

Racial Tension in 'A passage to India'

Muhammad Jane Alam

BA (Hon's) MA in English

Lecturer in English, UHSC

Ex. Ass. Professor & Chairman

Cambrian College

Ex Faculty, Darul Ihsan University

Bangladesh

Abstract:

The paper traces the problematic relationship between different races and political conflict in a colonial context as Forster has given a pen picture in his novel, 'A Passage to India'. The British colonized India had left an impact on many different levels of life and culture. E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* explores the relationship between the colonized, an Indian doctor, and the colonizer, a British schoolmaster. The aim of this paper is to focus on the conflict between the English and the native Indians again between the Hindus and the Muslim. From the history it can be learnt that Indian Sub-continent was once ruled by the British. The text highlights the relationship of the colonizers i.e the British and the colonized i.e the people of Indian Sub-continent. It can be hoped that the text will bring the readers to have an idea on the socio-economic picture as well as socio-psychological dilemma of Anglo Indians during the period of the British Raj.

Key Words:

British colonizers, sub-continent, relationship, snobbish, understanding, Anglo Indian

'*A Passage to India*' (1924) by English author E. M. Forster is a documentary novel of racial problem and political conflicts in Indian Sub-continent after its subjugation by the British colonizers. "A Passage to India is primarily a political novel with Indio-English racial overtones." (C. Chowdhury, 1954) The writer, E. M. Forster presents the conflict between the Indians and the English and among the Indians themselves. *A Passage to India* begins and ends by posing the question of whether it is possible for an Englishman and an Indian to ever be friends, at least within the context of British colonialism. "Is it possible for the Indians and the Englishman to be friends?" (P.33) To Jan Mohamed, "A passage to India attempts to overcome the barriers of racial differences." (Childs 1999: 348) Differences in religions, culture, languages, tastes, temperament and so forth create an engulf among the races. Forster has tried his best to depict this vividly in his fiction. He tries to remove the conflict between the nations and make a good relationship between them. As Forster wrote a letter to his friend, G.H. Ludolf about his feeling after the publication of the book —

"My chief news is that the novel is done at last and I feel-or shall feel when the typing over- great relief. I am so weary, not of working but of not working..... Now it is done and I think it good." (Forster: 1989)

Not only that, he also hoped — "They unite, though, in restraining their joy until the autumn." (Furbank P.118)

In '*A Passage to India*', Forster mentions various communities conflicting with each other such as The English people Vs The native Indians and Hindus Vs Muslims. Forster uses this question as a framework to explore the general issue of Britain's political control of India on a more personal level, through the friendship between Aziz and Fielding. Mentioning many characters from different communities and narrating many events he shows us the clash — both physical and psychological among the different sects. At the beginning of the novel, Aziz is scornful of the English, wishing only to consider them comically or ignore them completely. Yet the intuitive connection Aziz feels with Mrs. Moore in the mosque opens him to the possibility of friendship with Fielding. After its publication in 1924 "it was accorded instant recognition, as a fine

novel and as a perceptive and sympathetic treatment of the problem of ‘Anglo-India’” (White, 641). For this, it was selected as one of the 100 great works of 20th century English literature by the *Modern Library* (Paul, 1998) and in the novel Forster examines racial tensions between the British colonizers and the Indian people at the time of the British Raj and also the philosophical question about the nature of human relationships in general. (Macaulay, 188)

If we turn our eyes into the history of Indian sub-continent, we see that there is a long history for this clash. Once, the Indian Sub-continent was a Hindu dominating territory. With the passage of time this territory went under the control of the Muslim. It was a great blow for the Hindus. They became vindictive and hostile with the Muslims and through the ages this hostility was in continuity. Then the British came and snatched the power from the Muslims. Now the Muslims turned to be hostile with the British. Thus we find here a development of triangle clash — Hindus, Muslims and the British. The relationship between the Anglo-Indians and the Indian people, and their continuously growing conflict resulting from misunderstandings and differences in terms of race, culture, and religion are presented in the three overall parts of the novel: “Mosque”, “Caves”, and “Temple”. According to Gertrude White, “this tripartite division can be compared with the Hegelian dialectical pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis which provides the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the novel’s overall “theme of fission and fusion; of separateness and of desired union” (White, 644)

Coming to the power of the sub-continent, the British colonizers began to behave as the master. In '*A Passage to India*' Forster has focused on this very aspect. Here the British are rigid and rigorous in their attitude towards the Indians. Some literary critics doubt the novel’s credibility since it allegedly depicts British officials behaving too cruelly and the relations between British and Indians as unrealistic (Macaulay, 188). Although most criticism focused on its political assumptions, and Forster himself intended to express his skepticism about British imperialism in India and its destroying impact on human personal relationships, it was not predominantly intended to be a political novel. However, “as a political novel it has had a notable success.” (Rutherford,

2) Ronny Heaslop, a city magistrate, Mr. and Mrs Turton and Major Calender are the representatives of the master minded English colonizers.

