

*A Narrative Interpretation of
A Passage to India
from Postmodern Perspectives*

外 国 语 言 文 学 研 究 文 库



《印度之行》 叙事的后现代解读

索宇环 著

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上海交通大学出版社
SHANGHAI JIAO TONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

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By Yuhuan Suo

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内 容 提 要

本书运用后现代叙事学中的政治、文化、宗教、伦理等视角,对 20 世纪英国著名作家 E. M. 福斯特的代表作《印度之行》进行叙述视角、叙述结构、情节、空间等方面的细致的文本分析解读。本书以一部专著解读一部小说的方式,在国内叙事学研究领域中较为少见,因而成为同类作品中的显著者。本书适合高等院校人文、外语学科的教师和学生阅读。

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

《印度之行》叙事的后现代解读/索宇环著. —上海:
上海交通大学出版社,2010
(外国语言文学研究文库)
ISBN 978-7-313-06196-6

I. 印... II. 索... III. 长篇小说—文学评
论—英国—现代 IV. I561.074

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2010)第 007579 号

《印度之行》叙事的后现代解读

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上海交通大学出版社出版发行

(上海市番禺路 951 号 邮政编码 200030)

电话:64071208 出版人:韩建民

常熟市梅李印刷有限公司 印刷 全国新华书店经销

开本:787mm×960mm 1/16 印张:11.25 字数:210 千字

2010 年 4 月第 1 版 2010 年 4 月第 1 次印刷

印数:1~2030

ISBN 978-7-313-06196-6/I 定价:28.00 元

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前言

叙事学发展到后现代，已不仅仅是关于文学叙事作品里诸如叙述者、叙述视角、人物、情节等叙事手段的工作原理的学科，而是扩大为包括小说、神话、日记、游记、谈话、电影、广告、戏剧、档案、诉状等一切语篇中诸如叙述者、叙述视角、作者、读者、人物、情节、声音、时间、空间等叙事手段与政治、经济、文化、法律、道德、伦理、阶级、种族、性别等社会要素之间的互动关系。叙事学发展到这个阶段和层次，已经不再是一个单一的学科了，而是跨越了很多相关领域的庞大而复杂的科学体系。后现代是一个更加理性、更加人性的时代。叙事不仅是语言的、诗学的、美学的工程，而且也是政治的、经济的、伦理的、道德的体现。叙事不仅是作者的、叙述者的创造，而且也是读者的、批评者的成果。后现代叙事理论强化了叙事行为和叙事作品中的人的要素，作者的声音、叙述者的意志、人物的立场、读者的经历、批评者的视角共同参与到叙事作品的建构和解构过程中来，使得叙事作品生动、丰富、曲折、耐人寻味，而且也使得叙事作品具有了永无止境的解读空间。

英国小说家爱德华·摩根·福斯特发表于1924年的《印度之行》，不仅为作者带来了无与伦比的荣誉，而且也给世界留下了一个魅力永恒的谜题。这部小说的魅力到底体现在哪里？小说中的景物描写那般荒凉沉闷，故事里的人物既非绝代佳人，又非盖世英雄，情节朴素简单，既无杀戮，亦无艳遇，究竟是什么让几代读者对它爱不释手，潜心钻研？

经过本人多年的阅读和思考，对此问题有了一个临时的答案，那就是作者福斯特在这部小说里做了一个超越时空的跨越，而且是多维度的跨越，所以才对读者构成了意识形态、政治、美学、种族、阶级、性别、诗学领悟力和承受力的多方挑战。摩尔夫人与阿德拉的印度之行，不仅是一次远涉重洋的跨洲旅行，更是一次民族跨越，是盎格鲁人与印度人这两个文化渊源迥异的民族进行的一次大胆的亲密接触；摩尔夫人、阿德拉、菲尔丁与阿齐兹之间的友谊是两个阶级（中产阶级与劳动阶级）、两个宗教（基督教与伊斯兰教）的跨越；英国殖民统治印度不可避免地会发生东西两大文明碰撞。这些超乎常人的跨越本身就足以令读者瞠目结舌了，不仅如此，福斯特还向我们推出了性别跨越（女性变被动为主动，闯进男性的领地，主动出击，探索性爱的极限，挑战婚姻的权威）和政治跨越（殖民者和被殖民者这两个地位和利益截然冲突的社会阶层进行深层次的接触和交流，俨然一个乌托邦式的殖民模式）。故事里善良人之间的真诚相处

