

## **E.M. Forster's "A Passage to India": Colonialism and Cultural Misunderstanding**

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### **Abstract**

The dissertation entitled E.M Forster's "*A Passage to India*" portrays Colonialism and Cultural Misunderstanding. E.M Forster was an essayist and librettist. Forster focuses on the struggle for acceptance between men and woman, as well as the glorification- and criticism- of youth. Forster explores in his novels is the conflict of men and woman and their place in society. The novel deals in large parts with the political occupation of India by the British army and the concluding relations between the English and the native population. It is also about the two main characters, Fielding and Aziz, with all its obstacles. A Passage to India was selected as one of the hundred great works of Twentieth Century. The novel is based on Forster' experience in India. 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 ways. Colonialism in India is a harmful system for both the British and the Indians. Friendships like that between Indians and British are a rare exception, not the rule, and even such friendships are all but destroyed or thwarted by the problems and tensions of colonialism.

**Keywords :** Racism, Colonialism, Identity crisis, Cultural misunderstanding, Patriarchy, Imperialism, Ambivalence Hinduism

*A Passage to India* is an in depth- description of daily life in India under British rule. The British Raj lasted from 1858 to 1947. Thus the British saw their colonial rule over India as being for the Indian's own good. Forster shows how the colonial system makes the Indians hate and sometimes condescend to the British. It opens in an imaginary city of Chandrapore and other places were mentioned are also fictional. It is a town situated on the banks of the river gangs in north- eastern India. The famous Marabar caves, which are twenty miles away the city is "nothing extraordinary". "The very wood seems of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving. So abased, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye..."

(Forster3)

Chandrapore was never large or beautiful, but two hundred years ago it lay on the road between Upper India then imperial, and the sea, and the fine houses date from that period. It is primarily a "forest sparsely scattered with huts". The streets of the town are described as "mean", the temples are as "ineffective". The Indian soil is portrayed as "horrible" it is unpredictable, unreliable and treacherous.

Dr. Aziz an intelligent, emotional Indian doctor in Chandrapore. He was the central character in the novel. Aziz is a widower with three children. He is pleasant man, typically eager to please others. Unfortunately, he often acts hastily, without thinking through his actions carefully and the consequences are not what he expected.

A Muslim, Aziz is contemptuous of most Hindus, calling them "slack", because he disapproves of their careless view of time. Though he yearns to be friends with certain members of the British community, he like most of the other Indian

characters, resents the British colonial rule. The question that begins the novel, “Can an Indian be friends with an Englishman?” is one that puzzles Aziz for much of the novel.

The entry of Mrs Moore and Miss Adela quested from England to India changes the atmosphere of both the novel and at the same time the relationship between India and Britain in reality. Adela’s wish is to see the real India. Mrs Moore meets a young Moslem, by chance, on an evening walk by herself.

*A Passage to India* consist of three parts. Each part centres on a particular setting or location. “Mosque”, the first part, this part explained the central problem and setup: India is described like a muddle and there is a huge gap between the Indian people and the British occupants. Two sides of the divided city: In the Indian part “the streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest”. (Forster 31) On the other hand the English part of “Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is emphasized by the attitude of the English people towards the Indians. Natives are not allowed in the club, the Indians meet only themselves and vice versa. Attempts of getting together usually fail, as Forster shows with the Bridge party: the British hardly communicate with the Natives, and “bridges” are not built. Bridge party at collector Turton’s house is not a success.

The second part is “Caves”. It centres on the Marabar caves the site of Adela’ dramatic experience and the trial against Aziz. Adela seems to share the colonialist, racist attitude of her fiance Ronny. When he says, “(...) India isn’t a drawing room”.

“Your sentiments are those of a God”, she said quietly, but it was his sentiment annoyed her. (...) he said, “India likes Gods”. “And Englishman like posing as gods” (Forster 62.3)

Adela is also confused by the echo; she loses her sense of reality and imagines that Aziz insults her. He is then accused of raping her. The accusation destroy the friendly relationships that were beginning to build up before. The caves section shows that hostility, evil and negation triumph. There is frustration and alienation between the cultures. Adela realizes her mistake during the trial through the echo of the people chanting “Esmiss Esmoor” (Forster 228).

Mrs Moore is dead, Adela is hated and rejected by all, and Fielding is also cast out by the English community and misunderstood by the Indians. Aziz leaves Chandrapore and moves to Mau. The spirit and the echo of the caves brought misery to all, especially to the relationship between the cultures: “It is a shattering experience, calamitous to everyone: it destroys Mrs. Moore both spiritually and physically: it drives Adela to the brink of madness; it threatens ruin to Aziz, and actually alters his entire future; it imperils all relations between English and Indians; and it destroys all constructive relationships between individuals”. (White 56 f)

The cultures 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 that central theme of Forster’s *A Passage to India*, that the “East is East and the West is West and the two shall never meet”. (238), revealed the superior status of the colonizers and the inferior status of the colonized.

Aziz and Adela's embarrassment after the incidents in the caves showed inability of the colonizers to understand this far-off land. Forster also showed how this opacity acted as a block to the way to developing a meaningful understanding between the colonizers and colonized.

