

Representation of Colonialism in *A Passage to India*

Abstract

This study investigates the representation of colonialism in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* from a postcolonial perspective. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, it examines how the novel exposes the unequal power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized through themes of Orientalism, cultural hegemony, mistrust, and resistance. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Orientalism, post colonialism, and colonial discourse, the research demonstrates how Forster portrays colonialism as both a mechanism of domination and a catalyst for resistance. The analysis reveals that Anglo-Indian relations in the novel are characterized by deep cultural and political fractures that render genuine friendship and reconciliation impossible under imperial rule. Ultimately, *A Passage to India* exposes the inherent instability of colonial authority and anticipates the historical inevitability of decolonization.

Introduction

Colonialism, as a powerful machinery of domination over weaker nations, has been widely represented in literature. While many writers historically endorsed colonial ideology, critical thinkers such as Edward Said and HomiBhabha later challenged such perspectives, exposing the underlying structures of power embedded in colonial discourse. Among novelists, E. M. Forster stands out for his nuanced portrayal of British imperial rule in *A Passage to India*, where he presents both colonial and anti-colonial characters to explore the complexities of Anglo-Indian relations. The novel depicts the dominating tendencies of Eurocentric figures alongside the subtle resistance of the colonized. Dr. Aziz, as a representative of India and the broader Orient, emerges as a central figure who refuses to yield entirely to British authority. Conversely, the pro-British characters, upholding Kipling's notion of the "White Man's Burden," view Indians as inferior and uncivilized. This ideological clash reinforces hierarchies of superiority and inferiority, ultimately suggesting that any genuine bridge between the colonizer and the colonized remains an unattainable dream.

Objectives

In line with the research aim and methodological framework, this study sets out to:

1. Examine the treatment of the colonized by the colonizers
2. Analyze the nature of Anglo-Indian relations as depicted in the novel

Statement of the problem

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* explores the problems and challenges of British colonial rule in India. In the novel, colonialism is not just a background; it shapes people's identities, relationships and the balance of power. The unequal relationship between the British and the Indians creates mistrust, prejudice, and cultural conflict, making real friendship difficult. The British characters often act as if they are superior and responsible for "civilizing" the Indians, while Indian characters face unfair treatment but try to resist in both small and big ways. This unequal power creates a sense of division and distance, showing that true understanding between East and West is almost impossible under colonial rule. This study seeks to examine how Forster represents colonialism both as a system of control and as a reason for resistance and how this reflects bigger questions about identity, culture, and freedom.

Literature Review

The study of colonialism in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* has drawn the attention of numerous researchers and critics from diverse academic fields. Scholars have sought to understand how the novel explores the conflict between sympathy and domination, as well as freedom and control, within the context of British rule in India.

Many critics have also examined Forster's treatment of race, culture, power, and communication, showing that while his liberal humanism often criticizes imperial domination, it also partially reflects colonial attitudes.

Chandio and Malik (2015) argue that Forster's depiction of both major groups of colonized Indians—the Hindus and the Muslims—is relatively fair and authentic compared to earlier British writers. Despite his English background, Forster portrays the natives not as villains or mere “others,” but as complex human beings with doubts, aspirations, and a desire for change. Similarly, Abu Baker (2006) explores the uneasy and hierarchical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, emphasizing that the novel exposes the deep social and psychological divisions embedded in the colonial structure.

Likewise, Devi (2017) highlights the cultural misunderstandings that arise when two vastly different societies are forced to coexist. Through the story of Dr. Aziz and Adela Quested, Forster illustrates how colonial rule fosters mistrust and prevents genuine human connection between the English and the Indians. In a related vein, Khan and Khan (2020) point out that the arrogant and domineering behavior of the British further widens the emotional and social gap between the two peoples, which is vividly portrayed in the novel's three parts—*Mosque, Caves, and Temple*.

Naghshbandi and Zarrinjooee (2015) argue that Forster presents “Englishness” as inherently superior to “Indianness.” As a product of the English middle class, Forster's worldview, they argue, reflects Victorian ideals of moral and cultural hierarchy. Similarly, Lin (2019) examines Forster's orientalist tendencies by analyzing his contrasting depictions of the British and Indian landscapes, suggesting that these reflect the unequal colonial relationship. Drawing on Edward Said's ideas, Lin concludes that Forster's narrative exposes the East–West divide rooted in cultural domination, while also promoting multicultural understanding and equality.