却是那样多灾多难、咫尺天涯，不就是这许多的惊天跨越所致吗？

读者对这部文学作品的恋恋不舍，还因为作者在写作手法上进行了同样大胆的融汇——现实主义、浪漫主义、现代主义、后现代主义有机地杂糅，极尽含蓄与深刻之能事。故事展开的外在线索，不是时间的推移，而是空间的位移；叙述者不是一个全能的旁观者，也不是一个混入故事人物中的参与者，而是多种叙述者轮流执事；作为英国人在印度发生的故事，小说不仅探索了英国与印度之间的文化关系，而且还涉及伊斯兰教与印度教之间的瓜葛；孤男寡女相处，爱情却奇迹般地干涸，演化为误解和仇恨；小说的自然分布、空间的依次流转竟然与小说的情节、人物的命运存在着严格的吻合；在殖民与被殖民为主导题材的故事里，作者竟然还特别关注宗教信仰、伦理道德、婚姻观念的拷问；一个自称是脱离政治羁绊的人文主义作家，却处处流露出其强烈而矛盾的政治倾向。福斯特似乎是一个复杂、神秘的作家，他既属于那个年代，又不局限于那个年代；既属于那个民族，又不局限于那各民族；既属于那个性别，又不局限于那个性别；仿佛痴迷于艺术手法的实验，又似乎念念不忘社会人生之困惑。这种是是非非、真假莫辨、犹豫不定的倾向，最适合的解读工具便是后现代视角——承认一部作品的多重设计，承认作者的多重人格、包容观念和倾向上的矛盾甚至冲突，不把内容和形式割裂开来研究，不轻易给作品和作者定性，而是潜心于理解作品的存在和作者的心态。

《〈印度之行〉叙事的后现代解读》从后现代视角，解读一部现代的作品，并非有意颠覆前人的研究成果，也无意标新立异故弄玄虚，而是追求以一种包容的、开放的、发展的、动态的姿态对待经典作品，努力对《印度之行》作一个详尽的、客观的、深刻的、系统的、公正的分析，以饯一切热衷于文学、致力于文学批评的同仁。

索宇环

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Introduction

E. M. Forster, a writer hard to label

Edward Morgan Forster was born in 1879 in London. The first twenty years of his life coincided with the last two decades of the Victorian time (1837~1901), the most triumphant and complacent period of Imperial Britain. He was very familiar with the genteel and proud middle class and was able to witness the gradual decline of the Empire. His father, an architect from a strict evangelical family, died of consumption soon after Forster was born. The absence of father from Forster's life excused him from being pious to a given British religion and probably reminded him of taking good care of his health. Forster was raised by his mother and paternal great-aunt. His domestic reality made women no more an attraction and inspired in him no more curiosity. Forster was educated as a dayboy at the Tonbridge School, Kent, an experience responsible for a good deal of his later criticism of the English public school system. His experience at King's College, Cambridge made him intellectual, liberal and humanistic. His unhappiness at the public school was compensated by his fulfillment at the college. He was motivated not only to read extensively but also travel broadly. His exposure to Mediterranean culture and Indian culture facilitated his production of his well-known Italian and Indian novels.

Forster began to write shortly after graduating from King's College (1900). Just as Edward VII ascended the throne, Forster started his career as a novelist. During five of the Edwardian years, from 1905 to 1910, he wrote four novels to testify the middle-class virtues and develop the position-prestige-property-owning theme. These novels were *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908), and *Howards End* (1910). They were products of that particular time, stories about the changing social conditions at the decline of Victorianism. While King Edward's craze for continental travel and contact shaped many of Forster's fictional characters, Edward's remaining domination by his mother, Queen Victoria, influenced much of Forster's planning of the ending of his novels.

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Forster's early productive years were also filled with his mixture with his Cambridge friends and with the Bloomsbury Group, a set of unconventional bohemian thinkers in England that included Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Dora Carrington and Lytton Strachey. He was not overwhelmed by the mainstream modernism, but he certainly developed his unique modernism as a consequence of that friendship.

