

Forster, Kipling and India: Friendship in the Colony

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Abstract

Both E.M. Forster and Rudyard Kipling in their major Indian novels, *A Passage to India* and *Kim*, valorised friendship across the imperial and racial divide. In this comparative and contrapuntal study of these classic novels about India, I attempt to see how they negotiate the complications caused in personal relationships by haughty imperial attitudes on the one hand, and resistant nationalism on the other. Another dimension underlying the personal relationships in these narratives is that of sexual politics in instances where friendship leads to intimacy with dramatic consequences. The opposite of this perhaps is an attempt to sublimate the personal and the empirical into the spiritual, a trend evidenced in different ways in both. Finally, I refer to the work done on Forster and Kipling by a few other Indian scholars, to see how they engage with the issues outlined here.

Keywords: E.M. Forster, Rudyard Kipling, colonial friendship, imperialism, nationalism, sexual politics, spirituality

E.M. Forster (1879–1970) died fifty years ago but it feels as if he has been gone for much longer. One reason for this is that the last novel he published was nearly one hundred years ago (*A Passage to India*, 1924). But there is another reason which is perhaps of wider significance, that the world he belonged to and his works so aptly reflect has passed away too in a way he could hardly have anticipated though he did live long enough to see it go. If his England has changed beyond recognition since the publication of his last two novels set in that country, i.e. *Howards End* (1910) and *Maurice* (drafted 1913–14, published posthumously 1971), the India that he experienced and depicted is now in another orbit altogether, as a free country to which the British no longer have a passage except with a visa granted by the government of India.

In this article, I propose to read Forster's greatest work in relation to another British novel of India, *Kim* (1901) by Rudyard Kipling. The corpus of British novels on India comprises several other major works too, such as (to name only my favourite dozen) *Oakfield or Fellowship in the East* (W.D. Arnold, 1853), *The Competition Wallah* (G.O. Trevelyan, 1864), *The Old Missionary* (W.W. Hunter, 1895), *Lilamani: A Study in Possibilities* (Maud Diver, 1911), *The Village in the Jungle* (Leonard Woolf, 1913), *A Farewell to India* (Edward Thompson, 1931), *Burmese Days* (George Orwell, 1934), *The Pool of Vishnu* (L.H. Myers, 1940), *Bhowani Junction* (John Masters, 1954), *The Siege of Krishnapur* (J.G. Farrell, 1973), *The Jewel in the Crown* (Paul Scott, 1966), and *Heat and Dust* (Ruth Praver Jhabvala, 1975). But there can be little doubt that in their historical and aesthetic significance, *Kim* and *A Passage to India* remain unmatched as the major literary monuments of British rule in India.

I. The Comparative and the Contrapuntal

Traditionally, *Kim* and *A Passage to India* (henceforth *Passage*)¹ have been regarded as being worlds apart in more ways than one. Kipling is seen as an arch-imperialist and jingoistic champion of the British dominance of India, while Forster is regarded as the archetypal liberal sensitive to the injustices of the Raj and keen to advocate measures for making it a more humane and civilized institution. *Kim*, published in 1901 but set in the 1880s, represents the Raj at its zenith, at what has been called the high noon of empire,

¹ Quotations from both texts are referenced simply by page numbers, and are from the editions specified under "Works Cited."

while *Passage*, published 23 years later and encompassing the period broadly of its long and fitful gestation from 1912 to 1923, depicts a situation in which there is clearly friction and discord between the rulers and the ruled. While *Kim* is an idyll, *Passage* is a fraught contestation. It may thus seem that there are hardly any points of convergence between these two novels., but only a clear and even sharp contrast.

The consideration that the two novels belong to two very different eras of British rule in India may be addressed straightaway. This certainly seemed to be the case when *Passage* was published in 1924, for since the publication of *Kim* in 1901, several vastly transformative events had taken place in both Europe and India. The First World War had begun and been lost and won, while in India, the liberal constitutional opposition to British rule offered for decades by highly anglicized Indians through polite petitions for relief and reform had been rendered obsolete with the arrival on the scene of M.K. Gandhi in 1915, who had launched in 1920 his nation-wide movement of Non-cooperation with the British government and mobilized mass support for it on a scale never seen before. The immediate trigger for it was an episode from the previous year, in which the British army had fired at a peaceful, unarmed crowd assembled in a park in the city of Amritsar called Jallianwala Bagh, killed 379 people, and injured several hundred others in a matter of about fifteen minutes.

Kipling could not have imagined any of this happening when he published *Kim*. Nor could have anyone else for that matter, including Forster when he began writing *Passage* in 1912. Many critics have noticed that though finished and published after all the events listed above had taken place, Forster's novel bears the ambience of its initial conception and contains only a passing and oblique allusion or two to the events of 1919. The most notable is the suggestion made in the aftermath of the alleged assault on Adela Quested that as a collective punishment, Indians "ought to crawl from here to the Caves on their hands and knees" (211) – as they had in fact been made to crawl in a lane in Amritsar before the massacre. But there is no Gandhi, no mass movement, and no recognition generally of a transformed political climate. This frozen frame made *Passage* seem as if it was already outdated politically when it came out.

But there is a larger and more important point to be made here regarding the chronological gap of twenty-three years between *Kim* and *Passage*. As it happened, another twenty-three years after the publication of *Passage*, the British left India and it became an independent nation – again a development that no one could have thought possible within such a short time-span. It may be recalled that on the last page of *Passage*, Aziz tells Fielding that (not he but) his sons will one day "drive" the British out of the country,

whether it takes “fifty or five hundred years” (317) – with both the projected figures here turning out to be grossly over-estimated. Incidentally, it is a curious episode of Forster studies that these figures were reprinted in edition after edition as “fifty-five hundred years,” a patently absurd and virtually sempiternal time-span, without apparently any reader or editor batting an eye-lid, until Oliver Stallybrass in his authoritative Abinger edition (1978) corrected the howler.

