

## **Oriental Underpinnings in *A Passage to India*: Islamophobia at Work in Marginalization of Dr. Aziz**

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### **Abstract**

*Fiction rooted in religious subjects has been a much-debated issue in literary tradition, and this article is to explore the oriental underpinnings in the marginalization of the Indian characters in *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster, with a specific focus on the Muslim characters. The work is based on standpoint of orientalism with special emphasis on Islamophobic attitudes. The endeavor of the research is to study working of orientalism in *A Passage to India* to reveal that Forster has tried to depict orientalist attitude of the Westerns, together with exemplification of Islam and Muslims as stereotypes and marginalized figures in the work. The researchers have used Belsey's textual analysis method to explore the primary text- selected for the current research. The study is going to be an original contribution to the literary fields and depiction of Muslim character in the work of fiction.*

**Key terms:** Islamophobia, Marginalization, Orientalism

### **1. Introduction**

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* has established orientalism and colonialism as the basic themes. The novel presents a weaving of complex relationships, i.e. the British with the Indians, the Westerns with the Easterns, the Christians with the Muslims, the Christians with Hindus, the colonizers with the colonized, and Muslims with Hindus. Furthermore, the relationships are not the ones of equality but rather of superiority/inferiority and ruling/subjectation. The major character of the novel, Dr. Aziz, has been marginalized by the Westerns/British/Christians/colonizers due to his religious affiliation, although he is an unorthodox Muslim. For example, in the beginning of novel, in Chapter 2, he receives a call from Major Callendar while he is enjoying a lively *hookah* party with his relatives to reach hospital where he is needed urgently. He leaves hurriedly but to his surprise Major Callendar has already left when he arrives which makes him feel embarrassed and shocked. On every step the novel portrays the English

behaving like local gods and natives yield to be controlled and administered. Rani and Jamil (2015) opine that “British colonizers realize us that it is not a true concept that the colonized and colonizers could develop a positive relationship between each other” (Shazia Rani, Anila Jamil, 2015, p. 2). The reason behind it is that colonizers are taught at schools / colleges in their native countries to behave rigidly and unfriendly instead of understanding their feelings/ hearts. In line with the same background, the major character of the novel, Dr. Aziz, has been marginalized by the Westerns/British/Christians for having faith in Islam, though it has been very superficial. Although, he has adapted himself to the western culture and attitudes largely but still he has not been accepted by the Westerns- they never accepted him equal to them. He has been subjected to the level of humiliation by his British counterparts in the novel.

In the novel another major character, Miss Adela Quested, accuses Dr. Aziz of rape attempt in the Marabar Caves, and this episode leads to clash between East and West. His faith in Islam, though superficial becomes his only crime and reason to be convicted for a rape charge. None was ready to believe his innocence only because a British lady was claiming so and Dr Aziz, in their perception, being a Muslim has a potential to be violent and capable of stealing (Forster, 1979, p. 52). However, during trial, Adela withdraws her charges as she herself was traumatized by her relationship with Ronny Heaslop- another character. Dr. Aziz has not been a cause of her hallucinations in the caves, but Ronny has been the cause. Therefore, a mere false accusation has led to the destruction of reputation and career of a Muslim, Dr Aziz.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

The current paper, based upon comprehensive examination of the text of the selected novel in the light of oriental theory, is an attempt to discover attitude of British officials in India towards native Indians, especially Muslims. The study, further, brings to light impact of colonist ideology and culture upon the aboriginal culture and identity. The study tends to explore new perspective of religion in *A Passage to India* which has not been addressed in previous researches.

## **3. Literature Review**

E.M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* has been criticized from different perspectives by researchers and mostly post-colonial theories have been applied to it. The review of this paper is chronologically set to trace the development of thematic concerns in the novel. The shifting viewpoints signal towards a major change in the critique of fiction works since 9/11. A vast repertoire of literary scholarship is available on the novel, but only relevant to the present article have been selected for the review. This includes works of different researchers like Lidan Lin Ms (1997), Ahmad M.S. Abu Baker (2006), Zoe Lehmann (2007), Gulzar Jalal Yousafzai and Qabil Khan (2011), Muhammad Ayub Jajja (2013), Saideh Naim Vafa and Bahman Zarrinjooee (2014), Ahmad Jasim Mohammad and Suhair Saad Al-Deen (2015) and Biswanath Mahapatra (2015).

