

# Colonial Ambiguities and Modernist Elements in *A Passage to India*: Forster's Critique and Justification of Empire

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**Abstract**—This paper examines E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* as both a critique and a subtle justification of British colonization. While Forster portrays the negative consequences of colonial rule for Indians, he also reinforces stereotypes that align with imperialist narratives. The paper's textual analysis highlights this duality and explores the novel's use of modernist elements. This paper argues that Forster, in *A Passage to India*, attempts to depict the unpleasant experiences experienced by colonized Indians under British colonization; however, he simultaneously justifies colonization by contributing to the spread of stereotypes about the East, particularly Indians. Additionally, the paper identifies modernist elements that complicate the novel's ambivalence toward colonialism and whether it is being critiqued or justified.

**Index Terms**—British colonization, anti-imperialism, orientalism, stereotypes, modernism

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1858, Britain extended its power to rule India and establish the British Raj. For the first two years, it was followed by resistance from the Indians (the Great Rebellion) that resulted in a high death toll and large financial costs (Kaul, 2011). There had been many literary works and scholarships that were produced during that period to document what was happening. One of those works is *A Passage to India* which was published in 1924 and written by Edward Morgan Forster, an English novelist who attended Cambridge and was viewed as a liberal humanist. Along with others, he established the Bloomsbury Group that Virginia Woolf was a member of (Rohrberger, 2015). He was also known for his social criticism which is also one of the Bloomsbury Group's goals to encourage writers to touch on and address topics that were considered either socially offensive or embarrassing (Rohrberger, 2015).

*A Passage to India*'s plot takes place in colonial India under the rule of the British Raj. It tells the story of Aziz who, at the beginning of the novel, discusses with his friends whether a friendship with Englishmen is possible. He runs into Mrs. Moore, an English woman, in a mosque, and after a short conversation, he realizes that she is respectful of the local customs and sympathetic toward Indians. At a tea party, he offers to take Mrs. Moore and Ms. Adela to see the Marabar Caves where Adela claims she was sexually assaulted by him. Aziz is arrested but at the trial, Adela admits that he did not really assault her. He is released but still hurt by what happened and decides not to be friends again with the English people.

The novel was regarded as an anti-imperialist text by most critics; however, there are some who looked at the text as a way by Forster to justify colonization yet this can be easily refuted because there are instances where the negative side of colonization is portrayed. The use of the phrase "negative side" does have an implication that Forster, in fact, believes that there is a good side of colonization. This paper argues that Forster in *A Passage to India* attempts to depict the unpleasant experiences of British colonization that the colonized Indians had to endure; however, he justifies the colonization by contributing further to the spread of stereotypes about the East. In addition, the paper will also attempt to identify some of its modernist elements that complicate its aim to critique colonialism.

## II. DISCUSSION

In his description of the fictional town Chandrapore where the story first takes place, Forster alludes to the inequalities that the colonization has created in areas where the British colonizers and the natives reside. The Indians live in the part of the city that is filthy and plagued with poverty and it has only "a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest" (Forster, 1924, p. 1), while the part of the city where the British occupiers live is much better and "a tropical pleasaunce washed by a noble river" (Forster, 1924, p. 1). One city that has both the British and Indians but the land improves on the part where the colonizers live. Forster gives us a glimpse of the economic consequences of imperialism that the natives are victims of. The natives whose resources are being controlled and managed by the occupier live in poverty.

Major Callendar, a surgeon at the hospital and Aziz's superior, sends for Aziz, while he is with friends, to come to his home and then he leaves before Aziz arrives with no regard to his time or the distance it takes him to arrive. To add

insult to injury, two British women takes the carriage that he paid for to give him a ride to the major's home. The British Major is aware of the fact that Britain is the dominant power in India and can repress any type of revolution with an iron fist; therefore, it compels him to abuse his power and look down upon the Indians since they cannot push back against this unfair treatment. It has created a social hierarchy in which the Indians are at the bottom in the eyes of the British colonizers. Forster continues to report on the social division in Chandrapore when he introduces a club that is exclusive for the Anglo-Indians yet the natives are not allowed to be a member of. Ronny Heaslop, the city magistrate, a British who appears to loathe Indians and attempts to prevent any new English comers from meeting or interacting with the natives and believes the Indians should be thankful instead of criticizing the British colonizers.

