



Friendship and Conflict in the Times of Colonialism: A Study of *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster

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Abstract: *A Passage to India* by E.M Forster is a literary work which portrays an unusual friendship between the colonisers and the colonised people in India, during the colonial era. This inappropriate camaraderie became a source of controversy in the novel's subsequent reception. This research paper examines the complex dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised against the background of the India under British dominion, as portrayed in E.M. Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*. It examines the portrayal of orientalism stereotypes associated with colonial subjects and the systematic process of indoctrination aimed at creating uniformity. Additionally, this research paper also delves into the depiction of the hostile land that exacerbates the colonists' sense of alienation and displacement. Drawing upon Albert Memmi's work, *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, as well as insights from other cultural philosophers, the article offers an analysis of these themes. It is hoped that this paper will encourage further exploration of Forster's novels, particularly *A Passage to India*, and their exploration of the challenging issues surrounding identity formation, race relations, and the complexities of colonial discourse in hybrid contexts.

Keywords : *Colonialism, Friendship, Native, Coloniser, Colonised, Anglo-Indian.*

Introduction : E.M Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*, has been extensively discussed, particularly regarding its portrayal of the socio-psychological challenges faced by Anglo-Indians during the British Raj. A post-colonial perspective sheds light on Forster's precise depiction of this dilemma. By closely examining Forster's portrayal of India, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological struggle experienced by Anglo-Indians who yearn to consider India their home. This paper aims to highlight the process of colonial 'formatting', which refers to the creation of a coloniser and the demonization of the colonised, a necessary step for Anglo-Indians to be accepted within the colonial community. Additionally, we will explore moments when Forster keenly sensed the 'gulf' separating him from the Indians. Moreover, the focus will be on the issue of race relations. Such an analysis is crucial for unravelling the profound thematic

significance of the literary text and appreciating the complexities of identity formation and colonial discourse. Given the resurgence of the colonial era, emphasising the traumatic effects of colonisation becomes even more vital.

A Passage to India depicts colonisation as an obstacle that frustrates any possibility of friendship between the English and the Indians within the prevailing coloniser/colonised paradigm. Forster emphasises the process of 'formatting' that newcomers must undergo, aligning their ideologies and practices with those of other colonial settlers. Clare Brandabur notes that *A Passage to India* attempts to address the destructive impact of colonial imperialism on personal relationships, stemming from racist assumptions and psychopathology (Brandabur 1993). Jan Mohamed argues that the novel strives to transcend the barriers of racial difference (Childs 348). However, Nirad Chaudhuri criticises it for reducing political history to the liberal concerns of personal relationships (Childs 347).

Furthermore, Bhupal Singh regards the novel as a skillful portrayal of Englishmen in India, offering a nuanced portrayal of the Indian mindset, particularly the Muslim perspective, and delving into the complexities arising from India's encounter with the West (Singh 221). Conversely, Nihal Singh sees the novel as a depiction of how the British in India despise and ostracise Indians, while Indians, in turn, mistrust and misjudge the British (Childs 347). Additionally, Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests that Forster's theme revolves around relationships and communication between individuals of different races (Mukherjee 86). Diane Johnson highlights one of the novel's themes as the lack of understanding between people from different cultures (Johnson 2000).

Forster himself explained his intentions in writing the novel in a letter to Syed Masood on September 27, 1922. He stated that he initially conceived the book as a bridge of sympathy between East and West but abandoned this idea as it seemed too comfortable and incompatible with his sense of truth. He candidly expresses that he considers most Indians, like most English people, to be unpleasant, and he is uninterested in whether they sympathise with one another or not (Forster 1985:15). *A Passage to India* has generally received positive reception and is regarded as a significant work. In fact, an anonymous Indian writer, identified as 'A.S.B.' in 1928, expressed how they saw themselves reflected in the mind of an English author for the first time without losing their humanity (Forster 1985:22).