In 1910, Edward VII died. It ended a kingdom for the nation and an artistic stage for Forster. Fourteen years elapsed between the end of his suburban series and the next major work. Forster spent three wartime years in Alexandria doing civilian work and visited India twice. After he returned to England, he wrote *A Passage to India* (1924), inspired by his experience in India. The novel marked a new turn in Forster's writing career and announced his new interest and concern in fictional creation. It is neither an Italian novel nor an English one; it is an Anglo-Indian novel. It is neither about property nor about marriage; it is about human relationships. The novel is set in the colonial age when India was occupied by the British, but it explores the friendship between an Indian doctor and a British schoolmaster during the former's trial on a false charge. This novel was the last that Forster published during his lifetime, a fascinating riddle considering that he was only in his forty-third year of his ninety one years of life. But two other works remain. Forster did not complete another novel, *Arctic Summer*, while a second novel written around 1914, *Maurice*, was published in 1971 after Forster's death. Forster only allowed it to be published after his death because of its overt homosexual theme. His progressive transgression of literary canons and conventions made his long life respectable. In 1969, upon his ninetieth birthday, Queen Elizabeth II awarded him Order of Merit, the supreme recognition of a British citizen.

As a modernist writer, Forster does not seem so experimental and complex in a "modern" way. The language and structure of the text do not present the obvious difficulties of a fiction by, say, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf (Messenger, 1991: 2). But, just as you are safely following the conventional unfolding of the story, you are baffled by some sudden and unexpected turns and twists like implausible marriages or sudden deaths (ibid.), making you feel that Forster is a rather mysterious writer, or a confusing one.

As an Edwardian writer, Forster presents Britain's imperial power, people's

confidence and pride in their country, the affluent education and its power, and its genteel middle class. However, just as you are fascinated with the grand Edwardian period and admiring Forster for his being a British citizen, you come across confusion, bewilderment, discrepancy, and deterioration on the part of the British middle class and resentment, despair, and rebellion on the part of the author. You are guided to conclude that the Edwardian period was marked by an odd mixture of affluence and poverty, complacency and panic (Messenger, 1991: 3-4), and that Forster is sometimes proud of his status of being a middle class British man, but other times is ashamed of his class and country. What kind of a novelist is E. M. Forster? you could not help but ask.

As a liberal intellectual, Forster was particularly alert to the social inequalities of his time and the contradictions in his position (Messenger, 1991: 4). He maintained faith in freedom and democracy, but he also sensed some threat to his beliefs and backgrounds. He knew the middle class intimately from the inside, but he also despised his conceited, selfish, hypocritical, and shallow people. He “yearned for some radical transformation of society so that the individual could experience a freedom and fulfillment not possible in a modern industrial state, but he was also aware that his own comfort, security and cultural values would be threatened, very possibly destroyed, by such a change” (Messenger, 1991: 5).

Forster advocated cross-cultural and cross-racial intercourse, but he was a homosexual, showing no interest in and passion for the opposite sex. He was sensitive to class power and class division, but he tried to bridge the gap and break the boundary between classes. He enjoyed and cared for substantially material life, but he also cherished Utopian yearnings for a transformed society and ideology. With the success of his novels, his public reputation grew. On the one hand, he reveled in the popular respect and admiration from the multiple British colleges; on the other hand, he was in constant association with the Bloomsbury Group, an unconventional artistic set, and had other connections with London literary Bohemia. He loved his luxurious cosmopolitan life in London, but he made two long visits to India and maintained a long-term friendship with an Indian youth. He conformed to the accepted literary expectations and beliefs about social reality inherited from the great Victorian novelists while simultaneously challenging them. Virginia Woolf captured this paradox when she wrote in an essay about Forster’s novels: he was “always

constrained to build the cage — society in all its intricacy and triviality — before he can free the prisoner” (“The Novels of E. M. Forster”).

“So Forster negotiates between contrary impulses and different ‘layers’ of reality in his fiction” (Messenger, 1991: 7). He is a writer hard to categorize and hard to forget. He is a man popular during his lifetime and remembered afterward. His novels generated extensive discussion and criticism and still do so.

