

## Cultural Conflicts and Distorted Relationship in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

Rajni Devi

Assistant professor in English,(contract)  
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra,  
(Haryana)

Received May 24, 2017

Accepted June 16, 2017

### ABSTRACT

*A Passage to India is a good example of how different cultures, when forced to intermix, misunderstand each other, and what ramifications stalk from those misunderstandings. The novel portrays the impossible relationships between the English and the Indians during the colonial period through the story of Dr Aziz and Adela Quested. The novel is replete with the motifs of separateness, fences and gulfs. The novelist describes the reality of the relationship between the two cultures and races. The relationship of the colonizers and the colonized creates some bitter differences that cannot be crossed. Forster explores the attitude of the colonizers, who believe only in authority, domination and submission, not in relations. This research paper explores the distorted relationship and cultural conflicts between Anglo-Indian and Indian or Hindu and Moslems.*

**Keywords:** conflicts, Indian, British, racial, Englishmen, culture, relationship, Hindu, Muslim.

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* was published in 1924. In this novel, Forster reflects on his experiences during his travels in India. *A Passage to India* is considered of his most famous works written after his two visits, 1911 and 1921, in India. J. B. Priestley remarks, "A Passage to India, which adds racial relationships to the intricate pattern, is even more elaborate: a novel that requires several readings to be appreciated to the full, undoubtedly Forster's masterpiece" (355). When Forster travelled India, it was the period of British Raj. There were only two races— The East Indian or the colonised and The West Indian or the coloniser. To show the conflicts, the novel focuses on the three characters: Dr Aziz, his British friend Cyril Fielding, and Adela Quested. During a trip of the Malabar Caves, Adela accuses Aziz of attempting to rape her. Aziz's trial brings all the racial tensions and prejudices between Indians and the British colonialists who rule India. The relationship between the Indians and the British and their continuously growing conflict resulting from misunderstanding and differences in terms of race, culture, and religion are presented in the three parts of *A Passage to India*— "Mosque", "Caves", and "Temple".

Forster's works deal with the failure of a human being able to communicate satisfactorily, and their failure to eliminate prejudice to establish a possible relationship. E.M. Forster is a humanistic writer. His main belief is that individual human beings fail to connect because the humanistic virtues, tolerance, sympathy and good temper are ineffective in this world of religious and racial discrimination. However, he also believes that personal relationships can succeed, because values and noble impulses do exist within human nature. Forster's *A Passage to India* was written at a time when the end of the British colonial presence in India was becoming a very real possibility. As a result, racial conflict between the British and Indians was a recurrent happening in India. Forster gives equal time to analyzing Indian culture. On one level he portrays the many religious and cultures of the country, which are part of the reason India remains so internally divided.

The novel is divided between Anglo-Indians and Indian natives. The town of Chandrapore is divided into two parts, the English civil station and the native section. The civil station shares nothing with the city except the

sky. The railway line is also divided the European locality from the Indian locality. Thus, the city is stiffening with the conflict of class and race:

They seek to make Britain in India, rather than accepting and glorifying the resident cultures. They remain strangers to it, practically living in a separate country they provided for themselves, yet ruling one that they remained aloof from. (Eldridge 170)

The Indian is described as more informal, religious, and spiritual race, and so are distrusted by the English for being different. Even their religion is more informal. E. M. Forster states that by “sacrificing good tastes, this worship achieved what Christianity has shirked: the inclusion of merriment” (324).

The English officials and their wives are suspicious of Indians. They are furthermore distant and reserved in their behaviour towards the Indian. They are described as more formal and secular. Most English view themselves and their culture as superior. In a conversation with Mrs Moore and Miss Quested, Mrs Turton remarks, “You are superior to everyone in India except one or two of Ranis and they’re on an equality” (42).

