

The Colonial Tension in Forster's *A Passage to India*

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ABSTRACT

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is concerned with matter that may generate confusion, susceptibility and distinct prejudice and set two individuals, even two races face to face in relation to belligerence, intolerance and prejudice. *A Passage to India*, referring to colonialism, explores the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Colonialism is a practice of dominion which involves the subjugation of one people to another. The British colonized India and left an impact on many different levels of life and culture. This paper aims to explore one basic issue, the cultural misunderstanding between the colonizer and the colonized. Forster's study of India's history, politics, geography, culture and above all his observation of India culminate in *A Passage to India*. It may sufficiently lend weight to the view that this novel is mostly influenced by the experience of Forster's first visit to India. This research paper attempts to show how the colonized became victims by the colonizer. The disgusting attitude of the rulers, and the hatred of the Indians, was the core cause of the tension in India. Hostile relations between various communities made the social life very miserable. The violation of human rights and values further deteriorated the situation. The paper observes Forster's fairness and insight in portraying the British ruling class in India and his positive approach to find a passage where East and West, the twain can be meet.

Key words: colonial tension.

OH, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet...

(Kipling, The Ballad of East and West, Line: 1, 1865-1936)

The culture of the West will always be very different from that of the East. This saying is part of the refrain of "The Ballad of East and West," a poem by Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's frustration truly suggests the central theme of Forster's *A Passage to India* that East is East and West is West and the two shall never meet. *A Passage to India* is a classic example of how different cultures, when forced to intermix, misunderstand each other, and what consequences stem from those misunderstandings. Forster's novel deals with the failure of humans being able to communicate satisfactorily and their failure to eliminate prejudice, to establish relationships.

A Passage to India is cultural misunderstanding. Differing cultural ideas and expectations regarding hospitality, social proprieties, and the role of religion in daily life are responsible for misunderstandings between the English and the Muslim Indians, the English and the Hindu Indians, and between the Muslims and Hindus. A

Passage to India begins and ends by posing the question of whether it is possible for an Englishman and an Indian to ever be friends, at least within the context of British colonialism. Forster uses this question as a framework to explore the general issues of Britain's political control of India on a more personal level, through the friendship between Aziz and Fielding. The story revolves around four characters: Dr. Aziz, a Muslim doctor in Chandapore and a widower and Cyril Fielding, a Britisher. A young British schoolmistress, Adela Quested, and her elderly friend, Mrs. Moore.

Fielding is clearly the most associated with Forster himself. Among the Englishmen in Chandapore, Fielding is the most successful at developing and sustaining relationships with Native Indians. Unlike the other English, Fielding does not recognize the racial distinctions between himself and the native population. Instead, he interacts with the Indians on an individual-to-individual basis. Fielding treats the Indians as a

group of individuals who can connect through mutual respect, courtesy and intelligence. Cyril Fielding seems to be the model of successful interaction between the English and the Indians.

At the beginning of the novel, Aziz is scornful of the English, wishing only to consider them comically or ignore them completely. Yet the intuitive connection Aziz feels with Mrs. Moore in the mosque opens him to the possibility of friendship with Fielding. Through the first half of the novel, Fielding and Aziz represent a positive model of liberal humanism. Forster suggests that British rule in India could be successful and respectful if only English and Indians treated each other as Fielding and Aziz treat each other—as worthy individuals who connect through frankness, intelligence, and good will. Yet in the aftermath of the novel's climax—Adela's accusation that Aziz attempted to assault her and her subsequent removal of this accusation at the trial—Aziz and Fielding's friendship falls apart.

The occasion was of a tea party that held at the Fielding's place. Fielding invited Adela and Mrs. Moore to the tea party with him and a [Hindu-Brahmin](#) professor named Narayan Godbole. At Adela's request, he extended his invitation to Dr. Aziz. Everyone has a good time conversing about India, and Fielding and Aziz became friends. Aziz promised to take Mrs. Moore and Adela to see the Marabar Caves, a distant cave complex. Fielding and Godbole were supposed to accompany the expedition, but they missed the train. Aziz and the women explored the caves. In the first cave, Mrs. Moore was overcome with claustrophobia. But worse than the claustrophobia was the echo. Disturbed by the sound, Mrs. Moore declined to continue exploring. Adela and Aziz, accompanied by a guide, climbed to the next caves. As Aziz helped Adela up the hill; she asked whether he has more than one wife. Disconcerted by the bluntness of the remark, he ducked into a cave to compose himself. When he came out, he found the guide alone outside the caves. The guide said Adela has gone into a cave by herself. Aziz looked for her in vain. Deciding she was lost, he struck the guide, who ran away. Aziz looked around and discovered Adela's [field glasses](#) lying broken on

