

PERSPECTIVES OF THE NOVEL

i. Colonialism

Colonialism is the policy of a country seeking to extend or retain its authority over other people or territories, generally with the aim of economic dominance. In the process of colonisation, colonisers may impose their religion, economics, and other cultural practices on indigenous peoples. (Wikipedia). On one level, *A Passage to India* is an in-depth description of daily life in India under British rule. The British “Raj” (its colonial empire in India) lasted from 1858 to 1947. The prevailing attitude behind colonialism was that it was the moral duty of Europeans to “civilize” other nations. Thus, the British saw their colonial rule over India as being for the Indians’ own good. Forster himself was British, but in the novel, he is very critical of colonialism. He never goes so far as to advocate outright Indian rebellion, but **he does show how the colonial system is inherently flawed**. Forster portrays most of the British men working in India as at least well-meaning, although condescending and unoriginal, but their positions in the colonial system almost always push them towards becoming **racist** and harmful figures. This is played out most explicitly in the development of Ronny’s character. The British women, apart from Mrs. Moore and Adela, often seem less sympathetic than the men, to the point that even Turton blames their presence for the tensions with the Indians. The women don’t have the daily labor and interactions with Indians that the men do, but they are generally more racially hateful and condescending (and perhaps this is because they are usually so isolated from actual Indian society).

Forster also shows how the **colonial system** makes the Indians hate and sometimes condescend to the British. The colonialists are by necessity in the role of “oppressor,” no matter

how individually kind or open-minded they might be. This is best shown in the changes to Aziz's character throughout the novel, as he goes from laughing at and befriending the English to actively hating them. Although Forster ultimately offers no concrete alternative to British colonialism, his overall message is that **colonialism in India is a harmful system for both the British and the Indians**. Friendships like that between Aziz and Fielding are a rare exception, not the rule, and even such friendships are all but destroyed or thwarted by the problems and tensions of colonialism.

ii. Imperialism

Imperialism is a policy or ideology of extending a country's rule over foreign nations, often by military force or by gaining political and economic control of other areas. Imperialism has been common throughout recorded history, the earliest examples dating from the mid-third millennium BC. (Wikipedia).

E. M. Forster attacks against British imperialism in colonial India. It argues that acquiring an official position in the imperialistic administration makes Anglo-Indians so poignant that they start making **racial prejudgments** about the Indians. This attitude, of course, leads to damage the possibility of establishing friendship between the Indians and the British.

The novel projects the British colonizers as a prejudicial and **malicious community** whose slogan is to abuse and harm the natives. This attitude is plainly factual with Mrs. Callendar as she argues, "*The kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die*". Being ignited by racial bias, the British prejudice other races depending on poignant presumptions rather than logical assessment of data. Consequently, they make unreasonable judgments which the writer introduces by the use of irony. For instance, when the British meet at the Club to discuss Aziz's arrest for his

allegedly attempted rape of Adela Quested, a British subject defends him by referring to him as an unknown native with whom he plays polo the month before: *“Any native who plays polo is all right. What you’ve got to stamp on is these educated classes”*. However, the reader is aware that Aziz himself is the anonymous person in this quote. Forster goes on to illustrate more ironic examples like Aziz’s collar stud, Ronny’s criticism, his prejudgment of Aziz as well as of the entire Indian race, his poignant presuppositions, and his narrow-minded assessments without using logic and facts, etc.

iii. **Power**

Set in India at a time when the country was a British colony, Forster's novel is an obvious critique of the British Empire’s **power and control**. The assumption that one people have a right to dominate another – what people at the time called Britain's "civilizing mission" – is constantly and consistently undercut throughout the novel. As Adela begins to feel guilty about the notion of the British as a **civilizing force**. She contemplates who gave them the right to control a country. At the same time, McBryde uses a "scientific" approach to prove the **racial and national superiority** of the British over the Indians. The British Empire is portrayed as a fundamentally racist institution that excludes and subjugates others. As in the first chapter, The British National Anthem inspires feelings of power rather than patriotism. England's role in India is one of power and control.

