

Operations of the Colonialist Ideology in E.M. Foster's

A Passage to India

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Received May 10, 2015

Accepted May 24, 2015

ABSTRACT

The colonialist writings are inclined to project the Europeans and the European cultures as superior to the colonized ones. The British novelists and critics, fed upon the Orientalist discourses, have been projecting their own race and culture as superior, and portraying the Indians as inferior or the other. E.M. Forster has depicted the colonialist ideology of the supremacy of white race and its culture and the inferiority of India and the Indians in *A Passage to India*. The paper aims to examine the operations of the colonialist ideology in *A Passage to India*, to demonstrate that Forster intended to support the colonialist ideology of supremacy, and the depiction of India and Indians as stereotypical. The association of imperialism with culture and the consequential mimicry and hybridity among the Indians and the development of the identity of the Indians have been focused in the paper. The paper, in brief, analyses the novel from the perspective of Post-colonial theories. The paper proves that *A Passage to India* like any colonial writings honored the Europe and the European conventions and ideologies while the Indians and their culture were projected as substandard stereotypes.

Key words : ideology, imperialism, oppression, identity, lesser, stereotype, superiority, inferiority.

Colonialist critics and postcolonial writers were immensely inclined towards studying the depiction of the colonized cultures and societies. In the literature produced during the colonial era, the Europeans or colonizers are typically projected as superior to the colonized. The British novelists and critics, fed upon the Orientalist discourses, have been projecting their own race and culture as superior, and portraying the Indians as inferior or the other. *A Passage to India* has extensively been construed as an archetypal anti-colonial text since its publication in 1924. Forster acknowledges that he has taken the title from Walt Whitman's poem.

The opening of Suez Canal in 1869 creates Whitman's keenness to discover the East. The poem explains Whitman's strong will for connecting the East and the West. He considers that the establishment of Suez Canal will bridge the gap between the West and the East. Though Forster obtains the novel's title from the poem, he is not as hopeful as Whitman for the union of the West and the East. Forster's *A Passage to India* represents a racially incompatible journey of both English colonizers and Indian colonized in the city of Chandrapore in British occupied India around the turn of the 20th century. Forster projects himself as a concerned

spokesman for the Raj. IN the novel he seems to be against the British presence in India as well as the way that the British have justified their presence there. In that way the novel has been interpreted as the anti-colonial or post colonial text. However, although Forster has shown his concern to the Indians, there are some limitations in his attempts to defy the conventional Orientalist inclination to objectify India as the Other. Edward Said (1993) rightly contends that literature cannot be politically innocent. Forster is anti-colonial to an extent. However, he does not completely give up the idea of the English Empire. Forster's colonial stand in his subconscious mind is revealed not only in the comments of his spokesman, Fielding but also at the level of his own descriptive language. The driving force of the present study is to confirm that E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* is loaded with colonialist ideology of superiority and presents India, Indians and their culture as lesser and inferior. This was meant to validate the presence of the British Raj in India. The paper aims to examine the operations of the colonialist ideology in *A Passage to India*, to demonstrate that Forster intended to support the colonialist ideology of supremacy, and the depiction of India and Indians as stereotypical. The paper, in brief, analyses the novel from the perspective of post-colonial theories. The paper proves that *A Passage to India* like any colonial writings

honored the Europe and the European conventions and ideologies while the Indians and their culture were projected as substandard stereotypes.

Though Foster projects his image as that of being sympathetic towards Indians as colonized, the statements he has made at other places make him ambiguous regarding his stand. Say for instances, writing to William Plomer in 1934, Forster accepted that in *A Passage To India* he had "tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an unexplainable muddle" (quoted in P. N. Furbank, xxvi). In another epistle to Lowes Dickinson of 26 June 1924, he affirmed that his effort to perplex his subject was "a particular trick [he] felt justified in trying because [his] theme was India. It sprang straight from [his] subject matter" and that he "wouldn't have attempted it in other countries" (quoted in P. N. Furbank, xxvi). This clearly indicates that he tries to write about India in spite of his inability to understand his subject. But since he cannot clarify his subjects except to say that India is a muddle, he winds up repeating the typical Orientalist move, which is to approach the Orient only to withdraw from it.