The novel *A Passage to India* commences by portraying the vibrant Indian bazaars and drawing juxtaposition with the English settlement of Chandrapore. While the town's general outline remains persistent, fluctuating in size like an indomitable but modest life form, Chandrapore stands out as a city adorned with gardens, resembling more of a forest with scattered huts. Its allure is amplified by its tropical surroundings and the presence of a majestic river. The roads within Chandrapore, named after triumphant generals and intersecting at right angles, symbolise the encompassing grasp of Great Britain over India. The

author, Forster, conveys his disapproval of British colonisation by employing the term "net," implying the oppressive nature of their dominion.

In Forster's depiction, India itself exhibits hostility towards foreigners, launching fierce attacks on its colonisers in an attempt to expel them. Despite the British endeavour to "tame" the country, India remains untamed and untameable. The destiny of the English mirrors that of their predecessors, who also arrived in India with the intention to reshape it but eventually became integrated into its fabric, enveloped by its essence. The narrator contemplates the enigma of comprehending such a land, acknowledging the generations of invaders who have failed and finding themselves exiled. The constructed towns they establish merely serve as havens, while their conflicts reflect the unrest of individuals unable to find their true home. India recognizes their turmoil and extends a beckoning call through a myriad of expressions, both trivial and grand. However, the destination of this invitation remains undefined. India does not offer a promise but rather an ongoing plea.

India adamantly denies providing a sense of belonging to its colonisers, leaving them in a perpetual state of "exile." This absence of belonging is reflected in the houses they construct, which serve as mere retreats, allowing them to shelter from the relentless hostility of the land. The Marabar Caves epitomise this duality of promise and appeal. When observed from a distance, Fielding perceives them as "beautiful." However, a closer examination reveals only lifeless granite on either side, devoid of any movement. The closeness of the sky feels unnaturally oppressive. The caves resemble clenched fists and fingers, exposing their inherent hostility. India ensures that no coloniser can lay claim to it as their true home. Thus, when the Anglo-Indians gaze upon the cactus-laden horizon, they realise they are thousands of miles away from any scenery they can comprehend.

India, along with its creatures, resists being reshaped, labeled, or confined within frameworks. Everything within India eludes identification, as merely posing a question causes it to vanish or blend seamlessly into something else. Adela and Ronny's encounter with a bird at the Club highlights this elusiveness. They yearn to categorise and label it, seeking solace in such an act. However, India denies them this gratification, remaining elusive and unclassifiable. Similarly, Adela's desire to experience authentic India is left unfulfilled, while attempts to identify the animal that collided with the Nawab's car end in failure. The road bears the imprints of numerous objects, rendering any individual track indecipherable. The torchlight accentuates the contrasts of light and shadow, further obscuring their ability to interpret the revealed traces. It is as if India conspires with the earth and light to shroud these tracks in obscurity.

To the Sahibs, India stands in stark contrast to Europe. In Europe, life retreats from the cold, giving rise to exquisite fireside myths. In India, however, the retreat is from the scorching source of life, the treacherous sun, devoid of any poetic adornment, for disillusionment does not possess beauty. Ronny acknowledges that India revolves solely around its weather, which he identifies as the beginning and end of their entire affair.

India's hostility toward its colonisers manifests in the relentless heat that becomes problematic for the English. The sun relentlessly bears down on their backs, pursuing them with searing blasts of hot air. The sweltering weather assumes a monstrous quality, leading Lady Mellanby to label India as a scorching frying-pan.

The contrast between India and other locations in the novel, such as Egypt and Venice, emphasises India's hostility. Egypt is portrayed as warm and affectionate, depicted as a charming and inviting place. This romantic portrayal of Egypt can be attributed to the Elizabethan era, where it was often depicted as a land of sexual promise and the embodiment of the charms of the East in plays like Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Fielding, while in Alexandria, feels the difference between India and Egypt. He compares the bright blue sky, constant wind, and clean coastline of Egypt to the intricacies of Bombay. Egypt welcomes the West despite being geographically located in the East, symbolised by the statue of Lesseps that turns both to the East and the West. This welcoming nature of Egypt is further emphasised when the ghost of Mrs. Moore is "shaken off" the ship as it enters the Suez. Venice, too, stands in stark contrast to India's hostility. The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, are described as being in the right place, while in India everything seems to be placed wrong. Fielding reflects on the beauty of form in Venice and questions how there can be beauty without form, implying that India lacks aesthetic appeal.

