

# A Study of *A Passage to India* Through the Lens of Orientalism

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*A Passage to India* is a representative novel by E. M. Forster. His insightful exploration of the relationship between Britain and the colony India in early 20th century guarantees it a seat among the classics of the world's colonist literature. E. M. Forster's ideas in *A Passage to India* exhibit many affinities with Edward Said's thoughts in his *Orientalism*. This paper, therefore, aims to offer an interpretation of *A Passage to India* by using Said's philosophy of the Orientalism as the theoretical framework. Due to Forster's dual consciousness revealed in the novel, this paper will focus on two aspects, namely, the reflection of his colonialist ideology and his anti-colonial humanistic sense.

*Keywords:* *A Passage to India*, Orientalism, discourse, deconstruction

## Introduction

Influenced by the deep-rooted Western collective thought of Orientalism, Forster has, to a certain extent, portrayed the colonialist ideology of the superiority of the white race and its culture and the constructed inferiority of Indians in *A Passage to India*. Meanwhile, he also attaches his advanced thoughts and rational strategy of resisting colonialist hegemony to the work, which has, more or less, subverted the hegemonic discourse reflected in Orientalism.

## The Exploration of the Colonial Discourse and the Representation of India as Stereotypes

In *Orientalism*, Said follows a Foucauldian line in his analysis that Orientalism is not an objective reflection of the real east. It is, indeed, a manifestation of power. It conveys the idea of "European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (1978, p. 7). Therefore, Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). *A Passage to India* is loaded with British ideology of superiority and it presents its colony India as lesser and inferior. In fact, British hegemonic discourse over the colonized India is fully manifested in this novel.

## The Comparison Between the Eastern and Western Landscape

In British's collective imagination, India is depicted as a barbarous and evil land, the very antithesis of the west. In the opening chapter in *A Passage to India*, the Indian residence contrasts sharply with the British administrative district. In Forster's description, the Indian city, Chandrapore, is confusing and "nothing extraordinary". It is dirty and "undistinguishable from the rubbish" (1924, p. 3). The streets are "mean" and the

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temples are “ineffective” (p. 3). Along the river Ganges are the dusty bazaars and dark alleyways which only unveil the trace of backwardness and poverty of India. Even the wood seems “made of mud” and “the inhabitants of mud moving” (p. 3). It seems that everything in India that meets the eye is “so abased [and] so monotonous” (p. 3). While the Anglo-Indian’s residence, which is above the Chandrapore, the prospect alters: “On the second rise is laid out the little civil station and viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens” (p. 3). It is ironical that the English civil station “shares nothing except the overarching sky” with the inland where the natives live (p. 4).

Besides, Forster presents the aesthetics of Eastern and Western architectural structures as indicative of the differences of the respective cultures. Architecture in India is confused and formless: Earth and building blend with each other, the structures are drab and coarse. In a way, the middle of India is mirrored as nonchalant about logic and form. Western architecture, however, is described as representative of a general, honor form and proportion through Fielding’s eyes when he is in Venice. And Fielding reads in this structure the self-evident correctness of Western reason, a merit that is what the East lacks.

The comparison between the Western and Eastern landscape gives a presence of power domination of the Occident against the Orient. It also shows the superiority of the Westerners as a race over the Orientals. As Said explains, Orientalism is believed to be more of a sign of European Atlantic power over the Orient.

### **The Portrayal of India and Indians as Lesser and Inferior Other**

The binary opposition of Western Self and Oriental Other is constantly revealed in *A Passage to India*. As a matter of fact, the Indians are mere stereotypes. They are depicted as slothful, with strong parasitic tendencies. A typical example is Latif, a relative of Hamidullah. In Forster’s description, Latif has never done a stroke of work all his life and he lives off the generosity of Hamidullah:

So long as some one of his relatives had a house he was sure of a home and it was unlikely that so large a family would all go bankrupt. His wife led a similar existence some hundreds of miles away... (Forster, 1924, pp. 6-7)

Besides, the Indians are not only portrayed as ashamed of themselves and their own culture, they are also shown as desperate to please English officials. This, actually, reflects the “impact of imperial culture upon the native culture and identity” (Jajja, 2013, p. 42). Dr. Aziz, on the one hand, denounces the rudeness of the Hindu Bhattacharyas’s not keeping the appointment to receive two English ladies by their carriage as promised. On the other hand, he regrets and distracts the ladies with commentary on other things after he sends his invitation to cater to them, for he is also ashamed of his own shabby house. Still, the behavior of an Indian, Nawab Bahadur at the time of a slight car accident presents the childish nature of the Indians: “He cried out in Arabic and violently tugged his beard [...] and his terror was disproportionate and ridiculous” (Forster, 1924, p. 38). The English people, however, they act with calmness and “they [are] not upset by the accident” which is due to their good manner and upbringing (p. 38). This scene accords exactly with Said’s claim in his *Orientalism*: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved, childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (p. 40).

