

E.M. Forster and the Writing of Empire: Aestheticism, Humanism, and Liberal Guilt

Abstract

This study suggests a different mode of viewing the contradictions inherent in E.M. Forster's standing with regard to the British Empire. It contests the view that Forster is an anti-imperialist by making use of a wider range of his non-fictional writings. It also makes use of biographical proof to demonstrate that Forster was *personally* involved in the project of the British Empire, and therefore, complicit in the imperial venture. Forster's attitude towards his country's imperial dash is gauged within the context of his intellectual and literary relations with the Bloomsbury group. The mercurial quality of his discourse about the imperial circumstances is analysed in order to highlight the perfunctory, self-reflexive nature of his compassion with the "natives."

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ملخص

يعرف الكاتب الإنجليزي إ.م. فورستر، ذو الميول الليبرالية والتوجه الإنساني، بمناهضته للإمبريالية والاستعمار. تعنى هذه الدراسة بمحاولة إظهار الجوانب الخفية لفلسفة هذا الكاتب تجاه موضوع الإمبريالية والاستعمار الإنجليزي عبر استقاءها من كتاباته السياسية الأقل رواجاً في الأوساط الأدبية ويحاول التحليل أن يلقي الضوء على عدة عوامل في مسيرة فورسترو كتاباته تثبت توأته مع النزعة الإمبريالية الاستعمارية الإنجليزية بل و مشاركته الفعلية في تحقيقها.

Introduction

Edward Morgan Forster's declared sympathies with the colonised earned him a reputation of a liberal anti-imperialist writer. Without doubt, most of his enunciations about the British Empire were acerbic and ironical. In his "Notes on the English Character" (1920), for example, he lamented the fact that "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."¹ In another essay, "India and the Turk" (1922), he described Britain as "a solitary crusader... whose Ministers assert that the British Empire stands behind them."² Such declarations have largely exonerated him from connivance with the imperial temper of his country and have allowed him to demarcate himself from what Patrick Brantlinger calls "the jingoist trend in late Victorian and Edwardian writing"

represented mainly by Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard.³ Aided by the label of liberal humanism which has constantly been associated with his literary vision, Forster has incessantly exculpated himself from political and ideological intention in his fiction. Yet a close reading of his work betrays an outright political commitment to the issues of his age, namely British imperialism.

Edward Said, Benita Parry, Frederick Crews, Stuart Christie, and Michael Gorra, have all pointed to Forster's imperialist sympathies, with special focus on his novel A Passage to India (1924).⁴ Conversely, some other critics have tried to absolve him from complicity with the triumphalist rhetoric of empire. Amongst the latter is Mohammad Shaheen in his E. M. Forster and the Politics of Imperialism (2004).⁵ Shaheen agrees with some of Said's arguments in Culture and Imperialism about Forster's complicity in British imperialism, yet, he opposes Said's inclusion of Forster among imperialist writers, arguing that had Said considered Forster's Egyptian writings, he would have reviewed his judgment. Shaheen goes all lengths to prove that Forster is an anti-imperialist by excavating unpublished documents such as an unpublished lecture titled "Kipling's Poems," delivered at the Weybridge Literary Society in 1913 in Monument Green. In this lecture, Forster declared that "Kipling is vulgar" and that "He does brag."⁶ He also complied with a caricature of Kipling titled "Kipling is Not Literature," describing the writer as "putty, brass and paint."⁷ Shaheen believes that "Nowhere in Forster's writing do we have such a vigorous argument about the politics of imperialism where Forster states his anti-imperialist views with clarity, vigour and confidence."⁸ To Forster's conclusion that "Kipling Is Not Literature," Shaheen adjoins that "by analogy [for Forster] imperialism is not literature."⁹

In this study, I suggest a different mode of viewing the contradictions inherent in Forster's standing with regard to the British Empire. I intend to contest the view that Forster is an anti-imperialist by making use of a wider range of his non-fictional writings. Using biographical proof, I will argue that Forster was *personally* involved in the project of the British Empire, and therefore, complicit in the imperial venture. I will attempt to position Forster's attitude towards his country's imperial dash within the context of his intellectual and literary relations with the Bloomsbury group. I will also attempt to analyse the mercurial quality of his discourse about the imperial circumstances, and to highlight the perfunctory, self-reflexive nature of his compassion with the "natives."