Furthermore, India rejects friendship between natives and colonists. The arrival of Ronny during Fielding's tea-party disrupts the friendly atmosphere, with irritation seemingly emanating from the soil. The sky also expresses its objection to the presence of colonisers by turning "angry orange." In the novel's final scene, Aziz informs Fielding that their friendship is only possible once the British leave India. This scene reveals India's rejection of such a friendship under the current coloniser/colonised dynamic.

In *A Passage to India*, Forster acknowledges the necessity of India's independence before genuine friendship can be established and recognizes the problematic issues associated with the effort to free India. The novel begins with characters discussing the impossibility of being friends with an Englishman in India, and it concludes with Fielding and Aziz parting ways due to the infeasibility of such a friendship under British occupation. The novel comes full circle, highlighting the cultural differences, stereotyping, and colonisation that hinder the possibility of genuine friendship between the English and the Indians.

As Albert Memmi succinctly writes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, "The colonial situation manufactures colonialists, just as it manufactures the colonised." (Memmi 56-57) Anglo-Indians, the experienced colonisers, impose their stereotypes of the natives on newcomers. These colonists arrive from England intending to be gentlemen but are told that it is unacceptable. As a result, they all become the same, neither worse nor better. The colonisers in India became consciously English, shedding their unconscious Englishness. The colony's powerful discourse generates individuals who conform to the same ideologies and

practices. Ronny Heaslop, having undergone this process of assimilation, becomes a supporter and defender of colonial privileges. Enjoying the preference and respect granted by the colonised, he fights to maintain his privileges and aligns himself with the colonialists. He defends the British presence in India, despite recognizing its illegitimacy, in order to protect his position and gain acceptance in the colony.

Ronny's transformation is evident in his response to Aziz's interaction with Mrs. Moore in the mosque. He fully embraces his role as a coloniser, utilising phrases and arguments learned from senior officials to justify the British presence in India. He resists any challenge to his privileges, even if it means going against his own mother. Adela and Mrs. Moore also observe the change in Ronny, noting his self-complacency, censoriousness, and lack of subtlety. The colony moulds the personality of the coloniser, influencing even their aesthetic appreciation. In contrast to Ronny, Fielding stands out by showing sympathy towards the Indians and actively engaging with them, but he is seen as different from "us" and doesn't fit the typical mould. Fielding, having recognized the economic, political, and moral scandal of colonisation, refuses to become what his fellow citizens have become. He decides to remain in India, vowing not to accept colonisation (Memmi 19-22). Mr. Turton, therefore, sarcastically remarks that India does wonders for Fielding's judgement, especially during the Hot Weather (49). Fielding, rejecting colonisation, becomes the voice of Mr. Forster, according to Bhupal Singh (Singh 229).

Fielding faces opposition because he refuses to conform or be 'formatted.' He initially appears trustworthy until he expresses his ideas. The narrator in Forster's work warns about the dangers of intellectualism in India, stating that anyone who promotes it will face consequences (80). Fielding realises the complexity and animosity he encounters due to his sympathy towards the Indians. He regrets taking sides and desires to move through India without being labeled. However, he is labeled as "anti-British" and "seditious," terms that bore him and reduce his worth (183). He worries about the process of labeling, as it affects how people perceive one another (Sarup 14).