Furthermore, these two successive spans of twenty-three years, between *Kim* and *Passage* and between *Passage* and Indian independence, are dwarfed by the post-colonial fact that India has now been free for over three score years and ten. In their own day, Kipling and Forster may have seemed to belong to two different worlds, but now in our present perspective they both seem much of a muchness, lumped together as having published their great works in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In Bernard Shaw’s play *Candida*, when the eponymous heroine tells the nineteen-year old poet Eugene Marchbanks, who is besotted with her, to go away because she is fifteen years older than him, he replies: “In a hundred years we shall be the same age” (2020, n.p.). Postcolonially speaking, in more or less one hundred years that have passed since *Kim* and *Passage* were published, Kipling and Forster have indeed become the same age.

This comparative study of Forster and Kipling, or more precisely of *Kim* and *Passage* with occasional references to some other Indian writings of both the authors, is by no means undertaken with the intent to set one of them up against the other. Though “Comparative Literature” (more accurately called Comparative Literary Studies) has always been regarded as an odious and odorous enterprise, especially among those not initiated into the discipline, its purpose is not to weigh two or more authors/texts against each other and then pronounce one of them as being superior to the other(s) as in a competitive sport. Rather, its true endeavour is to read two authors together in a way that would illuminate both and enhance our appreciation of each, in ways that would not have opened up had we not chosen precisely those two writers to read one with the other, and from a point of view which renders them comparable in this positive sense. Kipling and Forster cry out to be compared with each other anyhow, if only because they are the most eminent examples of the sub-genre of the British Novel about India. They are eminently comparable, not the least because of their very eminence.

In this comparative exercise, it seems appropriate to invoke as well a related critical practice advocated by Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*, namely that of a “contrapuntal” perspective and reading (Said 1994, 18, 32, 51, *et passim*). This method required, he said, that “we must be able to think through and interpret together

experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formulation, its internal coherence and system of external relationships” (Said 32). In *Kim*, for example, he explained, “its picture of India exists in a deeply anti-theoretical relationship with the development of the movement for Indian independence,” and both must be taken on board to highlight “the crucial discrepancy between them” (Said 1994, 32).

As I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere, Said proved better at outlining this radical agenda than at fulfilling it, at least in the case of Kipling and *Kim* (Trivedi 2010, 120, ff). This was probably because his knowledge of the West was naturally more sure-footed and comprehensive than his knowledge of India. Further, his very metaphor of the “contrapuntal,” deriving as it does from Western music, presupposed a harmonious blending eventually of whatever might be “discrepant” but would not brook what was forthrightly discordant and could not be reconciled. Nevertheless, the breakthrough that he pioneered in putting a contrapuntal reading on our agenda is definitely worth persevering with.

In the case of both *Kim* and *Passage*, the aperture for a contrapuntal reading is offered by the implied addressivity of both the authors, a dimension Said does not register. These works were both meant to be read by the Western reader located by and large in the West, and though Indian characters participate vitally in the action of both novels, neither novelist countenances the possibility that many Indian readers may actually pick up these novels to read. For in those times, English had not yet become a global language and a vast majority of the population of India was illiterate even in its own languages.

It is this unanticipated, unaccounted for, and presumed-to-be absent gaze of an Indian reader that is contrapuntally provided here in this essay, with the proviso of course that there is no such thing as “the Indian reader” but rather, only individual Indian readers. The “internal coherence” of these novels is open in our postcolonial times now to the scrutiny of the external anglophone reader resident in the colony, as it barely was when these novels were published. (What may happen to these texts when they are translated into an Indian language, as *Passage* has been and *Kim* apparently not yet, is of course another question altogether which may be explored in its own right in another essay.)

II. Friendship in the Colony: Kipling

Embedded underneath the utterly different locales and contexts, story-lines, and the range of characters in *Kim* and *Passage*, there lies a question which is at the heart of both the novels: Can the British and the Indians be friends with each other even while Britain rules India? This may sound a bit like asking whether a lion and a lamb can be friends while the lion remains the king of the forest, and of course, it may surprise no one that the answers that each party returns are not identical.

In Kipling's novel (to take up the two novels in the chronological order), the boy-hero Kim is the orphan son of an Irish father. He grows up in the "bazaar" and can pass off effortlessly as a native. Initially, the boy is proclaimed to be "the Little Friend of all the World" and then "the Friend of all the World;" he is so called about forty times in the novel by various characters ranging from some he encounters only in passing to those he spends a lot of time with, including Mahbub Ali, Hurree babu and the lama (5, 7, 16, *et passim*). As this is an unfamiliar collocation in English, the suggestion clearly is that this phrase is a hallowed Indian term of praise, bestowed on Kim by the local people because he is universally popular – except that no such phrase is known to exist in Hindi or Urdu, the two vernaculars spoken in the novel. It is apparently an invention on the part of Kipling intended to glorify the footloose and fancy-free hero whom many critics have read as a wish-fulfilling projection of the author himself. (Kipling was born and initially brought up in India but sent off "home" to England at the age of five where, by his own account, he had a miserable time with his mean and oppressive foster-parents, which must have proved particularly galling after he had lorded it over a household of eight servants which his parents maintained in Bombay).