The Bloomsbury Group and "Colonial Civility"

Forster's appurtenance—albeit intermittent—to the Bloomsbury Group¹⁰ may account for his mitigated, even ambiguous, attitude towards British imperialism. He praised the group as "composed of people of high intelligence, who have spiritual integrity, great critical ability, economic independence and liberal opinions"¹¹ On the one hand, the major figure of the group and the most esteemed by Forster was Leonard Woolf, "a renegade former colonial officer" who founded with his wife Virginia Woolf the Hogarth Press which published anti-imperial books.¹² On the other hand, the group was largely believed to be the product of London's "intellectual aristocracy"¹³—a factor of inconsistency in relation to anti-imperial feelings. Roy Anindyo provides a useful theoretical frame for understanding the implications of such contradictions. He

argues that the writings of the Bloomsbury Group demonstrate an explicit view of “colonial civility,” a normative code of behaviour which amplifies the rift between England and its others.¹⁴ Despite being a distinctive constituent of English identity and national unity, colonial civility becomes a factor of exclusion when transferred to the colonial terrain. Such formative incongruities underlying Forster’s career may account for his half-way sympathy with the colonized and for his half-hearted critique of imperialism.

Writer, Civil Servant, or Colonial Agent

Forster’s experience with British imperialism transcends mere observation to full participation. His travels to the periphery not only contributed to his professional career as a writer, but also enhanced his status as a “civil” servant of his country. Forster, who had already toured India in the company of English friends between 1912 and 1913, revisited the subcontinent in 1921 where he acted for six months as private secretary to the Maharajah of the native state of Dewas Senior.¹⁵ This interlude, which he would fully document in 1953 in *The Hill of Devi*, availed him with the material for the writing of the final section of *A Passage to India*.¹⁶

Furthermore, Forster worked as a Red Cross volunteer in Alexandria from 1915 to 1918 and was also commissioned by the Labour Party Research Department to report on British colonial activities in Egypt in 1920. He had visited Egypt three times. On the first visit during WWI, he extended his stay to three years under the aegis of the International Red Cross. There he worked as “searcher,” an occupation that involved “visiting the wounded in hospitals and trying to gather information about missing men.”¹⁷ “Though technically a civilian,” Forster “appeared as part of the occupying army; he wore an officer’s Khaki uniform and received military privileges, such as paying half fare on trams and trains.”¹⁸ Although Forster was presumably a civil servant, he had direct contacts with political and military personalities such as Sir Ronald Storrs and General Sir Archibald Murray.¹⁹

The functions that Forster occupied as Secretary to an Anglophile Maharajah, as Red Cross volunteer, and as reporter on behalf of the Labour Party, are telling of the extent of his involvement in colonial and imperialistic schemes. Although marked by a civil-service nature, and regardless of his personal and “customized” sympathies with the periphery, these roles place Forster at the heart of the imperial mission by virtue of their strategic collision with the power relations inherent in master-subordinate encounters. It is worth recalling here that although Forster missed no opportunity to criticise British imperialism, he, in many ways contributed to the building and solidification of the imperial project through his effective role in the many functions assigned to him by the government of his own country.

Humanism as Aestheticism

In his pamphlet titled “The Government of Egypt” (1920), Forster was anxious to press the claim that the European colonists possess protective “rights” towards the colonised natives. He articulated a dissembling compassion with the Europeans who “had, and still have, scarcely any duties to the land where they claim so many rights.”

²⁰ At the same time, he regretted the failure of the revolt led by Urabi Pasha against the

dynasty of Mohammad Ali in 1882, which “could have set Egypt upon the path of constitutional liberty,” without missing the opportunity of describing the reigning family as “oriental despots” who exploited the peasants and agricultural labourers (4).

Forster ambivalently presented the two-edged quality of the colonial function of Lord Cromer (Evelyn Baring), the long-time British Consul-General in Egypt:

He pleased foreign creditors by rendering Egypt solvent and he introduced useful and humane reforms—e.g., encouraged irrigation and abolished the lash and the forced labour....But he had a profound distrust of the Orientals; he started the flood of British officials who now deluge the administration, and his aim was a contented but torpid Egypt who would never criticise the Occupying Power (4).

Forster’s detachedness seems quite questionable as he proceeds with the detailing of Lord Cromer’s civilizing endeavours, and by pointing to his only fault—quite a benign one—which is his “profound distrust of the Orientals.” This statement constructs the colonial subject as much as it actually constructs the colonised. Even as it hints at the accruing political abjectness of the Egyptians, it actually disguises its scope through an emblematic colonial discourse about the imperial power’s responsibility for the economic and moral upgrading of the colony. Furthermore, Forster’s declaration strangely echoes Arthur James Balfour’s description of Lord Cromer’s achievements in Egypt:

Everything he has touched he has succeeded in.... Lord Cromer’s services during the past quarter of a century have raised Egypt from the lowest pitch of social and economic degradation until it now stands among Oriental nations, I believe, absolutely alone in its prosperity, financial and moral.²¹

