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FORSTER'S ITALIAN NOVELS AS A TESTGROUND FOR *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*

Abstract: E. M. Forster is one of the authors whose auto-referentiality manifests itself on several levels, from the choice of themes regarding his novels and short stories, over his stylistic features, leitmotifs, symbols, and clear social engagement with concern to major global issues, to the transtextuality of his characters as, probably, the most outstanding one.

Through the prism of some key notions of colonial/postcolonial discourse, the paper deals with Forster's 'Italian novels' (A Room with a View and Where Angels Fear to Tread) as a testground for some of the themes and motifs elaborated in A Passage to India.

Key words: Forster's Italian novels, A Passage to India, cultural grammar, colonial mimicry, cultural contact.

1. INTRODUCTION

Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) has not been given much critical attention in the region of the former Yugoslavia. In most cases, he is only mentioned within discussions about the Bloomsbury Group, featuring prominent artists and intellectuals such as Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, Vanessa Stephen, Adrian Stephen, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, and John Maynard Keynes, among others, who would meet on a regular basis for some 20 years and deal with issues regarding literature, philosophy, aesthetics, and art in general. Although they did not come up with any sort of formal programme, they exerted a strong influence on the cultural milieu of the period. This view of Forster through the prism of his association with this group is fairly unjustified, given that this is a person whose oeuvre is beyond any classification and of timeless value. On the other hand, the Anglo-Saxon criticism has deemed it quite differently. Although not such a prolific author by today's

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standards, at least in terms of the number of novels he produced, he managed to draw the attention of critics by first two literary texts whose plots are set in Italy (Italian novels), as well as by a novel entitled *The Longest Journey*, with *Howards End* (1910) representing the pinnacle of that first artistic period of his life. It came, therefore, as quite surprising that his readership would have to wait for another fourteen years to indulge in his new novelistic achievement. Yet, the very emergence of *A Passage To India* made all that waiting justified.

The reign of Queen Victoria marks both the period of the greatest ascend of the British crown and, according to many, the period of greatest moral hypocrisy in the British society. The overall economic boom led to numerous qualitative changes in everyday life, one of the most significant ones being the fact that ultimate education was no longer out of reach for the underprivileged layers of society, those who cannot necessarily be associated with the Battle of Hastings. With reference to this, up until recently a degree from an Oxbridge classic philology department meant a sure shortcut to a prominent state position, or to a high position in any institution asking for a comprehensive overlook of social state of affairs. An inseparable ritual of the rise on the social ladder was a trip to France, Italy, or Greece for a half of a year or for a whole year, usually upon graduation from college. On the one hand, this could be seen as the establishment of tourism as an industry, but, on the other hand, as an indisputable expression of snobbery and arrogance.

2. SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ITALIAN NOVELS

This stance is visible in both of the Italian novels, *A Room with a View* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, where the characters of the English people are subject to criticism, often in a satirical tone, with Forster infusing their interactions with other characters with most subtle elements of criticism of the English society, which has much wider repercussions. In that respect, the following account is of a hectoring scale:

‘We are perfide Albion, the island of hypocrites, the people who have built up an Empire with a Bible in one hand, a pistol in the other, and financial concessions in both pockets’ (Forster, 1920).

It is not limited by current political issues, its messages are timeless and devoid of exclusivity in geographical terms. Still, Forster was not an idealist, and the respective denouement of his novels leaves us with a bitter taste in our mouth, offering no place for optimism. Indeed, this disappointment with the global state of consciousness in the post-WWII period led him to abandon writing fiction at the peak of his

creative power. Like many other artists in those turbulent interbellum years, Forster decided that art was not sufficient enough a weapon in armed conflicts. Illustrative in this respect is the example of Wystan Hugh Auden and his poem 'Spain', an anti-war manifest from the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, which he demanded be excluded from his subsequent collections.