On the other hand, Khrisat (2013) emphasizes that one of the major consequences of colonization in the novel is cultural misunderstanding. Differing beliefs and expectations regarding hospitality, social propriety, and religion create conflicts not only between the English and the Indians but also among the Hindus and Muslims themselves.

Overall, the reviewed literature reveals that most scholars interpret *A Passage to India* as a complex critique of colonial power and cultural tension. However, while many recognize Forster's liberal humanism and sensitivity toward Indian culture, few have examined how his personal ideology mediates between sympathy and superiority. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the nuanced ways Forster's narrative exposes both the possibilities and limitations of cross-cultural understanding under colonial rule.

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the representation of colonialism in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. According to Kothari (2008), descriptive research focuses on portraying the state of affairs as they exist, providing detailed and interpretive accounts of phenomena without manipulating variables. Since the study deals with a literary text, which is narrative and interpretive by nature, a qualitative design is the most suitable approach.

The study applies content analysis to systematically interpret the novel. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) explain, content analysis is a widely used qualitative technique that identifies, categorizes, and interprets themes, concepts, and patterns within textual data. Through this method, *A Passage to India* is examined for recurring motifs, symbolic representations, and character interactions that reveal the dynamics of colonial power, cultural misunderstanding, and resistance. Analytical strategies such as interpretation, explanation, and comparison are employed to uncover how Forster negotiates between sympathy and superiority in his portrayal of the colonizer–colonized relationship.

The primary data for this study consist of the novel itself, while secondary sources—including critical essays, journal articles, and theoretical texts—provide contextual and conceptual support. The research draws particularly on postcolonial theories, such as Edward Said’s concept of *Orientalism*, to frame the analysis within a broader critical context.

By combining descriptive analysis with postcolonial interpretation, this methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of Forster’s representation of colonial relationships and cultural tension, ensuring both depth and textual accuracy. This methodological design ensures a comprehensive and theoretically informed exploration of Forster’s colonial representation, allowing for both interpretive depth and textual fidelity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on established theories of post colonialism, orientalism and colonial discourse. These frameworks provide critical perspectives on colonialism, allowing analysis from both Eastern and Western viewpoints. As a colonial-era writer, E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* invites examination through an Orientalist and postcolonial lens to understand the representation of Anglo-Indian relations, power dynamics, and cultural conflict.

Post colonialism

Post colonialism is a critical approach that examines the cultural, political and economic legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on how colonized people and lands were exploited and controlled. It challenges the ideological foundations of colonialism and seeks to give voice to subaltern populations, allowing them to construct their own cultural narratives.

Postcolonial theory addresses issues such as slavery, migration, resistance, marginalization, race, gender, and identity, as well as responses to European imperial discourse in history, philosophy, anthropology, and literature. Scholars such as Chinua Achebe, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Buchi Emecheta, Frantz Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have contributed significantly to postcolonial studies, offering tools to analyze the power structures embedded in colonial texts (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007; Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Spivak, 1988).

Orientalism

Edward Said’s concept of *Orientalism* (1978) explores how the Western world has historically constructed and represented the East through a lens of power and prejudice. According to Said, Orientalism is not simply a body of knowledge about the Orient but a systematic way of thinking that supports Western dominance. It creates and maintains a distorted image of the East—as mysterious, backward, irrational, and uncivilized—while presenting the West as rational, progressive, and superior. Through this framework, the West defines itself in opposition to the East, using cultural, political, and academic discourse to justify imperial control.

Said argues that Orientalism establishes a binary relationship between the *Occident* (the West) and the *Orient* (the East), reinforcing Western superiority and Eastern inferiority. This binary becomes deeply embedded in Western literature, art, scholarship, and media, shaping how Eastern societies are perceived globally. By portraying the East as dependent, passive, and incapable of self-governance, Orientalist discourse legitimizes colonial domination and exploitation. Thus, Orientalism operates as both a form of cultural representation and a mechanism of political power. Said’s analysis reveals that Western portrayals of the East are never neutral, rather they are ideological tools that maintain the hierarchy between colonizer and colonized. His theory invites readers to question how knowledge, culture, and power are interconnected in shaping global perceptions of the non-Western world.

