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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REPRESENTATION OF COLONIALISM IN A PASSAGE TO INDIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of colonialism in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* from a postcolonial perspective. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the novel. It explores how themes such as Orientalism, cultural hegemony, mistrust, and resistance reveal unequal power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized. Content analysis is applied to interpret recurring motifs, symbolic representations, and character interactions. These elements reveal the dynamics of colonial power and cultural misunderstanding. Using insights from Orientalism, postcolonialism, and colonial discourse, the research shows that Forster portrays colonialism both as a tool of domination and as a catalyst for indigenous resistance. The analysis reveals that Anglo-Indian relations are marked by deep cultural and political divisions, making genuine friendship and reconciliation under imperial rule nearly impossible. Ultimately, the novel exposes the fragility of colonial power and suggests that decolonization is inevitable.

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Introduction:-

Colonialism, as a powerful machinery of domination over weaker nations, has been widely represented in literature. While many writers historically reflected colonial ideology, scholars like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha later challenged these perspectives. They exposed the hidden power structures within 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 is a representative of India and the broader Orient. He emerges as a central figure who refuses to yield to British authority. Conversely, the pro-British characters, upholding the notion of "White Man's Burden" (Kipling, 1899), consider Indians inferior and uncivilized. This ideological clash reinforces hierarchies of superiority and inferiority, suggesting that genuine understanding between the colonizer and the colonized is nearly impossible.

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

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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 fosters mistrust, prejudice, and cultural conflict. As a result, genuine friendship between the British and the Indians is difficult. The British see themselves as superior and responsible for 'civilizing' the Indians, while the Indians face unfair treatment and resist in various ways. This unequal power fosters division and distance, making true understanding between East and West 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. Scholars have explored Forster's views on race, culture, power, and communication. They note that, although he criticizes British control, he occasionally adopts the colonizers' perspective.

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 manner, 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 sides 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 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 division 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. Many scholars acknowledge Forster's liberal humanism and his sensitivity toward Indian culture. Yet, his liberal humanism has limits, as it combines genuine sympathy with subtle colonial superiority. Few studies have closely examined this aspect of his ideology. Hence, the study tries to address this gap by looking at how Forster portrays both the potential and the barriers to real cross-cultural connection in a colonial setting.

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 uses content analysis to interpret the novel. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), this method identifies and categorizes themes, concepts, and patterns in text. Using this method, the novel is analyzed for recurring motifs, symbolic elements, and character interactions that illustrate colonial power, cultural misunderstandings, and resistance. The study employs interpretation, explanation, and comparison to show how Forster balances sympathy and superiority in depicting colonizer–colonized relationships. 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.

Theoretical Framework:-

This study is grounded in established theories of postcolonialism, 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.

Postcolonialism:-

Postcolonialism 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 et al., 2007).

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 (1978, p. 3) 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. Orientalist discourse portrays the East as dependent, passive, and incapable of self-governance. This representation 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 the colonizer and the 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 people 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 illustrates 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 (1988), NgũgĩwaThiong'o (1986), and Achebe (1958) have critically examined the linguistic and cultural dimensions of colonialism, revealing how imperial domination continues to shape contemporary forms of identity and discourse.

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.

Binary Representations 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."

Forster uses these characters to explore psychological and social gaps between rulers and subjects. Yet, because the novel is written from a Eurocentric perspective, even sympathetic portrayals of Indians are filtered through an English lens, raising questions about authenticity.

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" (p. 23). 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" (p. 8). Despite physical proximity, the two worlds remain spiritually divided.

Preconceived Distrust:-

Mutual distrust dominates relations between the British and the 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" (p. 1). 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" (pp. 218-219) underscores the colonizer's pseudo-scientific justification of hierarchy. Although hegemony sustains colonial dominance through ideology, resistance naturally arises, highlighting the growing awareness 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 novel's depiction of colonialism highlights the ethical and psychological dimensions of imperial rule. Forster reveals deep fractures in the colonial system, showing how domination disguised as 'civilization' breeds alienation, mistrust, and cultural conflict. 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 uses symbolic spaces, especially the Marabar Caves, to convey deeper meaning. These spaces represent how colonized cultures are difficult to fully understand and resist imperial attempts at control and definition. Forster ultimately implies that the colonial encounter, grounded in hierarchy and prejudice, cannot sustain genuine human connection. This theme is critically examined in postcolonial theory by Said (1978), Spivak (1988), and Bhabha (1994), who highlight the enduring effects of colonial power structures on identity, representation, and cultural interaction. The text anticipates the moral collapse of empire and envisions a postcolonial world in which understanding replaces authority and empathy transcends domination. The novel underscores the need to decolonize the mind and reimagine cross-cultural relationships grounded in equality and mutual respect.

Conclusion:-

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* shows the complex realities of colonial rule and its lasting effects on people's minds, culture, and morality. The novel clearly shows how the idea of a "civilizing mission" actually creates inequality, mistrust, and separation between the British and Indians. By portraying the arrogance of the colonizers

and the struggles of the colonized, Forster highlights the deep gaps that make true understanding between the two sides almost impossible. The story also supports the idea that decolonization becomes necessary when people face oppression and cultural erasure. Simultaneously, Forster's liberal views reveal some ambivalence, reflecting Spivak's (1988) point that representing the colonized without reinforcing colonial ideas is challenging. Overall, *A Passage to India* criticizes imperial control and encourages empathy, equality, and a way of thinking free from colonial influence.

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