Forster, an Englishman himself, uses Aziz, an Indian, to portray this when Aziz says “That’s India all over...how like us...there we are” (108). Forster uses an Indian character to point out an Indian stereotype for added effect. Many of the English also view the Indians as selfish and self-serving. They say that “Whether the native swaggers or cringes, there’s always something behind every remark...always something, and if nothing else trying to increase his izzat— in plain knglo-Saxon, to score” (33). As a result, they view more “Westernized” Indians with less suspicion and more respect, which leads Aziz to complain to Mr Fielding that when he is “biking in English dress-starch collar, hat with ditch— they take no notice. When I wear a fez, they cry, ‘your lamp’s out!’” (69).

Forster describes that there was no sign of friendship between the Indians and the English. At the very outset of the novel, Dr

Aziz shows his scornful attitude to the English, wishing only to consider them comically or ignore them completely. He shows his distrust by saying to Hamidullah “Whether or not possible for Indians to be friends with Englishman” (7).

Another important issue that was seen at that time was the mutual prejudices of Hindus and Muslims, as their relationship are not cordial. They get closer to each other only to their common stand. One can easily see that the English treat the Indians with a lack of respect and the Indians seem to expect it.

Cultural misunderstanding is turned into a major theme in the novel. Different cultural ideas and expectations regarding hospitality, social properties and the role of religion in daily life are responsible for misunderstandings between the English and the Indians. Aziz tells Fielding at the end of the novel “It is useless discussing Hindus with me. Living with them teaches me no more. When I think I annoy them, I do not. When I think I don’t annoy them, I do... Why so curious about them?”(288). Forster expresses how these repeated misunderstandings become hardened into cultural stereotypes and are often used to justify the uselessness of attempts to bridge the cultural gulf. These conflicts have resulted from the cultural and social differences which cause tension between the Indian and the British characters. For these variations, the Indian fail to enjoy the eternal union and finally divided into two parts on the basis of racial belief. Adela also shows her ignorance of Indian customs when she asks Dr Aziz how many wives she has. The Turton set a party to bridge the gulf between East and West but this event emphasizes the tension that exists between the two cultures. Mrs Moore observes that India is full of “mystery and muddle” that westerners cannot understand. At the time of Aziz’s arrest, Turton tells Fielding, “I have had twenty-five years experience of this country... I have never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indians attempt to be intimate socially” (86).

The culture conflict, however, is not only between Indians and Anglo-Indians but also between two distinct groups of India, they're Moslems and Hindus. Forster makes it clear that these two groups have different traditions. Even Dr Aziz proud of his Moslem heritage and considers the Hindus to be almost alien because "they have no idea of society" (65). At the same time, although he is quite conscious of being an Indian. After the trial, both Hindu and Muslims altogether celebrate Aziz's absolution. In the final section, Aziz is living in Hindu state, where he regards himself as an outsider.

Forster was neither a religious man nor a religious writer. However, religion is a major theme in the book. The three part of the book "Mosque", "Cave" and "Temple" represents the three world's historic religions— Islam, Christianity, and Hindu. Aziz loves the cultural and social aspects of his Islamic heritage, but he seems less concerned with its theology and religious practice. He is aware that Moslems are in the minority in India, and so he feels a special kinship with Hamidullah. The Anglo-Indian is nominal representatives of Christianity, although they keep a little sign of such Christian virtues as charity, love and forgiveness. Mrs Moore is basically Christian in her outlook, but, she experiences a crisis of faith during her visit to the Marabar Caves, and her belief in God or in any meaning of life is destroyed. Hinduism is the main religion of India, and professor Godbole is the central Hindu figure in the novel. For Godbole Hinduism is "completeness, not reconstruction". The central principle of this religion is the total acceptance of things as they are. It is also most representative of the true spirit of India.