The novel starts with a short account of Chandrapore as the locale of the story, a city along the Ganges that is not famous except for the nearby Marabar caves. Forster

establishes Chandrapore as a prototypical Indian town, neither distinguished nor exceptionally troubled. This town can therefore be taken to be symbolic of the rest of India rather than an exceptional case.

The opening chapter of the novel is deliberately designed to prepare the reader towards the portrayal of India and Indians as lesser and inferior or other. Forster's selection of words to portray the imaginary Indian town, Chandrapore, and its environment, its landscape and its citizens, is offensive and degrading. Though the theme of the novel is apparently compassionate towards India and Indians, the narrative and the language are loaded with antipathy towards them. Say for instance, the towns of "blasted" India are the malaise of men, who cannot find their way home. The dawn of India brings in its wake no miracles, but failure and disappointment. It is more than that. It is described as failure of the virtue in the celestial fount. The sun rise in India is devoid of any splendor. India is only a horrid, stuffy place. The sun of India is treacherous; the month of April spreads lust like canker. The streets of the town are described as "mean", the temples are as "ineffective". The writer describes the existence of a few fine houses in the town, but they are hidden by the filth of the alleys, to deter the visitors. The town is devoid of any work of art, in the form of painting or carving. The writer further says that everything Indian, like its

landscape and city is "abased" and "monotonous". The Anglo-Indian city station, occupied by the British colonizers, has nothing in common with the native town. The narrator in the novel describes India as an eternal jungle infested with rats, bats, wasps and jackals without any discrimination of home or forest. The Indian soil is portrayed as "horrible". It is unpredictable, unreliable and treacherous. The gate of the Muslim mosque is ruined. Its courtyard is paved with broken slabs. The Marabar caves are described as bland and bald, even the sky which connects the cliffs is bland and glutinous. Mrs. Moor, who is represented as a sympathetic figure, and is looked upon by some critics as compassionate towards India and Indians, but actually is neo-assimilative imperial means to perpetuate the empire, finds the caves as "horrid". The cave is presented with the bad smell due to presence of many Indians. She feels suffocated inside. Something vile and naked hits her face, which in fact happens to be only the soft hand of a child. The images, Indian caves produce, are of snakes and worms. Mrs. Moor turns and cynic and depressed. Her fantasy about India comes to an end. Foster has not depicted anything glorious about India. There is only a half sentence reference to the world famous Taj. This communicates the fact that the author is inclined towards the colonial ideology and he looks down upon India and

its people without any sympathy or compassion for them.

The narrative description of character psychology in the novel reveals Forster's belief that India is incomprehensible. Fielding in the novel seems to be the mouthpiece of Foster's unconscious mind. Besides the similarity of their name and age, both are highly sympathetic towards India and its people, but both are unconsciously aware of the fact that they are caught up within a tide of cultural dissimilarity which is beyond their logical understanding. Say for instance, while Forster endeavors to rationalize India by writing a story about it, an act based on analytical intelligence; Fielding too attempts to sort out the truth of the muddled crisis within Indo-British relations through his "goodwill plus culture and intelligence" (52). However, both realize the limitations of their efforts and empathy at the end. Both of them lose their hope for the chance of connecting with or understanding India and Indians with their logical intelligence.

Most of the Western characters are portrayed as logical and rational while Indians are projected as defectively incomprehensible. Foster's portrayal of Indian characters is from the perspective of a colonialist and reductive. Indian characters are typically portrayed with "the smell of tobacco" (131) and their "sound of spitting." At the house of

Hamidullah, the Indians are depicted as slaves and subjects, recollecting the bare, formal words of courtesy and occasional ordinary politeness articulated by the white people towards them. The narrator confirms the subject and the reductive status of the Indians. The character of Professor Godbole, who should be considerably clever, is never justly elucidated through his assumed sophisticated psychology, but is introduced by his "queer little song"(118) which strangely troubles the two female characters throughout their stay, being characterized as inexplicably deep and incomprehensible to the western mind. The Indian protagonist, Dr. Aziz is projected as the incomprehensible. Though being an intellectual, he is still considered by Fielding as often being eccentrically sensitive, with "emotions never in proportion" (230). He is typically portrayed as an Orient lacking the ability to deal with the situation through his rational self. He is often described as hysterically breaking out into tears or eagerly chanting sentiments through aesthetic expressions of singing songs.