On the opening page of the novel, we are similarly told that Kim, a white boy, "consorted on terms of perfect equality with the small boys of the bazaar" (3). But this is not quite borne out by what we see happening. We see him sitting astride the legendary gun Zam-zammah after he has "kicked" a Hindu boy off its trunnions, and then a Muslim boy as well, and hurled abuses at them both and slandered their parents too for good measure (3, 6). The narrator comments: "There was some justification for this [...], since the English held the Punjab and Kim was English" (3). Later, when he is brought to the army barracks and left in the care of a drummer-boy his own age, Kim despises him and is in turn beaten by him (134). There is not much love lost between Kim and another boy he comes across, similarly nameless and called just the "Hindu child," especially after he

wins comprehensively against Kim at a game they play of close observation and memory, which leaves Kim “stamp[ing] in vexation” (159).

In some of his poems and short stories, Kipling portrayed a relationship between an Englishman and an Indian of the so-called martial races in which the two are locked in rivalry or even combat but feel a mutual admiration for each other’s valour which transcends the barriers of race and rank. As he put it in the opening stanza of his “Ballad of East and West”:

*Oh! East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!*

(Kipling 2020, n.p.; italics in the original)

The closest we come to such bonding in *Kim* is the link between Mahbub Ali, the adventurous Pathan horse-trader, and Colonel Creighton who is the master of a ring of spy-agents such as Mahbub Ali; the two have a bantering relationship, though it is always clear who the boss is.

Kim himself gets on better with several older persons who are kind to him and take care of him; indeed, they act as father-figures: the lama, Mehboob Ali, Colonel Creighton and Hurree babu. These relationships have been read as being fictional compensation for the absence of Kipling’s father in his own childhood, a father whom he grew up to regard as a mentor and who was a creative collaborator in several works of his, including *Kim* (See Trivedi, 2021). Thus, Kim roams freely all over India because he knows that he is assured of acceptance and indulgence from everyone he comes across. This may arguably be interpreted as representing the belief – or fantasy – entertained by many of the British in India at that time, including Kipling himself, that the natives welcomed them and were happy with their presence amidst them. The friendly feeling was believed to exist even more on the native side than on the British, if only because the latter could be firm and admonitory in a superior way whenever they fancied – as Kim is at the beginning of the novel to his peers Chhota Lal and Abdullah.

III. Friendship in the Colony: Forster

In the case of Forster, friendship as an equal and mutually enriching relationship was of the highest value. While a student at Cambridge, he became a member of a secret society informally called The Apostles whose objective was described by one of its members as “the pursuit of truth [...] by a group of intimate friends” (qtd in Furbank 1979, I: 75). After Cambridge, Forster was part of the Bloomsbury Group whose members included some men who had been Apostles together with Forster, but also several other men and women who were rather more inclined to be creative than high-minded, including notably Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa who was a painter. The inveterate truth-seekers from Cambridge here constituted a “mute circle [...] who sat puffing their pipes” while they were surrounded by a wider circle of people who were “more worldly and more garrulous” (Bell 1972, I: 100–101). The latter too believed in friendship but somewhat more light-heartedly, with their irreverent, promiscuous, and outspoken ways, and without carrying the burden of the common pursuit of truth or indeed of any other grand object. Forster remained in the first group though he mellowed over the years, while Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf (who married Virginia Stephen) seemed to have crossed over in different degrees.

Forster’s belief in friendship found iconic expression in his essay “What I Believe” (1938), written when a second World War seemed inescapably imminent. In it he famously declared: “If I had to choose between betraying my country or betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.” (Forster 1938, 66). Going back to an earlier phase of his life, it was his friendship with a younger Indian, Syed Ross Masood, which had led to his going to India and writing a novel about the country. Although *Passage* is not only “about” friendship, yet it was indeed born out of Forster’s passionate friendship with an Indian. Kipling, in contrast, seems to have had no Indian friends, at least judging by the fact that while he lived in India or during the years after he left the country, he seems to have written not a single letter to any Indian at all, whereas his letters to persons of many other nationalities fill six printed volumes. The Indian closest to him seems to have been his *khidmutgar* (man-servant or valet), Kadir Buksh. In his autobiography, written in the last year of his life and published posthumously, the only other Indians Kipling mentions are also servants or a couple of subordinates who ran the press at the newspapers he worked for (Kipling 1990, 3–4, 26, 89, 174, 176).

Forster, on the other hand, had two Indian friends who were dear to him, and he used both of them as partial models for characters in *Passage*. One was of course Syed Ross

Masood (1889–1937), for whom Forster had nursed an unrequited homosexual passion. In the novel he is the major source for Aziz whose name means “the dear one.” Masood was fond of Urdu and Persian poetry, as many educated Muslims in India then were, and felt nostalgic for vanished Mughal glory, as several of them did too; both these common traits of the times are shared by Aziz. In fact, Forster drew directly in *Passage* on some of Masood’s favourite Urdu verses (Furbank 1979, II: 113). But, unlike Aziz, Masood was educated at Oxford and was a distinguished educationist who served in high positions initially in the Muslim princely state of Hyderabad, and then as the vice-chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University from 1929 to 1934. Though Masood was emotional and demonstrative by British standards (as a majority of Indians could be said to be), he was, unlike Aziz, clearly not impulsive or maudlin. On the contrary, he had “a rather grand and princely manner” (Furbank 1979, I: 143), got into no trouble at all with the British, and was in fact knighted in 1933. Nor did his wife die early, as Aziz’s does; a photograph of Masood with his wife taken in England in 1935 by the celebrated literary hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London (National Portrait Gallery 2020).

