

An Analysis of Islamophobia from an Orientalist Perspective in E.M Forster's A Passage to India

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Abstract

E.M Forster's A Passage to India engages in rampant Islamophobia by depicting Muslim characters from an Orientalist viewpoint that is not grounded in reality, but rather an imagined set of principles that may seem progressive in their exploration of Muslim characters but ultimately fails under any literary scrutiny. His writing falls into many orientalist tropes such as religious mysticism, a misunderstanding of the cultures he tries to write about, a language of depreciation for Indians, and an Islamophobic worldview that colors the interiority of all his characters. Dr. Aziz, who serves as a protagonist, reflects all of Forster's unconscious colonial biases. This novel, while ultimately conveying an anti-colonial message, remains part of a larger colonial text for religious, historical, and political reasons.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Muslims, Islam, Orientalism, Literary Analysis, Colonialism

Introduction

The Passage to India is an English Novel that critiques colonialism but ultimately falls victim to its machinations. The novel engages in Islamophobia and Orientalism with its depiction of the natives and their “otherness” and uses mysticism to paint an otherworldly picture of India. This paper aims to explore the novel's Islamophobia using Edward Said's framework of Orientalism (1978). This will be done by analyzing the Muslim characters, their epithets, and the overall view that Forster presents about the social hierarchy of India in terms of spirituality and religion. Before going into these topics, however, it is important to outline the novel's historical context and provide a working definition of Islamophobia to build on.

Review of Literature

A Passage to India was published in 1924, and it would be a disservice to this analysis not to mention the historical context in which E.M. Forster lived. This is not to soften the criticism, nor is it to make any orientalist depictions acceptable by today's standards. However, it is necessary to clarify further why Forster might have had an unconscious orientalist and religious bias against Muslims. Despite this novel being an attempt to humanize Muslim characters, Forster had written this novel on the heels of World War 1, where Britain had direct opposition to the Ottoman Empire, and there was a clear disconnect between the British Empire and Indian Muslims on where the colonized loyalties should lie (Begum, 2019). Forster is in no way explicit about his judgments or biases against Muslims in his works, nor is he accounted to be by his peers, as older literary analysis on him declares him to be a “true friend to India” and someone who had opposed England's conflicts with Turkey (Lowe, 2018). However, as the analysis will show, despite the good-faith approach he operated on, Forster could not write about the interiority of a Muslim character without throwing in a mismatch of Orientalist tropes that were prevalent at the time, and still are today to some extent.

There is much debate about the meaning of Islamophobia, and for this paper, we will be using the academic definition by Awan and Zempi (2020).

“A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of a being a Muslim.”

E.M. Forster’s book does not aim to create threats, harassment or abuse against Muslims, but it does play into a cultural racism that targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim, while also being informed by institutional, ideological and political hostility.

Islamophobic language

Before diving into the characters themselves, it is vital to come to terms with the epithet that E.M Forster uses for the Muslim characters. The word “Mohammedan” is, by today’s standards, a slur against Muslims. But to truly understand the scope of this slur, one must read the succinct explanation in Edward Said’s work. The word evolves from a body of Western literature that depicts the Prophet Mohammed PBUH as a false prophet with many disturbing qualities such as lechery, debauchery and other deviant behaviors; therefore, anyone who is a Muslim is called a “Mohammedan” to fit the caricature of the Prophet in Western literature and ultimately reduces the religion to a set of negative values associated with the Prophet’s name. “Mohammedan” is the relevant (and insulting) European designation (Said, 1978, p 66)

That said, Forster uses the word 17 times in the novel. It is used by the characters themselves in a few instances of their dialogues which could have helped the text escape this criticism if the characters were meant to be portrayed as racist; however, there are a

few times where the omniscient narrator refers to the characters as such, and even goes as far to use it in a clearly disparaging sense, for instance when the writer pits two Indian characters of different religions against each other in dialogues about the Malabar Caves.

“The dialogue remained light and friendly, and Adela had no conception of its underdrift. She did not know that the comparatively simple mind of the Mohammedan was encountering Ancient Night. ” (Forster, 1924, p76)

The narration, written from a third-person omniscient point of view, reinforces the assumption that Forster himself was expressing an opinion about how “simple” the mind of a “Mohammedan” was. Despite the author's intent on humanizing the Muslim characters through figures such as Dr. Aziz, he still falls for the societal prejudice that was built upon through decades of Orientalist literature that shaped their lives in unconscious ways. It's a strange contradiction in his writing, since there are many moments in the novel where the British characters are portrayed as ignorant through their use of disparaging language against an entire group of people. Forster even goes out of his way to prevent the more open-minded character, Cyril Fielding, from using the same prejudiced words to describe this subset of people, clearly anchoring him as the moral center in the heart of imperialist England. However, other literary analyses of the character end up with the conclusion that this very same moral character serves not as a condemnation of English “superiority” and imperialism, but rather as a justification for it (Naghshbandi & Zarrinjooee, 2015)

The novel introduces several prominent Muslim characters, including Dr. Aziz. However, these Muslim characters keep falling for orientalist and Islamophobic tropes and undermine themselves as fully fleshed out complex characters.

