

## Impact of Colonialism in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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### Abstract

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is a seminal novel that critiques British colonialism in India during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This article delves into the far-reaching impact of colonialism on the novel's themes, characters, and narrative structure. Through the characters of Dr. Aziz, Fielding, and Adela, the novel highlights the complexities of cultural exchange, the fragility of human relationships, and the distortions of colonial discourse. The analysis reveals how Forster's work continues to resonate with contemporary discussions on imperialism, cultural identity, and post colonialism offering valuable insights into the enduring legacy of colonialism.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, E.M. Forster, A Passage to India, Post colonialism, Imperialism, Cultural Identity.

1757 was the turning point when the East India Company led by Robert Clive defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah in the Battle of Plassey and gradually began expanding its domain

over the other parts of India. India remained a colony primarily under the British Raj for nearly 200 years. In this span of time the Indian society and culture got deeply impacted by the European or so as to say the Western culture. This impact incurred both negative and positive influences on the Indian people. An objective analysis and appreciation of these impacts will help one understand better the history of modern India. It gave impetus to many litterateurs to write on subjects throwing light on the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

At one place we have foreign writers writing in English like Ruskin Bond, William Dalrymple, Mark Tully, Patrick French, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, etc., and on the other hand we have writers of Indian origin like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Lal Behari Day, K.S. Venkatramani, K.A. Abbas, K. Nagarajan, etc., reflecting Indian feelings and sentiments.

The colonizer, of course, who is the oppressor, colonizes with the clear intent of exploiting the resources available with the colonized and to govern the habitants of the occupied lands forcibly. Naturally, governance on a foreign land by force will certainly lead to illegalities, atrocities and injustices inflicted against the natives by the rulers. The rulers therefore, by no stretch of imagination can claim of just and fair administration. This unfairness in administration eventually leads to struggle and revolt against the colonizers finally resulting in the freedom from the ruled. Almost three dozen countries in Asia and Africa gained independence from the colonizers after the II World War.

E.M. Foster (1879- 1970), a British by origin, in his masterpiece *A Passage to India* gives an absolutely fair and impartial account of the culture, life, events, circumstances and psyche of both the British in India and the Indians. During his literary career, which runs in almost half- a-century, Forster wrote sixteen books which include five novels, two volumes

of short stories, three biographies, a treatise on the novel, two volumes of critical essays, travel books and pamphlets. *A Passage to India*, which gives a kaleidoscopic account of India under the British rule, was conceived by him after the two trips he made to India. The first was in 1911 when he was accompanied by G. Lowes Dickinson who was his mentor at King's College. The second was in 1921, when he again went to India where he worked as Secretary to the *Maharaja* of Dewas State Senior. However, it was before this time that he had already started working on the script of *A Passage to India* which was eventually published in 1924. According to F.R. Leavis:

*A Passage to India*, all criticisms made, is a classic; not only a most significant document of our age, but a truly memorable work of literature . . . . In its touch upon racial and cultural problems, its treatment of personal relations and in prevailing ethos the book is an expression undeniably of the liberal tradition . . . . (47)

There are many writers who have handled the concept of colonialism in their works. It is customary to read Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as the first important major work to present imperialist tendencies with Prospero representing the colonizer and Caliban representing the colonized. Celebrated authors such as Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Joseph Conrad in the *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) wrote remarkably on the different aspects of colonialism. Forster too like the other eminent writers of his times was inspired by the prevailing trends like; imperialism, colonialism and orientalism. However he stands unique among his contemporaries both in the exploration of the new human connections in the diverse modern world and in its determination to avoid the privilege of one worldview over the other. Forster surpasses the writings of all his contemporaries in his analysis of the inter-racial relationships, his depiction of the very real burden of history and his belief in human growth. "The novel shows how the colonial encounter is mediated by the structures of power and knowledge that shape the relationship

