

Liberal Humanism and the Concept of Race in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi¹ Sakiba Ferdousi²

Humanism has been defined as

...a set of presuppositions that assign to human beings a special position in the scheme of things[...]On the one hand, it can be contrasted with the emphasis on the supernatural, transcendent domain, which considers humanity to be radically dependent on divine order. On the other hand, it resists the tendency to treat humanity scientifically as part of the natural order, on a par with other living organisms.[Our Italics] (Audi,1999:396-397)

Humanism has been an important philosophical viewpoint in the twentieth century Great Britain, with many literary artists trying to uphold it in their writings. Historically speaking, in the first half of this century the idea of the essentially secular nature of human identity and the essential equality and unity of all human beings replaced the dependency on the transcendent domain of the earlier ones in a radical way. This happened while retaining a non-biologist view of humanity. E.M Forster, the novelist, believed in 'liberal' humanism or a kind of humanism which specially tries to understand the opinion of others ['a classic of the liberal spirit'-F. R.Leavis wrote about *A Passage to India*](Davies, 1997:43). One of the central tenets of this belief is that human nature is the same for all human beings everywhere and this human nature is not dependent on a transcendent or biological/natural order of things and there can be harmony between the races provided they communicate, in the language of *Howards End*(1910), provided they "only connect" (Davies,1997:42). However, although Forster believed in the essential unity and equality of human beings and seems to counteract the idea of race and racial discrimination, in *A Passage to India*, conceptual clarification, intensive textual analysis tied with the idea of free play *a la'* Derrida show that he is quite convoluted in his attitude. It shows that he shifts between the positions of an anti-racist racist (professing anti-racism but holding on ideationally to an essentialist notion of 'race') and a liberal racist (having a kind of generous attitude towards the other /inferior 'race[s]') in depicting the white and non-white characters in the novel, in a kind of free play where the center and the periphery shift positions. All this points out the presence of a kind of shifting complexity in *A Passage to India* and the novelist to be a kind of conflicted

1 Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

2 Assistant Professor of English, American International University, Dhaka.

liberal humanist and a 'racist' at the same time; a reality, which has remained, hitherto unexplored.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'race' in the following manner:

a. A limited group of persons descended from *a common ancestor*; a house, family, kindred. b. A tribe, nation, or people, regarded as *of common stock*. c. A group of several tribes or peoples, regarded as forming *a distinct ethnical stock*. d. One of the great divisions of mankind, having certain *physical peculiarities* in common. (Our Italics)

The term is often used imprecisely; even among anthropologists there is no generally accepted classification or terminology.

These basically denotative lexical definitions show that 'race' is a kind of group, the members of which have a common ancestor or a kind of mythical origin and who have certain common physical features.

The question of 'race' in the common parlance needs to be grounded in a proper conceptual basis in order to achieve a considered opinion about any author's (here Forster's) conceptualization of the same and its relation with his purported liberal humanism. Thus, these basically denotative definitions above need elaboration and clarification.

We begin with the anthropological definition of 'race' as given in the *Dictionary of Anthropology*:

...a major division of mankind, with *distinctive, hereditary transmissible physical characteristics*, e.g. the Negroid, Mongoloid, and Caucasoid races. It may also be defined as a breeding group with gene organization differing from that of other intraspecies groups [...]. Each race has a tremendous range of *internal variability*. Such identifying criteria as *skin color, hair and eye color, [...], nasal index, [...], hair texture, and the degree of hirsuteness and lip eversion* are generally used. There is no completely **pure race**, and *the criteria* for a given race may not be *manifested* by all the members, although any one member will probably manifest most. [Our italics and bold] (Tylor, 1991: 445)

This commonly accepted anthropological definition focuses on the physical and genetic differences in conceptualizing 'race'. Race has certain overt markers among which skin, hair and eye color, nasal index etc. are important (especially to a community conversant with this term), which shows that this definition is exclusively scientific in its origin and considers human beings as part of the biological order.