***A Passage to India*, a novel hard to categorize**

A Passage to India was published in 1924. The novel is set in India at the time of Raj. The story is told in the third person. The novel consists of three parts: Mosque, Caves, and Temple. English officials come to India to “work,” but English ladies and gentlemen come to India to seek spiritual revival, marital possibility and personal friendship. The narrative hinges upon the dramatic contact between the English and the Indians.

Mrs. Moore, an old widow, and her prospective daughter-in-law, Adela Quested, have just accomplished a passage by sea from Britain to Imperial India. Their destination is Chandrapore, an insignificant town in Imperial India, where Mrs. Moore’s son, Ronny Heaslop, holds a post as City Magistrate. Adela comes to secure an engagement with her boyfriend, Ronny, but before that she needs to confirm her feeling toward him. Adela is an independent, virtuous, sympathetic, and serious-minded girl who wants to see the “real India.” Her English countrymen arrange for her a formal “Bridge Party” where she can meet some of the “real Indians.” However, the inherent racial line prevents Adela from knowing Indians. The English arrogance prevails at the party, and the Indians are not prepared for a lone “traitor.” Mrs. Moore, on a lone tour, strikes up a quick friendship with a young Moslem doctor, Aziz, in a mosque. As a compensation for the failed party, Cyril Fielding, the liberal Principal of the local Government College, invites the two ladies to a tea party, where Aziz and Professor Godbole, one of his Brahman colleagues, are present. Unfortunately, this, too, is a failure when Ronny’s arrival pollutes the atmosphere and the party breaks up in some embarrassment and resentment. Adela thus decides that India has changed Ronny, and that she no longer wishes to marry him. However, a mysterious car accident brings them closer, and they announce their engagement. Meanwhile, Aziz and Fielding are getting closer, too, and, by the end of the first part

of the novel, they have become close friends.

The second part of the novel revolves round the mysterious Marabar Caves some twenty miles off the city of Chandrapore. Having impulsively extended his invitation to the English ladies to visit these local curiosities, Aziz feels impelled to go through with his plan in spite of all the difficulties and the guests' thin enthusiasm. The expedition is, from the start, predicts misfortune. Fielding and Godbole are late and miss the train; Mrs. Moore is upset by the strange echo and bad smell in the caves and becomes sick; Aziz and Adela continue with the cave tour but are separated at the Kawa Dol cave. Aziz emerges from his cave to find that Adela has gone down the hill and returned to Chandrapore in a car. Fielding arrives late and the party returns home to discover that Aziz has been charged with attempted rape. The English community divides over the matter of the charge. Fielding, confident of Aziz's innocence, resigns from the English Club and throws in his lot with the Indians. Mrs. Moore is similarly certain that Aziz is not guilty but ill and disillusioned; she decides to go home to England but dies at sea. Finally, the matter is brought to trial where, by being forced to re-live the experience, Adela becomes doubtful about the event and withdraws the charge. Aziz is released, but Adela is shunned by both parties, including her engaged fiancé, Ronny. Fielding feels bound to support Adela and, consequently, his friendship with Aziz suspends. This part of the novel ends with Adela and Fielding returning separately to England.

The narrative reopens, two years later, in the native state of Mau where Aziz has obtained a post as doctor to the Rajah and Professor Godbole a post as Minister of Education. It is the monsoon season and Godbole is busy officiating in Gokul Ashtami, a major Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Krishna. Fielding, back in India and promoted, has arrived in an official capacity to inspect the new school. Aziz has no wish to meet him as he feels betrayed. Resentments toward the English drive him to assume that Fielding has married Adela after persuading him to forgo the financial compensation from her that was his due. When he discovers that Fielding has married Stella, Mrs. Moore's daughter by her second husband, especially when he is charmed by Ralph, Mrs. Moore's other son, which reminds Aziz of Mrs. Moore and the special friendship that they enjoyed, Aziz reconciles with Fielding. The reconciliation coincides with the height of the festivities. The novel ends with the pair riding side by side through the Mau jungle, knowing that their friendship cannot be sustained in the

complexities of colonized India.