Forster dedicated *Passage* to Masood but there is no evidence to suggest that Masood was pleased with the book or the dedication. Forster had sent him the novel in manuscript so that Masood could help him rectify any factual errors, especially of a legal kind in his depiction of the trial scene, for Masood was a trained lawyer. But Masood’s response was laconic: “It is magnificent. Do not alter a word,” which Forster’s authorized biographer P.N. Furbank interpreted to mean that he had responded “unhelpfully” (Furbank 1979, II: 119). But another way of looking at it could be that Masood was politely but firmly distancing himself from the work, perhaps understandably so, as feeling hard done by as the real-life model for Aziz, an identification that Forster’s dedication did nothing to disguise: “TO/ *Syed Ross Masood*/ AND TO THE SEVENTEEN YEARS OF OUR FRIENDSHIP” (6). On the publication of the novel when fault was found with the legal procedures depicted in the novel, Forster “cursed Masood for the errors of Indian detail” (Furbank 1979, II: 130). Their personal friendship, however, seemed to have recovered and resumed.

Forster’s other great friend in India was his employer on his second visit to the country, Maharaja Tukoji Rao III Puar (1888–1937), who was the ruler of Dewas State Senior from 1918 to 1934. Forster thought him to be the most saintly man he had ever known, and a man with the most “loveable spirit” (Furbank 1979, I: 185). He appears in the novel belatedly in the third and last section as the Raja of Mau but we see him only

too briefly. He does not speak a word or interact with anyone, as he is shown singing and dancing like other devotees, such as Godbole, and then, quite suddenly, we learn that he is dead. Worse, his death is shown as being kept secret from everyone lest it should interrupt the festivities. This sounds improbable, for one thing because at that very public event, such a secret would have been practically impossible to keep, but also because it would have been considered a sacrilege to let the festivities carry on when the king was dead; even when a common Hindu dies, all festivities for the whole of the ensuing year are routinely suspended by the family. But Forster of course may not have known this.

What is especially discordant here is that after the novel was published, Forster expressed surprise at being complimented on his “fair-mindedness” while acknowledging that he had been obliged to “repress” his own preferences in order to “hold the scales.” Having scrupulously done so, he now went on to add: “It makes me so sad that I could not give the beloved [the Maharaja] a better show.” He also rued the fact that hardly anyone had found Aziz “charming” as he had intended him to appear (Furbank 1979, II: 126). This was, to say the least, disingenuous of him. Given his fine artistic control, his farcically comic or curtly curtailed treatment of the characters who were based on his two dearest Indian friends could not have been wholly unintentional.

The central friendship in the novel is that between Aziz and Fielding, a character traditionally read as representing some of Forster’s own attitudes and values. The imbroglio concerning Aziz and Adela Quested serves to obscure the relationship between the two men to some extent though it also serves to provide its acid test. The public statement by Forster about betraying one’s country rather than one’s friend was still fourteen years in the future, but it could be suggested that Fielding’s brave act of siding with Aziz in defiance of the aggressive attitude of the whole of the British community in Chandrapore provides a proleptic illustration of it. When Fielding resigns from the Club in the patriotically perfervid atmosphere prevailing in it, it is the equivalent in miniature of his giving up his British citizenship. However, Fielding himself looks on his act not as a gesture of self-sacrifice on the altar of friendship but rather as the only decent thing to do, since he knows it for a fact that the charges against Aziz are baseless.

After Aziz is acquitted, Fielding proceeds quite even-handedly to do the decent thing by Adela Quested as well, by providing her with shelter in his college, by talking to her at length about what she has done, and in the process warming to her in a way he has not done before. When he asks Aziz to waive off the punitive damages he wants her to pay, Aziz sees it as all but a betrayal of their friendship which presupposes unquestioning loyalty. They break off and over the next two years Aziz imagines the worst he can of

Fielding, while he finds a new friend, ally and well-wisher, in Godbole. This new friendship bridges the turbulent Hindu-Muslim divide, historically a far older chasm than the British-Indian divide which Aziz's friendship with Fielding had for a short while spanned.

In the final episode of the novel, Fielding wishes to recapture his old relationship with Aziz and asks him why they cannot be friends again. Now out of the reach of the prejudiced and vindictive machinery of the Raj, Aziz with his new nationalist ardour tells him that they can be friends only after the British have been driven out of the country as its rulers. Fielding responds: "But why can't we be friends now?... It's what I want. It's what you want" (317). Fielding here wants Aziz to prioritize personal relationship over nationalist loyalty, and is appealing to him, in effect, to betray *his* country for a friend. This may seem even-handed, even fair-minded, except that it is not, for one cannot compare a ruling country with a ruled country. In any case, Aziz does not need to answer this extreme demand from a friend who, in his view, had come up short, for the whole universe seems to answer it on his behalf; "the earth didn't want it" (317). A novel that began by asking the question whether it is possible for the English and the Indians to be friends ends by returning a comprehensive no as the answer.

IV. Beyond Friendship: National and Sexual Politics

On 15 August 1947, Forster made a radio broadcast to India in which he said: "You must excuse me if I begin with my friends. They are so much on my mind on this momentous occasion" (qtd in Fordoński 2017, 116). In this oblique and deflected acknowledgement of India's independence, Forster is once again prioritizing friendship over the country, as Fielding had wanted Aziz to do in the concluding episode of *Passage*. When Aziz shouts, "India shall be a nation!" the narrator reports (in indirect speech) Fielding as mocking the aspiration: "India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last comer to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood. She whose only peer was the Holy Roman empire [...]" (317).

But this jibe seems historically inaccurate and inconsistent. It is commonly accepted that the idea of the nation crystallized following the Treaties of Westphalia signed between May and October 1648, and only the especially fragmented stragglers among the European countries, such as Germany and Italy (the latter being the core successor of the Holy Roman Empire), had to wait until the nineteenth century to acquire a unified nationalist political identity, the other European nations having done so much before that. Nor was India to prove to be such a late-comer, for if the number of independent nations was

less than fifty in 1947, it is close to two hundred now, as indicated by the membership of the United Nations. India was in fact the first of the British colonies in Asia and Africa to become a free nation. Thus, Fielding (and the narrator) here seem to be flailing around a little illogically to find any argument or excuse to counter Aziz's nationalism.

