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EXISTENTIALIST philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's famous remark—avoiding politics doesn't avoid the consequences of politics—applies perfectly to EM Forster's *A Passage to India*, the novel published 100 years ago.

A newly-launched commemorative volume titled *100 Years of A Passage to India: International Assessments* (Orient BlackSwan) carries an exploratory essay about the political tensions left unresolved by Forster in his bid to offer a false poetic harmonious end to the vital piece of literature. Dr Harish Trivedi's concluding essay titled, *The Earth Said No, the Sky Said No: Poetry and Politics in A Passage to India*, brings forth Forster's "barest acknowledgement of the prevailing political situation in India", especially the lack of mention of Mahatma Gandhi.

Trivedi says politics lay thick on the ground all around Forster during both his visits to India. In 1912, Forster stayed with two British novelists (Sara Jeanette Duncan and Edmund Candler) whose works were patently political. By 1921, when Forster returned to India (stayed in the princely town Devas as the private secretary to the Maharaja, which birthed his 1953 work *The Hill of Devi*) Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement had captured Indian and British consciousness. In 1924, Premchand's *Ranghoomi* was out with a clear Gandhian message against colonial oppression.

As Trivedi points out, Forster provided the fuel and fire for a political novel, but repeatedly maintained that *A Passage to India* was "not a political tract... but a novel about human beings which hopes here and there to attain the effect of poetry". Forster loved India undoubtedly, but he didn't want to confront the imperialist basis on which the British justified colonising India! Unlike his predecessor Rudyard Kipling who spoke of the white man's burden and British rule as a natural order, Forster spoke of the possibility of true friendship between his lead protagonists Dr Aziz and his friend Cyril Fielding (British principal of a government-run college in Chandrapore). However, the novel's climax—the Indian doctor arrested and tried for an alleged assault on a young Englishwoman, Adela—outlines the colonial power dynamic.

This column vividly recalls the tense courtroom scenes in David Lean's (1984) film adaptation, which marked the novel's 60th anniversary. Watching it at Metro, just a month before studying it in my second-year BA syllabus, was a thrill. *A Passage to India* has since become part of my personal journey in understanding East-West conflicts. *Orient BlackSwan's* 100 Years of *A Passage to India* is a meaningful new stop along that journey. This volume—15 scholarly essays edited by Dr Trivedi—



(Above) An illustration of EM Forster in a turban graces the cover of the 100 Years of *A Passage to India: International Assessments* (Orient BlackSwan). **ILLUSTRATION/ JYOTHSNA PS**; (left) A still from David Lean's (1984) film adaptation of *A Passage to India*, which marked the novel's 60th anniversary

Mapping the Politics of *A Passage to India*

A commemorative volume on the centennial of EM Forster's *A Passage to India* unveils new insights into colonialism, race relations and East-West conflicts

affirms the novel's nuanced portrayal of the relationship between India and England. At a time when race, colonial history, identity, morality, sexual mores, and gender justice are being widely discussed in India, the book offers a timely re-exploration. India was not even a nation when Forster wrote the novel; today, it stands firm on the world stage, despite the contradictions that both the novel and Forster's worldview so keenly highlight.

Despite the incongruities, editor Trivedi finds the novel an exemplary work of art. He finds it relevant today, 100 years on, for encompassing issues of race, gender, even rape, religious misunderstanding and hostility, nationalism, and also human understanding and friendship. "No Western writer has ever written a better novel about India," he asserts. Trivedi, former Professor of English in the University of Delhi, is also the author of *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India*.

100 Years of *A Passage to India* is a painstakingly thorough project, following *Orient BlackSwan's* first in the series on T S Eliot's *The Wasteland: Indian Responses*. The new volume includes every possible aspect of the novel, beginning with Forster's own doubts (as revealed in the multiple revisions of the manuscript) about

the denouement, as well as the instant acclaim *The Passage to India* received in England. Forster jokingly attributed the record sales in the US to the American readers' pleasure in reading about the troubles of the British with their empire in India. The novel "aroused partisan passions" on the British and Indian sides. The British who served in India pointed to an unfair portrayal; Indian students in England disliked the depiction of Dr Aziz, especially some of his sexist comments on Adela, much before the mysterious episode in the Marabar caves. Indians felt Aziz's remarks on Adela's lack of femininity is an awkward articulation of his resentment towards the British standards of superiority.

Also, the three sections of the novel—Mosque, Caves, Temple—were viewed as stereotypical for someone who comprehended India beyond clichés! Many readers till date express wonder over Adela's sexual fantasy of having been



EM FORSTER
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assaulted by Aziz. They don't find it consistent with her character.

Trivedi interprets the caves segment as an expression of Forster's repressed desires, shaped by his experiences as a closeted homosexual. Forster's love for Indian Muslim scholar Syed Ross Masood (on whose life is *Dr Aziz* modelled) was complex.

The perspectives of 15 academics, literary experts, translators, and humanities scholars enrich the volume, thanks to Dr Trivedi, who brought together the band of "friends with Forsterian inclinations". While Madhu Singh analyses two stage adaptations of the text, Ruth Vanita treats it as a Vedantic novel. Rukmini

Bhaya Nair interprets the caves episode as Forster's worry of the looming ecological crises associated with imperialism. However, she clearly overestimates Forster as the "prophet of the Age of Anthropocene". There is little evidence to establish Forster's planet-related worries.

Rupert Snell (Professor Emeritus in the Department of Asian Studies, University of Texas, Austin) commissioned six celebrated bilingual writers to translate the novel's first paragraph in Hindi. The academic exercise forms the basis of his essay "On Translating *A Passage to India* into Hindi", which enlivens Forster's Chandrapore in myriad ways. Snell arranges the Hindi translation samples sequentially for the reader's evaluation. Each writer crafts a distinct Hindi title, offering a personal interpretation of *A Passage to India*. In Forster's time, "passage" was a common term for overseas travel, much like "flight" is today. So Hindi titles delightfully vary in the essay—Rohini Chowdhury and Rakesh Pandey choose *Bharat Ki Or*, Gopalkrishna Gandhi arrives at *Kooch-e-Hind*, Sara Rai terms it *Bharat Tak Ka Rasta*. The Hindi translators reveal their own personalities while taking on Forster's 238 opening words!

The new volume recounts the story of the novel's French translation by Charles Mauron, who became Forster's lifelong friend. The novel's Polish avatar comes with an intriguing story—translator Helena Myslakowska proposed marriage to Forster and landed in England. Although he cherished the friendship, Forster turned down the proposal.

Many assert that *A Passage to India* could have been a subtler portrait of everyday India during British Raj; some of its characters could have been rounder, and the narrator's voice firmer in the disapproval of colonial control. Yet few novels are recalled the way this one is! That's because not all bestselling texts transcend literary, geographical, cultural, temporal, philosophical and political boundaries.

This volume affirms the novel's nuanced portrayal of the relationship between India and England. At a time when race, colonial history, identity, morality, sexual mores, and gender justice are being widely discussed in India, the book offers a timely re-exploration. India was not even a nation when Forster wrote the novel; today, it stands firm on the world stage, despite the contradictions that both the novel and Forster's worldview so keenly highlight



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