

Representation of Indian Women in *A Passage to India*: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

*Representation of people and their land from non-European territories as 'others' has been a powerful tool used by the European writers in their works. These Europeans, who were often the colonizers, went to non-European regions to colonize the people and their resources. The colonizers made strenuous efforts to represent these people of the colonized regions as inferior, uncultured and uncivilized in their literature(s). Colonial writers aimed to show to their own people that people living in other parts of the world, whom they call 'Orient', did not have their own civilization; and it is the responsibility of the West to civilize them, which can best be summed up in the words of Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden'.¹ E. M. Forster, a prominent English writer, represented India and its people as degenerate, strange and feminine in his novel *A Passage to India* (1924). Forster showed females in India to be strange, timid and uncivilized who had nothing else to do except fill the blank spaces in the lives of their men. To unearth the hidden underpinnings in the colonial literature, postcolonial theory is the best counter discourse to respond to such misrepresentation of the colonized. The scope of this research paper is restricted to the representation of female gender as 'Others' in *A Passage to India*. The objective of this research article is to analyze the despicable motive(s) of Forster behind his representation of the Indian females as worthless human beings.*

Keywords: Representation, Females, Colonizer, Colonized, Orient, India

Introduction

The novel, *A Passage to India*, contains many female characters both Indian and English in origin, however, it is observed that all English female characters have their names whereas no Indian lady is mentioned by her name. One is led to wonder why it is so. The comments of colonizers about Indian females were based on mere assumptions as they never tried to consider the intellectual brave women like Rani of Jhansi or Razia Sultana who were there to fight against the 'men' of East India Company. For the colonizers women in India were a generalized herd led by men in their desired directions and these women obey them without any objection. Colonial writers, like Forster, represent the Indian females in their works as less confident beings who "cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Said, 1979: xii). Said has analyzed the

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Orientalist representation of the 'Orient' in European texts in which he lays a greater emphasis on "representations as *representations*, not as "natural" depictions of the Orient." (Said, 1979: 21). Said has provided the best tool to deconstruct the colonial discourse in his famous work *Orientalism* (1979). The concept of 'Self' and 'Other' in this famous work becomes a useful approach to analyze the relationship between the colonizer (Self) and the colonized (Other). Regarding the relevance of exteriority, it is assumed a self-evident truth that if the 'Orient' could represent themselves, they would; since they cannot, so the West assumed this responsibility to represent the Orient. Said further emphasizes the element of exteriority by suggesting that cultural discourse often consists of the substance, which is not 'truth' but representations.

Literature Review

Colonial literature tactfully maneuvers the predominant notion that European culture is all times superior. The language it employs is distinct in nature which rests on the basis of assumptions about the colonized and helps engender certain stereotypes so as to mediate the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized (Boehmer, 2005). She (2005:2) further writes "the history of the world for the past few centuries has been profoundly shaped by colonial interests, then there is a sense in which much of the literature produced during that time can be said to be colonial or postcolonial." Such type of literature is composed by the colonizers with special reference to the colonized nations who are portrayed as weak and degenerate nations who cannot govern themselves nor can manage their own matters.

Colonial literature portrays the female from the colonized land as uncivilized and myopic without having any direct contact with them where "accuracy of representational techniques is thus employed to construct an image . . . may or may not be faithful to the actual experience" (Bozdogan, 1988:45). Several of the writers have associated seductive charm with the Oriental females while they were exploring their lands (Stevens, 1984). Said (1979) refers to the element of "imaginative geography" in colonial texts, in which Orient has been described in a stereotypical manner as Said continues "It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality" (p.54). The European writers felt the great charm for land of the others and gave feminine attributes to its serenity and beauty. These constructed images and descriptions of the Orient by the West do not give space to the Orient to articulate themselves on many different forums by using phrases like 'them

and us' and 'our land and their land'. According to Said (1979) these Westerners being much curious are attracted and inspired by the land of the Other.⁹ However, they do not try to understand it. They are suffering from paranoia about the Other, and this becomes the reason that they only see the things which they wish to exploit about the Other.

Relationship between a White Man and a non-White Woman

British Raj in India always looked down upon miscegenation of the British officers rather it made sure the availability of Indian prostitutes for the soldiers of the lower rank. To protect these soldiers from venereal disease, England passed the Indian Contagious Diseases Act. Unlike England, it was not possible for women to file an appeal against their detention, nor there was any limit for upper time for detention (Ballhatchet, 1980). British military stood on assumption that prostitution was an indigenous phenomenon found in Indian native women, so, to them it was not an immoral act in light of the Indian moral standards. On the contrary, the disapproval of the phenomenon of miscegenation of the officers was rooted in the basic principles of colonization that to preserve the power relation in a society it was necessary for British elite class to maintain social and physical distance from the colonized people. Even the females belonging to elite social class of Indians were neither addressed with politeness nor with dignity.