Lidan Lin Ms (1997) has read the novel mainly from the perspective of liberal humanism and has brought into light the inherent irony of colonial humanism. She

concludes her article asserting that Forster has been consistent in the portrayal of inequality between the two cultures - English and Indian:

I argue that Forster's insistence on the incommensurability of Englishness and Indianness is ultimately motivated by the desire to subordinate the other into inferior categories so that the ruling of it can be properly justified. (Ms, 1997, p. 133)

According to her this consistency is not rooted in humanism, but rather ironically it is based on the assertion that the two cultures are not equivalent; it justifies the concept of 'otherness'.

Baker (2006) in his article has discussed colonial identities of the colonizers and the colonized. He has tried to explore the novel from the colonizer's viewpoint and the hostility with which they have been received by the natives in India. For him, "India refuses to give a sense of home to its colonisers. Hence, they [colonizers] remain in "exile"." (Baker, 2006, p. 70) He has also elaborated the brainwashing process of the colonizers for the newcomers and its influence on the formation of identities of the newcomers in India.

Lehmann (2007) has criticized the novel from the standpoint of post-colonial concept of 'otherness' and has argued that the 'Other' has impact on the identities of British and Indians because, "the ghost of the 'ColonialOther' is continually present, ultimately proving stronger than personal relationships" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 85). In his article he has explained that how this 'otherness' transforms the identities of the characters.

Khan & Yousafzai (2011) in their research article have explicated the idea of racial attitudes and racism in *A Passage to India*. According to them, Forster has shown the relationship between the two communities, i.e. the British and Indian, with simple honesty. For them:

The British community intentionally put the Indians at a distance and doesn't like to tolerate them. This intolerance creates the problem of reaction, harshness, retaliation, revenge, misunderstanding and hatred. (Gulzar Jalal Yousafzai and Qabil Khan, 2011, p. 89)

They have stressed upon the idea that the tension between the two communities can be abated with sensible attitudes.

Jajja (2013) on the other hand has highlighted the idea that Forster, like all other colonial writers, has used the novel as propaganda to promote the colonial superiority of the white race. For Jajja the discourse which has been utilized by Forster in *A Passage to India* is evidently a colonial discourse; with an aim to present Indians as lesser and inferiors.

Zarrinjooee & Vafa (2014) have expanded the ideas of colonialism and orientalism. They claim that Forster has used the colonial discourse to highlight the, "Indians' passivity against the process of Orientalisation" (Saideh Naim Vafa and Bahman Zarrinjooee, 2014, p. 799). They have also claimed that Forster has criticized the

Indians for their submissiveness to the British; have accepted the stereotyped notions of themselves by the British.

Mohammad & Deen (2015) have taken a modern perspective on the novel and have described it in terms of modern techniques incorporated by Forster. They have mainly talked about the working of symbolism in the *A Passage to India* because, "Each symbol in the novel represents and stands for another meaning" (Ahmad Jasim Mohammad and Suhair Saad Al-Deen, 2015, p. 4). They have emphasized upon the idea that E.M. Forster is a modern novelist. It is important to note here that the present article has analyzed the character of Dr. Aziz through the three major sections of the novel.

Mahapatra (2015) in his article has mainly developed the idea of colonial politics; expanded this idea by formulating his assertion that the politics in *A Passage to India* is based on racism. He has elaborated his proclamation further asserting that this racism in politics has led to the unification of the two native communities, i.e. Muslims and Hindus, against the British Raj. However, Mahapatra is biased in separating the two native communities on the basis that Hindus are concerned more with spirituality and alluding to the idea that Muslims are engaged in the racial politics.

By analyzing literature addressing *A Passage to India*, one can conclude that most researchers have tried to investigate colonial debate in the novel. Therefore, they have accentuated the idea that native communities are marginalized due to their ethnicity. However, it is evident from the literature review that one aspect of this marginalization has been completely overlooked by the scholars and that is religion. Keeping in mind importance of religion in life of individuals / nations and states / countries the present study is conducted to draw attention to the idea that the British have not only sidelined the native communities in general, but they specifically focused on one religion and community, i.e. Islam and Muslims.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

For the purpose of this article the theory of orientalism will be used with special emphasis on Islamophobia. Said (2006) has explained oriental discourse in the light of Foucault's theory of discourse. He has extended idea of power and identity through oriental discourse. In addition, historical and religious references will also be used. The researchers have used Belsey's textual analysis method to explore primary text- selected for the current research. Said, in his article "Islam through Western Eyes" (1980), has argued that the Western media has attached only two meanings with the word Islam and both the meanings are negative. Islam is either considered as a threat to "democratic order in the Western world" (Said, 1980) or Islam is presented "a defensive counter response to this first image of Islam as threat" (Said, 1980). The stigmatization of Islam/Muslim in Western literature is a deep-rooted phenomenon. Characters are either presented as a threat or they are presented as a submissive counterpart to the former image. This otherization of Muslim/Islam is embedded in Western discourse which Said has contended in his works. Foucault's power-discourse come into play when any such instance of abuse of power is analyzed. Therefore, the present paper uses Said's oriental-

discourse and Foucault's power-discourse to analyze the Islamophobic presentation of the major character, i.e. Dr. Aziz.