As a search officer for the Red Cross, Forster also took advantage of his stay in Egypt to closely observe the British occupation and the response of the local people:

Our troops, and in particular the British Tommies, were well received, and though the colonials (who ought never to have quartered among friendly oriental peoples) rioted in Cairo and elsewhere, and regarded the natives as “blacks,” their misbehaviour did not discredit the Expeditionary force as a whole. I have walked alone, both in the native quarters of towns and in the country, and always met with courtesy and kindness, and I have entered without difficulty mosques that were supposed to be fanatic. The mild and cheerful Egyptians seemed (especially to one who had known the Indians) an easy people to live with. But evil influences were at work (“The Government of Egypt,” 5).

Forster’s constant portrayal of the Orientals as happy and contented with colonisation works to underscore their own complicity in the work of empire. Moreover, rhetoric of conquest is perceptible in his relish at the unimpeded access to sanctified, and otherwise, forbidden places which are reminiscent of Mrs. Moore’s

infringe in *A Passage to India*. It is useful in this context to draw on Homi Bhabha's description of the intellectual and psychological complicity between Orientalist and Orientalised as paradoxical in nature. To borrow Bhabha's words, Forster's colonial stereotype can be seen in terms of "fetish" that "threatens the closure of the racial/epidermal schema for the colonial subject and opens the royal road to colonial fantasy."²² The process of Orientalisation is therefore founded on fetishism and on what Bhabha calls the "scopic drive"²³ which renders the other observable for gratification.

Kojin Karatani has described this trend as "aestheticism," arguing that the aesthetic in colonial reading is a scheme of "sadistic invasion" which allows some anti-imperialist gestures to re-enact the very epistemologies underlying imperialist discourse.²⁴ Forster, who tried hard to demarcate himself from the master-narratives of imperial superiority by recognising the intellectual and ethical presence of the natives, concurrently profited from a patronizing gaze that placed the latter as objects for scientific observation. Interestingly, Karatani considers the inclination to look upon the other as an object of study as characteristic of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought whose major aesthetic facet lies in the appropriation of the other on the basis of his confirmed inferiority. It is possible to argue here that Forster's professed "humanism" places him comfortably as a disciple within this category, and his art within the category of what Karatani labels the aestheticism which "refuses to acknowledge that the other who does not offer any simulacrum of a 'stranger' lives a life 'out there.'"²⁵ "Aestheticism always appear as anticolonialists," Karatani suggests,²⁶ and this is basically why Forster has deluded many critics into considering him an incontestably anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist writer.

Orientalist Ascription as Colonial Appropriation

Forster's "The Government of Egypt" re-centres the metropolitan constituent at the heart of the whole issue of imperialism, susceptibly casualising and banalising its complexities. Commenting on the censorship on the local Egyptian newspapers, he qualified the transgression as "more than average stupidity" (5) not because it breaches the rights of the locals' freedom of expression, but rather because it is devastating to the image of the British colonial command. "The total result of these suppressions was disastrous," Forster complained, because "not only were the natives irritated, but they believed we had been defeated, not merely in Gallipoli but all over the world, and dared no longer tell the truth"(5).

In evoking Gallipoli, Forster actually referred to the dismal failure of the Dardanelles Expedition (1915-1916) which pushed Winston Churchill to resign from admiralty. Britain's subsequent involvement in the Greco-Turkish war of 1922, commonly known as the "Chanak Crisis" or "The Chanak Affair," was partly validated by the existence of thousands of Allied soldiers' graves at Gallipoli. When the Turks breached the Greek line and then occupied Smyrna, seeking to regain Constantinople and Eastern Thrace, the British government gave utter support to the Greeks and showed extreme hostility to the Turks.²⁷ Churchill, who became Secretary of the Colonies, sent a heated message to the commanders of the British troops who were

stationed to defend the international zone and who were aided by French and Italian soldiers:

Not only does the freedom of the Straits for which such immense sacrifices were made in the war involve vital imperial and world-wide interests, but we cannot forget that there are 20,000 British and Anzac graves in the Gallipoli Peninsula and that it would be an abiding source of grief to the Empire if these were to fall into the ruthless hands of the Kemalists.²⁸

Forster's outrage at Churchill's logic of war-mongering made him respond in a characteristic way, championing the principle of "the peace which passeth understanding":

Our rulers knew that their policy would not be popular, and in the hopes of stampeding us they permitted this vile appeal [the graves at Gallipoli]—the viler because the sentiment that it tries to pervert is a noble one and purifies the life of a nation when directed rightly. The bodies of the young men who were buried out there have become spirit; whether they are British or Turk, they have no quarrel with one another now, no part in our patronage, no craving for more holocausts of young men. Anyone who has himself entered, however feebly, into the life of the spirit, can realise this.²⁹