Fielding's individualism disrupts the social order, as ideas challenge the caste system. His belief that people should strive to connect with one another through goodwill, culture, and intelligence clashes with the prevailing mindset in Chandrapore (p.80). Consequently, he feels a widening gap between himself and his countrymen (p.79) because he refuses to conform to their standards and ideologies. Anglo-Indians attempt to shape him to be like them, but he resists, having embraced his creed before it was too late. Fielding lacks racial prejudices because he grew up in an environment where herd mentality doesn't thrive (80). However, this herd instinct becomes apparent when Fielding aligns himself with the Indians in Aziz's case against the English. The Collector warns him that he cannot simultaneously support opposing sides in India (194). McBryde is surprised that Fielding does not join in the racial prejudices following the alleged rape of Adela. He cautions Fielding that personal views are not tolerated, and those who do not conform are ostracised (175, 180).

According to Albert Memmi, in the colonies, humanitarian romanticism is considered a serious illness and viewed as the worst danger. A coloniser who exhibits this "illness" is seen as a traitor, facing resentment from friends, threats from superiors, and even opposition from their own spouse (Memmi 19-22). Anglo-Indians suspect Fielding of being a "Japanese spy" and hold him responsible for the Muharram troubles. Furthermore, Fielding's attitude towards the Indians changes after marrying Stella. He questions whether he can defy his own people for the sake of an Indian again (313). Ronny also writes him a letter, welcoming his alignment with the oppressors of India to some extent, stating the need for all the support they can get (302).

Although suffering from "humanitarian romanticism," a coloniser who refuses colonisation cannot help but judge the colonised and their civilization. They acknowledge the underdevelopment, changeable customs, and outdated culture, which establishes a fundamental difference between them and the colonised (Memmi 22-25). Fielding, for instance, expresses his happiness and trust in the Indians but cannot escape his inherent sense of racial superiority. He remains aware of this "fundamental difference." Fielding perceives a barrier between himself and his Indian friends when he sends them picture postcards from Venice. He believes they would not appreciate the joys he experiences, such as appreciation for form, and sees this as a significant barrier (278). Additionally, when his Indian friends express concern about his name dying out without children, he feels his indifference further alienates him because it's something the Orientals cannot understand (130). Furthermore, as Fielding aligns himself with Indians, he becomes aware of the profound gulf that separates him from them (181-82).

Fielding recognizes the differences between himself and the Indians on several occasions. Aziz's comment about Adela's physical appearance makes Fielding uncomfortable, as it represents sensuality foreign to his own emotions, creating a barrier between them (242). He also objects to Aziz's proverbs, which differ from British ones and signify another barrier (170). Like Fielding, Forster also acknowledges this racial tension and incompatibility, which remains ever-present (Forster 1985:11). This does not highlight that no matter how hybridity blurs racial boundaries, they are ultimately emphasised because natives cannot escape their origins, nor can white individuals escape their white heritage.

Conclusion : *A Passage to India* by E.M. Foster is a novel that challenges the notion that friendship can exist between the English and the Indians within a coloniser/colonised dynamic. The novel clearly portrays Fielding's criticism of British imperialist colonisers, highlighting their racism and the fear on which their regime is built. The novel emphasises that due to the inequalities and racism inherent in colonisation, any attempts at friendship between Aziz and Fielding are frustrated. The barriers that exist between them cannot be easily overcome, preventing the achievement of genuine personal relationships and unity in reality. Despite this, Forster does not portray a pessimistic outlook, as he sees hope for the future, acknowledging that although obstacles exist presently, they can be overcome.

However, Edward Said finds the novel's conclusion disappointing as it leaves a sense of the profound distance that still separates the "us" from an Orient destined to bear the perpetual foreignness and estrangement from the West. Forster, through the phrase "not now, not yet," shifts the focus of estrangement from its racial foundations to the power dynamics at play. He advocates for a dialogue with those who believe in the possibility of friendship between individuals within unequal power structures, as individuals are capable of transcending these limitations. Said's perspective holds more validity in this context. Both Pathak and Satin argue that the coloniser/colonised status quo is the sole hindrance to friendship between the English and the Indians. However, the profound divide felt by Fielding and Forster, arising from the inherent differences between the two races, poses a serious barrier that jeopardises their friendship. Even if the English were to leave India, true friendship would still be unattainable due to the permanent foreignness that the Orient is destined to bear as a mask of its estrangement from the West.

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