

The Colonial Discourse in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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Abstract

This paper differs from the work of scholars who misinterpret E. M. Forster's political novel *A Passage to India* as a story emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural friendship between English characters and Indians. While some overlook the fact that Forster employs this intimacy to justify English imperial practices in India, this paper argues otherwise. Throughout his novel, Forster does not imply that the British occupiers do not have the right to rule India or that Indians are equal to the British. On the contrary, he depicts Indians as an inferior race incapable of self-governance, thereby justifying the presence of English colonizers in India. English characters are portrayed as superior citizens, and those who communicate with Indians are at risk of punishment for sedition and anti-patriotism. The Indian mutiny in the novel symbolizes the need for India's liberation and the end of British oppression.

Keywords: Novel, India, Colonial Discourse, Oppression.

A Passage to India by E. M. Forster is set in the city of Chandrapore, India, and it describes life in India in the beginnings of the twentieth century, only few decades before the end of the British colonial rule in India in 1947. The novel describes the poverty of Indians in contrast to the luxurious life of the British occupiers; however, Forster never suggests throughout his novel that the English colonizers have no right to rule India (Bailey, 2002). misinterprets the novel by pointing out that the story represents "a critique of colonial practice that details the 'human cost' of economically exploitative power formations". Nowhere in the novel Forster criticizes the English colonial practices in India or indicates that the Indians are equal to the English people. Scholars like Amardeep (Singh, 2007) focus on Forster's references to Islam and Islamic culture, "Forster is attracted to Islamic space not merely as a form of knowledge, but as an intense structure of feeling that is always partly an expression of his personal attraction to men like Masood". While critics like (Twidle, 2013) may suggest that the novel can be "read as a reflection on the possibility of friendship across cultures, or a broader allegory on Anglo-Indian relations during the final phase of British rule", others like (Sainsbury, 2009) claim that "friendship between Indian and English men is impossible mostly because Englishwomen prevent it". This paper explains that Forster suggests throughout his novel that the British colonizers can justify their colonial discourse and rule in India through establishing friendship with the Indian people.

The novel begins with describing the miserable life of Indians who live in the lower tier of the city of Chandrapore that is placed on the banks of the Ganges River. The place where the Indians live is described as following:

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. 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 ... Houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life (13) .

The poverty of the native Indians in Chandrapore represents the oppression that Indians suffer from at the hands of the British colonialists who treat the natives as less than human. This reminds us with “Britain’s economic, political and social exploitation of its colonies” (Morse, 2011) and the fact that the English Empire was invading other countries to rob them of their resources. No doubt Britain was looking to expand its colonies and exploit the natives rather than bringing civilization to the poor countries as some may claim (Goodlad, 2006) points out that “Britain’s geopolitical expansion was fueled by developmental hierarchies in which so-called backward peoples were figured as children – in need of care”. Therefore, the British occupiers consider their presence in India necessary for humanitarian purposes because the natives cannot govern themselves.

Forster’s narrator gives a description of the place where the British occupiers live in the upper tier in Chandrapore that is completely different from the place of the natives. The narrator says:

Inland, the prospect alters. There is an oval Maidan and a long sallow hospital. Houses belonging to Furasians stand on the high ground by the railway station. Beyond the railway – which runs parallel to the river – the land sinks, then rises again steeply. On the second rise is laid out the little civil station and viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical pleasance washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and peepul that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and, in their turn, hide the bazaars (13).

The two different images of the upper and lower tier in Chandrapore expose the hypocrisy of the English occupiers who claim that they aim to civilize the underdeveloped countries while in fact they exploit the natives. Furthermore, the separation of races suggests that the British viewed themselves as saviors who are superior to Indians (Kuchta, 2003) argues that Forster attempts to create a space between the Indians and British, “for what Forster seeks above all is a space in which Indians and Britons can engage one another without the psycho-social baggage that gives the colonizer delusions of grandeur and the colonized an inferiority complex”. However, the tension between British characters and Indians in the novel increases partly because of the harsh treatment of Indians and the stereotypical images of the British about the Indians as savages and uneducated .

Forster portrays India under British imperialism based on his two visits to India in 1912 and 1921 as well as the information that he got from his Indian friend Syed Ross Masood. During that time, Indians were looking for liberation from the British oppression that they suffered from since 1858. In a 1959 lecture, Forster speaks of the tension between the Indians and the British during his first visit to India, “I did not go [to India] to govern it or to make money or to improve

people. I went there to see a friend.... The tension between the Indians and the British was increasing.... The sense of racial tension, of incompatibility, never left me. It was not a tourist's outing, and the impression it left was deep." Even though Forster criticizes the mistreatment of the Indians at the hands of British imperialists, he never criticizes the British imperial enterprise in India. Furthermore, when Forster states that he was not looking "to make money" from his visit to India, he announces in his correspondence with Masood in November 1924 just after the publication of *A Passage to India* that the novel brought him "money and celebrity". Forster (Forster, et al., 1984) writes to Masood, "I expect you are sick of 'our' book but must tell you that the sales in America alone are close to 20,000. Well, dearest fellow, my intimacy with you has brought me money and celebrity." The fact that the time that Forster spent in colonial India was profitable to him leads to question the purpose behind the presence of English occupiers in India who were looking to make profit by stealing the resources of the country .