Furthermore, Forster harshly criticises the habit of touring France, Italy, Greece, and Switzerland, often without any respective background knowledge of these countries, the utmost authority for these philistine pilgrims being Cook's baedekers (guides). One of the leitmotifs of his oeuvre is 'muddle', and in the Italian novels that muddle is of a comic nature. It is here used under quotation marks since Forster referred to it as a sort of a philosophical notion, especially in *A Passage To India*. This is confirmed in a letter sent to William Plomer of 28 September 1934, where he states that 'he tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an unexplained muddle' (Forster, 1934). Nevertheless, he often uses it in both senses. With regard to that, this paper focuses on the criticism of English (British) society, primarily through a direct conflict with other cultures, which exposes all the flaws of the former. In depiction of this conflict, Forster resorts to numerous literary techniques, but characterisation seems to be his favourite tool.

With regard to this, one should point out that many of his protagonists bear autobiographical traits, with rare experiments featuring one-dimensional characters sinking into obvious symbolism, which reflects his influential theory of 'round' and 'flat' characters. By doing so, Forster always takes an individual as a starting point, avoiding generalisations, fully aware of the fact that the universe rests upon a myriad of microcosms, which, for Forster, are nothing but human beings. There are numerous examples of such a stance in his novels, not necessarily in the form of authorial aside. This brings us to recent critical accounts of Forster's novels, written within the colonial/postcolonial discourse, which prove that Forster is equally alive today as he was at the height of creativity. *A Passage To India* is widely acclaimed as his most popular novel outside the English-speaking world, in which the aforementioned issues and themes are internationalised, yet one cannot disregard the fact that much of that potential is present in other novels as well, primarily in the Italian novels, which, to a great extent, represent a general rehearsal for a master-piece on intercultural communication and understanding at a global level. This is discussed in detail in the sections to follow.

2.1. *A ROOM WITH A VIEW*

The choice of Italy as a setting for the aforementioned novels is not arbitrary, given the fact that the country represents the hereditary, through ancient Rome, of the old Hellenic culture, making it the cradle of modern European civilisation. Nevertheless, the trouble concerning a visit to Italy is of a double nature: first, Philistines cannot grasp the fact that the contemporary Italy is not an idealised empire of old times, and even if it were, it would be but a reflection of another culture; secondly, they are limited by their materialistic view of the world, preventing them from realising that there are things that resist the idea of being merely purchased or taken away but that, instead, need to be experienced, with a view to accepting and nurturing them.

A similar stance is found in Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point*, in a scene when Mark Rampion, the then poor, young, uncorrupted officer, tries to explain to his future wife, a young lady coming from a well-to-do family from the English countryside, what she has actually witnessed in Italy, although he himself had never been there. Yet, it is exactly that sort of intuitive and intrinsic purity of an artistic soul that is capable of understanding aesthetic values anywhere in the world. This scene is intensified by a perfectly pastoral setting, a view so endearing to Forster (a meadow near Cambridge in *The Longest Journey*, hills around Florence in *A Room With A View*, olive groves around Monteriano in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*). The purpose of such paragraphs is to offer a contrast to a somewhat sombre English scenery, to infuse it with a bit of light and radiance. In fact, it seems that the true conflict between these two concepts lies here, with rigid English traditionalism and its values, having served as a measure of humankind for centuries, being confronted with the Renaissance one, equally well-rooted but perverted as well. Both of them appear ideal on the surface, yet none of them is fully acceptable.

Forster's idea, though, is not to show a direct conflict, but to reveal each one's flaws, where the latter, as a paradigm of spirituality, is supposed to be experienced deep in one's heart, not merely visually. In that context, the reference to the "tactile Giotto" scene (Forster, 2000a) as an example of mechanical reception of sensory perception without any sort of understanding and, even more importantly, without ennobling oneself is but mandatory in critical terms. On top of that, there is Forster's remark on graduates in England, who, in his words, are in possession of everything but soul (Gardner, 1988). As a matter of fact, in this case Forster points to the issue of self-complacency, of self-isolation, of lack of understanding for everybody else, which leads one society into demise or, at best, in stagnation. This brings the

character of Charlotte Bartlet into the reader's mind, as an embodiment of that condescending, Victorian stance, who is not capable of performing even a useful act without leaving an impression of awkwardness, which produces a completely opposite effect. Such an act is a scene of changing the room with the Emerson father and son in *A Room With A View*, where, moral implications aside, there lingers an overwhelming issue of whether everything could have been less civilised but more beautiful and comfortable? Or, in other words, could one have avoided the 'muddle'? Here, it is necessary that the reader should understand 'civilised' as complicated, high-toned, but, above all, utterly in concord with the Victorian code that would not accept the organic unity of form and contents, preferring the former to the latter. Although designated as Italian, the novel does not teem with Italian characters, but Forster skillfully assigns them indicative cameo roles.