### **5. Data/Textual Analysis**

It is evident from literature review that the novel *A Passage to India* has not yet been investigated thoroughly through the lens of religion. Dr. Aziz, the focus of this article, protagonist in the novel - *A Passage to India* - is target of humiliation and degradation by the British Raj. The novel is mainly divided into three sections, i.e. Mosque, Caves, and Temple. Therefore, the analysis of Dr. Aziz's character will be made section wise. It is done so to investigate the symbolic value of the three sections and their connection with Dr. Aziz's character development/presentation.

#### **5.1. Mosque – First section of the Novel**

In the first section of the novel Dr. Aziz has been presented as a man conforming to the ideals of Western world. Furthermore, it is also evident in the introductory chapters that both British and Hindus have "no friction between them" (Forster, p. 33). Muslims have been rulers in the past and English are rulers in the present; therefore, there is no discord in the status of Hindus in India. However, the British Raj orientalizes and particularly targets the Muslims by associating the stereotypical attributes to them. Therefore, Dr. Aziz laments over the loss of past glory of Islam.

The introductory chapter reveals atmosphere of oriental India through eyes of a western writer. It also introduces the stereotypical attributes attached with Muslims by depicting three Muslim characters, namely, Mahmoud Ali, Hamid Ullah and Dr. Aziz. According to them, the English think that the 'Mohammedans' (Forster, p. 52) are capable of stealing, deceiving, revolting, crimes and so forth. Therefore, a background is provided for the reader that English can expect anything from the Muslims. However, Dr. Aziz is not concerned with either being friend with English or being their enemy because he is more interested in the lost glory of Islam which is apparent in the poetry of Muslim poets like 'Iqbal' and 'Hali' (Forster, p. 38).

The 'Mosque' section also uncovers the faith of Muslims in Islam, although, it is not the strong form of their faith rather a weak form of their belief in Islamic doctrines is reflected over there. It also echoes that Dr. Aziz is not a strong believer but a superficial one who merely respects Islam and its true spirit. He is also aware of the fact, "net Great Britain had thrown over India" (Forster, p. 39) and he feels himself to be, "caught in their meshes" (Forster, p. 39). This net is specifically for Muslims as Said has argued in his article, "Islam as News", that the West believes that it is only Islam which has never surrendered absolutely to the West. He has also argued that Islam is perceived as a "malevolent and unthinking essence" (Said, *Islam as News*, 1997, p. 200) by the West. West versus Islam ideal also is marked in the novel when Ronny Heaslop gets irritated with his mother Mrs. Moore for mentioning religion – Christianity- to him:

...the conversation had become unreal since Christianity had entered it. Ronny approved of religion as long as it endorsed the National Anthem, but he objected when it attempted to influence his life. (Forster, p. 71)

He grows suspicious when his mother mentions Dr. Aziz to him because he is a 'Mohammedan' and his background knowledge strengthens his suspicion. Said has also claimed in his article that the West looks down upon Islam as they believe that the West has surpassed Christianity while the Muslim world is still rooted in religion. Therefore, West considers them backward and primitive for their commitment with religion and unconditional surrender to it.

Miss Adela Quested, another major character, in the novel has been presented to the readers as an inquisitive lady who wants to, "see the real India" (Forster, p. 46). She is expected to be betrothed to Ronny Heaslop, while she is confused regarding her future relationship. This confusion has led her to be interested in Dr. Aziz as she remarks, after Mrs. Moore's encounter with him, "this sounds very romantic" (Forster, p. 51). Therefore, her interest in Dr. Aziz leads Ronny to suspect him because of the formulaic traits attached to 'Mohammedans'. As Said (1980) has argued that certain traits are associated with Muslims such as, "*Jihad*, slavery, subordination of women, irrational violence combined with extreme licentiousness" (Said, *Islam Through Western Eyes*, 1980), therefore, Ronny could easily accuse Dr. Aziz of any inhumane act.