Dr Aziz is arrested and charged with making insulting advances to Miss. Quested in the Marabar caves. Fielding stands alone against his countrymen by stating his belief that Aziz is innocent. A trial ensues which is central to the novel's development of the cultural biases and conflicts that occur during the Raj. Later, during the trial, Adela overcomes the echo that has followed her from the caves and accepts her mistake. Aziz is released but he remains furious over the incident. The Caves incident leads to a rift between these characters and Aziz starts believing he has been cheated by Fielding and Adela.

Marabar caves and the myths born of them represent a unique side of the Indian culture and how keeps people within their respective compartments. The caves represent, metaphorically, the rising movement in India for independence. Aziz's journey throughout the caves, and his subsequent trial, represent the development of nationalist and pro- independence ideals among the populace of India. The caves also symbolize the cosmic forces that remain prominent throughout the novel till the end. The third part is set among the Hindu people in Mau during a religious festivals, two years after the other parts, emphasizing again the contrast between the cultures. The temple is the symbol of the Hindu Religion: it stands for reconciliation, regeneration and hope. During this part friendship is again established between the two individuals Fielding and Aziz, when everything between them is explained. Aziz finally forgives

Adela and realizes his mistakes of the last two years. The new relationships cancel the bad effects of the Marabar caves: but real friendship between the two cultures cannot be established, there is only reconciliation:

“Reconciliation, not real union; that is not possible on earth, whatever may be the truth about that universe of which earth is only an atom. The hundred voices of India say, “No, not yet”, and the sky says, “No, not there”. (White 62). This is Forster’s final view: the two cultures are not yet ready for real friendship. “India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to one another. God...is...love...god has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and he is omnipresent even in India to see how we are succeeding”. (Forster 42)

*A Passage to India* is a triumphant expression of the British imagination exploring India. The colonizers are portrayed with elevated features of education, tolerance, philosophy and manliness in contrast to the ignorance, muddle and informality of the natives. To Forster an educated Indian like Aziz is talkative, impractical and incapable of understanding practical matters.

Forster is sincere in depicting corrosive racial clashes. The factors which perpetuate colonialism have also come under scrutiny in various situations in the action of *A Passage to India*. India’s internal casteism and religious disparity lengthened the slavery to colonialism.

“In colonized and de- colonized India, casteism and disparity of wealth perpetuate colonialism”. The racial problem is seen as corrosive. Aziz is a good doctor but his bed room and the by- cycle that he rides, reveal his poverty stricken

life. On the other hand, the life of English rulers is depicted as political and privileged. Economic exploitations produces discontent among the Indians. Their long deposited discontent inspire the deprived to stand face to face with the rulers. It also gives an impetus to the self- determinism among the natives. This determination functioning in Aziz.

Colonialism took many countries in its grip under the disguise of Christianity. Exercise of such force gradually produces a kind of resistant that comes from Aziz, who imbued with the spirit of nationalism, snabs Fielding, “Down with the English anyway”. Aziz’s spirit of nationalism only allows space for a faint hope of social interaction between the Indians and the Europeans. The British and the Indians are based upon binary distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’.

As a British colony, India always remained a ‘far off’ land to British colonizers. Forster portrayed an India that was inaccessible in many respects. The Cave section brought positiveness in the context of India and a negative result to the British people. Because all the Indians were untied against the colonizer British people considering that this is nothing but racial politics or tactics or a calculated conspiracy to humiliate and insult the Indian people. Only for taking a revenge for not properly understanding India what actually it is.

The novel concludes with the argument about the future possibility of friendship when Aziz says to Fielding “We shall drives every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then. ..And then...you and I shall be friends. Why can’t we be friends now? It’s what I want. It’s what you want” (316).

Forster leaves the question unanswered as none of the men give a satisfying answer to the query.

“The earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which riders  
Must pass in single file, the temple, the tanks, the jail, the palace,  
The birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they  
Issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn’t want it, they  
Said hundred voices, “No, not yet”, and the sky said, “No, no there” (316)

This concluding paragraph seems to suggest that Aziz and Fielding can only be friends when India becomes a free country again, but it may also suggest that they can never be friends. Not only politics makes them unable to reconcile as friends; the entire universe prevent human relationship between the Indians and British. Field would have loved to keep his friend’s company but for Aziz , every moment with a British feels like a scorpion’s sting and even if he says he will forget everything, what British did on that unlucky day has changed him forever. Nothing is now the same in his life. Like you turn a bag inside out, he is feeling like the British have emptied his soul. The open ending is like an abrupt halt and the author indicates that India will have to set a new destination for itself. British rule is not its destiny. Chandrapore was a beginning of the drama that saw its end in Mau. Aziz has received the answers he wanted and now he cannot change what is his fate. He cannot turn back to be with his British friends and let the humiliation repeat even for a moment. His conscience would not allow him to step back and Fielding’s fate is now bound with Stella and British rule which is short lid in India. The ending of *A Passage to*



*India* looks abrupt but signifies a new beginning for both Indian and British characters.

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