

On Colonialism of a Passage to India: Natural Ecology Perspective

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Abstract: This article intends to analyze how Colonial Ideas result in natural degradation and alienated relations between man and nature. Three major factors--anthropocentrism, eurocentrism, and colonialism, all of which cause serious natural ecological damage and social disharmony in *A Passage to India*--will be examined in this article. Due to the prevailing social policies at the early nineteenth century, natural environments have been destroyed in unprecedented ways.

1. Introduction

An ecological crisis is essentially the crisis of human nature. The fundamental cause of ecological crisis lies in the antagonism between man and nature and the world outlook or worldview upheld thereby, which consists of the central values of the culture. Basically, the western outlook or the typical western culture is based on the "subject-object dichotomy." Before the early Platonic time, the ancient Greek natural philosophy was similar to the Chinese "harmony between man and nature" concept. It was Plato, however, who initially proposed the "subject-object dichotomy" in ancient times. Later, Descartes attempted to clarify that subject and object are fundamentally antithetical, based on the "subject-object dichotomy" concept, which has become a philosophical guiding rule in modern times. Since Descartes, this rule has exerted an immense influence on modern philosophy and patterns of thought, and this is no exception in literary writings. The subject-object dichotomy puts forward the viewpoint that nature and man are completely opposite to each other; God created nature only for man's sake. Thereafter, human beings have taken nature for granted; they have made every attempt to exploit and utilize the natural resources for their own interests. It is needless to state that dichotomous thought leads to anthropocentrism.

From the thought of "commanding nature" proposed by Bacon, to Descartes' "Let yourself to be the ruler and master of nature," to "the legislator of nature" of Kant, these assertions mark the birth of anthropocentrism [1]. The eighteenth century is considered as the rational century; however, humanity did not behave that rationally in dealing with relations between themselves and nature. With the invention of the first steam engine, human beings stepped into industrial civilization. In this era, they began to exploit nature on a large scale and at a fast pace to create abundant material wealth. From then on, they have gradually engaged themselves in pillaging natural resources for their own benefit. While men have been indulging in their grand material achievements, the resulting pernicious consequences have followed naturally; human beings must swallow the bitter pill, which has been caused by their excessive exploitation of nature, such as the greenhouse effect, global warming, species extermination, forest fires, air pollution, soil erosion, population explosion, etc. Because of these natural disasters, human existence has been seriously threatened and ecological crisis has become a key topic worldwide.

2. Colonial Ideas Reflected in a Passage to India

Nature in *A Passage to India* is depicted as being oppressed. The subjugation of nature can be varied, which is not only embodied from the aspect of anthropocentric ideology but also from the problems existing in consonance with social backgrounds. As Li Peichao observes, modern anthropocentrism is closely related to colonialism, eurocentrism, individualism, and male chauvinism [2]. Basically, the intensification of contradictions between man and nature is interwoven within the contradictions of a society.

2.1 Anthropocentrism

It has been demonstrated that anthropocentrism leads to serious ecological crises. Anthropocentrism means that human beings may regard themselves as the central and most significant entities in the universe, or that they assess reality through an exclusively human perspective. It is also concerned with human survival and development as top priorities and demands that all activities should follow this target. Furthermore, anthropocentrism has removed human beings from nature and thus privileged mankind in the universe; it regards mankind as the only existence that has intrinsic value, whereas, nature, as well as other existence, serve merely as tools for the benefit of human existence.

Anthropocentrism is the first and the most important anti-ecological concept that should be criticized in ecological study. In accordance with ecocriticism, the idea of anthropocentrism can be dated back to the Bible, but the first ecologic thinker and ecologic critic is American scholar Rachel Carson. She argues that anthropocentrism, which has dominated human consciousness and human behavior for thousands of years, leads to the ruthless exploitation of nature. Another American historian, Lynn White, observes that "Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism is the ideological and cultural origin of ecological crisis"[3]. Further, he points out "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. . . .Christianity not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploited nature for his proper ends"[4]. It is incontrovertible that the limitations of Christianity gave rise to the emergence of anthropocentrism. The biblical *Book of Genesis* legitimizes human domination over nature, for God told Adam that all things were created to serve man, who is the legitimate ruler of nature.

