The Road to Agra Short Guide

The Road to Agra by Aimee Sommerfelt

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Overview

The Road to Agra is a tender story of the love between thirteen-year-old Lalu and his younger sister, Maya, who is seven. Lalu protects his sister and takes care of her needs. His concern for Maya's failing eyesight, the result of a contagious disease called trachoma, prompts Lalu to take his sister on a perilous, three-hundred-mile journey on foot to seek medical help. Lalu's desire to better his situation in life and his unwavering commitment to his goal will inspire young readers.

About the Author

Aimee Sommerfelt was bom on April 2, 1892, in Oslo, Norway. As a child, she read a great deal, acted out Norwegian fairy tales, and invented romantic and suspenseful stories with her siblings and friends. To this creativity, Sommerfelt added the compassion and sensitivity toward others that she learned from her father, Henrik Arnold Thaulow, a respected psychiatrist.

She married Alf Sommerfelt, a professor of comparative linguistics at Oslo University, and had two daughters and a son. They settled in a rural area not far from her childhood home, and Sommerfelt started writing for young adults in Norwegian as early as 1933. Her philosophy, based on her happy childhood, was that books for young adults should be entertaining, not disturbing, but the Second World War and the German occupation of Norway turned her attention to serious topics. She responded to her changed environment by writing several historical novels to influence young readers. For example, the plot of Miriam, set during the German occupation of Norway, centers on a Jewish girl and a Christian girl whose friendship is tested and toughened by the Nazi cruelty toward minorities.

Similarly, when her husband's assignment as one of the founders of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) took the couple to India for four years, Sommerfelt began writing about the plight of young people in underdeveloped countries. The Road to Agra, her first book published in America, is an account of the way young adults live in overpopulated surroundings. My Name Is Pablo, the result of a similar visit to Mexico, tells of social pressures in an impoverished and crime-ridden community.

Sommerfelt's touching stories met with immediate success in Norway as well as in the United States, and her books have been published in twentyfive countries and translated into several languages. The Road to Agra won the Child Study Association of America Children's Book Award, the Boys' Clubs of America Junior Book Award, and the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, all in 1962.

Sommerfelt stated that in writing about characters from India and Mexico, she hoped to promote world peace and understanding. She believed that young people would be better able to understand the problems of developing countries and racial prejudice by becoming more open-minded in their formative years, because young readers identify with the characters they read about. While there can be no question of Sommerfelt's sincerity and genuine concern in writing these books, many Indian and Mexican readers, as well as American and European critics, are offended by the paternalism and racial bias implicit in her writings.

Sommerfelt continued to write and translate for children even after she became blind. She felt encouraged when two of her books written after she lost her vision won awards. Surrounded by the company of her children and grandchildren, she continued to live in her country home until her death in 1975.

Setting

Set in post-independence India in the 1950s, the story shifts locale from the village of Ratwa to the crowded, bustling city of Agra in northern India. As in centuries past, life in Ratwa still moves according to the rhythms of the seasons and the rising and setting of the sun and moon. The economy and well-being of the villagers is based on nature; if the monsoon rains fail to appear, loss of livestock and famine result. Only the local moneylender can capitalize on the vagaries of nature. Although educational opportunities are inadequate and medical facilities are nonexistent, Ratwa remains a peaceful place. Villagers are comforted and protected by Chaya, goddess of shade and mercy.

If village life represents traditional values, the city symbolizes Western technology. The city of Agra has a modern hospital with a famous eye doctor who performs medical "miracles."

But the city also represents overcrowding, dirt, and constant activity; while the village exists in peaceful self-sufficiency, the city breeds exploitation of labor and lack of fellowship and humanity. Instead of the social cooperation characteristic of village life, urban life in India generates insurmountable economic and educational barriers among people.

Although the contrast between the city and the village is a theme of the novel, most of the action takes place on the road, as Lalu and Maya travel from Ratwa to Agra. The road becomes a microcosm of India, where the young travellers encounter wild animals and performing bears, as well as rich and poor, helpful and wicked people.

