

A Passage to India – Centenary Revaluations Conference Report

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The conference “*A Passage to India* – Centenary Revaluations” was a hybrid event which took place in Olsztyn, Poland, on June 24-26, 2024. It was organized by the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, the University of Warsaw, and the International E. M. Forster Society.

The conference was mainly devoted to *A Passage to India*, the last novel of E. M. Forster published in his lifetime and which appeared on the market in June 1924. It confirmed Forster’s position as one of the most eminent novelists of his time and started his international career with a Swedish translation in 1925, and then Czech and Russian translations both in 1926. The novel has since been adapted four times for radio, three times for the stage, once for TV, and, most memorably, once for the big screen by David Lean. It has been the subject of academic scrutiny for almost a century, various scholars applying a variety of theoretical approaches to the text. The purpose of our meeting, thus, was to reassess the century which has passed since the publication – looking at *A Passage to India* from all possible angles, within all possible context, debating over its past importance and influence, and trying to foresee the role it may play in the future. However, despite the fact that *A Passage to India* was central to our meeting, the presentations and papers on other aspects of Forster’s life and work were also welcome. The conference was intended as a celebration of Forster and an opportunity for all Forsterians to come together.

The event, despite technical and time-zone challenges, was a great success. It was the second conference organized by the International E. M. Forster Society that gave an on-line access to those who could not join us in Olsztyn. The event was streamed which enabled Forsterian scholars and fans from all over the world to join the event and be a part of the Forsterian community. Additionally, it was the fifth conference under the auspices of the Society devoted entirely to Forster.

The scholars and researchers explored Forster’s cultural, literary, and historical significance in eight thematic sessions and fifteen pre-recorded talks, the conference fostered rich discussions on the text’s translations, colonial undertones, literary influences, and enduring relevance. The papers and presentations

prepared for the conference were followed by the compelling and engaging discussions which reflected a variety of approaches and perspectives when it comes to Forster's seminal novel as well as a rich response to his other works. The findings were especially fascinating as the participants were from different parts of the world, representing different cultures and, what follows, world views.

Day 1 of the conference. The meeting was opened by the head of the Society, Prof. Krzysztof Fordoński. The first plenary lecture was delivered by Prof. Harish Trivedi, who spoke (via the Internet from Delhi) about "India" and "Indias" in *A Passage to India*. The further proceedings were divided into three sessions. The first session, entitled "*A Passage to India* - Anniversary Considerations", was inaugurated by Ratna Raman, who revisited *A Passage to India's* depiction of cultural and religious pluralism, highlighting how it remains a valuable text for addressing identity in a fragmented modern world. She also explored Forster's nuanced portrayal of gender and religion, noting the text's ability to evoke meaningful debates about cultural geographies. Then Tsung-Han Tsai analysed the politics of a new Taiwanese translation of the novel, arguing that its adaptations reveal Taiwan's broader cultural aspirations and struggles for global recognition. He suggested that the act of reinterpreting Forster's work is intertwined with Taiwan's search for self-definition. Further on, Krzysztof Fordoński offered an overview of the novel's translation history. Fordoński traced its 99-year journey through at least 50 languages and pointed out how each translation reflects distinct cultural priorities and historical moments. The session was closed with the presentation of the new critical edition of Forster's novels by David Scourfield and Howard J. Booth.

Session 2, focusing on literary India and its various perspectives, was opened by Howard J. Booth who argued that Forster's deep engagement with Anglo-Indian literature, including Rudyard Kipling, influenced *A Passage to India* by reversing colonial motifs and power dynamics. He emphasized that Forster's subtle approach to the understanding of Anglo-Indian stereotypes added layers of irony to the narrative. Further on, Jana M. Giles examined Forster's engagement with the sublime, focusing on the dismantling of Western aesthetic traditions observable in the text in favour of a more complex, mediated understanding of transcendence. Her paper also tied Forster's comments on aesthetics to the larger colonial discourse in *A Passage to India*.

Session 3 was dedicated to "India - Expectations and Experience." First, David Scourfield explored how Forster uses personal names and labels to judge

colonialist categorization, showing the fluidity and ambiguity of identity in colonial contexts. He argued that the novel's recurring theme of "unidentifiable" reality underlines the failure of imperial control. This talk was followed by Nawal Kechida's evaluation of Forster's ambivalence toward anti-imperialism. She indicated that his mundane depiction of India contrasts sharply with the romanticized exoticism often found in colonial literature. Her analysis revealed a tension between Forster's humanism and the implicit colonial biases of his time. Closing the panel, Xinyi Xu focused on the illnesses of Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore as expressions of colonial anxiety and suggested that their conditions expose vulnerabilities within the imperialist framework. Her paper also drew connections to contemporary discourses on psychosomatic illness and cultural displacement.