Berremán in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* provides a broader definition:

Race engages the attention of social scientists both as *a special constellation of cognitive or ideological categories and as a means of*

explaining sociocultural phenomenon. Race is a recurrent ingredient in the ethno semantics of group identity and intergroup relations. “Social races” are composed of socially defined and significant groups: the study of social race thus is a fundamental aspect of the study of social structure, especially in stratified societies[...] Since none of the folk usages is informed by valid genetic principles, the lack of correspondence between social race and biological race should occasion no surprise [...] *Social races differ from other stratified groups (such as classes with low rates of outmobility) in their methods of maintaining membership and group identity. Social races accomplish this by a special ideological device, the idea of descent.*[Our italics](Sills, 1968: 263-264)

This definition conceptualizes ‘race’ as an identity marker for groups and in the plural as constituents of society, especially in a stratified one. However, in this definition scientific categorization and data is used as differential markers by social scientists, who claim to be value neutral. The difference between ‘social race’ and ‘biological race’ points out the social and semantic problematique of ‘race’ and the cultural slant in race thinking. This definition conceptualizes human beings as not part of any transcendental order or an exclusively biological one.

Ashcroft *et al.* consider race as a cultural “construct” reflected among other things in literature in the context of colonial and postcolonial societies, and state:

The term implies that the mental and moral behavior of human beings as well as individual personality, ideas and capacity can be related to **racial origin**, and that knowledge of that origin provides a satisfactory account of the behavior [...] Racism [...] a way of thinking that considers a group’s unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, casual way to psychological or intellectual characteristics and which on this basis distinguishes between superior and inferior racial groups. [Italics and bold added] (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998: 198-199)

The last definition conceptualizes ‘race’ as a cultural and ideological dividing factor, which finds its accentuated expression in the idea of racism or racial essentialism especially under colonialism. This definition, adopts a kind of wise neutrality when it comes to categorizing human beings as belonging to the biological order or having “a special position” (Audi, 1999:397). It focuses more on the binary division among human beings conceptualized under colonialism (the Whites and the Non-Whites), or the superior and inferior racial groups and is thus more functional than ideational.

The above definitions of ‘race’ show that it is based on a generalization, that is, all the people/members of a certain genealogically connected group are conceived to be endowed with the same attributes and intellectual capability

and have the same originary starting point. Again it is stated that physical characteristics of a certain group is determinant of their morality and intelligence. But physical differences do not necessarily represent “cultural inferiority” or any essential difference in shared humanity. So this racial division is considered by some people as *a form of reductionism*, as Satyananda Gabriel states in his article “Continuing Significance of Race: Overdeterminist Approach to Racism”:

Race becomes the site of *a specific form of reductionism* wherein all sorts of political, cultural, natural, and economic characteristics are conflated with *genetic origins* to produce an understanding of the *inequality* of racial groupings as product of differences in genetic origins.

(Italics added.Gabriel,1)

This reductionism can be rephrased as a kind of ‘essentialism’ or beholden to the “metaphysical theory that objects have essences and that there is a distinction between essential and non-essential or accidental predications” (Audi, 1999:281)

The following in the entry on ‘Racism’ or the theoretical and practical attachment to the essentialist cultural notion of race in one of the most widely used dictionaries of philosophy is interesting. The writer talks of the different kinds of racism, like “unconscious, covert, institutional, paternalistic, benign, *anti-racist*, *liberal* and even reverse racism” and says that it “is widely regarded as *involving ignorance, irrationality, unreasonableness, injustice, and other intellectual and moral vices*[...]”[Italics added](Audi, 1999:769). The two types of racism, italicized above, viz. anti-racist (professing anti-racism but holding on ideationally to an essentialist notion of race) and liberal (having a kind of generous attitude towards the other/*inferior* race[s]) are relevant to any consideration of *A Passage to India*, as our discussion of the concept of ‘race’ in the novel will make clear.

A Passage to India is the tale of two culturally distinct races the White/British/Western and the Non-White/Indian/Eastern, living together in the city of Chandrapore, a representative city in the north of British India. Their living side by side as the colonizers and the colonized drive them into conflicts and Foster’s depiction of that colonial conflict gives vent to his attitudes towards these two races. Forster is labeled in the context of this novel, as *a liberal humanist, or a firm believer in universal (secular) humanist values*, as the novel is in the words of F.R.Leavis “a classic of the liberal spirit” (Davies, 1997: 43). But, in his representation of the said races, he leaves some room for the readers to question his *racial impartiality*. A person with an impression about *A Passage to India* as a critique of British imperialism built upon the theoretical foundation of racial essentialism and racial pride must expect that Forster would depict the representative characters from the ruling

race with severity and if necessary, would find examples of contrasted nobility among the Indian people. But to their utter surprise, a reader would find that Forster has not unequivocally done so. Rather s/he will see that Forster consistently maintains a kind of superiority complex in depicting the British right from the beginning of the novel. Starting with an important question – *whether a friendship is possible between the people of East and West* –, Forster spins a yarn in order to express a kind of racial essentialism and superiority.