between the colonizer and the colonized” (Parry 252). The novelist’s colonial consciousness pervades into the intricate web of relationships between the British colonizers and the Indian colonized. Set against the backdrop of the Indian freedom movement, *A Passage to India* describes the India of British days when the rulers or the colonizers regarded themselves as superior or the ruling Gods and had no intention to mingle with the Indians or the colonized people. In such a scenario, by way of this novel, Forster has attempted to provide a passage to India emphasizing upon the conflicts and the complexities arising out of the colonial rule in India: Forster has tried to keep himself neutral in the portrayal of the English and Indian characters in the novel. Apart from showing Indian people’s struggle with a hostile environment under the shadow of British rule, Forster has sympathetically observed the futile aspirations of a civilization struggling for freedom. He has made genuine efforts to penetrate into the Indian mind and psyche in order to bring out a contrast between the European culture and the Indian culture. Based on the Indo-English encounter, the novel thus presents the political, social and cultural profile of colonial India.

This research paper, therefore, aims to study the impact of colonialism on the characters, themes, and narrative structure of the novel, uncovering the ways in which Forster critiques the colonial enterprise. The impact of colonialism affected both the Indian and the English communities, and the paper, therefore, besides analyzing its impact on the Indian community also proposes to analyze its impact on the English community. Forster has captured many aspects of the Indian life under British rule especially the clash between the two cultures of England and India, between the West and the East and between the colonizer and the colonized. Benita Parry opines in support of the statement: “The book has a deep social and historical sense; the clash of cultures is firmly placed in the historical situation of a British Raj ruling a subject people at a particular point in time; cultural and political as well as spiritual matters are fully explored by the action . . .” (160). The central characters in the

novel; Dr. Aziz, Mrs. Moore, Professor Godbole, Fielding and Adela Quested embody the complexities of colonial relationships. They are divided on the basis of their race, nationality, religion, caste and creed. Racial and caste prejudices dominate projecting a wide gap between the psyche of the rulers and the ruled. One notices that there are big divisions even among the Indians based on religion, caste and community. The main theme of the novel i.e., the gulf between the different races, classes and creeds cannot be narrowed, is suggested in the opening chapter itself.

The two British women, Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore have been painted as liberal, kind and sympathetic who attempted to embark on “a passage to India” in order to understand India and its people. On their arrival here they meet a highly educated and cultured Muslim doctor, Dr. Aziz who is a friendly Indian and wanted to help the ladies who had come to India to see “the real India.” In his excitement, he offers to take them out to see the Marabar Caves. In the beginning itself, the novelist through his narrative suggests that the Marabar Caves are associated with something dark and mysterious: “They are dark caves. Even when they open towards the sun, very little light penetrates down the entrance tunnel into the circular chamber. There is little to see, and no eye to see it, until the visitor arrives for his five minutes, and strikes a match . . .” (124-25). The underlying tone of the novelist here makes the readers apprehensive of the visit to the caves. As suspected, the visit to the caves turns out to be nightmarish for both the parties, Indians as well as the English, The caves, a symbol of the unknowable and un-colonizable represent the limits of colonial power and the fragility of human understanding. Mrs. Moore who seemed to be bridging the gap between the English and the Indians, initially, undergoes a devastating change. The effect of the caves on her is of profound despair and collapse of will. She becomes indifferent to everything around her resulting in the inability to communicate with anyone not even with God. Terrified and defeated, she takes a journey back to England and dies on her way.

Adela too suffers a dreadful hallucination in the caves and rushes out, hysterically accusing Aziz, of trying to rape her. She loses the sense of right and wrong and evil overcomes her. Later, at the trial, when good sense prevails upon her, she withdraws her charge. This invites wrath of one and all and the enmity between the two races intensifies. Consequentially, her engagement with Ronny Heaslop breaks and she returns to England. Aziz, struck by fate, is arrested on the charge of raping Miss Adela Quested. There was no basis for this but the entire British community, except Fielding believed that he was guilty. Though Adela withdrew her charge and Aziz was declared innocent but this could not take away the untold misery and humiliation, he was subjected to during the trial scene. Dr. Aziz's trial, a pivotal moment in the novel, exposes the injustices of the colonial legal system and the dehumanizing gaze of the colonizer. After the trial Aziz becomes bitter towards the English and loses all hopes in the possibility of equal relationships between the Indians and Englishmen. He feels that Englishmen and Indians can only be friends when India becomes free. Fielding tries his best to support him during this crisis but Aziz's outburst reveals it all:

Clear out, all you Turtons and Burtons . . . Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmad will, Karim will. If it is fifty-five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea and then you and I shall be friends" (321).

Fielding is taken aback after witnessing the frenzy outbreak of Aziz. He too feels helpless and the bond between the two snaps. Thus the bond of friendship and understanding that is established between the two communities in the first section of the novel i.e., in the mosque cannot hold for long.

Fielding is the only Englishman whom Forster portrays as affectionate and balanced. Perhaps, the novelist expressed himself through Fielding, a man with no racial feelings who approached India and its natives without any bias or prejudice. The friendly relationship

between the two, i.e., an English man (who belongs to the ruling class) and an Indian Muslim (who stands for uncivilized barbarity) is a unique attempt of the novelist (who himself represents the imperialist class) towards bridging the gap between the two civilizations despite the fences and barriers that separate them.

Forster is one of the first writers to challenge the complacent imperial assumption of the British ruling class that ruled India for India's own good. He also breaks with the traditional hierarchy of the imperial relations that assumes that the colonized people offer nothing of value. In the present novel, he has shown the degrading effects of colonialism on the colonized. This emphasis on colonialism is a recurrent issue throughout Forster's work coupled with his ironic and often satirical portraits of the colonies which had emerged and, briefly, lived within. Forster outlines his case more clearly here:

For it is not that the English men can't feel – it is that he is afraid to feel. He has been taught at his public school that feeling is bad form. He must not express great joy or sorrow, or even to open his mouth too wide when he talks as his pipe might fall out if he did. He must bottle up his emotions, or let them out only on a very special occasion. (74)

Forster, with his liberal emphasis on education and individual psychology, approaches the critique of Anglo-Indian imperialism in terms of the predominance amongst the upper middle classes of the "public school attitude," the priggishness, snobbery, complacency, the lack of imagination and subtlety present in them.

The British who had established their empire in India as an imperialist were aware of their stature as the ruling class and hence they approached the colonized Indians with the same imperialistic attitude. Due to the prejudiced and biased attitude of the colonizers the Indians working under the English officials were continuously subjected to insults and harassments by their superiors. Hamidullah reveals that the city Magistrate insults him in the

court. Dr. Aziz is also fed up with his boss, the Civil Surgeon, who is not only arrogant but who takes pleasure in harassing him. Even his wife behaves very badly with Aziz. Aziz expresses his grievance in the following lines: “Major Callender interrupts me night after night from where I am dining with my friends and I go at once, breaking up a most pleasant entertainment, and he is not there and not even a message . . . Mrs. Callender takes my carriage and cuts me dead. . .” (21). The English club bars entry to the Indians. The British officials also take bribes and do not do the work. Mohammad Ali states: “When we poor blacks take bribes, we perform what we are bribed to perform, and the law discovers us in consequence. The English take and do nothing” (8). And it is not only the English bureaucrats who learned to take bribes, but the wives of these officers too accepted bribes. Mrs. Turton is one such woman. Throughout the novel, one comes across many such instances which reveal snobbery and high-headedness of the colonizers in their dealings with the colonized. Adela Quested, who wishes to see the real India, complains that she has seen nothing of India, but rather English Customs replicated abroad. The Anglo-Indians present at the Club laugh at her and Mrs. Callender, a British woman even says, “The kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die” (27). This statement is an expression of extreme hate that the English feel towards the Indian native, an inferior tribe to them.

