

The Failure of the “Personal Relations” in *A Passage to India*

LI Xiao-jiao

Wuhan University of Technology, Hubei Wuhan, China, 430070

In the novel, *A Passage to India*, E. M. Foster showed the failure of Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested to build intimate “personal relations” with the natives in India under the imperial and colonial rule of Britain. As colonists, the British rationalized and strengthened the racial separation and the prejudice and stereotypes against Indians to secure their superior status, while the national conflicts aroused the national awareness among Indian people. Under the adverse political pressure, Mrs. Moore and Adela were not strong enough to hold their grounds but only retreated.

Keywords: personal relations, racial separation, national conflicts

Introduction

A Passage to India was a novel setting in India written by E. M. Forster in 1924. It concerned the relationships between the British and Indian people as well as the political and cultural conflicts during the colonial period. Mrs Moore and Adela Quested, the two heroines in the novel, visited Chandrapore in India in hot summer as Ronny Heaslop, Mrs Moore’s son and also Adela’s fiance, worked here as a local judge. They tried to build connections or “personal relations” with Indian people like Aziz, but their trial ended with further misunderstanding and conflicts with the rising tension between the British and Indian people. This paper explored why their trial of building “personal relations” in India was destined to fail at the end. By “personal relations” Forster meant intimate relations based on kindheartedness and full of trust in and care for each other (Li, 2014).

Political Backgrounds

On arriving India, Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore were eager to know the real India and Fielding reminded them that to know the real India they needed to know Indian people first. Then Adela complained about having no opportunities to meet with them except her own servants. Actually in colonist India, there was strict racial separation whether socially, culturally or ideologically expressed through the novel. In Chandrapore city, basically the British enjoyed high social status and power and excluded natives except a very few from where they lived, worked or entertained themselves. The representative British Club was not opened to Indians. Also they just lived the same as their homeland fellows and disregarded Indian clothes, language, architecture, religions, customs, etc. Britishers used the term “Mohammedan” as a synonym for “Moslem”, which was considered objectionable by professors of this faith. The British’s absolute control over India was also secured by

disparaging Indian people who were described as inferior, ugly, dirty and obscene creatures. The Bridge Party, at which the mayor's wife Mrs. Turton assured Adela and Mrs. Moore that they were "superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis, and they're on an equality", was ironic in that it deepened rather than narrowed the racial separation.

Meanwhile, there were early signs of nationalism in the novel. In the sad talk of "whether or no it is possible to be friends with an Englishman?", Hamidullah, Aziz's uncle and eminent Moslem barrister, thought it was possible in England. Others also agreed with him and supplemented: it was impossible here, in India. Then they talked about how Englishmen changed their attitudes towards them after they stayed a period of time in India as in the case of Collector Turton and how haughty and venal Englishwomen treated them in spite of the exceptions. Although they were unaware of the root of the problem like when Hamidullah asked "what in this country has gone wrong with everything", they all clearly knew that there would be no lasting real friendship with Englishmen in India. The later failure of the "Bridge Party" proved their unified guess. Even if the Fielding's tea party provided some comfort, it was much more like a ephemeral fantasy as would be broken by Ronny's interruption and the later big event. When Aziz was unfairly accused of sexually harassment by Adela Quedest and immediately imprisoned, the riots broke out in Indians to stand by Aziz, their complaints escalating into racial hatred. Aziz's vow to Fielding after he was set free, "India shall be a nation!... We shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then... you and I shall be friends", echoed his attitude at the very beginning, "Let us shut them out and be jolly" (Forster, 1985, pp. 16, 535). Although the experiences of Aziz and his friends did not rise to a national and political level, they aroused the common wishes of the public for an independent country. In writing the novel during the 1912-1921 period, Forster was fully aware of "the forces of Indian nationalism" which "first began to operate with potent effect". Meyers (1971) believed *A Passage to India* had political significance as "Forster emphasizes the political implications of race relations, fear of riots, English justice and government, Hindu-Moslem unity, Indian Native States, nationalism and the independence movement" (Meyers, 1971, p. 331).