In *A Passage to India*, there is a touch of racial reductionism in the sense genetic origins supposedly determine the behavioral and intellectual pattern of the people of the two races. Imbued with a sense of superiority, apparently a conspicuous feature of the novel, Forster attributes a superior intellect and civility to the white people and irresponsibility and volatility to the Indians/Easterners. Moreover, he justifies the English dominion in India albeit subconsciously and very tactfully. The exploitation that is done in the name of the civilizing mission of the imperialists finds somewhat a justification through his writing. Race feeling/consciousness is ingrained in the common white people as becomes clear from the following confessional statement of Peter Burra in his 1934 Everyman Edition Introduction to the novel:

Race feeling, or the violent reaction from what seems the intolerable race feeling of our fellows, is strong in every one of us. It is almost impossible to start a conversation on India [...] without producing a heated quarrel. For in the case of India there is much more than even race feeling, which is strong enough to disturb us. There is our behavior to a conquered country [...]. It is race feeling multiplied by the old Irish situation [colonialism] multiplied by money. There is hardly one man in a million who can keep his head when the subject turns up, or one man in a hundred thousand who will try to. (Jay, 1998:11).

The writer gives credit to Forster for raising the issue of imperialism, for his desire to be critical against the British over the matter, as “Forster has chosen to be fair” (Jay, 1998: 11). But the question is how far it was possible for him to be a (fair) liberal humanist in dealing with race in the colonial situation.

In *A Passage to India*, Forster depicts a gallery of people – both from the English and the Indian side with the two different types of qualitative features in these two races. Through a superficial reading, Forster seems to be critical towards the English characters; but an intensive perusal of the book makes it clear that Forster’s English people are portrayed as basically generous, civil and good at heart. They are not evil; rather they have a positive attitude to life and to the Indians. What is evil in them is a later growth, in reaction to the unfriendly and hostile environment of India for which Indians are somewhat responsible, and not connected to their *racial origin*. On the other hand, Forster’s Indians are all, in one way or the other, *miserable creatures*–

dishonest, treacherous, feeble, fawning and what not. Thus Ebbatson and Neale comment that: "The Anglo-Indians in *A Passage to India*[Forster's ordinary community] stress the irresponsibility and volatility of Indians, thereby justifying the need for British rule". (Ebbatson and Neale, 1986: 46)

Turton and Mr. Bannister, who are there at the second chapter of the book to help us form our early impression of the English, are a sort of ideals- they were once quite intimate with the Indians. "They came out intending to be gentleman," (Forster, 1924:34) but Indians made it impossible. Through Hamidullah, an Indian character, Forster affirms their fundamental goodwill saying, " Hugh Bannister and [...] Mrs. Bannister whose goodness to in England I shall never forget or describe. They were father and mother to me, [...]in the vacations their rectory became my home. They entrusted all their children to me."(Forster, 1924: 33) And again about Turton, Hamidullah says, "I have driven with Turton in his carriage- Turton! Oh yes we were once quite intimate. He has shown me his stamp collection."(Forster, 1924: 34)

Keeping children in the care of a non-British or showing a stamp collection is certainly expressive of a white man's trust in the nonwhite and so Forster mentions it at the beginning. He does this to provide adequate support for the white people so that later it would be easy to establish that the evil attitude of the English is the fruit of the Indian environment. He further contends that it is the reciprocal hatred between the English and the Indians stemming from the evil Indian environment concordant with the Indians, which finally spoils the innate goodness of the English characters.

Others who are much convinced of the generosity of Forster would tell that Forster has exposed the goodness and evil of both the British and the Indians and, therefore, is very realistic in his treatment of humanity and not biased against any particular race. But, it cannot be denied that he tactfully puzzles the readers about his position. Virginia Woolf's remark in her essay 'The Novels of E.M.Forster' is relevant here:

Mr. Forster, it seems, has a *strong impulse to belong to both camps at once* [...] behind the rainbow of wit and sensibility there is a vision, which he is, determined that we shall see. But his vision is of a peculiar kind and his message of an *elusive nature*. [Our Italics](Jay,1998:15) .

