

Deconstructing Cultural Hegemony: A Critical Study of EM Forsters's *A Passage To India*

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the relationship between the Indian and British cultures in E M Foresters's *A Passage To India*. It illustrates the problematic relationship between the coloniser and the colonised in the colonial perspective as portrayed in in the novel. While it is a highly symbolic or even mythical text in numerous aspects, it attempts to record the attitudes of British colonial officials in India in a practical manner. The study also interrogates and examines the colonialist ideology that pervades in the novel. It also shows how Forester has been trying to reinforce the colonialist ideology as superior while portraying and representing India and Indian's as stereotypes.

Keywords: Colonialism, Orientalism, Ideology, Stereotypes, Representation, Natives, Superiority.

Introduction

A Passage To India written in 1913 and not published until 1924 is a realistic account of the attitudes of British colonial officials in India. The novel explores the barriers of inter-racial friendship in a colonial context. It is a fictional demonstration of the interplay between domination and resistance in the colonial situation. A reading based on the

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism would include "the sustained encounter between the English colonials . . . and Indians as the crux of the novel." In his ground breaking book *Orientalism* Said claims that orient is constructed by western practices like anthropology, tourism, fiction, and imperialism. In his another book *Culture and Imperialism* Said investigates the English cultural tradition from an imperialist point of view. Said believes that it is really strange that one reads all the novels of this tradition without ever inquiring or questioning the position of Empire or its colonies. The statement made by John McLeod in his book *Begining Postcolonialism* in relation to the novel gets justified. He states:

Under colonialism, a colonised people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonial values. A particular value-system is taught as the best, truest world view. The cultural values of the colonised people are deemed as lacking in value, or even as being 'uncivilised' from which they must be rescued. To be blunt, the British Empire did not rule by military and physical force alone. It endured by getting both colonising and colonised people to see their world and themselves in a particular way, internalising the language of Empire as representing the natural, true order of life. (19)

The first chapter of the novel prepares the scene for portraying India and Indians as inferior or the 'other'. While describing the imaginary Indian town of Chandrapore and its surroundings Forester depicts the town in a derogatory and humiliating way. It

becomes clear that the writer has a colonial mindset and look down upon India and its people. The narrative of the novel is characterised with antagonism for India and Indians. The Indian native people depicted by Forester are no more than caricatures. They are described as irrational, foolish, lazy, and dishonest.

Edward Said's position concerns the representation of the East, in general, and India, in particular, in Western culture. In Said's opinion East or India is seen as sexual, alien and irrational while the West is depicted as familiar, pleasant, and rational. To make his study relevant in colonial contexts, Edward Said uses various colonial paradigms and in a way tries to deconstruct the text's history. He believes that the approach of a critic should be to tell the history of the text from the point of view of those characters or individuals who have been ignored or excluded from it. Undoubtedly, native Indians seek recognition not only of their identity, but an equal treatment as equal human beings and community as a whole. This aspect of exclusion can be extended to various texts, and in reality Said has researched and studied the impact of colonialism on the people of different nations who were under the control of the empire. Benita Parry in an essay 'The Politics of Representation in *A Passage to India*' states:

The strategy of discrimination and exclusion can be deduced from the series of meanings produced by the word 'exotic': dissimilar, unrelated, extraneous, unconformable, untypical, incongruent, eccentric, anomalous, foreign, alien, abnormal, aberrant, deviant, outcaste, monstrous, fantastic, barbarous, grotesque, bizarre, strange, mysterious, unimaginable, wondrous, outlandish. Only by

willfully suppressing its initiation of an oppositional discourse is it possible to insert *A Passage to India* into the hegemonic tradition of British-Indian literature. (*A Passage to India: Essays in Interpretation* 28)

The ideological binary opposition of “We” standing for the colonisers and “They” representing the colonised is another important paradigm that has become a pretext for any form of colonialism. The idea gets justified in *A Passage to India*, which is based on the assumed white dominance and native inferiority. In the novel this becomes the very basis on which any relationship between Anglo-Indians and native Indians is formed. The best example of this is Dr. Aziz’s trial when the Anglo-Indians and natives were facing each other in the courtroom. Imperialism has been very influential in the creation of characters and circumstances, as well as in the encounter between the colonisers and the colonised. In the first place, two entirely different cultures appear to exist at the beginning of the novel. Chandrapore’s English inhabitants except a handful of them, presume a solely imperialist mentality. It is divided into two parts, which represents the colonial divide between two groups. The English section is characterised as orderly and dominating:

It is sensibly planned, with a red-brick Club on its brow, and further back a grocer’s and a cemetery, and the bungalows are disposed along the roads that cut at right angles. It has nothing hideous in it, and only the view is beautiful. (32)

In comparison to the English-speaking district, there is a definition of the native Indian portion, which is located in a low place. It looks chaotic and without any order:

‘Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life’(31). There is a club managed by the Anglo-Indians that stands for more discrimination among the races. It can be made clear that the narrator sets the tone at the beginning of the first section as well as the following two sections of the book before looking into the club. The symbolism used in the first chapter refers to the complexity of the sky, which can be more all-encompassing than the two conflicting factions of Chandrapore. The British used club as a place for social activities. Indians were not allowed in the club except those who were serving the British. The Anglo-Indians were considering it a holy place for their safety and protection. ‘The club, which was normally private, was one of the most interesting institutions developed by the Raj’. Anglo-Indian officials were representatives of it and, as an act of religious importance they engaged in its activities. Fielding was perceived to be an outcast by his community because he was showing sympathy in the case of Dr. Aziz. The club in Chandrapore is, thus, a sign of the dominance of British imperialism. It has the task of institutionalising their actions and uniting members against indigenous ways. Dr. Aziz remarks: “Indians are not allowed into the Chandrapore club even as guests.” The club maintains and preserves its identity as a location for the British and not for the Indians. Forster’s fiction is indicative of the general assertions of the Orientalist’s regarding the natives, acquired from an earlier tradition. The Orientalists describe characters as distinct or even opposite to the dominant Westerners in their narratives. In the novel Dr. Aziz is depicted as a traditional Indian Moslem according to Orientalist perspective:

Like most Orientals, Aziz overrated hospitality, mistaking it for intimacy, and not seeing that it is tainted with the sense of possession. It was only when Mrs. Moore or Fielding was near him that he saw further, and knew that it is more blessed to receive than to give. (154)

As an Oriental, Aziz is suspicious as well and he is destined to be in a state of confusion. The two conflicting definitions of “suspicion and belief could in his mind exist side by side.” This is another feature of the Oriental character:

Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumor, a mental malady, which makes him self-conscious and unfriendly suddenly; he trusts and mistrusts at the same time in a way the Westerner cannot comprehend. (276)

The last point concerns the general western outlook of the working Easterners falling ill. They don't trust them. The British officials investigated and sent deputies to make sure that Aziz is actually sick or he is pretending to be sick. This is somewhat ironic, considering that the Orientals themselves were accused of suspicion in Chapter XXXI. Aziz is accused by Major Callendar of claiming to be sick. That's why he sends the Hindu, Dr. Panna Lal to inquire. As told by narrator that Aziz is mildly sick but he pretends that he is really ill. The views of the narrator and Major Calendar are the same with respect to Oriental behaviour. Major Callendar still assumed that the worst of natives, although the narrator's belief is barely different. While analysing *A Passage To India* Forster's depiction of India seems gloomy and perplexing. People cannot get in contact with one another and they misunderstand and misinterpret each other. Character

representations are also far from realistic. Dr. Aziz for instance is portrayed as childish, emotional and presented as a typical stereotype. Forster and Fielding in a way, tend to be patronizing and disrespectful towards the Indians. In this respect, the novel is ambivalent: it neither opposes British colonisation nor defends it. It has the same conflicting attitude towards Indian nationalism. Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* remarks:

A Passage to India nevertheless founders on the undodgeable facts of Indian nationalism. Forster identifies the course of the narrative with a Britisher, Fielding, who can understand only that India is too vast and baffling, and that a Muslim like Aziz can be befriended only up to a point, since his antagonism to colonialism is so unacceptably silly. (245-246)

The relationship between Aziz and Fielding is topsy-turvy especially when it comes to politics. Fielding abandons the English people because he knows that Aziz is innocent. However, later on, he becomes aware of the divide between the two races:

At the moment when he was throwing his lot with Indians, he realized the profundity of the gulf that divided him from them. They always do something disappointing . . . they are bad starters and occasionally jib. (181-182)

A Passage To India can be interpreted as carrying the legacies of the British Raj. As with other writings in the genre it articulates the void that lies between the two races. It is not difficult to find rhetorical instances where the native Indians are described within a collection of necessary and fixed characteristics.

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