Those mistreatments can all be traced back to the power that the British Empire gave to the Anglo-Indians as Hunt Hawkins asserts that, "Forster does much more in his book, however, than simply deride the intolerance of a few accidental individuals. He carefully shows how this intolerance results from the unequal power relationship between English and Indians, from the imperialistic relationship itself" (Hawkins, 1983, pp. 55-56) Heaslop believes that "the British were necessary to India; there would certainly have been bloodshed without them" and "he was here not to be pleasant but to keep the peace" (Forster, 1924, p. 41). He does not specify what would cause the bloodshed between the Indians, but it is obvious that Forster alludes to the rhetoric of the British Empire in which they claim that without their supervision, conflicts would break out between the followers of the main religions in India, but even if this claim is true, it still does not give the city magistrate the right to act this way toward Indians. Heaslop does not only intervene and try to prevent Miss Adela from accepting Aziz's invite to the caves, but he also asks Fielding not to leave Miss Adela alone with an Indian and justifies that by saying "I don't like to see an English girl left smoking with two Indians" (Forster, 1924, p. 25).

Indians were separated from the British at the Bridge Party that was organized at the request of Miss Adela Quested to meet the natives. The British women despise the wives of the natives and do not talk to them. Mrs. Callendar shares her experience of interacting with the Indians and claims that she knows the truth about them, thus at the party she asserts that, "the kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die" (Forster, 1924, p. 10). Furthermore, Mrs. Moore asks "Do kindly tell us who these ladies are" (Forster, 1924, p. 16), but instead, she was told "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis, and they're on an equality" (Forster, 1924, p. 16). This is an exemplary record on the impact of imperialism on colonized women.

Forster published *A Passage to India* in 1924 which was the time around the end of the first-wave feminism that advocated for the basic rights such as voting and education. British women, over the age of 30, were first granted the right to vote in 1918 and Oxford University started giving full admission to women in 1920. Apparently, the status for British women was improving but Forster notes as an imperialist woman, she believes she is superior to native women. Tavassoli and Mirzapour state that non-Western feminists criticized feminism due to its side with imperialism because Western feminists are "theorizing a universal history of women from its own particular history" (Tavassoli & Mirzapour, 2014, p. 74) and that the Bridge Party "result[s] in heightened suspicion between West and East, the narcissism of western woman's view toward third world women is depicted" (Tavassoli & Mirzapour, 2014, p. 73).

The inequalities between the British colonizers and the natives are emphasized again when Cyril Fielding visits Aziz after he becomes sick, he feels embarrassed by the poor conditions of where he lives. Moreover, an Indian woman and her husband invite Miss Adela and add that they will send her a carriage, but they do not keep their promise because they are ashamed of the poor living conditions in their home as opposed to the British houses. In this, Forster challenges this version of the British colonization that claims it is only there to improve the lives of Indians, and he informs the reader of the injustice towards them.

When Aziz is accompanying the ladies to the Marabar Caves, the narrator reveals that "His friends thought him most unwise to mix himself up with English ladies, and warned him to take every precaution against unpunctuality" (Forster, 1924, p. 55) it seems here that the natives have developed a feeling of fear from the colonizers and strive to please them even though they took over their land. On their way to visiting the caves, Aziz, the colonized, is pleased to accompany Mrs. Moore and Miss Adela. He says, "One of the dreams of my life is accomplished in having you both here as my guests. You cannot imagine how you have honoured me. I feel like the Emperor Babur" (Forster, 1924, p. 62). He has been subjected to feeling inferior to the British colonizers that now he feels honored and happy to be around them and always ready to help them. According to Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the colonizers' feeling of superiority forces the colonized to develop a feeling of inferiority and in order for the colonized to overcome this, they have to understand and begin to use the colonizers' culture and act like them (Fanon, 2008, p. 69). Apparently, Aziz suffers from what is known as the inferiority complex that Fanon addresses as well. Aziz feels that it makes him civilized to talk to and go out with them as he thinks that it would help him to achieve equality by having them as guests while in reality, they invaded his land, and he does not really have a choice.