The manner and attitude of the English towards the native Indians reveal their imbalanced relationship and the binary opposites. Ronny’s description of the Indians is what Said believes as a repetition of Orientalist construction of stereotype. At the time the Bridge Party is arranged, the young representative of the Raj, Ronny, “is full of suspicion for the Indian guest” (Jajja, 2013, p. 41). He judges the Indians as “seditious at heart” and

believes that the Indians are always concealing a secret (Christensen, 2006, p. 162). For Ronny, he is not “out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly”, but “to do justice and keep the peace” (Forster, 1924, p. 22). The English couple Mr. Turton and Mrs. Turton stands for another typical Occidental dominance over the Orient. Mr. Turton’s impression towards the Indians is tinged with prejudice. He states that “when they had not cheated, in was bhang, women, or worse, and the desirables wanted to get some thing out of him” (p. 20). The same insolence is shown in Mrs. Turton when she reminds Mrs. Moore: “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 equality” (p. 19). Mrs. Turton hardly treats the Indians as individuals with their own personalities and identities. She treats them as if they were commodities (Jajja, 2013, p. 41). In effect, the attitude towards India and Indians held by British collectives is clearly expressed by A. J. Balfour when he gives a lecture in the House of Commons. Balfour claims, “broadly speaking, the east, and you never find traces of self-government” (Said, 1978, p. 33). Thus, there is undoubtedly a necessity that “this absolute government should be exercised by us”. And it is undoubtedly “a good thing to them” (p. 33).

In *A Passage to India*, the centrality of British power and the construction of India and Indians as Lesser and Inferior Other is greatly exposed. According to Said’s Orientalism, for Britain, India is the vindication of Western imperialism and an almost vivid example of Oriental backwardness. Therefore, India is, indeed, a representative of triumph of English knowledge and power in the colonial discourse.

### **The Difficulty of English-Indian Friendship**

To some degree, *A Passage to India* revolves around the question of whether it is possible for an Englishman and an Indian to be friend. The broad picture of English-Indian relationship is, therefore, shifted to a smaller focus on the relationship between Aziz and Fielding in the personal respect. As a matter of fact, cultural misapprehensions are dramatized through their cross-cultural relationship. Aziz is a genuinely affectionate character, but a great proportion of his affection is based on his intuited connections, as with the Englishman, Fielding. Though Forster “holds up Aziz’s capacity for imaginative sympathy as a good trait”, this imaginativeness can also betray Aziz (Heffernan, 2002, p. 26). In Aziz’s first arrival at Fielding’s for the Tea Party, Aziz once misinterprets Fielding’s dismissive comment about a school of painting to be dismissive of Aziz himself. Besides, the deep offense Aziz feels towards Fielding after the infamous trial is also due to his fictional intuition and overactive imagination. When the two men discuss the rumored affair between Fielding and Adela, Fielding is so astonished that Aziz should believe it and then he calls Aziz a “little rotter”. It is evident that this portrayal of the character Aziz is a stereotyped Oriental image inherited from the traditional British Orientalism:

Suspicion in the Oriental is a sort of malignant tumor, a mental malady, that makes him self-conscious and unfriendly suddenly; he trusts and mistrusts at the same time in a way the Westerner cannot comprehend. It is demon, as the Westerner’s hypocrisy. (Lowe, 1991, p. 114)

To sum up, *A Passage to India* reveals Forster’s orientalist idea through his depiction of the binary oppositions between the Occident and the Orient, the Self and the Other, the superior Britain and the inferior India. The comparison of the landscape, the arrogance of the British, and the compliance of the Indians as well as the difficulty of building a friendly relationship, are all the manifestations of the Western hegemonic discourse over the eastern colonized country.

### **The Exploration of the Deconstruction of the Orient-Versus-Occident Opposition**

Foucault declares that power involves resistance. He holds the view that where there is power, there is resistance. Said applies his theory and claims “where there is western aggression, there is resistance” in his *Cultural and Imperialism*. Facing cultural hegemony, Said advocates cultural resistance, and he calls for transcending the rigid mold of the binary opposition between the west and the east under the influence of Derrida’s theory of deconstruction. In the *Orientalism*, he points out: “The Orient-versus-Occident opposition was both misleading and highly undesirable” (Said, 1978, p. 193). Moreover, he stresses “the actualities of what was later to be called multiculturalism” (p. 335).

As a humanist and liberalist influenced by the Enlightenment rationality and colonial pressure, Forster expresses his humanistic concern and anti-colonial sense in *A Passage to India*, too. By depicting the Westernized Indians, the collapse of the westerners’ life-long beliefs, and the failure of the ironical trial, he has, actually, dismantled the Orient-Versus-Occident opposition.

#### **The Westernized Indians**

The westernization of Indians is shown not only through their mastery of the language, but through their garments. At the infamous Bridge Party, when Mrs. Moore asks for an introduction to know who the visiting Indian women guests are, she is met with Mrs. Turton’s friendly warning that they are superior to the Indians. Able to speak a little Urdu, the language of the natives but only in the “imperative mood”, Mrs. Turton finds, nevertheless, “the haughtiness of her hierarchical security” is greatly unsettled by the Indian women’s mastery of English (Barratt, 1993, p. 128). She is, indeed, shocked: “Why, fancy, she understands!” (Forster, 1924, p. 19). Still, she discovers that “some of the group was westernized and might apply her own standards to her” as the way they all dress themselves in the “lighted” European costume (p. 19). In the collective thought of the British, the subaltern is backward and clumsy. But Mrs. Turton as a representative finds her position being challenged by the subaltern Indians who can speak the same language and dress the same costume. The Indians’ mastery of English is greatly in line with Said’s claim of “the subaltern can speak” because they have their own voice, culture, and identities. In a sense, this is what Said means “the resistance” of power.