Ronny Heaslop is haughty in his behaviour. He is proud, prejudicial, and arrogant. He is deadly against the Indian people. As a government appointed city magistrate his intention is to create some pressure on Indian people. He is here from the British Empire to govern the country forcefully. He thinks that he is in India, not to be kind but rather to rule over the nation. Ronny speaks to his mother thus: "We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly. We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do" (Forster: 51). His intention becomes uncovered when he continues his long discussion with his mother, Mrs. Moore. He says:

"I am out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched country by force. I'm not a missionary or a Labour Member or a vague sentimental sympathetic literary man. I'm just a servant of the government." (P.69)

From his own experience, it is clear that he is taught and ordered not to show any sympathy, courtesy and humanity to the subjugated Indians. It is the policy of subjugators to rule in order to control the country with a mighty hand. This policy creates the mass discontent and finally it leads to the clash between these two forces. Ronny Heaslop took pride in saying often that the English rulers in India were not obliged to behave pleasantly towards the natives. It was the duty to keep law and order correct. Again most fluidly racial tension can be identified from the snide comments which are repeatedly made by the British "You're superior...Aryan Brother". (Forster: 1989) These racist comments made by the British show extreme hatred for the Indian culture, as "Aryan Brother" is a term made up by the British to call an Indian person. The suggestion that someone could call another human being by a term and not by a name is not only a severe sign of immaturity, but also creates tension as it secludes the British from the Indian's, it segregates them into a superior minority.

In the same way, Major Callender, the Civil Surgeon harassed his subordinate, Mr. Aziz in every possible manner. In chapter 2, Dr. Aziz is called in by Major Callender but when Aziz arrives there, he finds Mr. Callender is out without keeping any message

for Aziz. Thus the British treats them in a neglecting way. As Aziz discloses it to Mrs. Moore: —

“and Major Callender interrupts me night after night from where I am dining with my friends and I go at once, breaking up a most pleasant entertainment, and he is not there and not even a message.” (P.44)

In this way the Indian people are frequently humiliated. Humiliation of Aziz becomes graver when his carriage is taken away by Mrs. Callender without his permission: “She has just taken my tonga without my permission.” (P.44) Yet the intuitive connection Aziz feels with Mrs. Moore in the mosque opens him to the possibility of friendship with Fielding. Through the first half of the novel, Fielding and Aziz represent a positive model of liberal humanism:

“Forster suggests that British rule in India could be successful and respectful if only English and Indians treated each other as Fielding and Aziz treat each other—as worthy individuals who connect through frankness, intelligence, and good will.” (marked by teachers.com)

Fielding is described in the novel as, "essentially a cultured humanist, an educator, agnostic and a warm-hearted man....He is an intelligent man in his forties, with a strong belief in the efficacy of education and culture" (Forster: 14). Fielding stands alone among the British officials in India, for he is one of the few to treat the Indians with a sense of decency and respect. Fielding is an individualist who has no great allegiance to any particular group, but rather to his core set of liberal values and sense of justice. This quality allows Fielding to break with the English who support Adela's charges against Aziz and side with the Indians in support of him.

Similarly we see there is an indivisible wall between the governors and the governed Indians. It intensified the racial tension and problem already existing between them. Even the Indians have no right to enter into the club even as a guest. When Mrs. Moore intends to invite Aziz to the club, Aziz says: “Indians are not allowed into Chanderpore club even as a guest. (Forster 1989: 45) Forster has not left it rather he has mentioned it clearly as he had ‘seen certain important truth.’ (Letter to R.H Shipley, 1924) Whether he had been fair in his presentation of these truths was another question,

to which he gave slightly different answer at different times maintaining sometimes that the novel was too fair, sometimes that had merely tried, with imperfect success, to be fair to the poor Club 'Either way, 'God preserve us from cricket in Heaven!' (Letter to Edmund Candler, 1924) However, we see Forster tries heart and soul to make a bridge between the nations.

English women were much more snobbish in their attitude to the Indians than their male counterparts. The wife of the collector audaciously remarked that the Indians should be made to crawl from the city to the caves on their hands and knees as punishment for being in sub-ordinate. In the bride party, Mr. Turton felt hesitant in meeting the Indians when she was goaded by her husband to go towards them. She cried out: 'Oh these Purdah women! I never thought any would come. Oh dear!' (Forster 1989: 61) Peter says it in a different way, "A Passage to India is rather harsh and hostile towards women. They are portrayed as unsatisfactory: they are nags who criticize all the time, continually giggling, mixed-up spinsters. Their only goal in life is marriage. They are depicted as the enemy." (Childs 1999: 351) Their contribution to the racial situation in India than their fellow Englishmen is not less.