“What makes *A Passage to India* so profoundly satisfying a novel to which one frequently returns is its perfect combination of symbolic suggestion, psychological insight, and social realism” (Colmer, 1967: 61). When modern English literature tends to be rebellious against tradition, many writers are eager to try new modes of representation. For example, Joseph Conrad relied heavily on symbolic suggestion, and James Joyce made full use of psychological insight. They developed one mode at the expense of others. Forster worked along traditional lines, but he is by no means a follower and imitator of realism. *A Passage to India* deals with the current issues of colonialism, spiritual crisis and feminism. It combines comedy with seriousness, a legacy from Jane Austen’s novels. It probes into human sub-consciousness, reminding the reader of D. H. Lawrence’s psychoanalytical novels. It resorts to tradition, but it perfects each of the traditional modes of representation. It blurs the distinction of the old and the new. It has outlived its time and has enjoyed lasting fame and approval because it caters to both the traditional taste and the anti-traditional appetite.

The present study: a narrative interpretation

“Different readers, faced with the same text, will read a very different novel” (Beer, 1985: vii). Although *A Passage to India* has been read and interpreted by many critics, it still charms and fascinates more. Questions have been raised by new readers, and still more perspectives can be tried in excavating new features and new meanings from the novel. “*A Passage to India* is ... rich in interpretative possibilities” (Beer, 1985: vii).

This research intends to contribute something new to the study of Forster’s most controversial and inviting work. In the deconstructive spirit, from some of the conspicuous perspectives of postmodern narrative theory, this book attempts to analyze and interpret *A Passage to India* by associating narrative techniques with politics, culture, religion and ethics, the modern context of narrative production with the postmodern context of narrative interpretation, narrative as a literary product with narrative as a social construction, because I am convinced that “*A Passage to India* is a meditative novel that reflects not only on the world but on fiction itself” (ibid. : viii).

Forster is hard to label, and *A Passage to India* is hard to categorize. Forster

actively followed the fashions and models of his predecessors and contemporaries, but he was even more ambitious than any of them. *A Passage to India* seems to define something, but it never defines anything. It is like the caves it describes: it appeals, but never promises anything. The present study will revolve around this hypothesis: *A Passage to India* is an experimental and open work, assembling a multitude of narrative strategies and devices, contemplating a host of concepts, ideas, and projects, which entail contradictions and paradoxes. To reach this target, I choose the postmodern narrative theory, a comprehensive and indulging body of ideas and laws, as my guideline and principle of interpretation. In terms of narrative device, I am going to analyze point of view, space (a constituent of setting), structure, and plot. In terms of ideology, I am going to discuss politics, culture, religion and ethics. Influenced by the novel's complexity and infinity and inspired and supported by deconstruction and postmodernism, I prefer to match the narrative devices with aspects of ideology on the one hand, and to allow for plurality and multiplicity on both sides on the other. This is the uniqueness of this book, and it is the hardest part of my research.

The body of this book consists of six chapters. In Chapter 1, criticisms on Forster's *A Passage to India* both in the West and in China are reviewed, and remaining questions overlooked by other critics are presented. In the West, relevant criticism started in 1924 when the novel was published, suspended for more than four decades afterwards, and continued in the 1970s. In China, criticism started in the late 1990s and continues till the present. The Western criticism focuses on poetics, aesthetics, religion, and narration while the Chinese criticism concentrates on politics and culture. Remaining questions (persistently haunting me during my close reading of the novel) mainly concern the contradictions and controversies in the author's narrative actions and strategies, implying that the interpretation of this narrative needs a more humanistic, interdisciplinary perspective.

Chapter 2 is a brief introduction to postmodern narrative theory. It includes three major thoughts: reading as discovery, interpretation as multiplicity, and narrative as a socially symbolic act. They support and justify the three major academic ventures this research attempts: studying the modern novel from the postmodern perspectives, investigating into the multiple layers and sides of the same novel, and relating narrative strategies with ideological implications.

Chapter 3 analyzes the interaction between point of view and politics. The subjectivity of point of view reveals the author's and the reader's political orientations and considerations. The varied choices of point of view (multiple, variable, external, and internal) are helpful in reflecting the attitudes toward and the understandings of racial and gender issues. Universalism and liberal-humanism are also embedded in the author's selection and deployment of narrative point of view. Point of view is a source of information, an angle of perception, and a guide to reading. It reveals the author's intention and guides or controls the reader's perception.