As a devout Christian, Mrs. Moore believes that God is everywhere; even in India there can be no exception. However, India is a microcosm of nature with its varied climate, vast land, complex religions, numerous ecologies, and multiple ethnic groups. Christianity is unable to explain the existential meaning of the natural world and the vastness of the wider world in the broad Indian country, in which there exists an interior region or landscape that rational human consciousness cannot reach. For example, the echo in the Marabar caves brings her a crisis of faith: "everything exists, nothing has value"[4]. The second part, "Cave," is one of the most important components of this novel, in which Forster spends one-third parts of the novel to depict the caves in Mount Marabar as the symbolic embodiment of the primary chaos. "To call them 'uncanny' suggests ghosts, and they are older than all spirit"[5]. The chaotic world is a place that human civilization has never reached. Similarly, Forster describes the Marabar Caves with words like "dark caves," "absorb," and "upheaval" to strengthen and emphasize the natural power that is able to destroy all human endeavors and efforts in our limited world. Mount Marabar "robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind"[5]. In the meantime, it shows the nihilistic universal image that "everything is worthless" [5]. Both Adela's intellect and Mrs. Moore's pious belief are confronted with severe challenges: "all its divine words from 'Let there be light,' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'boum'. Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul" [5]. Caves symbolize the universe that one has to confront but still cannot understand. The caves are all in continuous succession, but are still separated from each other; this kind of segregated state intensifies the separate isolation in the human heart.

Besides the caves, we cannot neglect the natural scenes and wild animals portrayed in this novel. From a little wasp in Mrs. Moore room to a horrible mass of flies hanging from the ceiling in Aziz's house, from the "so strong and so enormous" [5]. Indian sky to "a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses trees, houses trees"[5]. India has far surpassed national and religious limitations and evolved into a mysterious universe which mankind is incapable of exploring and accessing.

Thus, what Forster endeavored to do is in fact primarily to reassert an intense universal awareness that human beings are only a very small part of the vast universe; it is impossible for them to control nature and to take the most appropriate advantage of nature. Human ideology and social systems, in short, simply stop working in the presence of nature.

2.2 Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism, a belief in preeminence of Europe and the Europeans, endows the white person with an innate superiority over a non-white, either consciously or subconsciously. Basically the world is viewed from a European perspective and the whites see themselves as the highest-ranking race while distaining all colored races. It is not excessive at all to comment that European civilization is responsible for the serious ecological crisis in the modern society, particularly the modern European industrial civilization, social development model, and social lifestyle. Forster himself suggests that the main mistake human beings made lies in the fast development of technology, industrialization, and mercantilism. Due to the rapid progress of science and technology, people become more and more detached from the physical world. The so-called western civilization being brought to Indian continent causes maximum disaster for the local natural world and social life. The imported car causes a traffic accident and leads to Bahadur's death; the dead man's ghost has always haunted the people nearby. "In the twilight, all resembles corpses, and the train itself seemed dead though it moved--a coffin from the scientific north which troubled the scenery four times a day"[5]. Here, Forster makes a vivid comparison of the train to a coffin, which destroys natural harmony four times a day when it goes by. It is obvious that Forster blames the subjugation of nature done by European scientific developments, so-called. He shows his concern for the disappearance of natural beauty, a consequence of the invasions of Europeans, and the catastrophic degradation of nature which resulted from the introduction of western industrialization.

Similarly, Eurocentrists lay stress on reason and order, ignoring human emotion, which perversely endows the bureaucrats with an unsound character. Mr. Turton, Mr. McBryde, and Doctor Callendar are typical representatives; they are insolent, aggressive, with a strong desire to rule the Indians as well as to govern India. All of them are part of the British colonial apparatus and they are all Eurocentralists. They regard themselves as God, always bearing their so-called sacred creed in mind that they have come to India for the purpose of rescuing the indigenous Indians; as Ronny tells his mother, "we are out here to do justice and keep the peace"[5]. Europeans tyrannically abuse their power over the Indian land and the Indian people, not only destroying the natural scenery to build the so-called civilized facilities of India, but also taking a very cruel attitude to native Indians; as Mrs. Callendar says, "the kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die"[5]. However, the Indian primitive chaos, unmanageable muddles, and community uproars cannot be controlled by rational control and well organized order conducted by Europeans:

The triumphant machine of civilization may suddenly hitch and be immobilized into a car of stone, and at such moments the destiny of the English seems to resemble their predecessors', who also entered the country with intent to refashion it, but were in the end worked into its pattern and covered with its dust [5].