Certainly Forster occasionally unfolds the rash and whimsical behavior of the British but he is more intent to establish their fundamental goodness, whereas for their faults he always provides a cause, albeit very carefully. For that reason the city magistrate Ronny's irrational pride and disgust is shown to have been caused by the mean and ungenerous psyche of the Indians. Forster tells us that Ronny was bound to change his sweet and humane attitude to the Indians, though he had a desire to be intimate with the Indians. After coming to the country, he once asked one of the lawyers to have a cigarette with him. He found afterwards that the lawyers had sent touts all over the bazaar to

announce the fact and had told all the litigants that Vakil Mahmoud Ali was with the City Magistrate. So the shocked Ronny withdrew his endeavor to come close to the Indians. And again it is told, he is very efficient and honest. The depiction of India thus needs a careful focus by the readers when the writer confirms Ronny's *essential* nobility, as opposed to the corrupt psyche of the Indians:

Everyday he worked hard in the court trying to decide which of two untrue accounts was the less untrue, trying to dispense justice fearlessly, to protect the weak against the less weak, the incoherent against the plausible, surrounded by lies and flattery. The morning he had convicted a railway clerk of overcharging pilgrims for their tickets and a pathan of attempted rape .He expected no gratitude recognition for this, and both clerk and pathan might appeal, bribe their witness more effectually in the interval band get their sentence reserved .It was his duty.[*Italics ours*].(Forster,1924:69-70)

Ronny's helplessness and frustration at the moral bankruptcy of the Indians undoubtedly accentuates his righteousness, and Forster upholds his attachment to Ronny's race through this and compromises his liberal humanist egalitarianism.

Ronny, Mr. Turton and Burton, the other English major and minor characters also have an essential goodness, which can be attributed to the idea of the white race. Fielding, Mrs. Moore, and Adela all are saintly human souls-staunchly anti-racist at least in the case of Mrs.Moore and Fielding and implicitly in the case of Adela.They are thus unparalleled in their virtues and in their intentions and their superior minds become apparent when they are compared with the Indian characters, who are not anti-racist in that manner. There would be no criticism of this type of portrayal if Forster did the same kind of justice to all the commendable Indian characters and did not de-link their attributes from their race. Rather than the same characteristics he seems to believe a little bit shiftily that Eastern and Western races have essentially *different* individual characteristic features and in this he is indulging in race thinking, if not in race-ism/racism unbecoming or conceptually anomalous in a (secular) liberal humanist.

The characterization of Aziz as noted by Spear is a good starting point to explore the racial essentialism in the depiction of the Indians:

Aziz is the only Indian treated in any depth [...] *Unpunctuality* is an Indian shortcoming of which he is well aware, yet it is not within his *nature* to come on time. His impulsiveness and exuberance are, however, personal traits of considerable significance as the plot progresses. (Spear, 1986: 15).

Our first impression of Aziz is created when he arrives late for Hamidullah's dinner party and his impulsive dropping of his bicycle down before a servant

can catch it. In order not to be late for the Marabar expedition he goes to the other extreme, camping overnight with the servants at the station. Here he is treated as funny and an Indian's unpunctuality is treated jokingly/satirically. Again he is content to listen to an argument between Mahmoud Ali and Hamidullah about whether or not it is possible to be friends with an Englishman, without interfering. Mahmoud Ali argues that it was not; the latter disagreed but Aziz, the representative Indian character, acted differently. In the words of Forster, "He lay in *trance*, sensuous but healthy, through which the talk of the two others did not seem particularly sad[...] Delicious it was indeed to lie on the broad verandah with the moon rising in front and the servants preparing food behind and no trouble happening".[Our Italics] (Forster,1924: 33).The word 'trance' is significant here as it shows Aziz to be conceptually incapable of dealing with the definition of self and racial others and as muddleheaded as the quintessentially positive Indian Godbole and like him symbolic of the lack of clarity in most members of the Indian/Non-White race.