Thus if we turn our eyes in to the last scene in the novel we see that Aziz informs Fielding that their relationship is only possible once the British leave India. This scene shows such friendship:

"Why can't we be friends now... It's what I want. It's what you want.' But the horses didn't want it- they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet' and the sky said, 'No, not there' (P.315-316)

All these godly approaches of the English and their humiliating behaviour towards Indians make a gulf in the relationship between two nations. The conflict takes an extreme form after the Cave incident. When Aziz is alleged of an attempt to assault Adela Quested in Marabar Cave, the English and Indians stand face to face. Here Aziz is

to face a trial and both Hindus and Muslims stand on the same platform as a single nation. During a trip to the Marabar Caves (modelled on the Barabar Caves of Bihar), Adela finds herself alone with Dr. Aziz in one of the caves, panics and flees; it is assumed that Dr. Aziz had attempted to assault her. Aziz's trial, and its run-up and aftermath, bring out all the racial tensions and prejudices between indigenous Indians and the British who rule India. (Sunil Kumar, 2007)

In fact the so called crime of Aziz gives the ruling class enough material for the character assassination of Aziz. All the English but Fielding unanimously declared him guilty even before the trial started. The Superintendent of the police unearthed some private correspondence of the doctor to find evidence of his moral lapses.

The Indians joined together to put off up a stiff to attempt of the ruling class to magnify the very trivial incident. The Nawab Bahadur was the ruler who financed the scheme of defense. The college students held demonstration against the City Magistrate. When Adela withdrew the charge and admitted her mistake, the trial had to be dropped and the accused discharged. The students and the others were then happy and they exhibited it by way of procession and celebration. The Nawab Bahadur renounced his title and became mere Mr. Julfikar. Thus taking Aziz's case as a national issue both Hindus and Muslims came to a close contact. Forster says this thus:

“Another local consequence of the trial was a Hindu-Muslim entente. Loud protestations of amity were exchanged, and there went with them a genuine desire for a good understanding.” (Forster 1989: 264)

But this picture was not always the same. Though these two (Hindu and Muslim) races are sometimes united for some national cases. They had communal malice among themselves. In '*A Passage to India*' Forster vividly depicts this pathetic picture. Aziz frequently manifests Anti-Hindu propensities. He deliberately picks a quarrel with his colleague, Doctor Lal and latter describes him to Mrs. Moore as 'a Slack unpunctual fellow'. He constantly connects Hindu with cow-dung. The Muslims festival of Muharram regularly produces riots. Aziz, later is unsure how much of the Hindu festival, Gokul Astami, he is supposed not to witness. At the end of the novel we see Aziz telling Fielding, "It is useless discussing Hindus with me. Living with them teaches me no more.

When I think I annoy them, I do not. When I think I don't annoy them, I do" (Forster: 288). Through characters' interactions and dialogues, Forster emphasizes that one of the major effects of racial tension is cultural misunderstanding. Different cultural ideas and expectations regarding hospitality, social proprieties and the role of religion in daily life are responsible for the misunderstanding between the English and the Muslim Indians, the English and the Hindu Indians, and between the Muslims and the Hindus. Albert Memmi agrees to this view in his *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1974) that one basic issue that dominates the narrative in *A Passage to India* is cultural misunderstanding between the colonizer and the colonized. But Yousafzai and Khan believe that Forster's thesis is that "violation of the human values is the root cause of tension." (2011: 76)

The racial conflict between these two communities was not only confined in two religions but was in variation of cultures, dress, languages, meal and so forth. It may be considered as cultural misunderstanding. According to Memmi, "The colonized society is a diseased society in which internal dynamics no longer succeed in creating new structure. Such society cannot dissolve the conflicts of generations, for it is unable to be transformed." (143) These conflicts are resulted from the cultural and social differences which cause tension between the Indian and the British characters in Forster's novel. For these variations the Indians fail to enjoy the eternal union though sometimes they temporarily showed affinity between themselves. The division of Indian sub-continent is the best proof of the impact of racial confrontation. India has been divided into two parts on the basis of bio-racial doctrine.

Even among the Hindus themselves there exist the problems of castes and sects. Very often they become involved in racial riot. Forster remarks:

"The fissure in the Indian soil are infinite: Hinduism, so solid from a distance, is raven into sects and class." (Forster, 1989)

In fine we can say that E.M Forster minutely presents the prevailing picture of racial tension he has experienced in this Anglo-Indian ruling sub-continent. Of course to draw all of these points together it is fair to say that there are several techniques as to how Forster expresses racial tension within *A Passage to India*. These include racist comments, the civil service, not understanding one another's culture and classes within

India and Britain which make the tension increase further. His outlook is objective and he leaves us without giving any solution but he has not left hope for the Indians that one day they may overcome this long born disease. As we see in the voice of Aziz, "No. Afghans, my own ancestors" (Forster: 297). Later Aziz cries, "India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Muslim and Sikh and all shall be one!" (297). Fielding mocks these nationalists claims but Aziz continues to say "Down with the English!" (297). He says that at least his sons will drive the British out of India! And once this is accomplished, "You and I shall be friends" (298). Forster later commented wryly: "A few years ago I wrote a book which dealt in part with the difficulties of the Indians. Feeling that they would have had no difficulties in India themselves, the Americans read the book freely." (Abinger Harvest, 1926) Not only that he wrote this book in such a way that The Indian Scholars later felt gratitude to Forster: "When I read A Passage to India, I was filled with a sense of great relief and of an almost personal gratitude to Mr Forster. This is was not because as an Indian I felt myself vindicated or flattered by the book. Indeed to know oneself is not to feel flattered, as many an Anglo-Indian reader of the book has discovered before me." (1928)

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