iv. **Justice and Judgement**

Tough the novel is certainly a critique of the British Empire, it does not reject everything British, European, and Western. Western civilization has some plusses. There's the whole notion of **civil rights**, for one – the notion that all human beings have rights under the law, such as the right to a fair and timely trial, the right to confront your witnesses, and that whole innocence until proven

guilty thing. And *habeas corpus* – your legal right not to be imprisoned without getting charged. Thus, with such vibrant tradition of civil liberties Western ideals should be good. But Forster's focuses on what happens to lofty Western ideals when they get caught up in a morally corrupt institution such as the British Empire. Individual British colonial administrators such as Turton, McBryde, and Ronny Heaslop all struggle between their baser desire to mistreat Indian "natives" and their obligation to uphold the finer aspects of British culture and Western civilization. The novel takes the occasion of Aziz's trial to show how justice becomes contaminated by the institutions – the civil administration, the military, the court system – of empire.

v. Race

In *A Passage to India*, life in Chandrapore, and indeed throughout the British Empire, is deeply fissured along racial lines, with the white Europeans on one side, and everyone else on the other. Indians are referred to as "**Oriental**," an outdated racial term that was applied to everyone living east of Europe, from Turkey all the way out to China. Orientals were stereotypically considered to be exotic, sensual, **passive, and backward**, as opposed to the intellectual, civilized, progressive Westerner. Thus Orientals, such as the Indians in *A Passage to India*, were considered unable to rule themselves, essentially needing the British Empire to help them toward civilization (despite the fact that they had civilizations of their own). Even as the novel criticizes this stereotyping of Orientals – or "Orientalism" – it is itself not entirely free of the Orientalist attitude. The narrator makes broad generalizations about Orientals, about their psychology and their sexuality, that shows how entrenched the Orientalist attitude is even in a novel that is sympathetic to them.

vi. Gender

In addition to race, gender also divides colonial society. British colonial society in India, made up as it is of administrators and their wives, is not exactly English society in miniature – it tends to

aggravate whatever is most conservative and traditional about English culture, including a traditional attitude toward **women as the much weaker sex**. The stereotypical idea is that Englishwomen need white knights in shining armor to save them from lusting Orientals; thus Adela, as an Englishwoman, needs to be saved from Aziz by Englishmen. Englishwomen further demonstrate their weakness by being far more racist than their men: a character like Mrs. Turton doesn't have the benefit of her husband's education or civic-mindedness. On the other hand, British colonial society dismisses the Indian practice of *purdah*, or of segregating women from men, as backwards and unenlightened.

Despite its criticism of the British colonial attitude toward women, *A Passage to India* seems to harbor **sexist attitudes**. In fact, some critics have argued that female characters such as Adela and Aziz's wife are reduced to pawns who are exchanged between men to establish relationships between men, excluding the possibility of equal relationships between men and women.

vii. Friendship

A principal focus of *A Passage to India* is the relationship between colonialism, race, and friendship. The nature of Dr. Aziz's association with both Fielding and Miss Quested is central to the story. Aziz considers himself a friend to both of them, genuinely is a friend, and feels his **positive feelings** reciprocated. Yet Miss Quested turns the friendship into something else by imagining that Aziz has sexually assaulted her inside the mysterious Marabar Caves. Until this point, Aziz has gone out of his way to make himself accepted to the Europeans. Unfortunately, this **striving for acceptance** was an inevitable factor in the colonial system, but the result was often a betrayal of friendship, or at least a perception of such betrayal by the injured person. Aziz is betrayed not only by Miss Quested but by Fielding as well. Although Fielding has believed him

innocent, and although Aziz is acquitted of the charges, Fielding's continued friendship with Miss Quested in the aftermath of the trial really upsets Aziz. Aziz expresses his wish not to associate with any British people. He even pushes away the friendship of Fielding. He and Fielding part ways, knowing they can never be friends as long as the British continue to control India.

viii. Religion

Religion plays a major role in *A Passage to India*, dividing not only the primarily Christian British from the Indians, but also dividing Indian society from within. While Hinduism is the majority religion in India, and Islam the most significant minority, other Indian religious groups mentioned in the novel include Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists. Ronny Heaslop typifies the British administrator's attitude toward all religion, including Christianity, as an irrational system of beliefs. According to him, Christianity is only useful insofar as it provides divine justification for the British monarchy, and no more. And India's plethora of religions only underscores its backwardness to someone like Ronny. The novel, however, explores how different religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, might provide a better, more inclusive view of humanity. But no one religion in the novel is valorized over the others.