We know that *A Passage to India* was written during the early years of the rise of nationalism against the British. Aziz, though he is the representative of Indian youth, fails to anticipate any revolutionary zeal. He is not an indomitable spirit whom the readers can respect. Rather the writer portrays him as *an impotent patriot*:

Aziz rests on the peripheries of political conversation more as an observing body than a participant [...] he remains merely an audience to the amorous "pain and amusement" that characterize his host's discourse: the narrative allows him a certain bodily autonomy from the debate on cultural friendship only to render his body the site upon which the exquisite costs of such friendliness shall later be determined (Suleri, 1992: 134)

His ideas concerning *race* as also reflected in his thoughts on *religion* or *sex* are also mentionable. He objectifies women in his attitude towards them and categorizes the female sex as "superficial and egoistical" (Jay, 1998:98): He begets his first child in an animal passion with a wife chosen by her parents and physically unattractive to him [...] .For Adela he feels no sympathy because she is not attractive to look at. He criticizes her "angular body" and "freckles" (Jay, 1998:98).

The sheer contrast in sexual morality or rather decorum between Aziz and Fielding is found in their discussion about Adela qua her physical features before the central incident of the novel:

'No Miss Quersted for Mr. Fielding. However, she was not beautiful. She has practically no breasts, if you come to think of it.'

He smiled too ,but found a touch of bad taste in the reference to a lady's breasts.

‘For the City Magistrate they shall be sufficient perhaps and he for her.
For you I shall arrange a lady with breasts like mangoes [...]’

‘No, you won’t.’[Our Italics] (Forster, 1924: 131)

Later on Aziz reacts to the rape charge with outraged sexual pride. He seems to hold his own sexual mythology; he believes that only physical beauty makes a woman desirable, and that plain women really yearn to be raped. Only an acknowledgement from Adela will pacify his outrage; he wants her to write an apology reading “Dear Dr Aziz, I wish you had come into the cave; I am an awful old hag, and it is my last chance” (Forster, 1924: 252). Before the trip to the caves, he plans to go to a Calcutta brothel, to find for Fielding a whore “with breasts like mangoes” and implicitly to go beyond vicarious pleasure (Forster, 1924: 131): His lust is thus “hard and direct” (Forster, 116) in contrast to the English whom he perceives as either frigid or indiscriminating, willing to satisfy their needs in the Chandrapore bazaar. Even in prostitutes Aziz’s standards are *high!* (Jay, 1998:98).

The English character Fielding is, on the other hand, an epitome of virtue and loveliness. He, as a foil, highlights the meanness and moral distortion of Aziz. He has not an iota of *racial bias* and not a bit of religious narrowness. He visits Aziz at the time of the latter’s illness because he feels solicitous about his friend’s state of health. He stands by Aziz in the hour of the crisis in the latter’s life and has to pay a heavy price. He loses the goodwill of his own community, which he loses by his advocacy of the Indians but he is not at all sorry. But this relationship does not last and a scrutiny of the book makes it clear that Forster has made Aziz mainly responsible for this breakup. Aziz too readily believes that, a secret affair has developed between Fielding and Adela. He even thinks that Fielding desires to marry Adela for her money. Not only that, for a moment he imagines that it was Fielding who followed Miss Quested in the caves and molested her and even when Aziz got the news that Fielding has married Stella, he was not at all happy, as she is the sister of Ronny Heaslop. In this way suspicion on the part of Aziz shatters the relationship between Aziz and Fielding though the latter tried in various ways to maintain it. Aziz is not individualized enough and all these characteristics add up to the case against the Indians.

Fielding, the great soul, not only protects Adela from a possible attack by the Muslim crowd after the trial, but places his own quarters at her disposal when she has no place to go and becomes quite friendly with her (and Aziz thought that sexual love was involved in this relationship). Later on, Fielding marries the forlorn daughter of late Mrs. Moore. He loves her passionately but she does not reciprocate it (“he knew that his wife didn’t love him as much as he loved her”[Forster, 1924:312]). Forster thus reductively heightens Fielding in contrast to Aziz, who could not love his wife before her death and who valued a woman on the basis of her physical appearance only. In fact he is drawn as a

person who *cannot tolerate other religions, who values a woman by her appearance only, and who indulges in the thought of having sex with prostitutes*. This is not the sympathetic picture of an average Indian (Muslim). The portrayal is negative, and dependent on the notion of race based cultural essentialism. Forster through empathy with these characters shifts between an explicit anti-racist denunciation of racism, while not denying the more than anthropological reality of race and a kind of liberal racism which looks forward to a liberal future connected with the idea of race. The ambiguous ending of the novel epitomizes this. The *natural* things do not want them to together and they do as they are attached to the biological order in being grounded in the secular concept of race as is expressed, thus, "But the horses didn't want it-they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it,[...]the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, [...]they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet', and the sky said, 'No, not there'." [Italics added]. (Forster, 1924:316)