The English, as a class have a feeling of the superiority of their race and culture. They consciously reject everything and everyone Indian. In the “Bridge Party” which is for bridging the gulf between the two races that Mr. Turton, the Collector of Chandrapore arranges, one can observe this English sense of superiority. This party proves a complete failure as it does not solve its purpose at all. This reflects on the fact that there can be no bridge or communication between the English and the Indians so long as the English persist in their blind arrogance. A narrow minded official explained the reason thus: “I have never

known anything but disaster result when English people and Indians attempt to be intimate socially. Intercourse, Yes. Courtesy by all means. Intimacy—never, never” (146).

The English officials in Chandrapore are extremely suspicious and distrustful of the Indians. They look down upon the Indians with contempt and disdain. They never bother to understand the Indians or the problems prevalent therein as they take them to be uncivilized and uneducated. When Fielding tries to break away from the Anglo-Indian on the issue of Aziz’s arrest, Mr. Bryde advises him: “We shall all have to hang together old man, I’m afraid . . . . But at a time like this there’s no room for well personal views. The man who doesn’t toe the line is lost (189- 90). In critical situations, this herd feeling changes into a mass hysteria as in the case of Adela’s experience in the caves. None of the members of the ruling class, with the exception of Fielding and Mrs. Moore has the least doubt that Aziz is guilty. The mass hysteria of the Anglo-Indians makes them shriek for revenge against the Indians for harming the innocent girl, Adela who has just arrived from England. Their collective concern in the trial is not just justice for Adela, but to subject the Indians to utmost humiliation and degradation. Forster has very well depicted this condition; how their mass hysteria can, on critical situations, lead them towards uncontrollable evil.

*A Passage to India* can also be studied on the basis of racial relationship. As such it exposes the evils of the British rule in India and the demoralizing effects it left on both the rulers and the ruled. Forster also poses the question of whether or not it is possible for an Indian and Englishman to be friends. The earlier part of the novel is concerned primarily with showing the relations between the colonizer and the colonized. But, in the very beginning of the novel it is revealed that Chandrapore is divided into two towns, the native station and the British civil station. The contrast between the two has been made explicit by Forster; the civil station, “shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky” (5).

The people are divided into separate classes on the basis of race, nationality, religion, caste and creed. Thus racial and caste prejudices dominate the scene. The society portrayed in the novel delineates the character of Dr. Aziz who mostly represents the Muslims and of Professor Godbole who represents the Hindus. The English are not represented by a single character but by a group of English characters. Prime among them is Ronny Heaslop, the character that exemplifies the ruling class of the nineteenth century British colonizers. He fulfills the characteristics of the administrative class. Quite conscious of the superiority of the English over the Indians, he hardly possesses a trace of humanity or sympathy for the Indians. Unlike him, though, Mrs. Moore and Fielding to some extent and Adela are the exceptions. Forster has depicted very impartially the racial problem, as it existed in the early part of the century.

However, Forster also refers in the novel that Indians are not free from vices either. While he is sympathetic towards the Indians, he does not spare them and paints their satirical portraiture which shows them as unreliable, suspicious and childish. They are defiant at one time and at another pathetically dependent on the British for their kindness. They are anxious to integrate themselves to British masters and yet they are also nervously defensive of their loyalty to their rulers. The implication that Indians rarely speak what they feel or vice-versa also perpetuates the image of the Indians, as unreliable and generally dishonest. Indians think collectively out of fear and hatred. Bhabha opines that “Forster’s portrayal of the Indian characters is marked by a orientalist sensibility, which reinforces the notion of Indian ‘otherness’ and perpetuates the colonialist gaze” (122). However, Forster has the insight to realize that the undignified behaviour of the Indians is the result of their humiliating subjection to the imperial rule.