Colonial Discourse

Colonial discourse, building on Foucault's concept of discourse, refers to the systematic production of knowledge about colonized peoples to justify and maintain colonial power. This discourse shapes perceptions, representations and policies, presenting the colonized as subordinate, exotic or uncivilized.

Through literary works, Western writers often constructed narratives that reinforced Eurocentric ideologies. Texts like *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster illustrate how colonial literature materialized European worldviews and legitimized imperial authority. Such portrayals influenced readers' perceptions and often marginalized or misrepresented colonized people.

Said's work on Orientalism and colonial discourse provides a theoretical lens to critically examine these texts, revealing the mechanisms by which colonial ideology was normalized and challenged. Postcolonial critics and theorists, such as Spivak, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe, have expanded these frameworks to explore non-Eurocentric representations of the colonized, emphasizing resistance, agency, and self-representation.

Main Discussion

Colonialism refers to a political and economic system in which a foreign power establishes control over another territory to exploit its human and material resources. This domination is accompanied by the forceful imposition of the colonizer's language, culture, and social practices. As a political structure, it depends on an ideological framework that legitimizes unequal relations and justifies cultural superiority.

Characters of the Binary of Self and Other

In *A Passage to India*, Forster presents the distinctive attitudes of both the colonizer and the colonized in a perceptive and balanced manner. The characters are divided into two groups, the "self" and the "other." The former represents the British colonizers or Europeans, while the latter symbolizes the colonized Indians. Characters like Ronny Heaslop, Cyril Fielding, Mrs. Moore, Adela Quested, Mr. Turton and Mr. McBryde embody the colonial "self," whereas Dr. Aziz, Professor Godbole, Hamidullah, and Mahmud Ali represent the Indian "other."

Through these characters, Forster explores the psychological and social gap between ruler and subject. However, as the novel is written from a Eurocentric perspective, even sympathetic portrayals of Indian characters are shaped through the lens of an English writer, raising questions about the authenticity of their representation.

Civilizing Mission

The ideology of the "civilizing mission" lies at the heart of the colonial enterprise. It claims to "civilize" those deemed backward or primitive, concealing exploitation behind a moral façade. This idea, often called "the White Man's Burden" after Rudyard Kipling's poem, justified British rule as a benevolent enterprise. Europeans perceived Asia and Africa as lands without the "light" of civilization and saw themselves as divine agents bringing enlightenment.

Forster mirrors this ideology through Ronny Heaslop, the quintessential colonial bureaucrat. Ronny declares that the British are "not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly" but to "do justice and keep the peace" (Forster, 1924, pp. 49–50). His conviction that India would face chaos without British rule reveals the colonizer's deep-rooted belief in his sanctified duty to reform and control. This moral justification for domination parallels Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the rhetoric of Christian evangelism that conflated conquest with salvation.

Uneven Anglo-Indian Relationship

The Anglo-Indian relationship in *A Passage to India* is marked by tension, prejudice and exclusion. From the opening chapters, Forster exposes the discriminatory attitudes of the British, exemplified by Mrs. Turton's assertion that the English are "superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis" (Forster, 1924, p. 42). The segregation between British and Indians recalls the Prospero-Caliban dynamic in *The Tempest*, symbolizing moral and cultural domination.

Indians are denied entry to the Chandrapore Club, reflecting social exclusion: "Indians are not allowed into the Chandrapore Club even as guests." Even social initiatives like the "Bridge Party," meant to promote unity, fail miserably, revealing the impossibility of true friendship between East and West. Forster's description of Chandrapore as two towns—native and colonial—reinforces the theme of separation: "The Civil Station shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky." Despite physical proximity, the two worlds remain spiritually divided.

Preconceived Distrust

Mutual distrust dominates relations between the British and Indians. Early in the novel, Aziz questions whether friendship with the English is possible, while Mahmood Ali dismisses the idea entirely (Forster, 1924, p. 7). Such attitudes stem from bitter historical experience. The English, believing themselves culturally superior, treat Indians with arrogance and suspicion. They exclude Indians from social spaces and hastily assume Aziz's guilt after Adela's accusation, reflecting institutionalized prejudice.