In *Passage*, the ultimate solution to the problems of imperial rule, as suggested for example, by Mrs Moore who is distinctly sympathetic to the Indians, is to be more pleasant to them, but even this of course is utterly unacceptable to her son Ronny: "India isn't a drawing-room" (49). The generalizing editorializing omniscient narrator, who seems not easy to distinguish from Forster himself at places, pronounces: "One touch of regret [...] would have made the British empire a different institution" (50).

The most trenchant critic of what the British are doing in India is the young, naive but earnest Adela Quested. With her searching honesty, she tells Fielding that the haughty conduct of the British at the Bridge Party has made her "angry and miserable," and adds: "I think my countrymen out here must be mad" (46). But this scathing comment is allowed to fade away without a response as the plot moves on to embroil her in terrible troubles of her own. One of the paradoxes of the novel is that in the episode at the Caves involving Adela and Aziz, Forster brings about an explosive political situation involving both race and rape, but then lets it drift and diminish into one woman's heated delusion. He seems to shy away from anything political and indeed from the word "politics" itself. When Fielding is asked by Hamidullah how Britain is "justified in holding India," Fielding's immediate reaction is that of exasperation: "There they were! Politics again." And the best answer he can make to this vital question is as lame and limp as anyone could think of offering: "It's a question I can't get my mind on to" (108).²

If Forster who was a liberal could not countenance Indian nationhood and independence, Kipling as a conservative who had worked in India as a journalist from 1882 to 1889, more than twenty years before Forster visited the country for the first time, could hardly be expected to do so. In fact, Kipling blamed the Liberals for encouraging the idea of independence in the first place. He recalled in his autobiography that "a Liberal Government had come into power at Home" in the early 1880s, and passed an act providing that "Native Judges should try white women"; this was the Ilbert Bill passed in 1883 which was vehemently opposed by the British community in India and had to be amended

² In parts, this discussion of Forster's politics derives from, and further develops, some of the formulations in my "Introduction" to a new 2021 edition of *A Passage to India* by Penguin India.

in 1884. (This led Forster to commit one of his several significant errors in depicting the trial of Aziz in *Passage*).

When recounting the Ilbert Bill episode in Chapter 3 of his autobiography which he wrote fifty years later in 1935–36, Kipling connected it with what he sarcastically but prophetically called “the great and epoch-making India Bill” which had just been passed by Westminster in 1935. Officially called the “Government of India Act,” it laid the constitutional basis for the granting of independence to India (a development interrupted and retarded by World War II), so it did prove “epoch-making” as Kipling had astutely foreseen. He alleged that those who passed it were, like those others behind the Ilbert Bill fifty years ago, “parting with their convictions” in relying on arguments such as “There’s no sense running counter to the inevitable” and deploying “all the other Devil-provided camouflage for the sinner-who-faces-both ways” (Kipling 1990, 31–32). He simply could not believe that the British could grant India independence except out of dubious and hypocritical motives or under duress, and he was not the only one to hold that view.

If Forster, and his sympathetic characters such as Mrs Moore and Fielding, used friendship between individuals and general goodwill as a shield against the harsh realities of politics, Kipling’s evasion of colonial politics was even more thoroughgoing. He evacuated *Kim* of all traces of British authority in India so as to be able to show that there was no resistance to it! As I have pointed out elsewhere, the whole mighty machinery of the Raj which we see move into grinding action in *Passage* is entirely absent in *Kim*: no Collector, no Superintendent of Police, no City Magistrate, no Civil Surgeon, no college Principal, no Mem sahibs, and no educated Indians either except a solitary one who is eminently loyal, while Colonel Creighton, the master of the network of spies, is only rarely seen as befits his role. And just as there are no significant British characters in the novel, except the nativized boy Kim, there are no significant Indians in it either. Of the two major native characters, Mahbub Ali comes from Afghanistan and the lama from Tibet, both of which territories lay outside British control and jurisdiction (See Trivedi 2011, xxxvi–xxxvii).

Kipling’s knowledge of India was far wider than Forster’s and in many respects deeper too, for he had seen what has been called the dark side of India: dark because it lay beyond the British “civilizing” influence, because some of the British who experienced it found it terrible as well as terrifying, and also because it was revealed only to a few persistently questing and probing Englishmen like Kipling. One of these areas was relationships concerning white men and Indian women. Though there is no inter-racial love interest in *Kim* because the hero is only a boy and fights shy of a native overture when it comes late in the novel from the Woman of Shamlegh with “her silver necklaces clicking on her broad

breast" (257), Kipling did depict in several of his short stories transgressive inter-racial love and sexual relationships, whether secret or open, with their varied consequences.

In "Beyond the Pale" (1888), the Englishman Trejago has a secret affair with a native woman named Bisesa through leading a "double life so wild" that he can later hardly believe it. But when she finds herself betrayed by him and then is found out by her family, her hands are chopped off while he is stabbed in the groin to leave him with a limp for the rest of his life; as Kipling says ironically, he is afterwards "reckoned a very decent sort of man" (Kipling 2011b, 42). In "Without Benefit of Clergy" (1890), Hodden too leads a double life and has a child with Ameera, which she hopes might help cement the inconstant "love of a man, and particularly a white man" (Kipling 2011b, 227), but then the child and the mother both die and he is seen sorrowing for a short while before duty calls him away. And in "Lispeth" (1886), the sturdy young hill woman of seventeen whom a missionary couple have converted and given the Christian eponym (as she pronounces it), finds one day a sick Englishman lying on a hillside, carries him home in her arms, and nurses and loves him for she believes he too loves her. He then goes away making a promise to return, which the missionary couple support to keep her quiet. When she realizes his word was false from the start, she says to them: "I am going back to my own people. You have killed Lispeth [...] You are all liars, you English." The righteous wife of the chaplain now claims that she believed that Lispeth "was always at heart an infidel" – presumably ever since she was converted at the age of five weeks! (Kipling 2011b, 36).