The reason for not targeting Hindus is also evident in the novel as they are believed to have bowed completely and unconditionally to the British Raj. Therefore, they are not considered as a threat to the West, however, the Muslims once rulers of the sub-continent are considered as a potential threat to the Raj. This submission of Hindus is evident when Dr. Panna Lal, a fellow doctor, after the Bridge Party, admits to Dr. Aziz, "I am just a poor old doctor who thought right to pay my respect when I was asked and where I was asked. Your absence, I may remark, drew commentaries" (Forster, p. 77)

The conflict between Hindus and Muslims in Sub-continent is further strengthened by the comments made by Dr. Aziz on Professor Godbole. According to him, the professor also wants the past glory of India but not precisely of the *Moghuls*. Therefore, Muslims are not only a threat for the British but also for the Hindus. Hence in the first part of the novel a stage has been set for Dr. Aziz for the future disaster which is to come in the subsequent part of the novel.

## **5.2. Caves – Second section of the Novel**

The rising tension between major characters of the novel - the British and Muslims - reaches its climax in this part of the novel titled as 'Caves'. Adela in her confusion regarding her relationship with Ronny, is overwhelmed by the echoes in the 'Marabar Caves' and her hallucination makes her imagine Dr. Aziz attempting to rape her. Her interest in Dr. Aziz is obvious in the first part while his lack of interest in her is also visible to the readers. However, without any solid evidence Dr. Aziz has been arrested after the caves incident and thrown into prison. Here the story of the novel resembles to the story of Bible (Genesis) about Joseph and the false accusation of Zuleika, where she is being charmed by the good looks of Joseph offers herself to him. Subsequently, Joseph's refusal makes her angry at him. This refusal leads to imprisonment of Joseph by Potiphar. Hence one cannot deny the inherent irony underlying the caves incident. However, the

incident makes British believe that Aziz is capable of doing so. They do not need other proofs as it has been enough for them that a white woman has accused him. Moreover, being 'Mohammedan', he is labeled for being primitive and violent (Forster, p. 52). However, towards the end of the section, Adela withdraws her charges when she realizes her mistake. Her accusation has led to destruction of a Muslim's career and reputation, it has been a decisive moment in Aziz's life to know that the West can never be believed. He alienates himself because of the attitudes of the Westerners. Though she took her allegation back, the humiliation he suffered at the hands of the British keeps hurting him. Even, he finds it difficult to maintain level of trust he used to have in Fielding.

### **5.3- Temple – Third section of the Novel**

The 'Temple' section provides resolution to the reader, but another stage has been set for the Muslims, in the form of clash between Muslims and Hindus. Although, no direct reference has been made to this conflict in the novel because the novel was written in 1924 and the legendary 'Two-Nations Theory' was presented by Allama Iqbal only in December 29, 1930; but one can sense that the tension is escalating between the two native nations on the basis of ideologies. Two sections- the mosque and Temple are segregated with third called 'cave' which symbolizes distance existing between these two religions and implies these can never coexist.

In the last section, the setting shifts to Mau, a Hindu state, and Hindus' festival to celebrate birth of their god Krishna. Here one can realize that after trial, the living conditions for Muslims have changed and after the British departure they are going to be under the influence of Hindus and again be marginalized. The festival ends with a storm hence prophesying a tumult for the Muslims of the Sub-continent. Thus, Forster concludes the novel alluding to the fact that after the British Raj, Muslims will be marginalized by the Hindus. The fact to which he has alluded in the first section, 'Mosque', when Aziz has, "buffeted the Brahmany bull" (Forster, p. 77) and this irritates Hindu doctor. The novel ends with a note that harmony cannot be reached in the opposite communities, when one is marginalized due to its beliefs and religion.

### **6. Conclusion**

An examination of the text of novel and the characters manifest that Foster has used religions to signify problems of colonial India. Islam is the first religion which is brought under discussion in the novel as a religion which had glory in past with many of the teachings being questioned even by Muslim characters at present. For example, polygamy was criticized among Muslim characters in the novel. Similarly, in the beginning, Dr Aziz even opposed his arranged marriage while was enchanted with free mixing of sexes in West. A critical examination of his character exposes hypocrisies of the West in marginalization of Muslims and Islam. Dr. Aziz has been used as a scapegoat by the West to unleash their revulsion for the Muslims and Islam. Furthermore, the Muslims are presented as inactive and lazy to meet the modern standards set by the West. Also, even if they do attempt to meet these standards they are not accepted by the West. This is for the reason, that Muslims have the capacity to overthrow them as it is evident through history.

Thus, it is what Said (2006) says, fear of West from Muslims that is at work when it comes to the portrayal of Dr. Aziz's character. Said further points out in his work that the West tries to ostracize the East, specifically Muslims, due to fear of its strength.

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