After the alleged sexual assault of Miss Adela by Aziz, and even before the trial starts, Forster confirms the mentality of British acting as a herd. When Fielding tries to get the facts by himself from Mr. McBryde, the Chandrapore superintendent of police, they try to stop him. He then asks for Miss Adela but the narrator observes that "He was still after facts, though the herd had decided on emotion" (Forster, 1924, p. 43). Unsurprisingly, the Major makes up a story about Aziz that he planned the whole thing; therefore, the point of the trip to the caves is to sexually assault Miss Adela and kill Mrs. Moore. When Miss Adela comes to her senses and realizes that her accusation of Aziz is a mistake, Ronny

tries to convince her to pursue her accusation and demands that she must testify. At the trial, Mr. McBryde, who is supposed to be neutral, says that the man is guilty and that “the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not vice versa --not a matter for Bitterness” (Forster, 1924, p. 95). This exposes the kind of the degrading language and a sense of superiority over the natives in colonized India.

Although Forster criticizes the British Empire in all of the above examples, it becomes evident that he is in favor of colonization as there is an emphasis on stereotypes that are typically a part of the colonizer’s rhetoric in order to make their colonization acceptable. The most notable person whose famous work *Orientalism* sheds light on this matter is Edward Said. In *Orientalism*, Said remarks that in order for Europeans to identify themselves, they make comparisons with those who are not them, therefore, their sense of superiority, when comparing themselves with non-European peoples and cultures, is what enables their culture to be dominant (Said, 2003, p. 7). Said goes on to say, “There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness” (Said, 2003, p. 7) and that the oriental was seen by them as “backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded (Said, 2003, p. 207). This was all used by the British Empire to justify their colonization since according to them, the Orientals are uncivilized, thus it is incumbent upon the British Empire to civilize those people.

Aziz along with his friends who are all educated are shown as people who make judgments and generalizations about the English people and their conversation is about the possibility of being a friend with them as if this is the only concern of the colonized Indians to seek friendship from the British colonizer. Their conversation revolves around topics such as friendship and marriage. Aziz and his friends are described as educated thus, they are supposed to be the intellectuals of the Indian society, yet they are the kind who spend their time gossiping and calling the English “red-nose” while smoking hookah that smells like “cow dung” (Forster, 1924, p. 2).

In addition, Aziz appears to be disrespectful of his late wife. When he shows her picture to Fielding who appreciates that, Aziz reply was “it’s nothing, she was not a highly educated woman or even beautiful” (Forster, 1924, p. 50). No one would ever say this kind of remark about their deceased partner but all of those characteristics that Forster uses to describe Dr. Aziz and his friends come from the comparison of the European with the Eastern. Aziz was shown as weak and naïve as opposed to the Anglo-Indians who are tough and experienced. He seems invisible to the British as when the two women at Callendar’s home take the carriage that brought him without even asking or noticing him. It is almost difficult to imagine that a man like Aziz would be able to even work as a doctor. Aziz and his friends are portrayed as ignorant and do not care about the filth in their city or talk about improving and developing it. This is crucial as it is implied that those people do not have much experience about life or the ability to manage their own affairs; therefore, they need to be taken care of by the British Empire.

One of the unfair images about Easterners and especially Muslims is that they are not accepting or intolerant toward people from other religions. Forster in setting Mrs. Moore’s first encounter with Aziz, he brings back that stereotype in Aziz’s reaction. Aziz sees a woman at a mosque, and he becomes agitated and shouts at her. This incident implies that the West is more tolerant toward people of other religions who visit their places of worship and Mrs. Moore as an example who goes to explore a Muslim’s place of worship even though she is Christian. This is the kind of irrationality that, Said argues, is attributed to the Oriental (Said, 2003, p. 40).