Indians are shown with the knack to construct and create unauthentic stories. It is upheld that the Indians don't care to confirm the fact and can invent a snake out of a stick to generate sensations. Indians, through the representation of Dr. Aziz, are portrayed as suffering from the habit of exaggeration. Aziz has no access to Heaslop but he is shown as

telling Mrs. Moor that he knows the city magistrate personally. Indians are represented as imitators of the Westerners. Indians have taken off the western manners, the life style and the dress code to the extent that Ronny does not regard them as Indians. They flaunt their European shoes and costumes. In spite of being inclined to Hindu philosophy and mythology, Godbole is presented as being influenced by the British customs and is shown copying the English conventions. He decides to name his school after King Emperor George the Fifth. Aziz is depicted as a mimic man who believes that his social connection with white officials can make him a complete man. Indians are portrayed as ashamed of themselves and of their culture. Dr. Aziz seems to be ashamed of his house as it is portrayed as full of black flies. He is described as a man who has so much taken in the Western culture that he feels embarrassed about his own culture. Therefore, he invites Miss Quested and Mrs. Moor at the Marabar caves rather his home. Foster has deliberately portrayed Dr. Aziz as an immature person who invites his guests to the Marabar caves, without having ever seen or visited himself that place before hand. Ronny finds Dr. Aziz the spoilt westernized type, in other words, a mimic man. Foster has represented Indians as the race that is inclined to finding or inventing complaints and excuses. Chapter two ends with the declaration that Indians are not allowed into

Chandrapore club, even the educated ones, in spite of their mimicry and complete assimilation of imperial culture.

Foster misrepresents Indians as being Lazy through the character of Latif who doesn't work and lives off the charity of Hamidullah. His wife whom Latif rarely visits lives somewhere else in similar conditions. Such a man who cannot afford living on his own and cannot earn the livelihood for his family is shown worrying about political and philosophical issues. So Indians are portrayed as all talking and not doing people. All the Indian characters are presented being obsessed with past glories and greatness.

Indian Women are misrepresented by Forster for being worse than men. Purdha, Hamidullah's wife, cannot take meal before male members in the family. Her belief that woman's life is not possible without marriage is magnified in the novel. Instead of compassionately showing up the Indian values and culture, celebrating the spirit of sacrifice and devotion for the family shown by the Indian women, Foster focuses on the darker sides of Indian women. He depicts the destiny of the Indian women as mere wedlock and motherhood. During the ceremony of introduction, Mrs. Turton illustrates the Indian ladies as if they were commodities. Some Indian lady is introduced as only as a "shorter lady" and the other one is described as the "taller lady". Indian

women are not treated as living individual. They are shown as uncertain, cowering, recovering, giggling, making tiny gestures of atonement or despair. Mrs. Bhattacharya, for instance, is represented as childish who does not know what she is talking about. It is only a stereotype description, intended to strengthen the colonial ideology of superiority.

Lecherousness and immorality of Indians is indicated by the fact that windows are shut to prevent the Indian servants looking at the white women. The insulting portrayal of Indians by Foster is seen when Indians are shown extra-excited to attend the party thrown by Turton. They arrive at the party even before the host or the guest of honour. The whites are shown irritated by the ill-mannered Indians at the party. Foster has misrepresented Indians as the race that does not care about their commitments. Say for instance, Bhattacharyas invited Mrs. Moor and Miss Quested. The Bhattacharyas were to send their carriage to receive Mrs. Moor and Miss Quested on the appointed day and time. But it never happened. Mr. Heaslop passes his judgment against the Indians that they are slack, unpunctual and without any notion of sanitation. The Indian food is also ridiculed for being conspicuous by their absence. The supremacy of British over Indians is highlighted even on the sports ground. The Indians are shown as wincing at the British and living with continuous fear.

Dr. Pana Lal has been portrayed as being anxious for his possible offence to the British collector, for his failure to attend the reception.