In addition to his hypothesis of after-life conciliation, Forster surmised that both Churchill and Lloyd George had no political future. In his essay "Our Graves in Gallipoli" (1922), he satirised Churchill's appeal and condemned the principle of making war for the sake of more graves:

There is still room in Chanak. Also it is well for a nation that would be great to scatter its graves all over the world. Graves in Ireland, graves in Irak, Russia, Persia, India, each with its inscription from the Bible or Rupert Brooke. When England thinks fit, she can launch an expedition to protect the sanctity of her graves and can follow that by another expedition to protect the sanctity of additional graves.³⁰

It is true that Forster's "Our Graves" testifies to a celebration of Eastern values. Yet, a close scrutiny of his rhetoric demonstrates a most bewildering duplicity. In a simulated conversation of the grave-occupants, he attributes unprejudiced, humane qualities to the Turk, while he attributes qualities of caution and reservation to the English. In fact, it is implied that the interred Turk who testifies of candidness as opposed to his grave-side English mate, is aware of the identity of his neighbour since the opening of the exchange. This suggests that Forster views initiatives of communication as emanating chiefly from the Easterner, and that mutual understanding is not possible in this world but in the after-life as would clearly be intimated in the ending of *A Passage to India*. Forster, as expected, consistently keeps his perspective centred around the inscription of empire on the metropolitan subject's identity.

“Our Graves” largely explains Forster’s view that the Westerner should learn the art of imparting wisdom from the Easterner. Arguably, this kind of ascription is a form of appropriation charged with an underlying binary structure. It attributes reason and pragmatism to the Westerner and emotion and easy-going character to the Easterner, an aggressive hierarchy on which imperialism thrives. Forster’s project, then, is to appropriate a quarter of Eastern culture which, in turn, allocates a full access to its very territory. Such an underlying binary also depends on the inclination of exploiting and contracting an ontological model absent from Western life. In this case the structure of dominance is reversed.³¹ Forster succeeds in confirming the binary of European rationality and pragmatism and Oriental irrationality and effusiveness. This is probably what Uday Mehta has in mind when he charges liberals with exclusionary practices which are justified by “a plethora of anthropological descriptions that serve to buttress the claim of incompetence.”³²

This ascriptive process also validates the claim that Forster redirects all the imperial/colonial concerns inwardly, towards the metropolitan core. Through his mere idealisation of the Oriental’s temperament, he exfoliates the deep ambivalence characteristic of relations between coloniser and colonised. His wish that the Westerner learn from the Oriental illustrates his awareness that, as post-colonial subjects, both Orientals and Westerners will participate in the disruption of imperial binary systems, rendering them counter-directional, that is, giving them a transcultural quality. This case illustrates how “the engagement with the colonies became an increasingly important factor in the imperial society’s constitution and understanding of itself.”³³

Forster’s disenchanted accounting for the gradual crumbling of the British Empire as immanent in the failure of social relations between the British and the Indian race is given voice in his essay “Reflections on India” (1922). Here, he makes it clear that “The decent Anglo-Indian of today realizes that the great blunder of the past is neither political nor economic nor educational, but social.”³⁴ He concludes that “Never in history did ill-breeding contribute so much towards the dissolution of an Empire” (614-15). On the one hand, as Michael Gorra suggests, Forster “insists on seeing British imperialism not in political or historical terms but as a problem in individual human relations.”³⁵ On the other hand, this very controlling attitude highlights not a criticism of the British Empire itself, but a regretful remonstrance at its incapacity to perpetuate itself. This essentially blinds Forster to what Benita Parry explains as the real reasons behind the impossibility of interaction between British and Indians:

From its beginnings, the British-Indian relationship was a confrontation between philosophical systems, cognitive traditions, ethical doctrines and social modes which were sufficiently different to preclude spontaneous mutual understanding in the context of imperialist domination the possibility of British tolerance towards India’s norms and sympathetic exploration of its ideas was inhibited.³⁶

