
The Motif of Violation in Forster's *A Passage to India*

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Abstract

In this paper I have discussed E.M. Forster's A Passage to India with the intention of examining the symbol of a violated white woman explored through the character of Adela Quested. My question is why this plot element of the violation of a white woman becomes a motif in novels dealing with the colonial situation. This paper proposes various ways of interpreting the motif. I have tried to show how during colonial times the white woman was projected as a figure representing 'civilization'. By analysing this motif of rape or violation, I wish to propose that the white woman appears as a symbol for the failure of colonial endeavour in the Orient, and moreover, she is as a transgressor who must face a terrible fate in the patriarchal discourse of colonialism. Besides, the paper also explores the motif of rape as providing a deeper insight into race relations within the context of colonialism and otherwise.

KEYWORDS: colonialism, race, rape

INTRODUCTION

*A Passage to India*¹, like the previous novels written by Forster, is symbolic in many ways, but unlike the other novels the symbolic content of this novel is highly ambiguous and thus a matter of intense debate. The incident of the Marabar caves has attracted a lot of critical controversy. Forster spent a lot of time in India and he explores his views on colonialism, Indian nationalism and the connection between the East and the West in this novel. Forster admires India as an ancient and great civilization, but also an unresolvable 'muddle'. Here I have studied the symbolic aspects of Forster's representation with reference to the violation (imagined or actual) of Adela Quested.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper I have discussed E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* largely from the point of view of postcolonial criticism. I have attempted to interpret the figure of the white woman in the context of colonialism with reference to several critical viewpoints. Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown* has been examined as it provides a comparative framework. The paper draws attention to the symbolic representation of the white woman in illustrations of American and European magazines at the beginning of the

twentieth century. Besides, the paper also explores the motif of rape from the critical perspective of race relations with reference to Western fictional representations.

DISCUSSION

Forster characterises the Indian colonial situation as a 'muddle' that cannot be resolved, in spite of the best intentions of either party. I intend to examine, in this paper, not Forster's notion of this ineradicable muddle, but his choosing of the incident of violence against the white European woman as an apt symbol for the muddle, or the incident of attempted rape as a plot device for illustrating and reflecting on the colonial situation. The significance of Forster's choice becomes apparent when we encounter the similar fate of Daphne Manners in Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*² and in John Master's *Bhowani Junction*³. I propose that this figure of the White woman becomes a signifier for the failure of the colonial civilisational endeavour. We notice that all the novels cited here emerge during the latter period of British colonialism and they probably reflect the waning of colonial power.

In *A Passage to India*, Forster depicts the confrontation of the British with their colonised Indian subjects with a plot revolving around the alleged molestation of a British woman Adela Quested and its repercussions. Forster illustrates his notion of the 'muddle' through the perplexing and mystifying atmosphere of the Marabar caves along with its confusing geography, the volatile friendship between Fielding and Aziz, the accusation and the case against Aziz that ruffles up the town of Chandrapore bringing it to the verge of a riot, the inexplicable consecration of Mrs. Moore to the status of a benevolent spirit and so on. But the more important symbol of this muddle seems to be the violation of Adela Quested inside the caves.

Adela Quested, a young British woman, comes to India along with Mrs. Moore to visit her fiancé Ronny Heaslop, the city magistrate of Chandrapore. Unaccustomed to the prejudice of the British community towards the Indians, she finds her new surroundings rather drab and uneventful. In these circumstances she agrees to visit the Marabar caves along with Mrs. Moore, Fielding and Aziz. Inside the dark, echoing caves Adela encounters something that terrifies her, though what really happens remains unexplained in the narrative. It is a bewildering crisis, because the British conceive it as an affront to the White race and the Indians think of it as a plot to frame an innocent native, and primarily because the incident itself could not be verified or established by Miss Quested herself or anybody else. She initially accuses Aziz led by a deluge of public empathy, and then fails to condemn him in court as she, overwhelmed by a sudden surge of honest reflection, confronts the truth of her own ignorance.