By referring to an already well-established stereotype about cold and unattractive Englishwomen with his comment that 'Italian girls only need to comb their hair back in order to be considered English' (Forster, 2000a), Forster complements the image of English people as a nation deprived of the sense for aesthetics. What is interesting in this particular case is that the comment is provided through the character of Signora Bertolini, which is one of the earliest examples of colonial mimicry in Forster's novels, the device more freely used in *A Passage To India*. In addition, the reply points to another concept of colonial studies inevitable in discourses deploying the encounter of two or more cultures, and that is cultural grammar. According to Bhabha (London, 1994), colonial mimicry is 'the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*'. In addition, In Bhabha's words, 'in order to be effective, it must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference' (London, 1994). With regard to this, Signora Bertolini's remark is a benign example of this phenomenon compared to instances appearing in *A Passage to India*, where it gains its full scale, due to the genuine colonial status of India, as opposed to the metaphysical one of Italy concerning the attitude of the British (English).

Essentially a love story, the novel, in the first part, revolves around the characters of Lucy and Cecil, with the character of George Emerson waiting for his chance. For his part, Cecil falls in love with Lucy on an institutional level, whereas George, naturally, only perceives her as a human being. The former seeks for her company in order not to fail social conventions, very much like Ronny Heaslop and Miss Adela Quested, who, as a British official, needs to meet all the more rigid social norms of Anglo-India. The key difference between Cecil and George lies in the fact that Cecil wants to fall in love with the Lucy that attended 'a spiritual training'

in Italy, and he is somewhat disappointed by her quick forgetting, that is, by her inability to list all the wonders of Italy and speak highly of them, which is exactly what is expected of her at receptions organised by Sawstonian aristocratic circles. In that respect, Lucy is a counterpart of Adela Quested, who is not impressed by the superior stance taken by Anglo-Indians in their relation to the local people of Chandrapore.

This becomes particularly visible in the second part of the novel, taking place in the idyllic scenery of the English countryside, where Sawston, as a London suburb, is situated. Yet, it is the other Italian novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, that deals in more detail with this small town mentality, and in a much grimmer tone.

2.2. *WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD*

Offering an almost identical setting as the one depicted in *A Room With A View*, Forster implies that the two novels form organic unity, making it virtually impossible to mention one without the other. Nevertheless, the novel in question features some more important themes as regards Forster's oeuvre than the latter. At the same time, Forster most skillfully infuses this novel with facts that refer to the universal nature of certain categories, which is particularly elaborated in *A Passage To India*.

An attitude towards religion and relations among religions are some of the most notable issues raised by Forster in the aforementioned novel, and his interest in such matters is already visible in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, through the character of Lilia. Her love affair and subsequent marriage with Gino, a poor private, is not troublesome only for financial reasons and with regard to her social status but also for the reason of a possible religious conflict. Unlike *A Passage To India*, whose social setting inevitably hints at likely divisions along this axis, the conflict in this novel features one of Forster's obsessions and deeply personal struggles, that of the divide within the Christian world and the loss of faith, especially within the Western denominations.

