations in his 1927 book, *Aspects of the Novel*, and his own art of fiction displayed in *Passage*, by Howard J. Booth’s exploration of Forster’s views on Kipling, and Ipsita Chanda’s reading of the novel as Forster’s message for risking connections with alterity despite its negative possibilities. More persuasively Bhaya Nair underlines Forster’s masterly prescience in anticipating “the Age of the Anthropocene so imbued with prognostications of planetary doom and internecine hate” (213). However, Ruth Vanita’s point in her discussion of “*A Passage to India* as a Vedantic Novel,” that Forster “critiques liberal humanism and moves beyond it” (96) is less than compelling. In fact, liberal values are firmly at the novel’s centre and the story moves in the liberal direction, though impeded by its inner tension and about-faces represented by the character of Cyril Fielding. Liberal sentiments are thick on the ground in the novel with its examination of the bonds of transcultural friendship.

All in all, this centennial offering is an eminently useful contribution to the reevaluation of one of the best-known and widely read novels of our time. The editor has cast his net wide and put together pretty interesting stuff in this volume of substantial value and real virtues. Yet some inadvertent slips are there: Forster’s mother died in 1945, not “in 1944” (xiii). The spotted typos include “fly-invested” (78),

“ICS office” (80), “Surry” (84), “Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1926) “(177), “an demonstrable” and “deitic” (207), “prophetia” (211), “a short shrift” (229). These typing errors will need to be weeded out in the next print.