Centripetalism and Liberal Guilt

To Forster, Egypt, and precisely Alexandria, stands as the historic meeting point of East and West. Yet, faithful to his centripetal treatment of empire, he envisions Egypt

as not more than a point of departure towards his “literal” passage to India, an outlook which corroborates the rationale of imperialism. As Desmond Stewart suggests, Forster’s “glimpse of the Suez Canal at Port Said impressed him more than the ruined Acropolis in Athens.”³⁷ His trip to India through the Canal confirms Barbara Harlow’s assertion that “Egypt was the key to India” and that “the Suez Canal did facilitate, even speed, the ‘passage to India.’”³⁸ In his “Salute to the Orient” (1923), he envied the achievements of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the master builder of the Suez Canal, whose career, in Mia Carter’s words, “was characterised by soaring accomplishments, great notoriety, and scandal.”³⁹ This “Grand Français” dared implement “Napoleon Bonaparte’s dream of building across the Isthmus of Suez a canal that would serve as a ‘short cut’ to the richness of the East.”⁴⁰ Forster described the canal as “the narrow trough” contrived by de Lesseps “across the sands...to the mouths of the Indus and the Ganges,” and exclaimed: “May I never resemble M. de Lesseps” in his great achievements and enduring fame.⁴¹ In this self-comparison to de Lesseps, Forster assumed a role beyond that of a writer to embrace a discourse of conquest, speaking in terms of winning and losing the East and looking forward to “When obstacles cease to occur in my plans ...[to] get the utmost out of Orientals”(275).

England was in fact the first beneficiary from the opening of the Canal which enabled it to implement a more effective method of transportation of goods and commodities as well as a swifter embarkation of armed forces to control its empire in case of trouble.⁴² It is England, therefore, that got the “utmost out of Orientals” as Forster put it, when de Lesseps “had melted away the Orient’s geographical identity by (almost literally) dragging the Orient into the West.”⁴³

Speaking to a BBC audience in 1946 about “The Challenge of Our Time,” Forster evoked his most recent visit to India and also his observation of the “starvation and frustration” which “can reach proportions unknown to these islands.” He concluded his speech with the assertion that “our world is in a terrible mess.”⁴⁴ Forster lamented the fact that his education as a late Victorian Liberal of “lofty thoughts” was “imperfect” because it did not proffer the decisive truth that “our economic position” came from “the nice fat dividends” which in turn were provided by the exploitation of “the poor of our own country and the backward races abroad, and getting bigger profits from our investments than we should” (71). He realised that all these realities have changed in the present century, since “The dividends have shrunk,” “the poor have kicked,” and “the backward races are kicking—and more power to their boots” (71). These changes signify that “life has become less comfortable for the Victorian liberal,” whose “admirable outlook has lost the basis of golden sovereigns upon which it originally rose, and now hangs over the abyss” (71). Unmistakably, Forster’s critique does not dwell on the victims of England’s progress or on the nature of their movements; rather, it stresses the necessity for the English themselves to reckon with the disintegration of old absolutes and accept the mutability of facts so that they could be empowered to draw the necessary lessons. The rise of nationalist movements, auguring imperial vulnerability and uncertainty as well as the likelihood of imperial retreat, is important only inasmuch as it awakens the English to the new imperatives of coping with their shifting world.

Daniel Born suggests that the spectacle of urban poverty at home and the consciousness of imperialism abroad generated amongst major Victorian and Edwardian novelists a perturbation that engendered a sense of “liberal guilt.” Forster, it seems, not only felt this liberal guilt, but also rendered his very liberalism guilty of implication in the naturalization of imperial ideology. First, as he overlooked the plight of Britain’s underdogs—the “backward races”—and shrank from proposing solutions; and second, as he chose to linger over the ontological transformations affecting a select social group within the safe borders of the metropolis instead of acknowledging the rise of nationalist movements in the colonies. This is precisely why liberals, as Born points out, are commonly accused of “only argu[ing] reactively to protect the selfish interests of separate human beings” and of “displaying a sometimes paranoid defensiveness about individual human rights without a concomitant stress on civic obligations or virtues.”⁴⁵

Conclusion

Forster’s rejection of jingoism in literature and his occasional criticisms of the aggressive penchant of his country won him the label of anti-imperialist. His connection to the Bloomsbury group, his dealings with the Leftist Woolf Hogarth press, as well as his self-professed liberalism were all formative influences in his “open-minded” reception of England’s others. Yet, as the discussion has established, Forster’s mitigated anti-imperialism and his half-hearted sympathy with the colonized are due to “colonial civility” which he shared with the Bloomsbury group. His attitude is in the main that of an aestheticist in his responses to the Egyptian anti-royalist movements. His assessment of the British involvement in the Greco-Turkish war enacts a recentering of the Anglo-Saxon self as the privileged subject of empire. While conceding the fact that empire was part of the order of things, Forster believed that precedence should be given to the ways of coping with its contradictions, not to the evocation of the oppressed. For him, the concrete events of empire are important only inasmuch as they awaken the metropolitan subject to the imperatives of managing a new reality.

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