Moreover, Mohammed Latif is a servant of Aziz who does not work and in constant need of his relatives to provide for him. Latif has a wife but he lives very far from her and does not even visit her. Hamidullah’s wife is isolated from the gathering and she has to get her husband’s permission before she talks to men which also should be behind a purdah. It is of critical importance to note that the purdah is seen by West colonizers as a sign of oppression against women which has been a part of their ideology. In their article titled *Postcolonial-Feminist Elements in E. M. Forster’s A Passage To India*, Tavassoli and Mirzapour note that the West colonizers define ‘Third World women’ in relation to western female facets which “clearly ignores some very important differences in culture, history, language and social class” (Tavassoli & Mirzapour, 2014, p. 73). They also mention that Partha Chatterjee argues that “the colonizers were able to ‘transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of country’ (118)” (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 73). This type of portrayal has been associated with Eastern females. Despite the fact that it is a popular misconception, the author reinforces this false image about females in that part of the world. Based on this image, the uneducated reader thinks that women in the East, as opposed to the West, are oppressed; therefore, it is the duty of British Empire to come and free those women.

Forster continues his emphasis on degrading the Eastern culture when the narrator comments “Like most Orientals, Aziz overrated hospitality” (Forster, 1924, p. 61). This exactly confirms Said’s argument of ‘us versus them’. Forster’s racist remark is a result of that comparison. He compared the European’s hospitality with the Eastern’s but then he realized that the Eastern’s hospitality is more generous and in order to make the European’s hospitality look normal and superior, he refers to its counterpart as “overrated”.

The rape incident is highly influential as it is not just the climax of the novel but also a continuation of the false images about the people from the East who have always been characterized as people who are not able to control their sexual urges and that they view woman as merely sexual objects who should be covered or otherwise, they have to bear the consequences for getting harassed because they evoke sexual desires in males. This sentiment, unfortunately, still exists in our present time. If a Western person commits a sexual assault, it is both condemned and publicized but it is not as much as if the perpetrator were Eastern due to this stereotype. Forster does not even completely clarify the

innocence of Aziz whether or not he sexually assaults Miss Adela or if she is assaulted by someone else. By creating this incident, Forster adds to the racist ideology that those people are viewed as sensual and promiscuous, thus he uses it to justify imperialism. Forster does not completely denounce colonization; instead, he seeks a new form of colonization.

Although it is difficult to pin down Modernism or limit it to an agreed-upon definition, it is only plausible to say that sometimes it could be identifiable through its numerous characteristics. In *A Passage to India*, the characteristics of modernism could be recognized in both its events and narrative. As it has been pointed out earlier, Forster uses some of the stereotypes in his description of the natives, thus it could be argued that this is some sort of modern racism. In his book *Modernism*, Michael Levenson explains that racism had existed through the growth of modernism and that:

Race was also constitutive to ideas of modernity, especially ideas of the primitive and the civilized, which helped to create the temporality of the modern. At the same time, whites considered nonwhite races to be raw material, meant to be organized by the administrators of the new economy, who often assigned skills according to racial and ethnic categories. (Levenson, 2011, p. 99)

Through his portrayal of the native Indians and reinforcement of the racist images about the east, Forster suggests that those are good enough reasons to confirm the need for colonization. He also attempts to come up with a new form of colonization.

If one were to write an anti-imperialistic text to criticize an empire, they could have done so without associating the colonized with racist images, especially, ones that are of stereotypical nature. Hunt Hawkins acknowledges this, "Several critics have asserted that Forster's attack on the bigotry of the imperialists is not necessarily an attack on imperialism itself" (Hawkins, 1983, p. 55). It is impossible to give Forster the benefit of the doubt, since those images are a systematic approach that the orientalist employs to defend colonization. He does not address the real reason behind colonization which is exploitation of the colonized country and its natural resources. Hawkins confirms that "there is no mention of England's economic exploitation of India. We see no plantations or mines in British India. Collector Turton presumably takes in tax, but we never see him doing so" (Hawkins, 1983, p. 60).