Representation of Indian Women as Ayahs

With the advent of the British establishment in India, the social distance between the white people and the non-white natives increased, and the interaction between these two different communities was reduced to the level of the white master ladies and the native servants. The Anglo-Indian press occupied much space in its representation of *ayahs* (female nurse for children) who were the Indian females in this case with whom the average British male or female would come into contact. *The pioneer* in 1880 praised the role of *ayah* and termed her as a dutiful surrogate-mother, "She has given her life for years to her master's family.... The children will carry in their hearts the *ayah's* laughter and tears ... after all else Indian has passed out of their lives" (Sen, 2002:50). But, on the contrary, reservations of the *memsahib* about the native servants who were considered to be unreliable ---highlighted in *The Calcutta Review* in 1885 and also about the *ayahs*, "the tender mercies of the native ayah (the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel!) "presented her in the typical colonial pattern to be immoral native woman (Sen, 2002:50). They were always distrusted and looked down upon.

Perception about Zenana in Veil in Anglo-India

Anglo-Indian discourse, along with many other aspects, revolved around the Indian women and their veil called *purdah*, which was considered to be a great divide between the native women and the colonial masters. This also became the source for many fantasies developed by the colonizers and the colonial writers about the colonized women. Most of the Indian women especially from upper-class irrespective of their religions would hide their face from the male colonizers and would remain confined to some inner part of their home, whereas women, in a small number, from *Parsi* community in Bombay and those belonging to advanced families in Bengal started appearing in mixed gatherings around 1860s and 1880s more frequently (Borthwick, 2015). The native Indian men remained strict in the sense of *purdah* of their ladies who would not be allowed to appear before the colonial men so that their chastity should remain intact. This strict cultural and religious code of the natives aroused the curiosity of the Anglo-Indian missionaries and writers to explore the personality of the native Indian woman. Forster seems to fail in understanding the Indian culture of *purdah* and modesty and its spiritual importance for the Eastern women which the European women did not display in their conversation and manners. Majority of the white missionaries and writers, without having profound knowledge about the local customs and household requirements, represented such practice of the natives in a negative manners rather termed it male dominant oppressive system. These Indian women were often represented as idle and lazy creatures who remained a sort of burden on their men. As Flora Annie Steel expressed her views about the Indian women that "they are petty, they are idle; indeed idleness in the women of the towns ... is responsible for much" (Misir, 2018:55).

These Indian women were also criticized for their native dresses which were described to be sensual in appeal, as the native cultural dress, *Sari*, is described to be a dress without any other type of undergarment. It is degraded for its transparency and termed as a mark of 'native' feminine libidinousness and the sensual moorings in Indian culture. Fanny Parks quoted in (Sen, 2001: 57) recorded her reservations about the *Sari* worn by the ladies in Calcutta:

"On beholding their attire I was no longer surprised that no other men than their husbands were permitted to enter the zenana ... the dress was rather transparent, almost useless as a veil ... the form of the limbs and tint of the skin is traced through it."

In this above excerpt, Indian ladies' garments are being criticized. *Sari* is one of the traditional dresses in India worn by the females who consider it the important part of their cultural costumes. They wear it to adorn themselves and cover themselves completely. Here, it is important to notice, the writer of these words ignores the short dresses of the European females whose bodies are half-covered in their dresses.

Orientalism Makes Assumptions About Indian Women

Oriental females are portrayed as morally corrupt and sexually exotic creatures. Said (1979) in *Orientalism* quotes Flaubert who says "the oriental woman is no more than a machine; she makes no distinction between one man and another man" (p.123). These women are shown to be involved in illicit relationship with other men.

In *A Passage to India*, Forster refers to the plight of Indian women in terms of their matrimonial problems. The Indian females are subjected to double marginalization in the novel. They are represented to be entirely dependent on males for their future. As wife of Hamid Ullah asks Dr. Aziz about his second marriage that "when he was going to be married" because she is concerned with the future of Indian girls "What is to become of all our daughters if men refuse to marry? They will marry beneath them" (Forster, 2005: 36). Words of Hamid Ullah's wife reflect double marginalization of Indian females in this context. Forster does not even mention the name of Hamid Ullah's wife as if she were a mere object of no practical significance. Hamid Ullah's wife tries to make Hamid Ullah and Aziz believe that it is a common problem of the girls in India. Forster terms it "tragedy" for the girls, and suggests that "better polygamy almost, than that a woman should die without the joys of God has intended her to receive" (Forster, 2005: 37). This situation may be construed the girls in India are to marry someone just to fulfill their physical needs.

In the Bridge Party the Indian women in *purdah* participate as guests, whose presence Mrs. Turton disapproves, "Oh, those *purdah* women! I never thought any would come" (Forster, 2005: 61). These *purdah* women are not treated as equals. There is no attempt on the part of the English ladies to make them feel comfortable and at ease. Hence, the gap widens. Colonial writers have often represented the culture of the colonized countries to be backward and outdated as to Mrs. Turton the women in *purdah* are from backward background.

One of the political perspectives discussed in colonial discourse is identity, where the colonized are often deprived of their real identity and are often described through their appearances and physical features. In the Bridge Party, the wife and sister of Mr. Bhattacharya, are not introduced

by their names rather they are called 'shorter lady' and 'taller lady'. Other ladies in the party are also described to be "uncertain, cowering, recovering, giggling, making tiny gestures of atonement or despair at all that was said, and alternately fondling the terrier or shrinking from him" (Forster, 2005:62).