Forster insightfully observes, "Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumour... he trusts and mistrusts at the same time" (Forster, 1924, pp. 279-280). The novel concludes by suggesting that true coexistence will remain impossible until India achieves decolonization.

Hegemony and Conflicting Approach

Hegemony functions as a subtle yet pervasive mechanism through which the colonizer restructures native culture. Said (1978) notes that the relationship between East and West is one of "power, domination, and varying degrees of hegemony." The British perceive India as a land of decay, describing it dismissively as "a country of garbage stations." Forster captures this colonial outlook in his depiction of Chandrapore as "scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely."

The failed "Bridge Party" and the events at the Marabar Caves expose the hypocrisy of colonial moral superiority. The collective British presumption of Aziz's guilt shows how hegemony manipulates justice. The racial claim by Mr. McBryde—that "the darker races are physically attracted by the fairer, but not vice versa"—underscores the colonizer's pseudo-scientific justification of hierarchy. While hegemony sustains colonial dominance through ideology, resistance emerges as its inevitable counterforce, revealing the growing consciousness of the oppressed.

Resistance

Where colonial oppression exists, resistance inevitably follows. As Said (1993) observes, "Where there is Western aggression, there is resistance." In *A Passage to India*, resistance manifests in the collective outrage of the Indian community during Aziz's trial. When Adela withdraws her accusation, the Indians unite, symbolizing an emerging national consciousness. Aziz's outburst—"Down with the English anyhow... we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea" (Forster, 1924, p. 322) captures the voice of rebellion and the hope of decolonization.

This theme resonates across other colonial texts also. Caliban's defiance in *The Tempest* and Moses's revolt in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* both represent the oppressed asserting agency. Resistance in Forster's novel thus marks the beginning of a journey from subjugation to liberation.

Forster's *A Passage to India* intricately portrays the colonial milieu and the unequal relationship between the British and the Indians. His characters personify their respective communities, beliefs, and loyalties. Despite his liberal humanism, Forster acknowledges that coexistence under colonial domination is impossible. The novel ultimately anticipates the decline of imperial authority and the inevitable rise of decolonization.

Implication

The representation of colonialism in *A Passage to India* holds significant implications for understanding the ethical and psychological dimensions of imperial rule. Forster's narrative unveils the deep fractures within the colonial enterprise, emphasizing that domination under the guise of civilization breeds alienation, mistrust, and cultural dissonance. His nuanced portrayal of British-Indian relations demonstrates that colonialism corrupts both the colonizer and the colonized, eroding moral integrity and human empathy on both sides. The novel's symbolic spaces, most notably the Marabar Caves, serve as metaphors for the incomprehensibility and resistance of colonized cultures against imperial attempts at control and definition. Forster ultimately implies that the colonial encounter, grounded in hierarchy and prejudice, cannot sustain genuine human connection. The text anticipates the moral collapse of empire and envisions a postcolonial world where understanding must replace authority and empathy must transcend domination. Thus, the novel's representation of colonialism underscores the universal need for decolonizing the mind and reimagining cross-cultural relationships on the basis of equality and respect.

Conclusion

Colonialism is a multifaceted concept encompassing pre-colonial processes masked by civilizing or religious rhetoric, cultural hegemony, economic exploitation, linguistic domination, and neocolonial interposition. *A Passage to India* vividly portrays the realities of British colonial rule and its detrimental effects on the colonized, marginalized, and oppressed subalterns. The novel illustrates that efforts to bridge the gap between the East and the West, or between the colonized and the colonizer, are largely unattainable.

This study has examined the nature of the colonizers' treatment of the colonized, as well as the dynamics of Anglo-Indian relations, highlighting why decolonization was an inevitable historical development. Through descriptive qualitative analysis, the research demonstrates the uneven juxtaposition of Indian and British communities, the pervasive mistrust, and the verbal and psychological conflicts that characterize colonial encounters. Ultimately, the novel underscores the impossibility of genuine coexistence under colonial domination and points toward the necessity of decolonization as a process of reclaiming agency and sovereignty for the oppressed.

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