Day 2 of the conference. The second day was inaugurated with a plenary lecture by Prof. Claire Monk of De Montfort University, UK. Prof. Monk's presentation was entitled "Reconsidering 'The Other Boat' (1913-1947-1957): Forster's Other Passage to India". It revisited Forster's queer short story "The Other Boat". In her lecture, Monk examined the story's reception since its posthumous publication in *The Life to Come and Other Stories* in 1972, when it was praised as one of Forster's finest works. Monk explored the story's themes of eroticism, violence, and colonial hierarchies, focusing on the spatial and racial dynamics aboard the SS *Normannia*. Additionally, she analysed the way the narrative talks about the West-to-East movement and imperial power structures. Her paper also touched on Simon Dormandy's 2019 experimental stage adaptation and the way the story continues to be reimagined and interpreted.

The plenary lecture was followed by a general discussion which was joined by the online participants of the event. This was also the time for Q&A session dedicated to the pre-recorded presentations submitted at an earlier stage by those who could not take part in our Forsterian on-site meeting. The topics were highly engaging and of diversified nature. Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar explored Forster's vision of bridging divides between the East and West through spiritual connection, paralleling the poet Whitman's ideas in *Passage to India* and stressing Forster's longing to harmonize the spiritual and cultural disparities between the two worlds. Next, Izumi Dryden investigated the role of music in Forster's novel, focusing on its use to bridge the human and divine. She was particularly interested in the way sound, rather than sight, creates a metaphysical dialogue, enhancing the novel's spiritual themes.

As for Shradha Kochhar's presentation, it examined Forster's usage of ambiguous spaces, particularly the Marabar Caves, to reflect uncertainties in identity, colonial tensions, and the elusiveness of truth. Another online participant, Chris Mourant, discussed the challenges of editing *A Passage to India* for the authoritative Cambridge Edition, underlining the importance of textual revisions that enhance understanding of its historical and cultural nuances. A centennial reflection on Forster's seminal novel was offered by Laëtitia Nebot-Deneuville who addressed its continued resonance in modern literary and cultural studies, and its ability to engage new generations of readers with its layered themes. Next, Francesca Pierini shared her thoughts on the way Forster constructs "national otherness" by contrasting East and West in these two novels. According to her, these depictions serve both as criticism and reinforcement of cultural binaries.

Lilian Rácz, on the other hand, explored music and rhythm structure in Forster's narrative, arguing that these elements mirror the novel's thematic tensions between harmony and discord, and its oscillation between the personal and universal. Then, in her paper, Laura Chiara Spinelli drew our attention to Forster's essays, showing how his reflections on culture illuminate his fictional works. As for Ashima Shrawan's presentation, it illustrated the application of Bharata's ancient Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa* to Forster's novel in question and thus revealed new dimensions of emotional and sensory engagement within its narrative. John D. Attridge, another online participant, using the lens of colonial "poverty tourism", looked closely at the novel's portrayal of India to find out how the narrative reflects and interrogates British perceptions of Indian poverty under the Raj.

Another pre-recorded paper, by Paola Irene Galli Mastrodonato, compared the pictures of India in Salgari's adventure novels and Forster's *A Passage to India*. She examined the two approaches to constructing divergent imaginative geographies of the subcontinent. Eliza Gładkowska, on the other hand, investigated the adaptation and legacy of Forster's *Howards End* in film, television, and other cultural texts. She studied various reinterpretations of the novel to measure the extent to which they preserve or transform the novel's central themes. Next, the aim of Kaberi Chatterjee's paper was to compare *A Passage to India* with two other narratives of colonial India. Chatterjee analysed their shared themes of cultural encounters and the lingering impact of imperialism. As for Murari Prasad, the scholar's presentation emphasized the universal scope of *A Passage to India*, arguing that its themes transcend geography to explore the questions of human connection and understanding in general. And finally, the paper by Ritashree Pal positioned

A Passage to India in modern debates on identity, exploring how its themes of race, religion, and nationalism resonate in contemporary global contexts.