Women in India are further presented to be uneducated and degenerate in look and they are treated like unimportant objects. Though, Dr. Aziz is very much particular about *purdah*, yet shows to Mr. Fielding photograph of his wife assuming that Fielding will be much happy to see it. He does it in order to develop close affinity with Fielding. Forster tries to prove that Indian males along with the colonizers use Indian females as mere objects as Dr. Aziz even forgets even his religious principles of *purdah* and discredits the sanctity of his dead wife. Fielding even expresses his surprise over this act of Aziz and asks, "Why you pay me this great compliment" (Forster, 2005:128). Dr. Aziz's reply is very much strange "Oh, it's nothing, she was not a highly educated woman or even beautiful" (Forster, 2005:128). It shows that women even after their death in India are remembered in low words as they are an unimportant part of nature. Indian women are presented to be uneducated and ugly who have no proper space in society. Ironically through Aziz, Forster further continues to degrade the image of Indian women when he (Aziz) tells Fielding that he should "Put her away" because she is of no importance, she is dead and also tells the reason why he has shown his wife's picture to Fielding "I showed her to you because I have nothing else to show" (Forster, 2005, 129). This further speaks Aziz's mind that shows double marginalization of the Indian females.

In chapter eighteen, McBryde and Fielding are involved in discussion about the native Indians and especially about Aziz because of his suspected act of sexual assault on Miss. Quested. In their conversation McBryde tries to prove that Indian women are licentious and they maintain illicit relationships with men other than their own husbands, etc. When McBryde is searching Aziz's drawers for some more evidence to establish a crime against him, he finds some "photographs of women" to which Fielding responds within no time "That's his wife", at this McBryde makes a dubious smile and passes satirical remarks about the Indian wives, "Wife indeed, I know those wives!" (Forster, 2005: 180). McBryde's words are suggestive in tone that Indian wives are ladies of doubtful character who are not pious and sincere in relationships with their own husbands. This remark of McBryde fully violates the sanctity of the Indian ladies to a great extent, whom he identifies to be the epitome of immorality on this earth, Such a degrading notion of the West about the Oriental women has been discussed by Said (1979: 187) in *Orientalism* in which he quotes Flaubert,

"the oriental woman is no more than a machine; she makes no distinction between one man and another man."

In the novel, chapter thirty, Hamid Ullah himself endorses such a notion when he says, "nonsense still goes on among our ladies" (Forster, 2005: 268) who are shown to be so confounded that they are not even clear in their own thoughts because of their extreme excitement to meet Fielding with whom they are very much impressed, so much so that they are even ready to give up their *purdah*. Female gender is shown to be less confident as Himadullah says to Aziz that his wife wants to meet Fielding but whenever Fielding calls, she often makes excuse that "she is not feeling well" and the reason he further gives for her reluctance to meet him is that "she is ashamed of the room, she has no nice sweets to offer him" except Elephants' Ears and when he tells her that it is his (Fielding) favorite food, she worriedly replies that "he (Fielding) will know how badly hers are made, so she cannot see him on their account" (Forster, 2005: 268). One cannot deny the hospitality of Indians whether they be men or women. If Forster intended to show that these women were not good enough to entertain guests he is wrong because one cannot deny the exotic food of Indians and the variety of sweet meats that are prepared in every household. If Mrs. Hamid Ullah thought her food was not good enough for Fielding perhaps it meant that she was as an Indian so daunted by their presence that she considered her cooking expertise not good enough for the 'master's' taste. It further reveals that for the colonizers the Indian females are psychologically deaf and dumb who are often afraid of the colonizers. Through Hamid Ullah, Forster authenticates the version of the colonizers about the Indian females, in such words "For fifteen years.... have I argued with my begum....and never gained a point...? the missionaries inform...our women are downtrodden" and further tells Aziz that he should choose the Indian ladies as a subject for his poetry, "The Indian lady as she is and not as she is supposed to be" (Forster, 2005: 268). This conversation between Hamid Ullah and Dr. Aziz relegates the Indian ladies to the subaltern position who cannot speak for themselves rather they are to be represented. Forster deprives them of their voice as if they were some strange type of human beings who need others to voice their opinions rather than that they had no opinions. No one talks of their meagre opportunities to get education.

Conclusion

It becomes quite obvious that Forster has marginalized Indian women to a great extent. In the novel *A Passage to India* the setting is

India but nowhere Indian characters are seen in dominant positions. The absence of the names of female Indian characters is conspicuous throughout the novel. Whenever Indian female characters are referred in the novel, they are represented as voiceless people who cannot represent themselves. Whereas the English female characters have their names with complete prefixes and suffixes that shows they are important persons like Miss. Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore. Indian women are mentioned in derogatory tone as McBryde tells disdainfully to Mr. Fielding that he knows the reality of Indian wives. He criticizes them for their character as he assumes them to be morally degenerate ladies. The truth is that Indian females are a mystery not easily understood nor solved. Hence when an English man says disdainfully, 'I know these wives' he reveals that he knows nothing about them as he had never come intellectually and emotionally in contact with them.

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