Politics, as we understand the term now, is never quite absent from human relationships and it takes on a stronger colouring when a relationship turns into physical intimacy and friendship is no longer platonic. This is even more so when the setting is imperial/colonial and relationships cross the racial divide. The distribution of authorial sympathy between the two sides in the stories by Kipling discussed above may come as a surprise to those readers who think they already know his politics only too well, for he finds each of the three Englishmen clearly blameworthy. In Forster's case, the *frisson* is perhaps greater in *Passage*, for unlike in Kipling, he reverses the racial equation and stages in his novel a friendship, or perhaps only an incipient acquaintance, between a man who is Indian and a woman who is white. But their relationship is not at all one of mutual attraction as Forster is at pains to make abundantly clear; the two of them just happen to be thrown together for a morning's jaunt with a large group of other people. There is no love in the air; instead, there is a major distraction as Adela is thinking and fretting in her mind about her engagement with Ronny while physically walking alongside Aziz. The engagement is shortly broken, as other engagements were broken in two

previous Forster novels as well. Forster's patience with heterosexual love relations seems to have been wearing thinner and thinner as his career progressed, until he stopped writing fiction prematurely, partly because, as his biographer reports: "being a homosexual, he grew bored with writing about marriage and the relations of men and women" (Furbank 1979, II: 132).

To the extent that fiction derives not only from the author's imagination and observation but also from his personal experience, Forster's frustration with the form and the conventions of the English novel as it had evolved since before Jane Austen is not difficult to understand. It just did not speak to him anymore, especially with his homosexual novel *Maurice*, completed in 1913 but lying unpublished (and unpublishable) until after his death, as he struggled meanwhile to complete the long-stuck *Passage*. In contrast, the teen-aged Kipling had apparently led a full-blooded life of adolescent adventure in Lahore from 1882 onwards, walking in the native city through the night, smoking at opium dens, and frequenting brothels.

Forster's only sexual experience in India was apparently with "Kanaya" (whose name clearly was Kanhaiya which Forster presumably found to be too much of a mouthful, or simply did not bother to get right); the ever considerate Maharaja of Dewas had served up this servant on a platter with his royal compliments to Forster for his delectation. In contrast, Kipling's own slumming among Indian women is caught with a nicety in a fictionalized biography by the Indian psychoanalyst-author Sudhir Kakar. He shows Kipling going to a high class establishment where he sees a lovely bejewelled courtesan and is "enchanted [...] but not aroused," and on another occasion going into a narrow lane and encountering a "short, plump and [...] very dark" woman, merry and forthright, and being unable to resist her (Kakar 2018, 189–90, 190–93). To state the obvious, Forster and Kipling wrote so differently about India possibly because they had each experienced the country in dramatically different ways, and the difference remains even when they address similar or comparable themes.

V. Conclusion: Politics, the Canon and Friendship

Not only did Forster and Kipling experience quite different Indias but they had also come from very different Englands. When he was eight years old, Forster was left a sum of 8,000 pounds (just under a million pounds today) by an aunt. This set him free for life from financial worries and secured, as he put it, his "financial salvation" (qtd in

Furbank 1979, I: 24) He had gone to King's College Cambridge, one of the most highly regarded academic institutions in the world, and was forever afterwards "a King's man," even before he went back to live in the College as a fellow for the last decades of his life. The novelist Rose Macaulay, reviewing *Passage*, alluded to this essential affiliation of Forster's, calling King's "perhaps the most civilized place in the world" (qtd in Furbank 1979, II: 124) Reflecting on the review, Forster spelt out what the place had meant to him in a letter he wrote to another King's man now serving in India:

I have wondered...whether I had moved at all since King's. King's stands for personal relationships, and they still seem to be the most real things on the surface of the earth, but I have acquired a feeling that people must go away from each other (spiritually) every now and then and improve themselves if the relationship is to develop or even to endure. A *Passage to India* describes such a going away – preparatory to the next advance, which I am not capable of describing [...]. The "King's" view over-simplified people; that was its defect. (qtd in Furbank 1979, II: 124)

In responding to another reviewer (who had served in India for a long time), Forster answered the charge that he was "always prejudiced" against the English characters by saying that he meant to be so, "for this lack of balance is inherent in the Indian tangle." He added that someone else may well come along and write "the perfect, the unaccented book some day, and all my theory of an Indian tangle [may] prove mere Cambridge" (qtd in Furbank 1979, II: 130). As Forster acknowledged somewhat self-consciously, he had not only gone to Cambridge but *was* Cambridge by his very temperament and mental constitution.

Kipling, on the other hand, had not gone to university at all because his father on his low Indian salary could not afford it, and the only legacy he received was the legacy of India. (See Trivedi 2021). His father Lockwood was an artisan from Burslem in the Potteries who had worked on the terracotta decorations of the building that is now the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, but as his salary there would not have supported a family, he had on marrying sailed out with his wife to India. When Rudyard finished school in England in 1882, Lockwood had called him back to live with the family in Lahore and fixed up a job for him as a journalist for a small English newspaper there (Lycett 2015, 23–25, 107). Over the next seven years as he served in India, Rudyard began to share some of the attitudes of the other British who had lived and worked in India for long and viewed with amused contempt persons coming out of England just for a few months'

tour and forming hasty liberal opinions on the Indian situation. Kipling wrote a poem titled "Pagett M.P." (1886) and then also a short story, "The Enlightenments of Pagett M.P." (1890), in both of which he mocked such visitors, and the name Pagett became a byword for the ignorant but meddling visitor to India. When Forster first visited India in 1912, he mused: "I am becoming quite a Padgett [sic] M.P., being full of good advice to everyone" (qtd in Furbank 1979, I: 230), and after *Passage* was published, Forster again acknowledged that to his British critics who had lived for long periods in India, he probably seemed to be like "Padgett [sic] M.P." (qtd in Furbank 1979, II:127).