The Q&A session was further followed by three sessions. The first one explored Forster's works beyond *A Passage to India*. Mykyta Isagulov examined Forster's intermedial references to art and mythology in his Italian novels, showing how these elements serve as a critique of English rigidity and social prejudice. He argued that Forster's allusions to Greek and Italian cultural heritage create a counter-narrative to England's declining imperial identity. Next, Nikolai Endres explored homoeroticism in *Maurice*, contrasting Martial's Roman vice with Vergil's idealized homoerotic relationships. He suggested that Forster uses Roman literary tropes to assess contemporary understandings of homosexuality. Yet another paper, by Maxime Petit, offered an analysis of the historical and sexual themes of "The Torque". Petit showed how Forster uses the past as a utopian space free from modern social constraints. The paper highlighted the humor and critical stance toward Christianity in Forster's historical narratives. Closing the session, Arpana and Deetimali Nath discussed homoerotic desire in two short stories, "The Other Boat" and "The Life to Come", revealing Forster's exploration of racial and imperialist power dynamics within intimate spaces. They argued that these narratives show the controversy related to colonialism while acknowledging the psychological toll of imperial ideology.

The next session looked at "Forster in Contexts". Aasiya Lodhi discussed Forster's 1946 BBC radio broadcasts, emphasizing their role in shaping British perceptions of India's independence while reinforcing colonial paternalism. She particularly stressed Forster's sentimental tone in *Has India Changed?* and how it reflects lingering asymmetries in British-Indian relations. Following, Paulina Pająk analysed the reception of Bloomsbury Group works in interwar Poland, focusing on the Polish translation of *A Passage to India*. She argued that the interwar publishing networks and periodicals played a key role in popularizing Forster's works, embedding them within broader transnational literary trends. Finally, Lawrence Jones examined the New Liberalist ethos in *Howards End*. He reasoned that Leonard Bast's evolving portrayal reflects Forster's critique of *laissez-faire* economics. His genetic analysis of the manuscript revealed a more compassionate representation of Bast than previously recognized.

The third session, closing the day, was devoted to Forster's influences and legacies. It was opened by Stuart Christie who claimed that Forster's immersive narrative style reflects an "aesthetics of accident," thus capturing

the immediacy and contingency of experience. Christie pondered over the question whether this immersive approach resists theoretical interpretations or aligns with neoliberal discourses on global connectivity. The next paper was presented by Artur Piskorz. He commented on the nostalgia in heritage cinema adaptations of *Howards End* and demonstrated how visual elements like architecture and landscape generate romanticized, yet often problematic, visions of the past. Emma Karin Brandin's discussion on Forster's use of domestic comedy to criticize rigid Edwardian gender norms closed the panel. The paper pointed out the way Forsterian humour is capable of exposing the contradictions within societal expectations of femininity.

Day 3 of the conference. The last day of the event included two sessions. Their discussions revolved around Forster's relevance to contemporary issues and literary intertextuality. The first session, entitled "Reading Forster in the 21st Century", began with Tarik Ziyad Gulcu's comparison of *The Machine Stops* and the COVID-19 lockdown situation. The speaker focused on the narrative's prophetic vision of technological dependence and social disconnection. His paper suggested that the novella offers a cautionary vision of dehumanization through isolation. During the same session Randi Saloman analysed gender and consent in *A Room with a View*, connecting Lucy Honeychurch's experiences to modern #MeToo narratives. She argued that Forster's portrayal of conflicting desires reflects broader societal tensions around gender roles and autonomy. The exploration of the nonnormative kinships in *Howards End* and *The Longest Journey* by Simon Turner closed the session. Turner explained how Forster reimagines inheritance and friendship as alternatives to traditional family structures.

The final session of the conference, "Forster and Other Writers / in Other Approaches", was opened with Rosie Blacher's analysis of sensory experiences in *A Passage to India*. Blacher argued that the novel's focus on sensory engagement challenges colonial ideologies and anticipates ecocritical thought. Then, Julia Szoltysek discussed Damon Galgut's *Arctic Summer* as a creative reimagining of Forster's life and works. She drew the attention to the text's portrayal of Forster's maturation as a writer and individual.

At the close of the conference, the event was discussed and concluded. The conference succeeded in revealing the multi-layered legacy of *A Passage to India* and E.M. Forster's broader oeuvre. By addressing topics such as colonialism, translation, queer identity, and ecological thought, the discussions emphasized the novel's ongoing relevance to contemporary debates in literature and cultural

studies. Consequently, the meeting confirmed that *A Passage to India* and other works by E. M. Forster are still very much present in the world of culture. Moreover, the rich response from the participants clearly showed that the issues the writer was interested in are regularly stirring emotions among both the researchers and fans of Forster.