Social Sensitivity

While The Road to Agra won international acclaim for Sommerfelt and touched readers with the central characters' plight, it is, nevertheless, a superficial look at the situation in India.

Sommerfelt's central concern is to present India as a poor country that is ill-equipped to care for its subjects. She suggests that its only hope lies in the help it can get from Western countries.

The protagonists' trek to Agra wrings sympathy from her Western audience, but it also gives the author the opportunity to make her story more dramatic.

Sommerfelt also glorifies the West for its charitable efforts on India's behalf, such as when the children hear on the radio that WHO is giving another one million rupees for the treatment of lepers and that doctors and nurses will visit the villages with free milk and medicine.

Lalita Prasad, the Indian doctor in Agra, voices Sommerfelt's general attitude when she says, "India is the world's most unfortunate country if she cannot even help her own children." The author condescendingly states that it is not fair for other countries to have more; they should help India. In addition, the book makes statements that are insulting to Indian national pride. When Lalu and Maya express surprise at the free milk given to their dog, Sommerfelt adds, "Nurse Astrid...came from a country where there was plenty of food for dogs." Another passage states: Far, far away from here there is a country where everyone has plenty of food. Not like here in India, where there are lots of people and very little food. If some child or other in that far away country decided that he doesn't want an ice-cream cone and gives the money to UNICEF instead... then you will get a glass of buffalo milk. Do you understand?

The comparison is not only derogatory to India, but by ignoring the achievements and ancient traditions of India, it gives a biased and one-sided impression of life there.

Literary Qualities

Sommerfelt employs the journey motif from epic literature to signify Lalu's transition from childhood to maturity.

When he undertakes the long journey to Agra, he is young and unsure of himself.

He feels "as if he were a branch pulled roughly away from the parent trunk, a branch which must certainly wither."

Once he decides to take his journey, his elders treat him like an adult and give him advice on how to survive. As he traverses the dusty road to Agra, Lalu learns from both good and bad experiences. But although Lalu and his sister learn about human nature, they react to events instead of making them happen. Despite the emotional appeal of the children's situation, Sommerfelt is unable to portray well-rounded, multidimensional characters.

Lalu and Maya undergo a series of adventures on their way to Agra. The book's episodic plot follows an almost predictable pattern, in which one or two good experiences precede an unpleasant one. Another literary device Sommerfelt uses is foreshadowing. The village guru predicts that a gray elephant will bring good luck, and indeed good luck arrives in the form of a gray jeep driven by WHO workers.

Similarly, the camel driver prepares the children for disappointment in Agra when he tells them that his little girl died because there was not enough room at the hospital.

In portraying a society and culture that is foreign to a Western audience, Sommerfelt relies on oversimplified and stereotyped characters and situations, providing little insight into the Indian customs and values that lend dignity to people. Thus, villagers are typically good-natured but ignorant and superstitious, while city people are impatient and unhelpful. Sommerfelt presents India as an "exotic" country, where holy cows with gilded horns sit in the middle of busy roads while traffic goes around them. Although Sommerfelt mentions the Indian caste system, she does not explain its function or make it an integral part of the story except to state that it results in discrimination against the lower castes. Unauthentic details further distort the picture. Nani fans the kitchen fire with a peacock feather fan, an item that in real life is sold mainly to tourists and is certainly not practical in front of a coal fire. Lalu and Maya meet a Maharajah's son who not only gives the two, dirty, raggedy-looking children a ride on his elephant, but also buys their dog and feeds him all sorts of delicacies. The situation is improbable because of the differences in the characters' social and economic status. Furthermore, "Maharajah" is a Hindu title, and the author has him stop at a Hindu temple during a festival, but the prince's name, Nawab Khan, is Muslim.