This topic is introduced in the beginning of the novel through the fact that Lilia is a Protestant while Gino is a Roman Catholic, where the church is solely understood in the former terms. When Harriet, the protagonist's sister-in-law, says that Lillia solemnly promised that she would attend the church on a regular basis, although it would be impossible to confirm given the physical distance between the two, it is nothing but a desire to establish control over one and fulfil social norms, for the sake of maintaining the required social etiquette. The true meaning of such

an interaction is best seen through the significance of public opinion in societies like that, and all those established on such grounds, such as the Anglo-Indian one as depicted in *A Passage to India*. In Laffin's words, 'public opinion is a major force that assesses, praises, or condemns the behaviour of an individual, leaving them little freedom of choice in directing their own conduct' (Giordano, 2001). The pinnacle of this discussion is represented by the description of the Marabar Caves in *A Passage To India*, in which the scarcity of light and the indeterminate nature of echoes, resonating with the same answer deprived of any sensible message or shape, is reminiscent of the profound crisis of the 20th-century faith, in particular in the West, resulting in the rise of a number of new philosophies, creeds, and spiritual movements embodied in the New Age.

Through the image of Kawa Dol, a tilting rock on top of the Marabar Caves, whose volatility reminds one of an uncertain direction Christianity might take in the near future, Forster conveys an idea, indeed a prophecy, of an uncertain future for the whole of mankind, given the inseparable nature of the colonial discourse, domineering the then Western world, and its Christian roots. The onset of WWII only proved this prophecy to be even more sinister than Forster the agnostic and cynic could have imagined.

Finally, another major issue that premieres in this novel and is explicated in *A Passage to India* is the issue of marginal groups. In more precise terms, it is the issue of the dynamic nature of the positions of the metropolis and the colony, with the latter assuming power over the former under certain circumstances. It is exactly the situation between Lilia and her husband Gino, where Lilia, double underprivileged in the Sawstonian environment as a woman and as a widow, all of a sudden, due to her financial independence, gains power over her poor husband. Subsequently, she feels the same power over Philip, her brother-in-law. Unfortunately, she exercises that power with such little concern for Philip's feelings and with such bitterness that the reader inevitably feels compassion for the former bully. This is replicated in *A Passage to India*, in the scene of trial of Dr Aziz, when Adela Quested accuses him of molesting her in one of the caves. In Adela's case, the relations of subordination are even more complex. It looks as if those proverbial worms of sounds from the Marabar Caves, wriggling and merging into each other just to wriggle again and merge for an eternity, symbolised the cyclic nature of colonial relations in the widest possible terms.

The minority, institutionally deprived of any rights, stands with their powerful weapon ready against the majority wielding the seeming power provided by the very institutions. On top of that, Lilia is trying to make some profound changes,

not realising that any reform not coming from within can only cause some even greater trouble. Again, in this respect, Mrs Moore and Adela Quested are their counterparts in *A Passage To India*.

The Civilian Club in Chandrapore is matched by the cafe on the central square in Monteriano, representing the hub of social activities, but only as regards to men. Gradually, Lilia comes to an understanding that women in Italy are nothing but decorative items, and that they are not expected to appear in public, unless under supervision of men or chaperons, as is the case with Lucy in *A Room With A View*. Thus, a subtle relation with the notion of purdah in India, which is referred to as 'the custom of keeping women in seclusion and clothing them completely in public, practised in most Hindu and Muslim societies' (Childs, 2002). The only difference is that in Italy, as opposed to India, this seclusion is only a recommendation, though it appears much graver than the actual ban, which brings us back to the power of public opinion. The women in Italy can be exposed to the eyes of other men, but it almost never happens, since their husbands never bring their company back home. In fact, they have no need to, given that the whole of social life takes place in cafes. As Forster bluntly (2000b) puts it, 'Italy is such a delightful place to live if you happen to be a man (p.53)

Feeling lonely in her hill house, Lilia engages in a futile battle for a more substantial life, aiming not at restricting someone else's liberties but enlarging her own. While her walks through a forest are mere eccentricity in England, they take on a completely different meaning in Italy, due to differences in respective cultural grammars. In Italy, they represent a case of violation of deeply rooted social norms, very much as the walks undertaken by Adela Quested and Mrs Moore in *A Passage To India*. For the sake of absorbing the damage made, Forster resorts to the introduction of the Other through the notion of foreignness, which renders Lilia as 'the privileged maniac, the tourist' (Forster, 2000b: p.54), who is pardoned due to her obvious difference. At home, she is treated in a similar manner by Gino, as they are, in his opinion, two different worlds. The trouble begins when these worlds come into contact, causing Gino to realise that her behaviour has imminent repercussions for his social position, again under the influence of public opinion.