After the British Empire had left India, Indians had difficulty in reviving their country and recovering their economy because the colonization made India dependent on them. The British Empire also exploited the natives by forcing them to work in areas where their lives were in danger yet Forster does not even mention any of that. Forster's form of colonization that he seeks is portrayed through his character Mr. Cyril Fielding. Even though Fielding is presented as a virtuous person, he never condemns the British occupier's existence in India and when Aziz asks him to justify England's holding of India, he replies, "It's a question I can't get my mind on to" (Forster, 1924, p. 48). The narrator proceeds, "There is only one answer to a conversation of this type: 'England holds India for her good.' Yet Fielding was disinclined to give it" (Forster, 1924, p. 48). Forster was both imperialist and anti-imperialist. He bore a resemblance to Conrad in Said's discussion in *Culture and Imperialism*. Said points out that, "Conrad was both anti-imperialist and imperialist, progressive when it came to rendering fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination" (Said, 1994, p. 18).

Moreover, the mode of narrative in *A passage to India* correlates with what Paul Sheehan, in *Modernism, Narrative, And Humanism*, refers to as "The modern mode" (Sheehan, 2002, p. 14). According to him, the mode tends to keep events unresolved and instead "[A] state of affairs is revealed" (14) and that the "plot development ... in modern narrative it is a 'displaying'" (14). Forster casts doubts on religion as a source of morality but not through the use of the typical omniscient narrator. It is referred to here as untypical because the narrator does not stay omniscient all the time. The narrator does not give their point of view about Fielding who possesses high moral standards. This makes the reader judge the characters without the influence of the narrator. Heaslop is religious but biased and cruel toward the natives while Fielding is not religious yet he is not corrupt and his moral sense prevents him from taking sides with the British colonizers in the conflicts throughout the plot. The reader starts to develop a sense of admiration for Fielding because of his courage to stand against injustice. The reader knows this from his actions and what the other characters' think of him. His atheism is only revealed by Fielding himself when he answers Syed Mohammed's question that he does not believe in God while they were at Aziz's home.

Furthermore, *A Passage to India* seems to be loaded with ambiguity that is repeated through its events. In her *Criminal Law and The Modernist Novel: Experience On Trial*, Cathrine Frank comments that:

Such uncertainty is already something that differentiates *A Passage to India* from a realist novel. However, what is really distinctive about the Marabar non-experience is the way in which its un-narrated quality functions within the text. Not only what happened to Adela never revealed, its unknown quality does not, ultimately, open up a gap in experiential knowledge that can, or should, be filled (as it would in a detective novel). (Frank, 2014 p. 54)

Its central event inside the Marabar caves is not fully explained. We still do not know what happens there and why it only affects Mrs. Moore and Miss Adela. It is mentioned that it is an echo but there are not enough details as where it comes from and what causes it. When she is in the caves, Mrs. Moore becomes irritated and has a breathing difficulty. She becomes occupied with strange feelings and anxiety which makes her leave and stay out of the caves. After what happens to her, she becomes somehow a different person that is doubtful and cynical. Miss Adela suffers from the same experience and becomes sick for a few days after that. She claims that she is sexually assaulted but when she feels herself again, she thinks she may have made a mistake. However, it is still unclear whether she is sexually assaulted by

Aziz or someone else or even if she is assaulted in the first place. Additionally, Aziz flatly contradicts himself when he answers Miss Adela's question that he is married and invites her to come and see his wife, whereas earlier in the novel he states that his wife is dead.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Forster's *A Passage to India* does not completely oppose colonization yet it seeks to improve it. In addition, it attempts to describe people of the East from an orientalist's perspective through false images and stereotypes. This kind of ideology is obviously a way to show that those people are in need of colonization to assist them in achieving the colonizer's version of civilization with no regard for their differences.

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