Themes and Characters

The adult characters, with the exception of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) crews, are insignificant to the central action; it is the teen-age Lalu who takes charge of his own life. Lalu's father, like the other villagers, is superstitious and old-fashioned in his thinking. He firmly believes that the stars determine fate; hence, he refuses to seek medical help for his daughter's blindness: "God will never allow Maya to go blind unless it is ordained that she shall go blind." The illiterate villagers are equally suspicious of school learning, believing that the truly wise do not need to read books and that schooling gives children a false sense of superiority. Of the older generation, only Nani, Lalu's grandmother, challenges this mode of thinking. She feels that the journey to Agra will make an adult of Lalu and help him acquire patience. Her speech is full of folk wisdom; when Lalu asks her if he is old enough to undertake the journey, she encourages him by saying, "the thin branch that bends is stronger than the thick one that cracks," and, "Each of us must fly according to the size of his wings." Nani is sensitive to Lalu's moods, and he is able to express his hopes to her. Sommerfelt successfully captures the loving, respectful relationship between grandparent and grandchild.

An independent young man, Lalu is determined to take control of his potentially bleak future. Yet Sommerfelt saves him from becoming an idealized character by attaching a selfish motive to his journey. Although his heroism is prompted by his love for Maya, he also has a personal stake: Maya has been given a coveted seat in the village school, and she must be able to see in order to continue her education and share her education with her brother.

Lalu's vulnerability becomes apparent when he and his sister are imprisoned in the ox-shed and he weeps, fearing for his life and sensing that everything he has worked for has been destroyed.

Maya depends on Lalu for security; when she feels threatened, he reassures her with a story. He tells her, "If things are at their worst there is always something good, somewhere, even if it is nothing but a drop of honey." Despite her reliance on her older brother, Maya is not a stereotypical, passive female character. She complements her brother perfectly; when Lalu loses heart, she has the courage and strength to move on. In fact, it is Maya who thinks of a way to escape from the oxshed when Lalu despairs. While riding to Allahabad, she thinks to let her scarf drag from the cart so that Lalu's pet dog, Kanga, can follow their scent.

Lalu and Maya's experiences express the tension between the opposing values of modernity and traditions. The city symbolizes progress through education, industrialization, and medicine. The village, on the other hand, represents traditional values.

Lalu and Maya forsake traditional views, refusing to accept their condition passively; the outcome of the story implies that one's actions determine one's fate. But while Lalu's attempt to take control of his life contributes to the story's outcome, his future seems to be too much at the mercy of charitable Westerners.

The exploitation and the ill-treatment of the young and helpless that Lalu and Maya observe on their journey demonstrates the devastating effects of greed.

Boys in villages do the work of adults, building contractors hire two workers for the price of one, and the weaving factory runs entirely on child labor.

Though the young weavers are well-fed and kindly treated, Sommerfelt stresses that their jobs deprive them of the opportunity to learn to read and write.

Even performing bears and monkeys are exploited by their owners for profit.

Animals, Sommerfelt suggests, should be treated with love and dignity in the same way that Maya and Lalu treat Kanga.

Sommerfelt emphasizes that choosing selflessness over self-interest can lead to unexpected rewards. Jhandu, the camel driver, says that Lalu should go to Agra for Maya's sake and not for pragmatic reasons, because an honorable deed is a selfless act that is blessed by God: There is no room for profit and honor on the same plate." In the end, Lalu's selflessness is rewarded, as a doctor in Agra offers him a job, a place to stay, and a seat at school.

The author's didacticism is unmistakable: the book calls for people to care for the unfortunate., People in Western countries, she feels, are selfish and should do more to help India, just as people living in Indian cities are urged to help their neighbors in the villages.

Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the relationships between parents and children in India. What value is placed on interpersonal relationships?

2. What techniques does Sommerfelt employ to elicit an emotional response to the plight of Lalu and Maya? Is the author playing on the reader's emotions, or is there justification for the action of the novel?

3. Many critics argue that Sommerfelt displays a condescending attitude toward India, implying that India's only hope is in the help it receives from other countries. Do you think the author is condescending? If so, why? If not, discuss some ways in which she shows respect and admiration for India and its citizens.

4. In the journey motif, the young hero is usually assisted by older, wiser characters. Who are Lalu's mentor figures, and how do they aid him? Who are the villains? What are the conflicts that Lalu faces, and how do they affect him?