Chapter 4 analyzes the relation between space and culture. *A Passage to India* is famous for its ingenious use of space in structuring the narrative. Space in this novel is not merely a setting for the story, but it also embodies culture. The mosque serves as a home for the human soul, where pain is relieved and pleasure is found. The Civil Station represents the English metropolitan life, which forms a sharp contrast with the rural, agricultural Chandrapore. The tennis court projects the rivalry and gap between the English and the Indians. The Maidan facilitates the fellowship between an Indian doctor and an English subaltern. Mr. Fielding's living-room accommodates the meeting between the English ladies and the Indian doctor and the Indian professor, but the harmony is a short-lived Utopia. Aziz's bedroom stages the brotherhood between an English educator and an Indian doctor. The Indian caves represent the primitive forces still lingering in India, which attract and frustrate the Western reason and intellect. The court where Aziz's case is tried stimulates the Indian nationalism and ultimately separates the two races. The Indian temple where the Hindu festival is observed shows the secularization of God. The merry and casual attitude toward God does not suggest any disrespect for the Holiness, but engages all Hindus in exciting and inspiring religious rituals. Space and culture are in a productive interaction.

Chapter 5 analyzes the interplay of narrative structure and religious orientation. The novel engages the functioning of three religions: Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. Coincidentally, the narrative features several tripartite structures. The three structural elements correspond to the three religions. That is, the three religions perform both ideational and aesthetical functions. The three tripartite narrative structures are Femininity — Masculinity — Birth, Union — Dissolution — Union, Society — Solitude — Society. It is evident that the two Indian religions

produce congenial and constructive effects on the society or individuals that practice them. The English or Western religion seems out of date and guides people to desolate situations. What can be further inferred from this structuration is that the two English ladies come to India not to conquer but to seek help, since England has become a waste land of human spirituality.

Chapter 6 is about the interaction between plot and ethics. It illustrates how plot reflects ethics and how ethics motivates plot. The sequence of events and the direction in which actions proceed demonstrate the characters' moral choices and ethical codes. In return, the characters' preferences or priorities in given situations determine in what sequence actions are taken. Since postmodernism is so much concerned with ethics and Forster is so popular a humanist, the narrative interpretation of *A Passage to India* must give its due attention to the role ethics plays in the narrativization. In the novel, ethics is mainly engaged in two major themes: friendship and love. In a place where there is nothing extraordinary for display and where racial friendship is hardly possible, the only motivations of human connection are loyalty and responsibility. People approach each other not because they like each other, but because they feel impelled to. These ethical motivations make many of the events accidental, fragmental, and mystical.

Based on the narrative analysis in these six chapters, the study yields the following conclusions. First, narrative is a hybrid literary product. It exhibits many facets of human life: politics, culture, religion and ethics. It employs different elements of narration: point of view, space, structure, and plot. Each element can perform different functions. Second, postmodern narrative theory is a general body of knowledge of narrative that integrates structural narratology, post-structural narratology and postmodernism. It departs at narrative elements and strategies and arrives at narrative meaning and cultural reflection. It studies narrative as a combination of form and meaning. Third, postmodernism got its name in the 1970s, but its existence started much earlier. In some pioneering and experimental modernist works like *A Passage to India*, postmodernist issues like identity crisis, secularization, culture shock, depoliticization, and globalization are already dealt with. One task of deconstruction is to liberate the classic works such as *A Passage to India* from its canonical nomination. Fourth, Forster is a transcendental novelist. Many critics acknowledge that he is hard to label. He was in the prime time of

modernism, but he experimented with realist, modernist and postmodernist ways of artistic representation. He was in the age of British Imperialism, but he embraced post-colonialism and humanism. He belonged to typical English middle class, but he was fond of mixing up with Indian intellectuals. Forster was both in and out of his time. Fifth, *A Passage to India* is an experimental novel. The present study reveals that Forster has actually unconsciously experimented with some of the postmodernist techniques of artistic representation. Instead of portraying one hero and/or one heroine in his novel, he focuses on several characters in alternation. He inserts an episode of alleged rape in the major narrative, but he never bothers to define and verify it. He sets the story in Chandrapore, but assertively announces that it is dull and boring. He sets the story in the age of colonialism, but tries to solve post-colonial problems like cultural assimilation and identity integration. The novel presents a cosmic and diversified world, so it endlessly invites re-reading and re-interpretation.