Islamophobic Caricatures

The novel follows a Muslim main character in Dr Aziz, but it fails to give a nuanced portrayal that would make him a believable Muslim. In fact, Dr Aziz and his friends can all be labeled as Islamophobic caricatures; starting with Hamidullah who is Dr. Aziz's uncle. Hamidullah is Cambridge-educated and is shown to have an optimistic outlook on Englishmen at the beginning of the novel. His reasons for this outlook range from well-established friendships with a family back in England to his reverence for simple acts of kindness, such as being "thanked" and given a lozenge for his sore throat. This level of subservience for simple acts of kindness from what is supposed to be an oppressive class of rulers is another example of Orientalism at play, where the "orient" accepts its domination for simple commodities because the "occident" knows "what is good for them" (Said, 1978, p 35). Hamidullah's religiosity is never a subject that is brought up, and that is because his state of acceptance of Western domination and education exempts him from practicing religion in any obvious way.

In fact, none of the characters who are devout Muslims practice Islam in any meaningful ways, and if it's ever implied they are, they are shown to be irrational characters, like Dr. Aziz's lawyer Mahmoud Ali. He is the character who is completely anti-colonial, and is presented as a blundering idiot, quick to anger and prone to sabotaging his friend. In the trial, he storms out of the courtroom and abandons Dr. Aziz, despite being his assigned lawyer, and later he sabotages him again by throwing away Fielding's letters, which could have helped clear up a central misunderstanding that caused a rift in their budding friendship. He is perhaps the most blatant orientalist depiction in the novel, constantly throwing tantrums and being "childlike" and "irrational" (Said, 1978, p 40). This character contributes to the notion that Islam and Muslims are incompatible with a civil society. As the most devout Muslim, he is positioned as malevolent and unthinking (Jehangir et al.,

2019) While in contrast other ethnic characters who practice different religions are positioned as more reasonable adjudicators during the court scenes.

Dr, Aziz, despite being the central character explored in the novel, should be the exception to the rule and exempt from the pitfalls of Orientalism and Islamophobia, but despite the writer's best efforts to craft a well-rounded, complex human character, Forster still misses the mark. Aziz is an Indian Muslim Doctor who is constantly at odds with wanting to build a friendship with a group of Englishmen and is burdened by his awareness of the power imbalances that exist between the two social classes and the injustice of it all.

Forster's narrative choice to frame Aziz's internal struggles around sensuality is one of the earliest orientalist tropes attributed to Dr. Aziz. Earlier in the ninth chapter, Aziz begins planning to go to a brothel, and in the next, he makes vulgar and disparaging remarks about Adela Quested's breasts. Later in the story, his escapades in the brothels are used against him in court during his sham trial regarding sexual assault. This sequence of events and the character's internal thoughts serve as a surface-level plot point: Aziz is not attracted to Adela and therefore could not have committed the assault. However, what it does in a larger sense is isolate the only Muslim protagonist to be the only character who is openly crass, vulgar, and thinking of sex in a direct way. In contrast, Adela's sexual anxiety, which is a big part of her story arc, is a characteristic that is implicit and operates as an unconscious driving force that could be understood only through psychoanalytical readings.

The way Forster treats both the characters and their approaches to such repressions is very telling. Both characters have moments when certain taboo desires enter their unconsciousness (Aziz et al., 2025), but only Adela, the Englishwoman, is afforded the veil of implicitness. Aziz's promiscuity, when contrasted with other protagonists in the

story, can only be due to Forster's inability to have the noble "occident" behave as crassly as the "orient". The Englishman appears to operate from an angle of purity and innocence, while the "Orient" is much more vulgar.

"Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire," (Said, 1978, p 188)

Forster chooses to use the Islamic faith as a narrative device for Aziz but is completely incurious about the interiority of the average Muslim. Aziz is constantly portrayed as someone who finds solace in the Muslim faith, but his internal dialogue does not do an adequate job of reflecting that.