5. Some critics have seen Lalu's struggles as a metaphor for the challenges that faced the newly independent India.

In what ways is his experience symbolic of India's growth and sense of identity?

6. WHO and UNICEF represent the Western world's efforts to assist less fortunate countries. What obligations, if any, do well-off people have to less fortunate peoples? Why should they help them? What reasons might they have not to help them?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Does the dog Kanga play a symbolic role in the story? Does he embody the theme of the novel in any way?

2. What is the function of the episode in which Lalu is charged with thievery?

3. Research and describe life in India in the 1950s. Then discuss the accuracy of Sommerfelt's portrayal.

4. After a heroic journey in which Lalu has more or less been in charge of his own life, he is frustrated in Agra by the treatment of the callous gatekeeper. Is Lalu's defeatist attitude in keeping with his character when he resignedly turns back home? Would you change the ending to show Lalu in control rather than being indebted to the "do-gooder" Western characters?

5. Research and discuss U.S. efforts to help India or other underdeveloped countries. You might discuss the negative feeling these countries often develop toward America and the causes for this reaction.

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. Something about the Author. Vol. 5. Detroit: Gale Research, 1973. Includes a detailed list of books and awards won by Sommerfelt. The entry also has a brief biographical sketch with the author's account of her travels, family life, and aims as a writer.

DeMontreville, Doris, and Donna Hill, eds. Third Book of Junior Authors. New York: Wilson, 1972. Contains an autobiographical sketch in which Sommerfelt traces her writing talent to her childhood reading and inventions, and to her later travels to India and Mexico. As a writer, her aim was to sensitize young minds before adult prejudices could intrude.

Macbean, Margaret. "Long Trek." New York Times Book Review (October 1, 1961): 32. The author feels that Sommerfelt does not let her moralizing intrude and instead "allows the reader simply to share Lalu's adventures."

Moore, Opal, and Donnarae MacCann.

"Paternalism and Assimilation in Books About Hispanics." Children's Literature Association Quarterly 12 (Summer 1987): 99-102. The authors briefly review Sommerfelt's novel My Name Is Pablo, which they assert implies that children are a special object of persecution in Mexico. They believe that Sommerfelt's work reflects a sense of European superiority, which she supports through "overgeneralizations and inappropriate cultural comparisons."

Nirodi, Vrinda. "Presenting Strange Lands." Saturday Review (November 11, 1961): 46, 48. Nirodi states that, in general, books on India lack "the perception and imagination it takes to make them more than a collection of facts," and contends that The Road to Agra fits the formula of emphasizing the sensational and bizarre aspects of Indian life.

"Review." Commonweal 75 (November 10, 1961): 186. Gives a brief plot summary and states that the story of the two children is "of such great poignancy that it would be quite unbearable if the tide did not turn at the last minute."

"Review." Horn Book 37 (December 1961): 553. After giving a brief plot summary, the reviewer praises the book's excitement and holding power, and states that Sommerfelt's understanding of India lends depth to the story.

"Review." Kirkus Review 29 (August 15, 1961): 732. The author feels that the book is an unsentimental portrait of India today, especially of the grim reality—softened only by old legends and religious beliefs—that faces most of the country's children.

Related Titles

Set three years after the events of The Road to Agra, The White Bungalow continues Lalu's story. After Maya's cure is complete, Dr. Prasad sends Lalu back to Ratwa with vague promises of a scholarship if he studies hard. Thus, the doctor's white bungalow in Agra becomes a symbol of hope and prosperity to Lalu. Lalu's stay in Agra has instilled a disdain for village life, and he wants to become a doctor like his benefactress.

Lalu rejects farming, the profession of his ancestors, and thinks that medicine is the only worthwhile work in the "new" India. The story, thus, centers on the conflict between traditional and modern values. When the lack of rains and the ensuing famine lead to his father's illness, Lalu decides to stay home and assume family responsibilities. His friend Ram, who has no family ties because he has been rejected by his soldier father, is the one who leaves the village to study. In The White Bungalow, Sommerfelt expresses the dream of the new India, that one can serve by living in the villages and bringing science to farming.

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