the ground. He put them in his pocket. Then Aziz looked down the hill and saw Adela speaking to another young Englishwoman, Miss Derek, who has arrived with Fielding in a car. Aziz ran down the hill but Miss Derek and Adela drove off without explanation. Fielding, Mrs. Moore, and Aziz returned to Chandrapore on the train. At the train station, Aziz was arrested and charged with sexually assaulting Adela in a cave. Aziz's trial released the racial tensions between the British and the Indians. Adela said that Aziz followed her into the cave and tried to grab her, and that she fended him off by swinging her field glasses at him. The only evidence the British have was the field glasses in the possession of Aziz. Despite this, the British colonists believed that Aziz was guilty. They were stunned when Fielding proclaimed his belief in Aziz's innocence. Fielding was ostracized and condemned as a blood-traitor. But the Indians, who considered the assault allegation a fraud, welcomed him. During the weeks before the trial, Mrs. Moore was apathetic. Although she professed her belief in Aziz's innocence, she did nothing to help him. Ronny, Mrs. Moore's son, alarmed by his mother's assertion that Aziz is innocent, arranged for her return by ship to England before she can testify at the trial. Mrs. Moore died during the voyage. Her absence from India became a major issue at the trial, where Aziz's legal defenders asserted that her testimony would have proven the accuser's innocence. Adela became confused as to Aziz's guilt. At the trial, she was asked whether Aziz sexually assaulted her. She had a vision of the cave, and it turned out that Adela had, while in the cave, received a shock similar to Mrs. Moore's. The echo had disconcerted her so much that she became unhinged. At the time, Adela mistakenly interpreted her shock as an assault by Aziz. She admitted that she was mistaken, and the case was dismissed.

Although he is vindicated, Aziz is angry that Fielding befriended Adela after she nearly ruined his life. Believing it to be the gentlemanly thing to do, Fielding convinced Aziz not to seek monetary redress from her. The men's friendship suffered, and Fielding departed for England. Aziz believed that he was leaving to marry Adela for her money.

Bitter at his friend's perceived betrayal, he vowed never again to befriend a white person. Aziz moved to the Hindu-ruled state and began a new life.

Two years later, Fielding returns to India. His wife is Stella, Mrs. Moore's daughter from a second marriage. Aziz, now the Raja's chief physician, comes to respect and love Fielding again. However, he does not give up his dream of a free and united India. In the novel's last sentences; he explains that he and Fielding cannot be friends until India is free of the British Raj.

The strains on their relationship are external in nature, as Aziz and Fielding both suffer from the tendencies of their cultures. Aziz tends to let his imagination run away with him and to let suspicion harden into a grudge. Fielding suffers from an English literalism and rationalism that blind him to Aziz's true feelings and make Fielding too stilted to reach out to Aziz through conversations or letters. Furthermore, their respective Indian and English communities pull them apart through their mutual stereotyping. As we see at the end of the novel, even the landscape of India seems to oppress their friendship. Forster's final vision of the possibility of English-Indian friendship is a pessimistic one, yet it is qualified by the possibility of friendship on English soil, or after the liberation of India. As the landscape itself seems to imply at the end of the novel, such a friendship may be possible eventually, but "not yet."

This paper highlights the problematic relationship between the *coloniser* and the *colonised* in a colonial context as manifested in Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*. 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 colonisers who are all the same. Further, it deals with the image of the land as being hostile to the colonisers, fighting them and intensifying their feelings of alienation and exile.

The novel depicts colonisation as frustrating any chance of friendship between the English and the Indians under the coloniser/colonised status quo. Though it is in many ways a highly symbolic or

even mystical text, it also aims to be a realistic documentation of the attitudes of British colonial officials in India. Forster spends large sections of the novel characterizing different typical attitudes the English hold toward the Indians whom they control. Forster's satire is most harsh toward Englishwomen, whom the author depicts as overwhelmingly racist, self-righteous, and viciously condescending to the native population. Some of the Englishmen in the novel are as nasty as the women, but Forster more often identifies Englishmen as men who, though condescending and unable to relate to Indians on an individual level, are largely well-meaning and invested in their jobs. For all Forster's criticism of the British manner of governing India, however, he does not appear to question the right of the British Empire to rule India. He suggests that the British would be well served by becoming kinder and more sympathetic to the Indians with whom they live, but he does not suggest that the British should abandon India outright. Even this lesser critique is never overtly stated in the novel, but implied through biting satire.

The novel is an exploration of Anglo-Indian friendship. Forster pays great attention to the description of the two societies that are to be found in India, namely the natives, the Indians, and the new comers, the British, but also to way they interact and to the relationships they establish. Throughout the novel, the barriers of inter-racial friendship in a colonial context are explored thoroughly: *A Passage to India* is a classic example of how different cultures, when forced to intermix, misunderstand each other, and what consequences stem from those misunderstandings. Forster's novel deals with the failure of humans being able to communicate satisfactorily and their failure to eliminate prejudice, to establish relationships.