"and he meditated suicide. Would he meet her beyond the tomb? Is there such a meeting-place? Though orthodox, he did not know." (Forster, 1924, p55)

To a reader who has no context of what it means to grow up Muslim, this line would not mean much; however, speaking from an Islamic framework, these ideas would quickly be associated with religious guilt, as a majority of Muslims believe in the afterlife (Pew Research Center, 2012) and believe that suicide is a major sin that's consequence is eternal damnation (Shah & Chandia, 2010). In Islamic teachings, feelings of guilt are not something to be avoided; rather, they are an innate human emotion that can guide a person to do better and seek divine forgiveness. Guilt and shame in Islam have a long scholarly history that cannot be discounted. In fact, the self, or the "nafs," carries a religious connotation that is widely debated among scholars (Mohamed, 1996). Islamic psychology is a whole other branch of study that treats guilt as the foundation for repentance. (Sawai, 2015)

Culturally speaking, Forster had not done any due diligence on what religiosity means to a Muslim and how such "taboo" ideas could affect them internally. This is not an issue of

theology, but rather a psychological analysis that most Muslim readers would easily catch. This is not to say that no Muslim has ever had thoughts like these, but the people who grow up with the religion will not question the existence of the afterlife if they are “orthodox” like Aziz claims to be. At the very least, some level of guilt should be associated with the thought, which would make Dr. Aziz a much more compelling and believable Muslim character.

Not to mention that Aziz’s promiscuity should also be another reason for some religious guilt. Adultery is forbidden in Islam, but Aziz can only think of the societal backlash that he would face if he were to visit a brothel, making his internal dialogue less believable as a Muslim and furthering the caricature of the “Mohammedan,” which positions Muslims as lecherous and unable to control their desires.

Spirituality and Religion.

E.M Forster uses religious sites as allegorical devices to explore certain themes. When it comes to Islam, Forster uses the mosque as a space for bridging the gap between an Indian and an Englishman. When exploring Hinduism, Foster uses the Marabar Caves as a chaotic literary device that causes real-world and spiritual strife and later rectifies that by using a Hindu temple as a place of reconciliation and a promise of a better tomorrow. While all that is well and fine as a narrative tool, it cannot be overlooked how Forster uses two foreign religions as magical realism devices to deliver these messages (Mahmoud, 2022); however, unlike the magic realism that exists in Latin American Literature, Forster takes existing religions and their sites to create a sort of mysticism, which further contributes to the Orientalist mindset the writer operated on.

In the novel, his Western characters experience a crisis of faith and delusions as they approach the Marabar Caves. They seem to hear echoes that haunt them and send them into a panic. Mrs. Moore, who represents Christianity in the story, experiences a crisis of

faith after this incident and quickly leaves the continent. Adela, plagued by the mysticism of the caves, goes into a state of panic and hallucinates Aziz assaulting her. The only ones not affected by the caves are the Indian characters, regardless of their faith. It is as if they are immune to the caves' spiritual callings simply by being locals. This could be read as an allegory of the land rejecting colonization, but it also contains a healthy dose of orientalist mysticism.

Despite Forster's use of Adela to critique his fellow Englishmen for romanticizing India and foolishly chasing an idealized version of it, he, too, falls for the same Orientalist critique he employs against his fictional characters. Forster takes religions "foreign" to him and paints them in a mystical and alluring way that cannot be understood by people of the Christian faith. He reinforces the Oriental idea of the "other." Also, in an attempt to avoid the naivete he sought to critique through Adela, Forster ends up disparaging the Indian landscape in his descriptions: the trees, the roads, the bungalows, the sun, and all native elements of India are described as bad, ugly, or oppressive (Naghshbandi & Zarrinjooee, 2015).

To make matters much more complicated, Forster attempts to explore the dynamics in India between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. Ultimately, there is nothing worthwhile to explore here since Forster lacks the understanding of two of the three religions, but he once again unconsciously taps into an element of islamophobia. Despite being a devout Muslim, Aziz spends the final part of the novel living in a temple. This kind of harmony between religions in India is not the unbelievable part of this; rather, it's that only at the temple is Aziz able to move on and repair his broken friendship with Fielding, without any interference from other Muslim characters like Mahmoud Ali.

The resolution for a devout Muslim character only comes when he distances himself from his Muslim community and brethren and embraces the harmony that exists within the temple. Whether intentional or not, Forster once again symbolically lambasts Muslims and Islam and positions Aziz as someone who gets enlightened when he is furthest away from his religion, much like his other friend, Hamidullah.

Conclusion

E.M. Forster's attempt to explore the nuances of India and its people falls apart for one simple reason: he could not separate his writing from his own Orientalist ideas and did not do a good enough job of researching the religions he chose to write about on a surface level. The writing comes across as Islamophobic, Orientalist, and severely lacking in the cultural and religious nuances needed when writing about Hindu and Muslim characters. It's important to point out these issues with the text to help future writers understand that simply making a character Muslim is not enough. Representation must be accurate. It should also be noted that many colonial analyses tend to overlook the Islamophobic tendencies that exist within these bodies of work and lump them together under one orientalist critique. While this study analyzes the interiority of the characters in the novel and the caricatural nature of how it presents Muslims, it does not tackle the societal issues and fallout of such representation. In our contemporary age of research, there should be a more robust body of work that can give Islamophobia in literature a frame of reference separate from Edward Said's Orientalism

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