The desire but inability on the part of the most important Indian 'liberal' racist [we are importing the western concept of 'race' to explain the Indian's formulation of the 'other'] and the most important 'anti-racist' British to connect is made problematic by the expression of the sky that it was impossible of realization on earth. The expression of the sky that the reconciliation of the two cannot happen on earth shows that it can probably never happen, as Forster did not believe human beings to be transcendently anchored. Thus the 'only connect' ideology of the liberal humanist Forster of *Howards End* (1910) fame (Davies, 1997:42), is contradicted here by the persistence of anti-racist and liberal racism in the characters and by extension in the novelist.

In contrast to Fielding and Mrs. Moore and Aziz's devotion to religion in a way like that of Godbole, becomes a butt to prove his narrow mindedness. He loves his religion too much and cannot *tolerate* other religions: "he had always liked mosques [...] the temple of another creed Hindu, Christian or Greek would have *bored* him and failed to awaken his sense of beauty." [Our Italics] (Forster, 1924:211) Godbole reminds Aziz of cow dung and the rhythm of the Hindu drum is uncongenial to him. He thinks that Hindus in general are slack and have no idea of society or punctuality. On the other hand Fielding is not biased towards any particular religion: he is a rationalist, he mixes with both the Muslims and the Hindus and loves everyone. Ronny despite all his failings, is not also a religious fanatic.

Mrs. Moore is one of the foils to Aziz. She meets Aziz in the mosque and her conversation with him shows in contrast to him how reverent she is towards other religions, how friendly and how completely free from prejudices she is. She respects all the peoples of the world and loves even the tiny creatures and has a deep curiosity about the Indians and suffers from no racial prejudices.

Adela, the other member of the English community, who is a kind of shadow to her, wants to know the Indians and speaks to them sincerely and with candor though she does not get many responses from them; rather both Mrs. Moore and Adela are affected by the cave profoundly but negatively and lose their reasonableness, symbolizing the anarchic nature of India and putting a question mark on the concept of material affinity but not identity between humans and nature. They are thus conceptualized as essentially different from the Indians, who do not get daunted by the encounter.

Turton, another foil, to Aziz, is endowed with great civility and respect for womanhood: "he never spoke against an English woman" (Forster, 1924: 49). Ronny is also far more superior to Aziz in his attitude to women. Though Adela is not beautiful to look at, he loves her and allows her the freedom to choose and marry. After the love scene between Ronny and Adela, "How decent he was" (Forster, 1924:99) was the bewildered, enchanted expression of Adela. Ronny never forces her to accept his opinion as hers and never criticizes her physical features or dreams lustily of a physical intercourse with her. With such nobility Forster has portrayed the English! Again after an accident where Adela and Ronny were, he comments: "Thanks to their youth and upbringing [...] they were not upset by the accident" and again "English people are so calm at a crisis"(Forster, 1924: 104). In contrast to these characters Aziz objectifies women and think of them as instruments of pleasure, rather than soul mates and worthy of respect. All these point up the presence of a kind of orientalist/racist subjectivity in the imaginative self of the novelist in depicting Whites and Non-Whites unbecoming in a liberal humanist who believed in "only connect".

Godbole, the exotic "other" Indian is drawn as metaphysically involved and socially a joke. He is treated perhaps with more sympathy than Aziz, but is not a universal human ideal. He is a Hindu teacher at a Government college. The writer portrays him as aloof from the main happenings of the novel. After the incident at the caves, he shocks Fielding by his apathy as he questions Fielding whether the expedition was successful or not even though he knows of the catastrophe. Again in answering the question whether Aziz is innocent or guilty, Godbole engages him in a philosophical discussion about the relative nature of good and evil. Later at Mou, it appears that Godbole knows that Fielding has married Stella, yet though he is aware of Aziz's misconception he makes no attempt to clarify the matter. The writer has made him an irrational escapist conceptually *muddleheaded* who symbolizes the muddle that is India, more clearly than does Aziz. Again what is praiseworthy in him is his extreme religious devotion, which cannot be imitated. He does not eat beef and eggs and he will allow nobody to eat them in front of him! In depicting Godbole, Forster upholds the idea of the Indian others as aberrant and racially grounded in their conceptual confusion as becomes clear from the reference to Aziz's

being in a trance while the minor Indian characters were trying to grapple with racial essentialism. (Forster, 1924:33)