In the novel, Forster's emphasis on the racial differences received more importance than that on cultural differences. In Chandrapore the club is all-white. No Indians are allowed here. In response to Mrs. Moore's insistence Aziz retorts that no Indians are permitted to enjoy the show in the club. Even "Windows are barred, lest the servants should see their mem-sahibs acting"

(25). In fact, the colonizers never truly intend to interact with the colonized as they believe only in domination and submission, not in relation and this temperament turns the colonizer into a master, a slave driver, a prison guard, above all, a god. Hence, Ronny does not hesitate to say, "India likes gods. And Englishmen like posing as gods" (49). Again McBryde's "Why mix yourself up with pitch?" (168) and "the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not vice-versa" (213) are indicative of the colonizers' feeling of superiority and racial antagonism.

Though the bitterness of relationship reminds us of the political turmoil of colonial India the novel appears to be a study of characters, their tastes, attitudes, sentiment and way of thinking and it is not his crude consciousness of the time. In this connection Hemenway says, "Even though *A Passage to India* started certain waves which joined with the big currents of national freedom in India, there is little evidence that Forster intended this as a major goal of his novel" (Hemenway, 95). Forster himself disclaims the political motivations of the literary work. In an interview of 1962 Forster said, "The influence [political] was not intended; I was interested in the story and the characters. But I welcomed it" (Hemenway, 95).

Though Forster does not directly admit the complicity of politics with the text, a historicist probe can discover a strong foothold of political background, mostly the belligerence of relationship between the colonizers and the colonized on the basis of racial, religious, linguistic and above all, psychological wavering. Friendship that he has portrayed between Aziz and Fielding is not durable. It is rather full of limitations which stand between them and finally cause a breach. Mrs. Moore's affectionate attitude towards Aziz is soon disillusioned by her incapability of maintaining hegemonic prejudice. Adela's hysteria in the caves is the outcome of her rooted belief that the Orientals have no civilization, no history and no loyalty. Though these English women seem to embrace the heart of India, they pathetically fail because of the negative construction of the image of the subcontinent. In fact, they have helplessly

knocked at the shell of colonial image but in vain. They have also failed to match the acute colonial awareness of Ronny who knows that they are here only to rule, not to love. He believes only in exercising power, coercion and persuasion. Persuasion, despite widespread enforcement, is more effective than coercion.

The British always sought to supplement their control of the Indian empire through a web of hegemonic practices involving subtle strategies of cultural manipulation. Knowledge of Indian culture, ideology, ethnology, ethnography, anthropology and the geography of India helped the British colonizers to build up a powerful discourse. Very often books of science, fiction, technology and even the Bible were used as epistemological techniques for control. Books of literature also helped furnish the bourgeois epistemological knowledge for colonialists. They were used to exploit the people intellectually. They were also used to shape the style of thoughts of the colonized. Colonial literature mostly reflects the awareness of colonial machinery and encompasses cruelty and violence. The texts on literature misled natives by making them look for a utopia and not the real world of bourgeois evil practices. Colonial texts usually evaded the issue of contributing to the decadence and decay of native values and ignored the skepticism of the natives towards the colonial forces that were oppressing them. *A Passage to India* depicts both the deterioration and the formation of relationships between Anglo-Indians and natives.

Among the all factors, Religion is probably the most definitive factor in the way Indians lead their lives, particularly if they practice Hinduism and this is why the clash between Hinduism and Christianity in *A Passage to India* parallels the conflict between the Indians and the British. Hinduism is best represented in the novel by professor Godbole, and Christianity is epitomized in Mrs. Moore who comes to India with the kindness and understanding heart of a devout Christian but leaves morose and peevish. Perhaps she is haunted into this state by professor Godbole's strange song. It is this song that forces Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested into emotional

cocoons from which they only escape to meet horrible circumstances: Mrs. Moore is terrorized to the point of apathy and Mrs. Quested meets horror in caves. Another significant aspect is the enormous difference between the English colonial elite and the native population of India. One can see that the English treat the Indians with lack of respect and the Indians seem to expect it. Cultural misunderstanding is turned into a major theme in the novel. Differing 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 Muslim Indians, the English and the Hindu Indians, and between the Muslims and the Hindus.

Forster demonstrates how these repeated misunderstandings become hardened into cultural stereotypes and are often used to justify the uselessness of attempts to bridge the cultural gulfs. Forster ends his novel *A Passage to India* with the reconciliation of Aziz and Fielding. The final message of the novel is that though Aziz and Fielding want to be friends, historical circumstances prevent their friendship. Even if the final lines of the novel are pessimistic, Forster does leave open the possibility of a cross-cultural friendship between Fielding and Aziz at a certain moment in the future.

Forster's message has changed throughout the course of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, characters such as Fielding and Aziz are evidence of Forster's belief that with goodwill, intelligence and respect, all individuals can connect. But, in the final scenes, the natural landscape of India itself seems to rise up and divide Aziz and Fielding from each other. Forster suggests that though men may be well-intentioned, outside circumstances such as cultural difference and the interference of others can conspire to prevent their union.

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If you cannot do great things, do small things in a great way.

~ Napoleon Hill