ix. Contrasting Regions

A Passage to India turns again and again to India as a country so vast, so diverse, and so exotic that it cannot be fathomed by the puny human mind. India is contrasted with England, which is presented as a small, charming island that doesn't overwhelm you with its neat valleys and lakes. England is homey and familiar; India is uncanny and strange. England is modern, progressive, civilized; India is both primitive and infinitely more civilized, bearing the ruins of numerous ancient and modern civilizations. In the novel, even the Indian characters have trouble grasping

what India is all about. The mysterious Marabar Caves stand in for India as a whole: an entity that is certainly extraordinary but about which not much can be said. The novel itself seems torn between championing India's rich history and disparaging its muddled diversity.

x. Separation

“Separateness” is a major problem that concerns Forster. It is throughout his two classics *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* and especially the latter one. **Man’s isolation from man, from God and from himself, is tragic and inevitable.** Thus, how to “connect” men and themselves is also what Forster ponders on and explores.

The theme of separation in *A Passage to India* is evident from the cultural distance between the Indians and the British. Due to colonization and the notion that India was occupied by the British, there is a natural separation between both cultures. Forster spends a great deal of time and text explaining that there is a fundamental difference or chasm between both cultures.

There is the separation of Indians from the British in terms of treatment and opportunity. At the same time, there is a theme of separation within the British, themselves. Specifically, there are those British like Fielding, who believe in working with the Indians in making a better life for many, and those like most of the other Indians, Rony or McBride or any of the British who regularly attend "the club," that seek to control the Indians and strive for dominance in the establishment of personal superiority as "little gods." The theme of **emotional separation** can be seen in the withering relationship of Adela and Rony, as well as Fielding and Aziz. This theme is enhanced in a more mortal sense with Mrs. Moore and Professor Godbole, who seem to be separated from the temporal realm and entering one of greater eternity. I would think that the Marabar Caves themselves, an area where only the equality of "Boum" can be experienced, is

separated from the rest of the world, itself. At some level, each character in the work endures some type of separation, which can be a statement in its own right about the nature of Colonial rule and life.

xi. Culture

Many observations about race and culture in colonial India are threaded throughout the novel. A *Passage to India* is in some ways a sort of ethnography, or an examination of the customs of different cultures. On the English side, many **cultural forces** affect the characters. Ronny is naturally goodhearted and sympathetic, but his “public school mindset” and the influence of his English peers compel him to become hardened and unkind to Indians. The other English expatriates view Adela as naive for sympathizing with the Indians, and they even admit that they too felt the same at first before realizing the “truth.” Overall the pervading culture of the English in India is that one must adopt a **racist**, patronizing attitude to survive and thrive, and that one’s very Englishness makes one superior to the Indians. Forster also examines the English tendency to be rational without emotion, and what is perceived as the English lack of imagination.

Forster gives equal time to analyzing Indian culture. On one level he portrays the many religions and cultures of the country, which are part of the reason India remains so internally divided. On the individual level, Aziz is the best-developed Indian character, and he too (like the English) is subject to **cultural norms**. Forster portrays the Indians as generally more emotional and imaginative than the English, with a tendency to let **stray notions harden into solid beliefs** without evidence. This “ethnography” then informs the novel’s other themes of division, friendship, and colonialism. Overall Forster shows that race and culture are forces that cannot be altogether avoided, no matter a person’s individual intentions. Forster gives the greatest

importance to interpersonal human interaction and friendship, but he also recognizes the pervasive influence of larger social forces.

xii. Division and Unity

Ideas of division and unity are important in *A Passage to India* in both a social and spiritual sense. The social and cultural divisions between English and Indians are clear, but India itself is also internally divided. The phrase “a hundred Indias” is used several times to describe the “muddle” of the country, where Hindus and Muslims are divided against each other and even among themselves. The best hope Forster proposes for this chaotic division lies in the idea of unity, particularly of the spiritual kind. Most of the novel’s main characters are Muslims or Christians, but the book’s final section focuses on the Hindu side of India, as introduced by the character of Professor Godbole.

Hinduism has many gods and rituals, but certain aspects of it incline towards pantheism, which is the belief that all things are essentially one, and of a divine nature. Forster shows this sense of spiritual unity in several places, like the “liberal” Christians willing to accept monkeys into heaven, and Hindus like Godbole who try to accept even a wasp as divine. This kind of empathy and unity between living things is a positive force for Forster, and he implies that it may be the best hope for both friendship between individuals and peace between cultures. He advocates the constant striving for greater unity and empathy.