Civilizing the Orient is the white man's burden, therefore colonialism is already a gendered discourse. The realm of the colony is the White man's domain. What is then the white woman's role in this system? We may argue that that she has a twofold role: firstly as a symbol of the colonial mission of civilization, and secondly as playing a secondary, supportive role to the men in carrying the 'white man's burden. The representation of the white European woman as 'Civilization' may be found in some illustrations in magazines published in USA and Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century, the heyday of colonialism. For example, in one such illustration by the artist Udo Keppler, Britain is visualised as a white woman bringing civilisation to Africa:

The archetypal dominance of "Civilization" over "Barbarism" is conveyed in a 1902 Puck graphic with the sweeping white figure of Britannia leading British soldiers and colonists in the Boer War. A band of tribal defenders, whose leader rides a white charger and wields the flag of "Barbarism," fades in the face of Civilization's advance. The caption, "From the Cape to Cairo. Though the Process Be Costly, The Road of Progress Must Be Cut," states that progress must be pursued despite suffering on both sides. The message suggests that the indigenous man will be brought out of ignorance through the inescapable march of progress in the form of Western civilization. (Sebring 2014, 2)⁴

It is noteworthy that the "sweeping white figure of Britannia" has obvious similarities with the famous 1830 painting of the French revolution by Eugène Delacroix⁵, *Liberty Leading the People*, where 'Liberty' is depicted as white European woman. Thus, in Western imagination, the figure of the white European woman is a traditional symbol of civilization, progress, liberty and so on. In *A Passage to India*, we may compare the benevolent figures of Adela and Mrs. Moore as Englishwomen who truly represent the best intentions of colonialism: to connect to the colonial 'Other', to civilise the racial 'Other'. Secondly, her role to assist, help, support the man's cause, or be in some way 'useful' in this crucial and difficult enterprise. This is perhaps the role conceived for her by the patriarchal discourse of colonialism. Thus, when a white woman transgresses the role designed for her, the inevitable fate that awaits her is disaster, and the kind of disaster that patriarchal society has ordained for women who transgress: sexual dishonour.

Adela visited India, we may surmise, with the sole aim of fulfilling her 'purpose' in life, of being the ideal wife for her fiancé Ronny. But once in India she (and Mrs. Moore) is surprised and affected by the racial prejudice of the European masters to their Indian subjects. This reaction, which marks her as different from the other white women of her community, at once puts her into an oppositional role with the colonial authority. Further, she along with Mrs. Moore trust Aziz, an Indian, to accompany them to the Marabar hills. And finally, she betrays her community in failing to identify Aziz as the

one who tried to molest her inside the caves. She thus becomes a woman marked to suffer because she has transgressed the colonial code for the superior White community. It is interesting to note that she had made an honest effort to satisfy the demands of the patriarchal norm by reconciling her differences with Ronny and by initially condemning Aziz. But ultimately, she fails to stick to the norm for a white Woman in the colonial world, and when the Marabar affair ends, she is relegated to the margins of the narrative. Thus, her character not only represents the cruel fate of the transgressor in the patriarchal colonial discourse, but also how this discourse objectifies her identity, transforming her into a tool, a device for illustrating the colonial world, that loses value when that role is fulfilled. Thus, the narrative shifts focus to explore further the relationship between Aziz and Fielding, forgetting Adela and her fortunes as she returns to England.

Adela's violation also connotes the failure to fully comprehend and to fully possess the 'Other'. "Adela is one of those persons to whom life must "explain" itself rationally. She wants to "know" India, to harmonize all of its paradoxical voices into one clear harmonious chord of being" (Dauner, 1961, 264)⁶. The Marabar caves are an ambiguous symbol and there have been different and conflicting interpretations. The caves may be interpreted as a symbol of primordial chaos which may be said to represent India. We may, therefore, see Adela Quested as a colonial torchbearer seeking to understand, modify, illuminate the dark native space; bringing the light of civilization into the darkness in the heart of India: an adventure which is fated to fail. Adela's question to Godbole and Dr. Aziz, "What are these caves?" may be interpreted as the colonial desire to know, to reveal, or to uncover the mystery of the Orient. Godbole's ambiguous and enigmatic answers do not enlighten her. Adela is also, therefore, the voice of rationality trying to rationally interpret the mystery and enigma called India. We may also see Adela as a projection of Forster's motto in *Howards End*⁷, "only connect", and also of the failure to establish that connection. Adela fails to 'connect' and to establish a relationship with India. Her violation is therefore emblematic of the failure of understanding between the West and the East. This failure to connect also reflects the impossibility of traversing the racial difference between the colonizer and colonized: "In the manichean world of the colonizer and the colonized, of the master and the slave, distance tends to become absolute and qualitative rather than relative and quantitative. The world is perceived in terms of ultimate, fixed differences" (JanMohamed, 1985, 70)⁸. Commenting on the manichean separation of the colonial world in *A Passage to India*, and its use of metaphysical symbolism in the incident of the Marabar caves, JanMohamed says, "In the final analysis, racial difference is once again supported and justified by metaphysical difference." (1985, 77)