Forster presents colonial India as a country made of British institutions that control the economy and politics of India. Adela Quested, an Englishwoman who arrived recently in India, along with Mrs. Moore, the mother of the city Magistrate Ronny Heaslop, expresses her desire to see "the real India" (28) and that "implies her awareness that she sees a British India created by the white powers" (Davidis, 2000-1999). Cyril Fielding, the teacher at the Government College, suggests to Adela that the best way to see "the real India" is to "try seeing Indians" (30). Here, it would be important to note that the Indians, who are viewed by the Anglo-Indians as an inferior race, were not allowed into the Chandrapore club that was only visited by British people to discuss national issues. Historically speaking, (Castle, 1993) argues that the Indians viewed the British as heroes and saviors who had humanitarian causes in India, "Oxford Survey of the British Empire published in 1914... admitted that a concentration on the 'heroism of the British' meant that a study of the incident [the Mutiny] 'added to rather than diminished British prestige'". The inferiority of the Indians can be seen the novel through the attempt of Indian characters to please the Anglo-Indians despite the poor treatment even of Indian intellectuals .

Said (1994) is overly critical of Forster's novel when he says: "Forster's India is so affectionately personal and so remorselessly metaphysical that his view of Indians as a nation contending for sovereignty with Britain is not politically very serious, or even respectful". Forster never addresses the issue of imperialism seriously in his novel, but rather suggests that the imperial project would be more successful if the English bridge the gap with the Indians and treat them respectfully. Said (1978) also argues that Forster never takes the side of the oppressed and that the novel leaves the readers "with a sense of the pathetic distance still separating 'us' from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West". Forster never discusses the social and political inequities faced by the Indians at the hands of the British occupiers or shows sympathy toward the oppressed Indians. On the contrary, Forster is supporting the English rule in India expressed in the question of Fielding to the Indian doctor Aziz, "who do you want instead of the English? The Japanese?" (297). This question was a reply to the hope of independence revealed by the speech of Aziz, "until England is in difficulties, we remain silent, but in the next European War – aha aha! Then is our time!" (297). Fielding, who is reflecting the viewpoint of Forster, implies that no other nation would rule India better than the English people .

The bridge party that was arranged by Mr. Turton, the governor of Chandrapore, with the hope of making Adela see the "real India" represents "an attempt to bridge the gulf between East and West" (31). However, this multicultural meeting proves to be a failure because of the arrogance and insolence of British occupiers and the fact that Indians are not treated properly at

the party. Tayeb (2004) comments, “the endeavor to approach and communicate with the colonized is represented from the outset as an aberration”. Tayeb explains the reasons of the failure of this cross-cultural friendship ,

This presumptive superiority is what invalidates the establishment of a hybrid friendship and forbids the settler to overstep the boundaries of the colonial self-sequestered herd. Those who dare contravene these colonial norms must, on the one hand, undergo the volatility and unpredictability of such a cross-cultural approach, and accommodate the quailing responses of the colonized. On the other hand, they endure most of their countrymen’s grudges and acrimony, as well as the slur of disloyalty(46) .

Cross-cultural friendship is avoided in India and those who break the norms need to suffer from rejection and accusations of “disloyalty.” Mrs. Callendar, the wife of the civil surgeon at Chandrapore, boasts that “the kindest thing one can due to a native is to let him die” (30), and this could be a result of her feeling of superiority. Mrs. Turton discourages Adela and Mrs. Moore from approaching Indian women when she says: “You’re superior to everyone in India” (43). In general, Englishwomen are described as “haughty and venal” (18) that live in their comfortable bungalows and play essential part in the imperial enterprise in India. When Mrs. Moore starts to worry that Indians are not treated properly, Ronny replies, “there you go again, mother I really cannot explain everything. I do not want Adela to be worried, that is the fact; she will begin wondering whether we treat the natives properly and all that sort of nonsense” (37). The fact that Ronny calls the treatment of Indians properly “nonsense” explains how the imperial rule distorts human relations. Ronny is aware that the English are not in India to make friendship with Indians, but rather to take the resources of the country .

