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100 years on, re-reading 'A Passage to India'

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IT has been a hundred years. EM Forster's 'A Passage to India' has been read, dissected, interpreted, loved, mutilated, lugged around, thrifted, borrowed from and licked by the most popular and the most fringe discourses in literary studies. These range from 'political, psychological, symbolist, metaphysical, postcolonialist, queer', and other critical impulses, as Lelyveld recounts in '100 Years of A Passage to India'.

Set in the fictional Indian city of Chandrapore against the backdrop of the British Raj in the 1920s, the novel revolves around four characters and their relations: Dr Aziz, a young Indian Muslim physician, his British friend Cyril Fielding, and British visitors Adela Quested and her elderly friend, Mrs Moore. It is about the despair that grows over the landscape, and eventually between their friendships and relations.

A book of criticism, '100 Years of A Passage to India' goes beyond a simple, immediate critical reading of the novel. There is something that has gathered over and played on the novel over time, owing to multiple (mis)readings, and passages, that can only be articulated when all these essays are placed together. As tentative as Forster is about 'India a nation!', on the last page of his novel, this volume articulates a history of tensions and contentions that characterise what we call India, illuminated in the journeys taken by the novel over the last hundred years.

100 YEARS OF A PASSAGE TO INDIA
Edited by Harish Trivedi.
Orient BlackSwan.
Pages 268. ₹1,350

This volume seems to suggest that India is about an affection, a poetics, an encounter, that remains incomplete. Whether it is the friendship between Aziz and Fielding, which is overshadowed and broken by colonial difference (says Anjum); Adela's misunderstood desire, and her short-lived return to India (says Anamika); Forster's homosexual longing for Syed Ross Masood, the other author (says Lelyveld) — beautiful things stop dead in their tracks. The political interrupts the poetic, as Harish Trivedi says in the last chapter. The novel captures such affection and its troubles, and the essays throw these into churning.

Trivedi, the editor of this volume and a former professor of English at Delhi University, admits to having read the novel for the first time in the 1960s, as a student of literature. Rupert Snell begins his essay on translating Forster with something similar: "When I first read 'Passage' in 1969, the Indian republic and I were in our late teens." Anjum Hasan read the novel at her father Noorul Hasan's "urging, as a teenager, and more than three decades later, all that remains in my porous memory is an image and one sentence".

It is not a coincidence that most writers bring their observations from reading the novel again, as if attempting to complete an idea that remains unfinished or open. Like the tentative opening of the dark caves in the novel, the first answers seem wrong. Trivedi taught 'Passage' for many years, starting from 1969 and most hopefully running up to the present.

A different kind of repetition is articulated by Anjum Hasan, who was "appalled at how much it [the novel] holds" when she read it again after a few decades. She is talking about how the troubles in the novel were produced for her family, as Muslims in today's India. Some other authors in the volume also speak of reading again, whether it is in translation (Rupert Snell, Evelyne Hanquart-Turner, Fordonski), adaptation (Madhu Singh), comparison (Ipshita Chanda, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Howard J Booth), or shifting gaze (Ruth Vanita, Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar).

Anamika has written the character Adela again, or rather, after the novel — a most creative critique of 'Passage' and the desires in it. Putting these many repetitions together suggests that the novel captured a formative trouble in the nation, its flicker even before it came into being, which renders it repeatedly relevant as a text.

This might be the question of the nation itself. This volume reveals that Forster has rendered this question into literary form, consciously or otherwise.

Each essay broaches this differently. Rupert Snell, for instance, deals with this in translation from English, into the language of contested national prominence, Hindi. The Ganges, hidden by city-trash, 'happens not to be holy here', in the fictional town of Chandrapore. In someone's translation, 'to come down' becomes *avtarit*. In this movement to a holier word, the mythical, celestial descent of the river is also rendered as impure as the flood (to come down) of trash. There is something about such negativity that remains fitting for modern India.

When Trivedi wrote to King's College, the copyright holders for 'A Passage to India', in hopes of translating the book into Hindi, they wrote him a very colonial letter, denying him permission. A jarring hostility remains — rupturing poetic possibility, even today.

'A Passage to India', in English, is beautiful but incomplete.

— The writer, a translator and poet, teaches at Ashoka University