Both E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, published in 1924, and Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*, published in 1966 depicts 'the Raj' or Britain's empire in India and the relationship between the British and Indians as individuals and as members of their respective racial communities. While Scott concentrates on the last few years of the British empire, Forster's novel published nearly forty years earlier underscores the already ebbing ties and connections between the rulers and the ruled in probably the second decade of the twentieth century. Tensions, anxieties and problems are exacerbated in Scott. What interests me most, however, is the figuration of the White woman in these two novels, which seems to me as emblematic of these tensions and the whole colonial enterprise. If we analyse the fortunes of Daphne Manners in the *The Jewel in the Crown*, we find another white woman who transgressed the norm of colonial society. In this novel also, as in the previous one, we find a stratified society and strict behavioural codes. Daphne falls in love with an Indian, Ravi Kumar, rejecting one from her own community. She is inordinately sympathetic to the Indian people and is frequently at a loss to understand the norms of behaviour expected from her as a representative of the superior race. In the narrative, she ends up being raped by unknown persons in the Bibighar gardens. Daphne fails to identify the perpetrators as Indians and claims that they could be British as well. Daphne's absolute honesty is a character trait that echoes Adela's candour and ruthless self doubt that ultimately saves her from the delusion that her unfortunate circumstances had created for her, aided by her White compatriots. Apart from Daphne's insistent self-questioning and integrity, her humanitarian intent is evident from her choice of a nurse's vocation. In both these women, we notice the desire to surpass racial codes, and an understanding of and empathy with humanity irrespective of race. Perhaps this leads them to be sacrificial scapegoats in the colonial discourse, which rested on the preservation of unyielding borders between races.

From the point of view of race relations, the motif of violation of the white woman is very significant. We find that images of rape are not too uncommon in Western fiction depicting racial inequality and abuse. In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*⁹ or William Faulkner's 'Dry September'¹⁰ we find the same motif of rape. In Lee's famous novel, a black man, Tom Robinson, is accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell; and, in Faulkner's short story, Will Mayes, also a black, is accused of raping Miss Minnie Cooper. These representations are usually explained as the projection of white fantasies of desiring a racial Other. However, in the postcolonial situation, the relations of race acquire an added dimension. The exploitation of the colonized race and country is metaphorically described as rape; as in colonial or Orientalist discourse the colonized space is frequently represented as feminine. Contemplating on the motif

of rape in *The Jewel in the Crown*, Sharpe says that it is “intended as an anti-imperialist allegory in which the literal rape signifies the colonizer's violation of the colonized” (1993, 1)¹¹. There is a comparable incident in colonial history, which could definitely have served as reference to both Forster and Scott:

Miss Marcella Sherwood, a Church of England missionary and a resident of Amritsar for over fifteen years, was unable to escape the wrath of the crowd. As she was bicycling down a narrow lane, she was set upon by a crowd that knocked her down from her bicycle, and then delivered blows to her head with sticks while she was still on the ground. Miss Sherwood rose to her feet, and had just started to run when she was again brought down. On the subsequent attempt she reached a house but the door was slammed shut in her face. She was again beaten and left on the street in a critical condition. The crowd then dispersed; Miss Sherwood was soon thereafter rescued, and prompt medical attention saved her life. (Lal, 1993, 35)¹²

Sharpe comments on the circulation of such images of violence on European women during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857: “During the 1857 revolt, the idea of rebellion was so closely imbricated with the violation of English womanhood that the Mutiny was remembered as a barbaric attack on innocent white women.” However, she says that although such cases were investigated no evidence could be gathered to substantiate the rumors. (1993, 2). Questioning the trope of rape and its recurrence after the 1857 revolt, her work enquires why it becomes a symbol for “rapaciousness of the British Empire” (1993, 1) and argues that, a crisis in British authority is managed through the circulation of the violated bodies of English women as a sign for the violation of colonialism. In doing so, I see English womanhood emerge as an important cultural signifier for articulating a colonial hierarchy of race. (Sharpe, 1993, 4)

CONCLUSION

The colonial West conceived India, and the Orient, as a chaos, leading to its justification of colonialism as a civilizing mission. But in Forster's work we find a creeping sense of despair, because the vaunted ambition of the colonial enterprise to civilise the Orient has mostly failed. Therefore, the white woman comes across as a signifier both for the civilizing mission and its failure. Quite interestingly, in a comparatively recent Indian novel, *Riot*¹³, by Shashi Tharoor, we find a replication of the same motif: an idealistic white American woman working among the poor, illiterate people in a remote Indian village is raped by rioters. Tharoor seems to be borrowing the motif to recount his tale of a postcolonial nation disrupted by senseless communalism and riots. But the replication underlines the perpetuity of the manichean separation between the liberal, civilized and enlightened first world and the dark, riotous and chaotic India even in a neocolonial globalized world order.

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