#### **The Destabilized English Beliefs**

The Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India* is a centre motif. They function as a mode of deconstruction within the text in an “uncanny anticipation of the deconstructive approach” (Barratt, 1993, p. 127). Through portraying the decentring experience of Adela and Mrs. Moore in visiting the caves, Forster presents that the life-long beliefs and spirituality held by the English are swayed and dismantled. The essence of Marabar Caves can not reveal itself in language. Situated just beyond the reach of words, it is like a Derridian *trace*, inaccessible to verbalize (p. 128). The notions given to the caves are as “the unspeakable” and “like nothing else in the world”, for they “bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen” (Forster, 1924, p. 54). Mrs. Moore sticks to her Christian faith of “God is love” and she holds that it is God who “puts us on earth to love our neighbors and show it, and He is omnipotent, even in India” (p. 23). In the claustrophobic confusion of the cave, she encounters the deconstructive force, which “reveals beneath the foundations of the metaphysics an indefinite root system that nowhere touches ground in a transcendental instance that would itself be without roots or ancestors” (Ryan, 1982, p. 11). She experiences the terrifying echo, which is entirely devoid of distinction (Forster, 1924, p. 60). As a

result, the infinity of her fundamental beliefs about God has been engulfed by the echos of the caves. Furthermore, the vastness and absence of the Marabar Caves also exert the same power in Adela. When Adela enters the cave alone, her cool British rationalism fails in facing “the irrational that inheres within it” (Barratt, 1993, p. 131). In deed, her very self experiences a threat of division. “The struggle within her self against the disruption of her centre or ground takes on”, and in her mind, it conceives an illusion of an attempted rape by Aziz (p. 131).

The Marabar Caves seem to possess strong deconstructive power. In visiting them, the two English ladies both have a terrifying decentring experience. The reversing force of the uncanny echo in the caves is so powerful that Mrs. Moore’s life-long beliefs are shattered and Adela’s rationality is challenged. The echo works, like Derrida’s *iteration*, “to make visible the lack of ground for the alleged originary difference, thus rendering all subsequent distinctions indeterminate...” (Heyles, 1990, p. 182).

### **The Court’s Collapse**

The court’s collapse, the failure of the charge of Aziz’s attempted sexual assault towards Adela, is another typical manifestation of the deconstruction of the binary opposition between the west and the east.

After Aziz is arrested, the English officials immediately assume that Aziz is guilty as if his charged crime confirms their long-held suspicions and stereotypes about Indians. But Adela states that she has made a mistake and she finally declares a withdrawal of all the charges. The court, by then, collapses. Forster’s description of the scene elevates the effect of this event:

And then the flimsy framework of the court broke up, the shouts of derision and rage culminated, people screamed and cursed, kissed one another and wept passionately. Here were the English, whom their servants protected; there Aziz fainted in Hamidullah’s arms. Victory on this side, defeat on that complete for one moment was the antithesis. Then life returned to its complexities, person after person struggled out of the room to their various purposes and before long no one remained on the scene of the fantasy but the beautiful naked god. Unaware that anything unusual had occurred, he continued to pull the cord of his punkah, to gaze at the empty dais and the overturned special chairs and rhythmically to agitate the clouds of descending dust. (1924, p. 100)

The depiction above is in accordance with Derrida’s viewpoint: “To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (“Signature”, 1977, p. 41). The event of the court’s collapse reflects the Oriental marginal existence’s confronting the Occidental unshakable power. To a large extent, the binary opposites are, therefore, deconstructed.

### **Conclusion**

*A Passage to India* is one of the seminal texts in the post-colonial Orientalist discourse. It exhibits a variety of affinities with Said’s philosophy of the Orientalism. Employing Foucault’s knowledge-power discourse theory, Said unveils that the binary opposition between the west and the Orient is a kind of subjective construction and it is a created and imaginary “Oriental myth” resulted from the imperialist hegemonic discourse. In this novel, Forster exposes his orientalist thoughts through his depiction of the comparison of the two countries’ landscape, the British-Indian colonial colored relationship as well as the difficulty of their friendship. It accords with Said’s belief that the binary opposition between west and east is entirely the cultural hegemony of ideology. Meanwhile, Said advocates multi-culturalism, the independence, and equality of the different cultures. His basic standpoint is anti-essentialism and opposing culture hegemony of Orientalism. Forster also reveals his humanistic concern and

anti-colonial consciousness in *A Passage to India*. Through portraying the westernized Indians, the collapse of the English fundamental truths, and the failure of the charge case, he has, indeed, deconstructed the binary oppositional pattern of Orientalism.

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