Forster had in fact read Kipling extensively as he demonstrated in a lecture he gave titled "Kipling's Poetry" (1908). He divided Kipling's poems into several distinct categories, quoted several of them at length, and distributed both praise and blame, with just a bit more of the latter. The one trait of Kipling that he spoke most admiringly of was his "spiritual standard" and his "mysticism," as displayed in a few poems too but above all in *Kim* (Forster 2007, 22). This may seem surprising, coming from the sceptical and atheistic Forster with his preferred comic-ironical mode, but it makes better sense in the light of his remark, cited above, that in *Passage* he had tried to indicate that for the development of personal relationships, "people must go away from each other (spiritually) every now and then." It is not immediately obvious just how he showed that in the novel, but he possibly had in mind the circumstance that Fielding goes away from India for two years, and then returns and meets Aziz again. However, a difficulty in accepting this interpretation is that at that meeting after an interval, their relationship turns out to be more discordant than it has been ever before.

On the other hand, the spirituality and even mysticism that Forster discerned in Kipling is perhaps not so apparent to many other readers. Kipling himself would not have claimed any such thing for himself nor has any critic of his work. What he does is to make the lama a *religious* man of ardent faith who would go to any length to complete his pilgrimage by finding the River of the Arrow, for the reason that having found it, he would be ready for salvation. But all this is a matter of the lama's creed and his personal mythology rather than anything spiritual or mystical.

Nevertheless, Forster in his lecture waxed eloquent about Kipling's mysticism, so much so as to sound even a little envious. "There is no explanation of the gift of mysticism," he wrote; "[...] only one thing is certain; it is the peculiar gift of India, and India has given it to Kipling, as he gave it to his boy hero, Kim" (Forster 2007, 22). This reverent formulation by Forster seems to be an instance of Orientalism at its fervent best, especially as it seems difficult to reconcile this with what actually happens in Kipling's novel.

The boy Kim is a self-confessed “chela” of the lama, i.e., a disciple who would smooth his worldly path for him, begging for him and buying railway tickets and so on, but he seems singularly uninterested in the lama’s religious wisdom. His own parallel quest is to find his own people, i.e., his deceased father’s regiment; having done that quite early in the novel, he then spends three years in an elite school supported, somewhat improbably, by the lama’s funds in Tibet, leaving the lama to fend for himself during this long period by begging and travelling all on his own. At the end of the novel, he rejects the ready-made salvation, almost by proxy, that the lama kindly offers him, and chooses instead to go with Mahbub Ali and join the adventurous espionage network of the Great Game. As I have argued elsewhere, “there is not a single spiritual bone in Kim’s body” (Trivedi 2011, xxx).

Just as spirituality may be seen to be allied with an exalted form of friendship (and spirituality is in fact a form of friendship in Sufi belief, which neither of the novelists here evokes however), politics may be thought to be an awareness of the worldly factors that may complicate friendship. It is no surprise to find therefore that both Kipling and Forster seem keen to downplay, if not to deny, that their great novels considered here had any palpable political content in them. This is partly because of the simple reason that the word “politics” had a much narrower meaning in their times that it does now, for what it signifies has changed and been expanded exponentially since then. In fact, there is hardly any aspect of life now that cannot be, and is not, interpreted as being political, in the sense of involving a play of power relationships. In the specific context of literary criticism, it was perhaps Irving Howe’s *Politics and the Novel* (1957) that signalled this radical transformation as much as any other single work. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* continued to say even in a supplement published in 1982 that a political novel was “a novel about imaginary politicians,” Howe had already inaugurated a new way of thinking when he declared: “I meant by a political novel any novel I wished to treat as if it were a political novel” (Howe 1957, 17). In stark contrast, Forster had concluded his lecture on Kipling by stating that Kipling has some poems “that only deal with what is permanent and noble in our humanity. They speak to us of the past; they may speak of us to the future, in days when our politics are forgotten and our newspapers indecipherable” (Forster 2007, 27).

In what may seem to be a little paradox, readers and critics in the Anglophone West in recent times have increasingly exposed and highlighted the politics underlying the works of not only Kipling and Forster but of writers in general, from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf, while several dedicated readers in India have continued to read both Kipling and Forster from a largely apolitical point of view. Perhaps the most prominent

and influential of such Indian scholars was G.K. Das of the University of Delhi, who in his book *E.M. Forster's India* stated that while *A Passage to India* was “apparently” about “the dissolution of the British Empire of India,” what was “more important from Forster’s point of view” was “looking at India and Indians as such, independently of the political context” (Das 1977, 74).

Of Das’s two students who too later went to Cambridge for their doctoral studies, Rukun Advani chose to work on Forster’s criticism, while Christel Devadawson attempted a comparison between Forster and Kipling – or rather, a juxtaposition, with Kipling discussed in the first two chapters and Forster in the next two, before they could finally meet in the fifth and last chapter. Devadawson adopted a thoroughly non-political and anti-postcolonial view, for the solicitous consideration that “the postcolonial reinscribes the antagonisms of the colonial world” (Devadawson 2005, 186). On the other hand, the view of British rule in India that she took was so benign that her British supervisor John Beer joked in his “Foreword” that while Forster had said that he found it “impossible to be fair” to the British in *A Passage to India*, Devadawson “so often achieves precisely that” (Beer 2005, 10).