In the novel, Forster also demonstrates that colonialism is not only a tragedy for the colonized but effects a change in the colonizer as well. Once they arrive in India, they seek to

make Britain in India, rather than accepting and glorifying the resident culture. As a class they become rude, arrogant and insensitive. Various characters in the novel constantly comment on these changes that occur to the British once they adjust to the imperialistic lifestyle. Hamidullah speaks to his friends, “Yes, they have no choice that is my point. They come out intending to be gentlemen and are told it will not do . . . . I give any Englishman two years . . . . And I give any English woman six months” (7). Miss Adela Quested also constantly worries about becoming this caricature of her former self and recognizes the changes in her husband to be, Ronny, as he transcends into the British ruling class lifestyle very soon.

The English in England have a different perspective about India and its people than the ones who arrive here. No sooner do they step here, they transit into the role of rigid and unforgiving rulers. Hamidullah suggests this when he says, “. . . the Reverend and Mrs. Bannister, whose goodness to me in England I shall never forget or describe” (8). Thus, the newly arrived colonizer is expected to transform himself into an imperialist ruler. Acceptance of this role of a colonizer is necessary in the colonized country and those who do not accept it find themselves outcasts of the society they reject. This can be illustrated with the examples of Fielding and Adela. Fielding, the Principal of Government College in Chandrapore, refuses to take on the role of a colonizer and even turns to the colonized for support. He remains unaware of the inner workings of the imperial structure. This makes him more likely to believe that relationship across cultural boundaries can be constructed. He is more open-minded than the seasoned Anglo-Indian or the young Englishman coming to India for the first time. He has not been schooled in proper imperial behaviour, and thus better equipped to question it when he does come across into contact with it. He always connects with the Indians. He has no qualms about speaking to them or visiting them in their homes. Fielding also realizes the truth that the real India lays not in the British imperial scope, but the Indians

themselves. When Aziz is accused of an assault on Adela, Fielding is the first to come to his aid, forsaking his own people. He declares, “I believe Dr. Aziz to be innocent . . . If he is guilty I resign from my service and leave India. I resign from the club now” (210). The result of this is that he is immediately denounced by his own people.

Adela Quested is also one such character in the novel who is troubled by this conventionalized role of a colonizer. She comes to India to see its wonders and to connect with the people. She does not wish to be a part of the society that Ronny is fond of and is reluctant to take upon herself the role of the British archetype. But, when Adela refuses to pursue charges against Aziz then she realizes her folly in accusing him of attempted molestation, and it leaves her ostracized. Those who were once her greatest supporters, now become her most vehement enemies. Ronny leaves her and she returns back to England realizing the consequences of not accepting the mark of a colonizer: “And Adela – she would have to depart too; he [Ronny] hoped she would have made the suggestion herself ere now. He really could not marry her – it would mean the end of her career. Poor lamentable Adela, . . .” (286 – 287).

Thus, *A Passage to India* presents a picture of the colonized India. Forster, very impartially, has discovered the impact of colonialism. He does not flatter the Englishmen nor aim at pleasing the Indians. Said evaluates the statement thus, “The novel’s helplessness neither goes all the way and condemns (or defends) British colonialism, nor condemns or defends Indian nationalism” (245). E.M. Forster gives images and accounts of the brutality and callousness of the British administrators. He also delineates the problems arising out of the contact of east with the west in which racial prejudice is the main cause. It is significant; nonetheless, that Forster addresses the possibility for genuine sympathy between individuals of such different cultural backgrounds. While other writers examine sympathetic relationships between genders or classes, Forster uses the novel form to explore the

possibilities and limitations of sympathy in a much larger context. However, Forster does not question the right of the British to be in India. His main criticism of the British rule is that it is an order of force and will, not of love and understanding. He aims at no solution, and offers no explanation. He merely records with sincerity and insight the portraiture of the English and the Indians in the colonized India. Moreover, through his portrayals of different colonizers, one can see that the impact of colonialism had been on not only the colonized, but also the colonizer, showing that no one is immune. Thus, after the analyses, one can conclude that this paper has demonstrated Forster's nuanced portrayal of the colonial encounter and the novel taken for study here remains a vital work in understanding the enduring legacy of colonialism.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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