3. CONCLUSION

Up until the 20th century, literary discussions had little to do with the outer world, relying mostly on aesthetical principles and formal features of a work of art, with its social context neglected, often not comprehended. Then, the unprecedented

development of literary and artistic thought, embodied in a multitude of theoretical accounts, reviews, and texts in general exploring the world of fiction and poetry and of performative arts from all possible angles reflected the milieu of vast socio-economic change, to which it, in turn, contributed to a large scale. Today, most of these schools, groups, and circles are known under the umbrella term of Modernism. Its huge scope of views of literature determined and, to a large extent, expanded the boundaries of literary studies, equipping them with the necessary metalanguage and providing it with academic outlines. Yet, the true global influence of literary criticism on the general readership and, subsequently, on matters concerning the spheres of life not having been previously associated with the world of fiction, as well as other scholarly disciplines, is made possible through the Establishment of Postmodernism, an even wider concept than Modernism itself, featuring, among other things, the field of colonial/postcolonial studies and discourse, in which the perception of the literary text makes a transition from a by-product of colonial rule to the key element upon which it rests and which essentially shapes it.

In that respect, Forster's oeuvre is more vivid than ever, not just his fictional pinnacle of *A Passage To India*. The first previews of these major issues are noticeable as early as in his Italian novels, through narrative passages and dialectical exchanges concerning the notion of identity, that is, the Other, in the widest sense of the concept. Though often taken as an inseparable whole in critical circles, each of the Italian novels offers a slightly different approach to the issues designated. In *A Room With A View*, they are treated in a predominantly benign fashion, where the cultural conflict between the two cultures is restricted to an anecdotal level, at times stereotypical, where Italy is but a symbol of a spiritual and aesthetical refuge offering a playground for stuffy Victorian scruples, whereas England is presented through the mentality of upper-class suburbia. Sawston, on the one hand, and Monteriano and, in part, Florence, on the other hand, function as wider social metaphors, as two physically distant yet metaphysically interconnected entities forever caught in an interplay of domination and subordination as a basic pattern of colonial/postcolonial discourse. An almost identical situation is found in *A Passage To India*, where the Civilian Club of the Anglo-Indian community and the local population of the town of Chandrapore lead seemingly independent lives, but it only takes a couple of newcomers from the metropolis to show that, under a calm surface, there is a vortex of bustling colonial relations in need of more complex interpretations.

In the end, the novels analysed offer Forster's craftsmanship to intertwine the two axes of political, social, and cultural relations in global terms, the East-West and North-South ones, in such a way that the needle of his compass imperceptibly goes

full circle, depicting the abundance and dynamics of the respective conflicts, leaving us, as the only constant, the faith in the power of an individual not to succumb to the pressures of their environment, no matter the price.

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ФОРСТЕРОВИ 'ИТАЛИЈАНСКИ РОМАНИ' КАО ОГЛЕДНО ПОЉЕ ЗА ПУТ У ИНДИЈУ

Резиме

Е. М. Форстер писац је чија је аутореферентност уочљива на неколико нивоа – од тематике његових романа и приповијетки, преко постојаности стилских обиљежја, лајтмотива, симбола и

јасне друштвене ангажованости, до транстекстуалности ликова као, вјероватно, најупечатљивијег обиљежја његовог опуса.

Кроз призму неких кључних појмова из колонијалног/постколонијалног дискурса, рад се бави Форстеровим 'италијанским романима' (*Соба с погледом* и *Тамо гдје се анђели не усуђују да кроче*) као огледним пољем за неке од тема и мотива детаљно разрађених у роману *Пут у Индију*.

► **Кључне ријечи:** Форстерови 'италијански романи', *Пут у Индију*, културна граматика, колонијална мимикрија, културни контакт, акултурација.

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