Considering the portrait of these important characters, we can detect Forster's unconscious (or conscious) belief in the intellectual or moral superiority of the English/ white race in all these and in essences in the categorizations of British and Indian. This is without our being able to categorize him as an unabashed racist/ racial supremacist considering the overall tenor of the novel. He seems to have in his major characters that are reflections of his fragmented self, at times a paradoxically anti-racist kind of racism and at times a kind of diluted or liberal racism.

There is no denying the fact that this novel has presented uncommonly the life and people of India but the essential superiority and utility of the British in India is not contested. John Beer in his essay, "The Undying Worm" (1962) has made the following comment in this regard:

A reader who is looking for further meaning in the novel may well be attracted to the idea that it is intended as a *piece of anti-imperialist propaganda*, polemic against British rule in India. As a picture of that rule, however, it contains major distortion. At the hand of the writer it appears they need *the justice and fair administration* that the British give them. [Our Italics](Bradbury, 1986: 188)

Again the novel fails to preach the universal brotherhood of liberal humanism, as the writer seems skeptical of the possibility of having noble human beings in general. In one of the letters to Syed Ross Masood, Forster seems to confirm his cynicism about the belief in the essential goodness and unity of all human beings:

When I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West, but this conception has had to go, my sense of the truth forbids anything so comfortable. I think that *most Indians like most English people, are shits*, and I am not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not. [Italics added](Bradbury, 1986:25)

So Forster may have had the intentions of bridging the gulf between the races, exemplified by "only connect" of *Howards End*(1910) fame as noted by Davies (Davies, 1997: 42) but in the novel and later on he seems to have realized the futility of his vision and his using of the words like "most Indians like most English are shits"- do indicate a lack of enduring sympathy for the Indians as human beings and contravenes his earlier belief in the essential goodness of human beings who have "a special position"(Audi,1999:396-397) and here he thinks of them as part of "the natural order"(Audi,1999:396-397) which is incongruous in a liberal humanist, even a skeptical one. They express his partial/ contemptuous disregard and a kind of condescending attitude towards Indians, expected in a liberal racist. Sara Suleri states that if "A

Passage to India attempts to engender an illusion of cross cultural conversation, then it is a dialogue that is highly conscious of *the limits* rather than the expansiveness of cultural sympathy” [Italics added]. (Suleri, 1992:58). The limits refer to the actual or conceptual boundaries of race which were questioned by the whole worldview of liberal humanism, and reinforces the contention that Forster is caught in a shifting movement / free play between the ideas of anti-racist racism and liberal racism and the concept of race which he upholds is essentialist on the whole.

A consideration of the concept of race in *A Passage to India* shows Forster to be very much aware of the *reality* of race in his milieu. The general consensus about the generosity of this (secular) liberal humanist portrayal of racial interaction and tension is contradicted by the kind of reading against the grain practiced in this article. Refocusing on the concept of race/racism from the socio-philosophical point of view in tandem with the text of the novel [which we can also call a social and cultural artifact] points out a way out of the conundrum in terms of the free play between anti-racist racism and liberal racism (Audi, 1999:769).

Forster, in *A Passage to India*, is involved in a kind of proto-Derridean free play between the positions of an anti-racist racist and a liberal racist as well as in a way between those of a skeptical liberal humanist and a potential conceptual anti humanist, if not practical. The purported stability of meaning attributed to the text as going beyond race as exemplified in the last scene (Forster, 1924:316) evaporates if the text is looked at from a provocatively post-colonial standpoint, taking into account the above reality. Forster's concept of 'race' in the novel is unstable and in contradiction with his liberal humanism though anchored almost exclusively in this world. While Forster is not the kind of racist that Kipling is in most of his writings, the presence of liberal humanism and a kind of essentialist concept of race in the same text makes us see him from a new angle and encourages us to question the received truths of criticism about the concept of 'race' and (secular) liberal humanism in *A Passage to India*, in the context of the western paradigm.

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