Human Weakness

Besides the political factors of colonization, racial separation, racial hatred and the rise of nationalism, there were also personal reasons for the failure of "personal relations" between two heroines and Doctor Aziz.

Adela was the first one to put forward the idea of knowing the real India. Her enthusiasm for this new world and people here overwhelmed her from the very beginning. When she knew the cruel and indifferent way Indians were treated, she was eager to show her kindness. But like a headstrong kid, she was unaware of the difficulties along the way and the troubles she may caused to others and herself. Her enthusiasm soon decreased after she saw the quite reserved awkward Indian women and after Mrs. Bhattacharya did not fulfill her promise of an invitation. Although Adela well managed her kindness and courtesy towards Indian people, she could not resist showing reluctance inside to travel around in extreme heat and showing disrespect of Indian culture by going casually into one of the caves alone. To discern Adela's motive of this trip we would sooner reveal her hypocrisy in knowing Indian people. Adela was about to marry Ronny Heaslop, the city magistrate of Chandrapore, and wanted to know the place where she would stay for years. She went around with a pair of judgemental eyes. She was fully aware of that she would live in rather than into this place, so she carried on an observer perspective. Like Ronny,

she was here to rule, not to integrate into. As Fielding commented, Adela never had any real liking for India and Indian people.

Compared with Adela, Mrs. Moore was more like a participant who involved in Indian life with respect for its culture and religion. When she went into the Mosque, she did not forget to take off her shoes. This movement won Aziz’s respect and liking for her. In their first meeting and conversation, Mrs. Moore treated Aziz on an equal basis. From Mrs. Moore’s talk with his son Ronny, we would find out that her kindheartedness mainly came from her Christian belief that people should love each other by God’s will. Aziz found Mrs. Moore most agreeable because they both had religious enthusiasm, although in different groups. However, Aziz was not a completely native person because he had received western education and taken on some new modern characteristics like Englishmen. During the travel, when Mrs. Moore stood in the cave among many other natives, she felt nervous, uncomfortable and had the faint idea that someone had deliberately touched her. And when she got out, she found out it turned out to be a little baby on a woman’s arms. She regretted having had such a wrong idea. So Mrs. Moore also did not escape the prejudice. In comparing Mrs. Moore’s attitudes towards Aziz and other natives, we might reach a different conclusion that Mrs. Moore treated Aziz differently because of some similarities Aziz shared with them English. If the movement in the cave showed her fear in front of the unknown of India, her refusal to appear and defend Aziz in the trial and her leave proved complete retreat from it. Maybe she would like to be involved in anything except trouble.

In conclusion, Adela and Mrs. Moore were not strong enough to insist on their first choice. Compared with them, Fielding had nothing to blame. He was the only successful person here who had built real friendships with Indian people by overcoming English rules. But Aziz in the awakening of nationalism finally expelled Fielding because he was still one of the English. From this result we could know that political factors still outweighed personal factors. As Aziz implied, a real and equal cross-border friendship shall be based on national independence on both sides.

Conclusion

In *A Passage to India*, the enthusiasm of Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore to know the real India ended with Mrs. Moore’s lonely voyage and death, Adela’s broken engagement and leave for Britain with shame, and Fielding’s broken friendship with Aziz. While their strong curiosity about India and Indian people somehow smacked of romanticism, their latter failure of achieving “personal relations” with Indians was determined by both political and personal factors.

References

- Foster, E. M. (1985). *A passage to India*. London: Penguin Books.
- Li, X. L., Li, J. B. (2014). Personal relations in the context of imperialism: A new perspective on *A Passage to India*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, (2), 93-100.
- Meyers, J. (1971). The politics of “A Passage to India”. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 3(1), 329-338.
- Palmer, N. (1958). Indian Attitudes toward Colonialism. In R. Straus-Hupe (Ed.), *The idea of colonialism*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc..
- Sheeran, P. (2007). *Literature and international relations: Stories in the art of diplomacy*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited.