

‘Thick Description’ of Indian Cultural Signs in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of the present paper is to deal with Edward Morgan Forster’s (1879-1970) *A Passage to India* (1924) based on the cultural theories of Clifford Geertz (1926-2006). Geertz redefines culture as ‘Webs of Significance’ or ‘Symbolic System.’ He clarifies that symbolic actions and signs are the key for interpreting cultures effectively. Culture involves a worldview, a religious belief, ethos and ritual. Having an eye on the theory of ‘thick description’, this paper focuses on the interpretation of the local conventions, context, significance, intentions and social networks in Forster’s *A Passage to India*. In this regard, the paper sheds more light on the layers of meaning embedded in Indian symbolic cultural signs such as the Mosques, Marabar Caves and Temples. Forster decodes the significance of Hindu rituals and provides a thick description of cultural events, as a labyrinth, based on Hindu worldview. He flattens out a very complex description of the signs by examining the systems of perception that inform them. Finally, this paper clarifies Forster’s narrative as a process of detailed decoding through the web of concepts, local conventions and individual motives that make the Indian isolated signs meaningful.

Keywords: Culture, Sign, Thick Description, Symbolic System, Labyrinth.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Clifford Geertz clarifies that man is in need of symbolic system of meaning in any particular culture. He proposed a distinct methodology for analyzing cultural signs to open up different layers of meanings. To Geertz, meaningful concepts are formed in the process of symbolic exhibitions. He transforms ethnography to an interpretative approach in search of meanings. ‘Thick description’ is a decoding semantic possibility inherent to the sign, and it contains labyrinth of interpretations. Cultural behavior, in turn, is the interactive creation of meaning with the signs. India can be considered as “vast and various labyrinth of religious” and “daedalian social and cultural structure” exist within India (Geertz, 289).

‘Thick description’ of cultural signs is one of the most important elements that can be seen in the works of Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970). Because of his visit to India and his friendship with Masood, his Indian friend, he became familiar with the Indian local conventions, beliefs, and context, during his visit. Forster finds a way to this labyrinth of religious and cultural signs by focusing on thick description of cultural signs. He knows that interpreting the meaning of a cultural act needs a depth of local knowledge. Forster witnesses the Hindu religious festival, Gokul Ashtami festival. A great festival celebrates the birth and incarnation of Lord Shri Krishna, while dancing in worship of the god and the crowd sways with divine ecstasy, singing and playing. The ritual enactment recreates the process of noise, color, and the belief system of Hinduism. The religious ritual deepened his understanding of ritual in Hinduism and he uses the Indian cultural signs in his works discussed in this paper. Forster elaborates in scrupulous details on the India before him, and here is where the true thickens of Indian culture takes place. Forster produces a very complex reading of signs by examining the Indian system of perception that informs it. He works through the webs and issues of Muslim, Hindu and indigenous local conventions and motives in each part.

A Passage to India (1924, *PI*) shows the multitude of cultural meanings. It lays primary importance upon cultural acts and system of signs. It is, indeed, about India. The complexities of symbols in the context of India are a labyrinth which creates treasure for deciphering. The novel puts greater emphasis on the context and details in order to grasp and set down the meanings of a cultural behavior in India. It shows the depth and thickness of Indian culture and the ethnographer's task to decode the cultural signs of the Mosques, Marabar Caves and Temples in all their complexity, locality and contextuality. The novel shows the various possible meanings of the Hindu ritual. It shows that India becomes more understandable if the observers know more about the context in which Indian cultural signs and rituals take place. Forster aims at unraveling and reconstructing the different clusters and layers of meaning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this paper, thick description of cultural signs in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is discussed and analyzed from cultural viewpoints. According to Geertz, who studies, culture, sign, thick description, symbolic system and labyrinth, this paper focuses on the concepts of thick description and its related subjects. Furthermore it examines Forster's ideas to find some definitions for the concepts of cultural signs to confirm the hypothesis based on Forster's own opinion on the thick description in cultural studies frameworks.

A Passage to India brings out a fuller understanding of local details. Forster teases out the layers and social networks embedded in Indian culture. He ties up with Geertz's definition of what a culture really means. It is a passage for interpreting the meaning and significance behind Indian culture. Forster tries to describe the significance and the systems of signs to obtain thick description through participant's observation in the Mosque, the Caves and the temple.

By regarding all discussions, supposing thick description and deep participation in the cultural acts expressed by Forster, the paper aims to examine the subjects such as symbolic systems and sign, through an analysis of Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, and its three parts, the Mosques, Marabar Caves and Temples. Thick description seeks to reflect the labyrinthine nature of social life. In other words, thick description and its consequences in *A Passage to India* will be discussed in details.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forster himself argues that his novel was "about the human race's attempt to find a 'more-lasting home': that it was as its core about religion and metaphysics" (Childs, 349). Forster has always been an elusive figure in the history of literary criticism. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), in her essay on "The Novels of E. M. Forster" (1927), also finds "something baffling and evasive in the vary nature of his gift" (342). Forster changes the Western norm by giving a correct definition of culture and ethnography. He revises the previously imagined vision of Indian culture, and the thick description about the social context is necessary.

Forster's quest for representing and interpreting India is just like Adela's quest for seeing real India. He tries to show that there is an ordered system of symbols in terms of which Indian defines their worlds and expresses their feelings. The Muslims, Christians and Hindus are suspended in webs of significance they have spun. Any action or sign in the mosque, cave, and temple is informed by a wider web of meanings, which can be studied through a focus on these specific actions and signs.

Forster's novels are dense and focus on decoding cultural signs, but more importantly, his novels explore a deep interpretation based on the conceptions expressed by symbolic systems. He proposes that each culture is like a web of significations, in which one can search for layers of various meanings. He tries to open the eyes of his fellow countrymen and extricate them from thin and surface interpretation of culture.

Culture: 'Thick Description'

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Clifford Geertz clarifies that symbolic actions are the means for interpreting cultures effectively. Man is in need of symbolic "sources of illumination" to "orient himself" with respect to the system of meaning in any particular culture (Geertz, 45). In Geertz's redefinition of culture, signs and meanings are the key to interpretation. He moves away from "the essentializing Western tendencies to construct a native from a privileged point of view," to find meaning in particular actions (Hawley, 204). Geertz defines culture as a pattern of meanings and conceptions exists within symbols. Man is "suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," and the analysis of culture is "an interpretative one in search of meaning" (5).

The cultural system of a religion is composed of two complementary symbolic orders, an ethos and a worldview. Ethos designates the moral and aesthetic aspect of a culture. Geertz explicitly correlates religious ritual with ethos and religious belief with worldview. Ethos and worldview are "synthesized, fused, or stored in symbols that are

arranged in various systems, patterns, or control mechanisms such as ritual, art, and religion” (Bell, 26). Geertz argues that “any religious ritual [...] involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and worldview” (113).

Geertz’s second contribution is an examination of what ethnography is and what it does. He mentions that culture is not a force or causal agent in the world, but a context in which people live out their lives. ‘Thick description’ refers to both describing and interpreting observed social action (and behavior) within its particular context. To Geertz, “culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described” (14).

Deep description distinguishes winking from a social gesture, a twitch based on the cultural context of the eyelid contraction. Based on socially established codes, the ethnographer shows the difference between twitch and wink, whether winking is involuntary or intentional, or it has a meaning-based communication function and imparts a particular message parody or conspiracy. Thick description “strives to discover, sort out and detail the significant features, layers, and networks of human discourses, interactions, institutions, contexts, behaviors, conventions, and so forth” (Hens-Piazza, 28). According to Gina Hens-Piazza, ‘thick description’ captures the potential meaning of social context and “burrows deep into the labyrinth of a social world” (ibid).

It is the ethnographer’s job to unravel the webs of meaning and interpret them. Culture is not just a frame of mind but it is public, social, relational and contextual. When the Western observer does not understand the beliefs or actions of persons from a foreign culture, he acknowledges his “lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs” (ibid 13). The ethnographer’s interpretation asks researchers to start from the symbolic action to manage and follow what local does. Geertz’s method of description allowed for closer scrutiny of the complex meanings and values of daily practices. Martin Packer, in *The Science of Qualitative Research* (2011), elaborates that an “ethnographer doesn’t merely observe but inscribes and interprets” what they have witnessed (219).

‘Thick description’ is concerned with “the elucidation of local detail rather than grand comparison” (Barnard and Spencer, 809). An interpretation should refer to the embeddedness of the microscopic and “tiniest detail of human life in layers of contextual significance” (ibid). Understanding another culture is thought to lead to locally knowledge and interpretation that are given within the local culture. An interpretation is a thick description that is richly and deeply embedded in the context of social life. The ethnographer must interpret signs to gain their meanings within the social relations to see all the possible meanings. Thick description “elucidate the level of symbolic meaning in people’s actions” (Kuznar, 90). It involves interpreting actor’s intention moods and motivation that “reveals the hidden meanings” (Moody-Adams, 163).

Geertz applied his method of cultural interpretation to the myth, ceremonies, rituals, and symbols. The description of culture should include a kind of knowledge that Western observer had gained through “detailed and in-depth engagement” (Abram, 10). In Bali under the colonial Dutch, the observer “sees cockfighting as ‘primitive,’ ‘backward,’ and ‘unprogressive’” (Geertz, 414). The colonizer perceives these cockfights as primitive and harmful that due to the time and money the peasants wasted on them, in sum it might be an unworthy custom of a nation. The foreign outsiders bring out the irrationality, savageness and foolishness of the men who engaged in the cockfight play. Geertz proposes an eloquent portrayal of ‘thick description’ of the Balinese cockfight. The ethnographer interprets Balinese ritual for traces of the elusive substance and shows the cultural significance of cockfighting in Balinese society. For cockfighters and for gamblers, honor, pride, esteem, and masculinity are more important than money.

The ethnographer’s deep interpretation of the cockfight shows that it is not about roosters but the entire Balinese culture. Cockfighting uses emotion for cognitive ends, “it says in a vocabulary of sentiment—the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, and the pleasure of triumph,” but what a cockfight says is not only these emotions, for the Balinese, participating in cockfights is “a kind of education” and what a Bali learns is “what his culture’s ethos and his private sensibility [...] look like” (Geertz, 449). The point of ‘thick description,’ then, is that it successfully articulates the significance of an action by paying close attention to the contextual richness of the situation in deep interpretations.

Decoding of Indian Cultural Signs in A Passage to India

In the opening scene of *A Passage to India*, Dr. Aziz, one of the main characters, visits a mosque. Aziz, an Indian Muslim, likes the mosque; since, for him the mosque is “gracious” and “exquisite” (PI, 5-6). Arrangement of the mosque pleases him because he is aware of the significance of the symbolic system in his religion. The symbolic system and extrinsic cultural codes please him and his sense of beauty. For Dr. Aziz, the inscription of the names of Allah, lamp, and light are extrinsic cultural codes that show the truth of Islam.

Forster shows the fusion of ethos and worldview in the symbolic system of Islam; however, “the temple of another creed, Hindu, Christian, or Greek, would have bored him and failed to awaken his sense of beauty” and “he tried to symbolize the whole into some truth of religion” (PI, 6). Only the symbolic system of Islam awakes his sense of beauty

because his ethos and his “moral and aesthetic style and modes” are different (Geertz, 127). Islamic signs and meanings are the key to interpretation of the mosque.

Forster shows that Dr. Aziz is familiar with the imaginative universe and signs in the mosque. Islam like the other forms of religion is a cultural system, which is composed of two complementary symbolic orders, an ethos and a worldview which are fused and stored in Islamic symbols, that is what Forster directly explains:

Where he sat, he looked into three arcades whose darkness was illuminated by a small hanging lamp and by the moon. The front—full moonlight—had the appearance of marble, and the ninety-nine names of God on the frieze stood out black, as the frieze stood out white against the sky. The contest between this dualism and the contention of shadows within pleased Aziz, and he tried to symbolize the whole into some truth of religion or love. A mosque by winning his approval let loose his imagination. The temple of another creed, Hindu, Christian, or Greek, would have bored him and failed to awaken his sense of beauty. Here was Islam, his own country, more than a Faith, more than a battle-cry, more, much more ... Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and his thoughts found their home. (PI, 6)

Islam is, indeed, a pattern of meanings and conceptions which exists within symbols. Conceptions expressed by symbolic systems and Muslim communicate with this pattern of meanings and conceptions within the symbols. The Muslims are suspended in webs of significance they have spun, Islam is the webs of significance, and the analysis of Islam might be an interpretative one in search of meaning. Islam is something to which “social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly described” (Geertz, 14).

Dr. Aziz states that “this is a mosque, you have no right here at all; you should have taken off your shoes; this is a holy place for Moslems” (PI, 6). The reason is based on the difference between Islamic and Christian symbolic system. In *A Passage to India*, the British observers, as the colonizers, are unable to understand the contextual meaning of the Indian culture, or the colonized culture. The interpretation is different from the native Indians; it is not based on the ‘thick description’ of signs in order to see all the possible meanings.

Like Dr. Aziz, Mohammed Latif refers to the embeddedness of the microscopic and tiniest details of India and the Marabar Caves. When the British colonizer asks Mohammed Latif about the Marabar Caves and the aim of going and seeing them, he replies: “God and the local villagers knew” (PI, 57). Mohammed Latif directly suggests a fuller understanding of local indigenous religious practice in colonial India.

In order to understand the aim of visiting and the cultural significance of the Marabar Caves, it is required that the descriptions be microscopic in detail and whatever is found, not interpreted beyond the homely details of Indian everyday life and society. Mohammed Latif explains that foreign interpretation should be connected with the elucidation of local detail. Forster refers to depth and thickness of culture. The observers must decode the complex meanings of caves.

Foreign observer might see the caves from the local point of view for a detailed analytical stance. When Miss Adela Quested, the stereotypical form of an English Lady, asks about the Caves, professor Godbole who is a Hindu, describes the Marabar Caves as “Great Honor” and Dr. Aziz defines them as “immensely holy” (PI, 31). Only a thick and deep description shows the complexities of this semiotic system of the caves. ‘Thick description’ is a way to decipher the cultural meaning and social context of the Marabar Caves. Adela never touches the Marabar Hills and thinks that there is evil within the caves. Adela fails in the thick description of Indian culture, because “nothing evil had been in the caves” (PI, 64).

For Adela, echoes are terrifying echo but Godbole “had never mentioned an echo; it never impressed him” (PI, 64). The echo makes impression only on Mrs. Moore and Adela. Professor Godbole and Dr. Aziz never hear the echo and are never really impressed by it. They are familiar with the symbolic system and act in accordance with them. English ladies cannot see the Godbole’s India. For the English ladies, there is only darkness and empty space under the arch of the cave. They experience nothingness in the cave. Mrs. Moore can only perceive absence, futility and meaninglessness, but Godbole realizes that even divine absence is a kind of presence: “absence implies presence, absence is not non-existence” (PI, 78). Forster depicts Adela, and Miss Moor who are not aware of the meaning behind the Marabar Caves, and their symbolic import in Indian society or among locals.

The Marabar Caves are more than muddledom or mystery. Adela never goes beyond facts and surface appearances, while ‘thick description’ presents details, emotions and webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. It is because of the lack of the microscopic description that “the true India slide by unnoticed” (PI, 19). The reason is the “lack of the familiarity with the imaginative universe within which” Indian acts “are signs” (Geertz, 13). Therefore pattern of meanings and conceptions exists within symbolic systems in the caves.

Indigenous need the symbolic “sources of illumination” to “orient” themselves with respect to the system of meaning (Geertz, 45). This is how Indigenous are “suspended in webs of significance” that they themselves have

spun (ibid 5). The observer must decode the complex meanings of the caves. They might describe them in culture in all their complexity, locality and contextuality. Interpreting the meaning of the caves needs a deep local knowledge.

The British observers see the caves as savage, wild, uncanny and primitive. The foreign outsiders perceive them as primitive, harmful and unworthy while for the local natives the caves are holy and signs of honor. They might interpret signs to gain their meanings within the social relations to see all the possible meanings in the caves. The context under which these caves are made might be richly and thickly described. They see ruggedness, crookedness and irregularities in the structure of the caves while these wild caves are holy in Indian culture.

In the temple, professor Godbole is participating in a religious celebration whose theme is "God is Love." Like the ritual of cockfight, this religious ceremony and holy festival is highly formalized and has high symbolic importance. It is "unsatisfactory and undramatic tangles" for the British observers and they just see Godbole's rituals as "frustration of reason and form" (PI, 138, 125).

Forster moves beyond this religious ritual by knowing the particular social understanding of the ceremony, the intention of Godbole, Hindu audience, and how they construe the meaning of the holy festival itself. For the observer, Godbole's ritual is a presentation of a particular religious perspective, but for Godbole, this ritual is "enactment, materialization, realizations of not only models of what they believe, but also models for the believing of it" (Geertz, 114).

The ritual has a meaning-based communication function and imparts a particular message for Hindu. What seems meaningless in ritual for the outsider is full of hidden meanings for the Hindu: "Tears poured from his eyes, because he had seen the Lord's salvation" (PI, 126). Participating in Hindu ritual can be regarded as a kind of education. The aim of this ritual is tranquil of soul.

All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear. But the human spirit had tried by a desperate contortion to ravish the unknown, flinging down science and history in the struggle. (PI, 126).

The cultural meaning can be deciphered according to socially established codes. The social context of ritual and the meaning behind the temple celebration is necessary. For Godbole this religious ceremony brings spiritual harmony, spiritual unity and oneness. 'Thick description' involves the interpretation of Godbole's intention and symbolic meaning or concepts behind Hindu ceremony. Hindu festival brings the equality of self and statue among people. Salvation, tranquility of soul and spiritual harmony are the cognitive ends.

The ritual is a ceremonial form, a symbolic fusion of metaphysics and Indian style of life. The religious ritual "involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and worldview" (Geertz, 113) and this fusion of ethos and worldview are "unknown to an English crowd" (PI, 124). It is a highly complex philosophy behind the ritual and "no eye could see what lay at the bottom of the Brahman's mind, and yet he had a mind and a heart too, and all his friends trusted him" (PI, 125). Thick description can "elucidate the level of symbolic meaning" in Godbole's ritual (Kuznar, 90). It involves interpreting Godbole's intention, moods and motivation that "reveals the hidden meanings" of this religious ceremony (Moody-Adams, 163). Forster offers readers, through Godbole, a new way to look at Hinduism and ritual in temple. Forster leaves the reader with increased clarity and sight to show how much they really can interpret Indian culture, and how much that is real and authentic.

CONCLUSION

Forster strives for the thickest possible description within Hindu culture. He provides a various possible meaning of Godbole's ritual and religious symbolic significance in the Mosque and the Marabar caves. Ritual and ceremonial forms might have multiple layers for local Indian actors and Godbole. He illuminates the thick interpretation across cultures in the mosque, cave, and temple. Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, tries to manifest a deep interpretation and reconstruct more contextual understandings of Indian local life than just passing observations. Forster proffers a deep participation in the cultural practice in India, unmask and deciphers the hidden moods, intentions, and significance. *A Passage to India* tries to indicate that it is only by wading through multiple complex layers of local interpretation and sorting out the signification of Indian cultural signs that the observer can arrive at more sightful cultural portrait of India.

Forster gives a sense of why Adela has so much trouble in seeing and understanding the Indian ethos and 'thick description' of Indian culture. There is an ordered system of symbols in terms of which Christian, Hindu, and Muslim define their worlds and express their feelings. Forster shows that the true India is untouchable for Adela and Mrs. Moore. For Mrs. Moore, the caves are just the shades of dark not holy symbols in the Indian culture, while Professor Godbole describes the caves as great honor and Dr. Aziz defines them as immensely holy.

Forster creates a space for the Indians voices, where the voice of the ethnographer co-exists with the voice of Muslim, Hindus and indigenous. He takes us into the labyrinth of contradict religious and symbolic system. *A Passage to India* tries to leave thereaders trapped in an eternal and infinite labyrinth of religious cultural signs. In a nutshell, Forster allowsan access to the webs of significance spunned by indigenous people.

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