Last but not least, the Marabar incident proves to be the best illustration of the Europeans' intention to take advantage by using their intelligence and bureaucracy to reconfigure the Indian social order. But this kind of order does not apply to remote India in the material universe. The echo of the Marabar caves makes Mrs. Moore question her belief in Christianity and arouses spiritual turmoil in Adela. Moreover, the cave echo intensifies the conflict between English and Indian and results in the trial of Aziz. In order to succeed in the trial, the police chief induces Adela to recite the ill-intentioned testimony, and thus they become prisoners of their own deceit. Adela abandons her testimony that she was insulted by Aziz; rather, she confesses that it was the ceaseless echo in the chaotic caves that gave rise to her illusion; the narrator observes, "she did not know who touched her, could not breathe, and some vile naked thing struck her face and settled on her mouth like a pad. She went mad, hitting and gasping like a fanatic. . . there was a terrifying echo" [5]. In addition, Ronny repatriates his aged mother back to England in the most unsuitable season for a trip just because Mrs. Moore could be the only one to appear in court as a witness to prove Aziz's innocence, but his command to his mother causes her death on the ship home.

2.3 Colonialism

Colonialism, as a form of capitalism, enforces social changes and exploitation, and it is closely

associated with uneven development. According to Marxism, it is an “instrument of wholesale destruction, dependency and systematic exploitation producing distorted economies, socio-psychological disorientation, and massive poverty and neocolonial dependency.”¹ Roger Tignor settles on three sentences to define Colonialism in his famous book *Jurgen Osterhammel’s Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*:

Colonialism is a relationship between in indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule.²

From the late fifteenth to the twentieth century, European nations established colonies in other continents. There were three reasons for them to expand their colonial ambitions: to make profits, to expand the power of metropole, and to spread their lifestyle, political and religious beliefs, and culture and technology. *A Passage to India* is an excellent example to illustrate how the colonists took action to expend their aggressive ambitions in the colonized countries for their own economic profits and political hegemony. In the novel, Forster condemns the colonial system that causes distorted and alienated human characters. For example, Mr. Turton is very friendly at the beginning when he comes to India; an indigenous Indian describes him in this way: “I have driven Turton in his carriage, Turton! Oh yes, we were once quite intimate. He has shown me his stamp collection” [5]. However, he has totally changed after living in India. “I give any English two years, be he Turton or Burton. It is only the difference of letters. And I give any Englishwoman six months. All are exactly alike” [5]. In order to succeed in the trial of Aziz, he entices Adela to recite false testimony at court. Not only Turton but all the English have been assimilated and even brainwashed under the colonial system of Anglo-Indian society. We can find more examples to support this view. Ronny, for instance, was a humanitarian with whom Adela had once fallen passionately in love in the Lake area, but Ronny had completely changed since he lived in colonized India. His ferocious character had hardened under the nurture of colonial ideas. To Adela, “his self-complacency, his censoriousness, his lack of subtlety, he seemed more indifferent than of old to what was passing in the minds of his fellows, more certain that he was right about them or that if he was wrong it didn’t matter” [5].

Apart from the officials like Ronny or Mr. Turton, Forster presents us with another group of people who show their great interest in India and its people: Mrs. Moore, Adela Quested, and Fielding. These three do not go along with the colonial officials in their evil deeds. They appreciate genuine human relations and pursue and establish friendships with native Indians. However, their good intentions appear to be vulnerable to the colonial system. Mrs. Moore attempts to get to know more about Indian cultures through contact with Muslims and Hindus, but she is rejected spiritually and physically. Fielding tries his best to get rid of all social, cultural, and colonial prohibitions in order to seek pure personal relations with native Indians, but he is unable to overcome the deep-rooted obstacles between the two races. As for Adela, the whole Indian life seems to be a hallucination. Only by keeping the honesty that British middle class intellectual holds is she able to face up to the frustration and psychic turmoil caused by colonialism.

3. Conclusion

In short, based on textual analysis, we are able to get a clear view of Forster’s sympathetic concern about ecological degradation caused by colonial ideas, as well his concerns, innate and intuitive, of the proper relationship between man and nature. And it is evident that the subjugation of nature can be varied, which is not only embodied from the aspect of anthropocentric ideology but

¹ “The definition of Colonialism according to Marxism”, December 14, 2021
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism#cite_ref-Dic_11-0>

² “Another definition of Colonialism according to Roger Tignor”, December 14, 2021
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism#cite_ref-Dic_11-0>

also from the problems existing in consonance with social backgrounds, especially colonialism. The intensification of contradictions between man and nature is interwoven within the contradictions of a society. Forster speaks highly of nature and spares no effort in creating harmonious and peaceful natural scenes aimed at emphasizing the importance of nature as well as the importance of reaching the harmonious co-existence between it and man. Additionally, through vivid depictions, Forster conveys his profound ideas that true connections within mankind can be reached only based on harmony between man and nature. Only by integrating man with nature can we attain harmony between man and man as well as between man and himself; the second is perhaps required before the first can be realized.

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