The description of India as “muddle” (68) in the novel makes the friendship between East and West impossible. Singh (2007) defines the word “muddle” as “the opposite of ‘knowing where one stand’s” and this would be a result of the diverse cultures, races and religious groups that occupy India. Crossing these cultural and racial boundaries along with the existence of colonialism in India sounds to be impossible. Furthermore, the “muddle” of India could be the reason that changes British characters into haughty, indifferent, and impolite. Ronny represents an example of a character that life in India changes him and makes Adela end her engagement to him ,

India had developed sides of his character that she [Adela] had never admired. His self-complacency, his censoriousness, his lack of subtlety, all grew vivid beneath a tropic sky; he seemed more indifferent than of old to what was passing in the minds of his fellows, more certain that he was right about them or that if he was wrong it did not matter(78) .

The indifference of Ronny and his feeling that the Indians are enemies transforms him into a violent and vicious character. When Aziz asks Fielding, “How is England justified in holding India?” (106), Fielding replies, “I am out here personally because I needed a job. I cannot tell you why England is here or whether she ought to be here. It is beyond me” (106). This presents English characters like Fielding as victims of the imperial enterprise in India who were ignorant of the evil practices of England overseas. In a moment of openness and honesty, Fielding says to Aziz, “England holds India for her good” (106) revealing the real purpose behind the invasion of the English Empire to India. This exposes the hypocrisy of Ronny who announces at a certain point that “We’re [the English] out here to do justice and keep the peace” (51). Therefore, the reason behind expanding the colonies of the English Empire was economic through stealing the resources of weak countries doing justice and keeping peace as Ronny claims .

The naivety of Indian characters like Aziz increases the racial hatred between Indians and English community through his attempt to please the two English women, Adela and Mrs. Moore, the new arrivals in India, through inviting them to the Marabar Caves. The two women are devastated by their experience in the Caves that leads Adela to falsely accuse Aziz of attempting to rape her. Adela recounts what happened with her in the Caves and the frightening echo that made her assume that Aziz tried to assault her sexually,

I remember scratching the wall with my fingernail, to start the usual echo and then as I was saying there was this shadow, or sort of shadow, down the entrance tunnel, bottling me up. It seemed like an age, but I suppose the whole thing cannot have lasted thirty seconds really. I hit him with the glasses, he pulled me round the cave with the strap, it broke, I escaped and that is all. He never actually touched me once. It all seems such nonsense(181) .

It would be important to note here that before pronouncing Aziz innocent, getting at the truth was not what the English community was looking for. This can be seen when Ronny sends his mother home, the only witness in the case, so she does not testify, while at the same time, the Anglo-Indians “demanding holocausts of natives” (182). Furthermore, Fielding regrets taking the side of Indians against his people because of his fear being accused of disloyalty and sedition. At this stage, Forster, who seems to be advocate of the English imperial project in India, never suggests that his people are the reasons of evil and racial hatred and that they should depart India .

The first encounter of Adela and Mrs. Moore with the “muddle” of India happens in the Marabar Caves that are described as dark and gloomy. Sainsbury (2009) describes the Marabar Caves, “this cave-womb, this primal India, is beyond history, beyond morality, beyond comprehension, and cannot be controlled by human means, whether spiritual, moral, or historical”.

The darkness of the Caves creates a sense of confusion that widens the gap between East and West (Bhabha, 1994) argues that “cultural difference, as Adela experienced it, in the nonsense of the Marabar Caves, is not the acquisition or accumulation of additional cultural knowledge; it is the momentous, if momentary, extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed

artifice of its signification, at the edge of experience”. This implies that nothing results but a disaster when people attempt to cross the cultural boundaries of their communities. This can be seen in Forster’s novel through the characters of Adela and Mrs. Moore once they experience the cultural difference in the Marabar Caves and results in the racial prejudice and hatred caused by the stereotypical image about the Indians as sexually voracious. Forster concludes his novel by blaming politics that interferes to spoil the cross-cultural friendship between the British community and Indians. The natural voices in India refuse the immediate friendship with English people and suggest that it can be possible after independence ,

The horses didn’t want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file; the temples, the tank, 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 in their hundred voices, ‘No, not yet,’ and the sky said, ‘No, not there(298) .’

Forster criticizes the cruelty of the Anglo-Indians, but never condemns the English imperial enterprise or calls for the Independence of India. The English characters as Forster describes them remain the privileged superior citizens who contempt and disrespect the natives .

In conclusion, the English occupiers do not care about bringing peace or order to colonial India, but rather to take the resources of the land by force. Forster suggests that mistreating the Indians may lead to resistance and rebellion and implies that the English community may receive support through making friendship with the Indians. The novel does not represent a criticism of the British colonial practices, but rather a disapproval of the manner of governing India. Forster is supporter of the imperial enterprise in India and suggests a more successful way to govern India through making cross-cultural friendship with Indians. The failure of the multicultural gathering in the novel may reflect not only the dissatisfaction of Indians with the imperial practices but rather hope for independence and freedom .

Conflicts of interest statements

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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