

Book Review

Book: A Passage to India

Reviewed by: Ahmad Aqeel Sarwar

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Edward Morgan Forster_ essayist, short story writer and novelist _is considered a writer of first rank among the English literary figures. He travelled to India during 1912-1913 at the invitation of his friend Syed Ross Masood. During his visit he experienced interaction with the Indians and he felt the difficulty in having relationship with the natives. His experiences in India hatched the basic idea of a novel.

A Passage to India (1924) is a novel set against the backdrop of the British Raj and the Indian independence movement in the 1920s. It was selected as one of the 100 great works of English literature by the Modern Library and won the 1924 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction. Written as a precise mixture between a realistic and recognizable setting and a mystical tone, shows its author as both an excellent stylist, as well as a perceptive and acute judge of human character. When it was published, the people in England took it as a guide book for those who wanted to visit Sub-continent. It was considered to be helpful for the British to understand the mind and culture of the Indians.

The locale of the story is Chandrapore, an Indian state. The story is about the difficulties of friendly relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It also examines the difficulty that outsiders face in understanding India and her people. The Sahebs – the ones who have just arrived and those who have been living in India for a long time all desperately try to create 'home' in an alien land. The frustration they feel is in large part due to cultural differences.

The two communities meet symbolically in the relationship between Dr. Aziz and Fielding which ultimately fails as a result of a misunderstanding. Dr. Aziz is an educated Muslim who has adopted the British ways in order to come up to their standard. His inability to be accepted by the ruling community as one of their own draws the attention towards the fact that the colonizer never takes the natives as their equal.

Mrs. Moor and Adela Quested come to India to have a glimpse of a foreign culture. They want to see the 'real' India. Their visit to Caves, which is the climax of the novel, comes to an end with an unpleasant incident. Their host, Dr. Aziz, is arrested on charge of attempted sexual assault on Adela Quested which leads to a reaction from the natives against the English community. During the trial Fielding takes sides with Dr. Aziz but he faces a very harsh reaction from his community.

So what really happened in those caves? Is Aziz really innocent? And how will this accusation affect him and the people of Chandrapore? How do friendships get affected by this incident? Forster deftly navigates the politics and friendships in this difficult situation. The religious festivals, the weather and the landscape of Chandrapore has been depicted to give a glimpse of the lives of the people of Sub-continent and how they interact with the people belonging to other religion.

The novel is however not a very clear and realistic picture of India. It is written from the perspective of the British, the India seen through the lens of colonizer. Dr. Aziz is created by the colonizer as the best possible type of the Indians. He is shown as having adopted the British ways but is unable to come up to the standard of the rulers. There is no doubt a difference between the two cultures but the English culture has been portrayed as better than the Indian culture.

It also reveals the stereotypes with which Orientals are depicted and the constant process of 'formatting' or brainwashing to which newcomers are subjected, in order to generate colonizers who are all the same.