Nawab's reaction at the time of minor accident misinterprets Indians as immature and childish. When his car meets with a minor jerk, he is shown having lost his mind, abusing his driver and behaving roughly with Miss Derek. While returning from picnic, Aziz acts childishly with the British official who is going to arrest him for the charge of a rape attempt. Only Fielding, a British, can keep him calm and sane. Fielding is portrayed as a superior human being who is in control of everything. Indians, including Aziz, wail and weep at this misfortune. Muhammad Ali, in spite of being educated, is portrayed as a typical Indian man who acts childishly during the trial scene. McBryde thinks it the normal conduct of "an inferior race". Indians are presented as irrational, wild and superstitious while the British are thought as calm at the time of crisis.

Indians are painted as unconcerned about ethics and individual accountability. The Indian minds are referred as mediocre and rough. They are shown indifferent to the basic cleanliness of their own houses. Dr. Aziz, an educated Indian, is shown as messy who doesn't prefer cleanliness of his own home. His home is a place full of filth and black flies. The floors are scattered with

garbage of cane and nuts, spotted with ink, the pictures crooked upon the dirty walls. His friends are described as third-rate people. Everything Indian is portrayed as inferior and everything British is better. Say for instance April which is considered to be the pleasant month in Britain is horrible in India. Indian sun is portrayed as sinister lacking any charm. Aziz, under the influence of colonial ideology, has incorporated the western ideas of beauty as well and does not look upon his late wife as beautiful. Indian men are portrayed being attracted to white women rather Indian ones. Indian children are shown like monkeys. Indians are represented as filthy, ugly people whose lack of etiquette is unpleasant. They are shown keeping their melons in their fez and guavas in their towels. British officials customarily illustrate Indians as incompetent of accountability. The picnic planning is depicted as "odd", the purdha carriage is made fun of as "comic". On top of all these, the Indian cook is shown making tea in the lavatory. The Indian hot weather is attacked badly. By May, a barrier of fire falls across India and the sea. Whereas the British novelists and poets rejoice the splendor of their countryside, here, the narrator grieves over Indian landscape which is of "fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills and more fields". Every Indian is thought as spy and every Indian is blessed with the wicked imagination, a European construction of the

East. The collector asserts that Indians are jackals and India is a poisonous country. Indians are shown cowards who always do something disappointing. Fielding thinks that Indians can be intolerable at times. Almost all the British characters think of Indians as eccentric and backward. Foster has portrayed Indians as being ignorant about the latest development in science, arts and commerce. They are called niggers and nothing is too bad for them. For one suspected crime against a white woman, the ruling white community wants the whole of India to crawl up to the caves.

Educated Indians like Dr. Aziz are portrayed as indifferent to politics. They avoid politics. This is what the empire wanted. Forster also intended to nurture the politics of the empire. Fielding declares his point of view, "England holds India for her good", an echo of the construction of Kipling, "White man's burden". Haq, Aziz and others confess their incompetence and low standard at all levels. This is meant to justify the presence of the British in India forever. Ronny holds that India is a miserable country which needs to be handled with a stick. He treats the Indians at the place of Fielding derisively and offensively ignores them. He never leaves a chance to attack Indians with his bitter comments. He refuses the invite by Aziz by saying it is, "just their way of being pleasant". However, Mrs. Moor, who is portrayed as sympathetic towards Indians, reminds Ronny

that God has put them (the white Christian ruling class) on earth to love their neighbors. This is how Foster tries to justify the British presence in India. Foster here seems to be supporting the colonial ideology that whites are on a mission of bringing light to the darkness of colonized countries. This mission legitimizes the enslavement of other races.

Forster almost becomes a propagandist, who is propagating the British ideology of superiority. He seems to be hiding his true intentions behind the mask of civilization and bringing knowledge to the colonized countries. We can sum up with the statement that in spite of its apparent theme of sympathy towards Indians, *A Passage to India*, strengthens the colonialist ideology of superiority and its narrative reinforces the stereotypes and the East –West division, made-up by the West about India and the Indians. The novel doesn't refer to the cruelty

of colonizers over native. Foster has not mentioned any Indian leader or the freedom fight by the Indians to get rid of their oppressors. The Indians are depicted to have incorporated the customs of rulers. Indians are portrayed as ashamed of themselves, of their culture and of their identity. Throughout the novel, the Indians are presented as lesser people, who cannot manage their affairs like mature, responsible individuals. This is the projection of the European hegemonic assumptions, which have been uncovered by the present study.

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If you cannot do great things, do small things in a great way.

~ Napoleon Hill