Another student from the University of Delhi, Parminder Kaur Bakshi, who went not to Cambridge but to Warwick, did in fact offer a radical view of Forster by stating forthrightly in the very opening words of her thesis that “E.M Forster is a homosexual writer,” and then by proceeding to treat each one of Forster’s six novels, from *The Longest Journey* to *Maurice*, from a homoerotic point of view (Bakshi 1996, 1). As for Kipling, there is apparently only one Indian in recent decades to have pursued a Ph.D. exclusively on his works, and in her three-fold approach, Madhu Grover takes on board the political and aesthetic dimensions of Kipling’s works as well as “what I tentatively term as the claims of the ‘spiritual sphere’” (Grover 2007, 3) – and this without having seen Forster’s lecture on Kipling.

Apart from the meagre volume of research being undertaken on either Kipling or even Forster in current times, these two authors are seldom set as required reading even in the B.A. syllabi in Eng. Lit. in India. (Kipling was never in the University of Delhi undergraduate syllabus, for example, and Forster was dropped a couple of decades ago). One hundred years after they published their masterpieces depicting the British Raj, the two writers are not only the same age but they seem similarly stranded by history and the evolving literary canon, at least in India. The country has its own English-language writers with whom to pack its syllabi, as well as writers in English translation from the numerous Indian languages. The very meaning of “English Literature” has changed

since British rule ended, and that perhaps is a sign of the true postcolonial. Nor does one hear friendship mentioned very often; it is all about partnerships now, and the more strategic they are the better. The Age of Imperialism is well and truly over, and so is the age of Liberal Humanism which was once thought capable of redeeming the worst of Imperialism.

To return to friendship, both Kipling and Forster necessarily looked on the term and the concept as they are normally used in England and among the English. But friendship in India is not understood to be quite the same thing amongst Indians as it is in the West. This makes it doubly problematic in inter-cultural terms when it comes to friendship between the English and the Indians. There are hardly any works of literature in the Indian languages which entertain even the possibility of such a friendship as depicted by Kipling and Forster in their novels. In fact, the great majority of English characters in them are depicted as being “cunning and depraved” or as “representatives of brutal Western power and machinations,” who are capable of casual and murderous cruelty at any moment without plausible provocation; in contrast, the rare English character who is good and kind-hearted acquires the mythic aura of a character in “a fairy-tale” (Das 2001, 208, 214). Even the greatest of Indian writers, including Sir Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who won the Nobel prize in literature in 1913, and Premchand (1880–1936), the greatest fiction-writer in both Hindi and Urdu, depict such terrible and terrifying English characters. The worst of the English characters painted by Kipling or Forster would seem to be saints in comparison.

To try and bridge such a huge gap of fact and perception that prevailed during the colonial period through an occasional instance or two of individual friendship was going to be a fragile and precarious enterprise in the best of circumstances, and most Indians would not have thought it even worth the attempt. At the beginning of *Passage*, Hamidullah, who has been a student in England in the good old times of Queen Victoria when there were very few Indians in England and correspondingly less hostility towards them, says that it is possible to be friends with them but only in England and not in India, i.e., not on colonial ground. Mahmoud Ali, who has never been to England, says it is not possible at all, and “the very sad talk” they are having gets even sadder as they begin recounting the insults and slights they have to put up with every day from the English, to which Aziz contributes his own share. He goes further than the other two to say, “Why talk about the English? Brrr...! Why be either friends with the fellows or not friends?” The narrator now sums up, “He too generalized from his disappointments – it is difficult for members of a subject race to do otherwise” (2, 14, 15). And this is even before

Aziz meets Mrs Moore, Fielding or Adela, and is disgraced, humiliated and traumatized by the false charge of assault brought against him by Adela, and thereafter feels embittered enough to flee from the English and seek refuge in the kingdom of a Raja who is a devout Hindu (and thus by prejudiced definition antipathetic to Muslims though obviously in fact not so).

Friendship with the rulers is thus not a felt need of any member of “the subject race” in either *Passage* or for that matter *Kim*. It is the two English authors who keep projecting friendship or even intimacy as a psychological necessity on the part of their English characters. Kipling asserts Kim to be a friend of all and sundry, the whole “world” – which may be thought somewhat to dilute the effect intended. What is more, he paints Kim as having gone native and smoothly passing off as an Indian, thus transcending friendship to a stage of osmosis. In *Life's Handicap*, probably the best single collection of his short stories set in India, Kipling in his “Preface” states that the stories he narrates in the book were told him by a whole variety of Indians with whom he was obviously on close enough terms for them to share their life-stories with him, and these included Indian priests, a carver, a carpenter, and “nameless men...[and] women spinning outside their cottages in the twilight” (Kipling 1997, 9). His claim to such a wide and intimate knowledge of Indians and India also served to authenticate what he narrated, at least in his own view.

Forster's Indian “friends” included two Hindu Rajahs, one of whom was his employer, and some members of the Muslim elite whom he saw for a few days at a time as he travelled across the country on his two brief sojourns in India, with the notable exception of Masood who was his one long-term Indian friend. Beyond these personal circumstances, both Kipling and Forster as writers evidently believed, in their different ways, that if they and their fictional characters could have Indian friends, such interracial relationships would somehow take the sting out of the general inequities of colonial rule if not quite compensate for it. This would, in a postcolonial retrospective view, seem to have been a fond belief that was wishful to the extent of being fanciful. The best that can be said for it is that while it may seem historically facile and paternalistically patronizing, it was at least well-intentioned.

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