Adela Quested, who brings more racial tension in the novel because of her hallucination, played an important role in *A Passage to India*. Adela's experience at the Marabar Caves causes her to undergo a crisis of rationalism against spiritualism. Adela begins to recognise that her assault, and the echo that haunts her afterwards, are representative of something outside the scope of her normal rational perception. She finds

she has no love for India, and suddenly fears that she is unable to love anyone. Her accusation opens a new chapter of doubts and suspicious, that draws a line between the East and the West. The novel tells us that "the question had lost interest for her suddenly" (242). One cannot fail to notice that all the opinions expressed in the novel regarding the episode do not seem to be given significance. This could due to the indifference towards women that is presented throughout the novel. The crisis of the caves is consequently an opportunity for the British officers to show themselves as an impediment in the way of any understanding between the two races:

The English always stick together! That was the criticism. Nor was it unjust. Fielding shared it himself and knew that if some understanding occurred, and an attack was made on the girl his allies, he would be obliged to die in her defence. He didn't want to die in her defence. He didn't want to die for her; he wanted to be rejoicing with Aziz. (235)

By taking Aziz's side, Fielding not only loses his own self, but he puts his fellow Englishmen at risk. After the trial, a victory of Indians proves that English is not to be always superior.

Forster opines that relationship between the different races does not work smoothly in the imperial India. There are the problems of status, career and power that divide the British from the native people. There are in addition, prejudices and feelings of superiority of the British. Ronny Heaslop is ignorant; major calendar boasts about torturing an injured Indian youth; Mc Bryde expresses arrogant views of the lust the Indian show for white women; Miss Dereck shows anger towards Indian employers and Mr Turton is imperious towards the Indians. This racism shows in the Anglo-Indians attitudes towards the Aziz after the incident in the Marabar Caves. Mr Mc Bryde feels that Aziz's pretends to be a good person, in fact, he is a negative minded person and his brutal and cruel action to an English lady, cannot be forgiven. All the colonists do the action very

fast as every colonist should do. Mr Turton states that he has “never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indians attempt to be intimate socially” (182). But such intimacy is only negative. Only mutual respect and self-esteem can enable them to socialize with each other. Hamidullah states, “Only contend that is possible in England” (33). He expresses a friendship between an Englishman and an Indian on an equal basis is possible in England. Aziz also asserts:

Why talk about the English? Brrr...! Why be either friends with the fellows or not friends? Let us shut them out and be jolly. Queen Victoria and Mrs Bannister were the only exceptions, and they're dead. (33)

Aziz is against the British at the beginning, however, he begins to change his opinion after meeting Mrs Moore in the Mosque. This is also the threshold of a friendship between Fielding and Aziz. If the Indians and British treated each other as Aziz and Fielding did, then it would be possible for members of the two nations to be friends. But at last, it proved wrong because as long as the colonialists rule the colonised, they will always resent one another. The culture and racial differences, and personal misunderstandings, separate Aziz and Fielding. In his conversation with Fielding, Aziz tells the cause that the Indians tolerate the British are only for the political reason. Aziz states:

Clear out, clear out, I say. Why are we put to so much suffering? We used to blame you, now we blame ourselves, we grow wiser. Until England is in difficulties we keep silent, but in the next European war—aha, aha! Then it is our time.... we may hate one another, but we hate you

most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea. (315,316)

In these sentences, Aziz explains that he, Fielding, Englishman and Indian cannot be friends until India obtains independence from the Britishers. Priestley writes about Forster creations:

He rejected from the first any idea of being a solid chronicler of a society, of filling with realistic detail a broad of canvas, of making his narrative acceptance and convincing by accumulating representative characters and events. He works in brilliant flashes, sudden revelations of character, a glimpse of heights and depths, the action that is not realistic and typical but symbolic. (355)

Thus, the conflict between the English and the Indians appears to be a racial one. The novel also demonstrates the issue of nationalism, colonialism and molestation. The political pressure is also represented in this novel with social issues of British in India. The friendship of Aziz and Fielding is shown a friendship between coloniser and colonised and the main difference between them is the difference of race.

### Works Cited

1. Eldridge, C.C. *The Imperial Experience: From Carlyle to Forster*. New York: St. Martin Press. 1996. Print.
2. Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*. London: Penguin books Ltd, 1979. Print.
3. Priestley, J. B. *Literature and the Western Man*. London: Heinemann, 1962. Print.