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Revelation of Identity in E. M. Forster's Novel *A Passage to India*

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Abstract

Revelation of identity in Literature is a plot device where a character's true, hidden, or significant identity is unveiled, often leading to personal reformation and new roles for the character, or prompting a larger conflict or epiphany within the narrative. These revelations can explore themes of self-discovery, alienation, and the human condition, as characters grapple with internal and external pressures to understand who they are. There are several writers who concentrated their writing in revelation of identity. They have explored varied identity in their works. James Joyce has dealt with fragmented self and cultural identity in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses.* Virginia Woolf has examined inner identity and selfhood in *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando.* Franz Kafka has showed alienation and loss of self in *The Metamorphosis.* Toni Morrison has explored African-American identity in novels like *Beloved.* And, Salman Rushdie has written about cultural and postcolonial identity in *Midnight's Children*. Apart from these writers, E. M. Forster deeply explores the theme of identity crisis, highlighted through the psychological and cultural struggles of both colonizers and colonized individuals. This paper highlights the problematic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in a colonial context as manifested in Forster's novel, *A Passage to India*. The present paper is an attempt to look into the ways scholars of identity and selfhood have approached the implications of rational knowledge.

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E.M. Forster (1879-1970) was a British novelist, essayist, and social and literary critic. He is one of the most famous English novelists who lost his father when he was still a baby. His father had been an architect, but he grew up mainly under the care of his mother and his paternal aunts. The two families—his father's side and his mother's side—were very different in character, and this shaped Forster's understanding of family life and tensions. His father's family was strict, serious, and religious, with a strong sense of moral duty. His mother's family, on the other hand, was more easy-going, warm, and generous, but sometimes careless. Because Forster was exposed to both these contrasting influences while growing up, he developed a lasting insight into how family differences and domestic conflicts work. This theme of tension between opposing values shows up again and again in his novels.

Forster's education also influenced his ideas. He went to Tonbridge School in Kent as a "day boy" (meaning he did not live in the boarding house but attended classes during the day). His experience there gave him reasons to criticize the English public school system. He found it too rigid, harsh, and often damaging to individuality. Later, he would highlight these criticisms in his writings, showing how such schools shaped boys into narrow-minded men, often unable to truly connect with others. In one of his early novels, *The Longest Journey* (1907), Forster explored the problem of living a life dominated by only one side of human experience. He suggested that relying only on the physical, practical side of life (what he called "the earth") makes a person strong and cheerful but also risks turning them into someone rough and limited, without higher imagination. On the other hand, if a person relies only on imagination and ideas, ignoring the realities of the world, they may lose touch with reality and live in illusions. Forster believed that a balance between the two—earth and imagination—was essential for a healthy, meaningful life.

This idea became even clearer in Howards End (1910), which turned out to be his first major success. The novel shows how people from different social and cultural backgrounds struggle to connect, and how difficult it is to bring together practicality and imagination. Forster's famous phrase from Howards End is "only connect," which reflects his belief that human relationships and connections are the key to overcoming divisions. During World War I, Forster worked in Alexandria, Egypt, for about three years. These years of war service gave him new experiences of different cultures and environments. He also visited India twice, first in 1912–13 and later in 1921. These visits had a powerful influence on him. He saw the complexity of Indian society, the mix of religions, races, and traditions, and the difficulties of British rule there. His fame rests largely on his novels *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to India (1924*) and on a large body of criticism. When he later wrote his most famous novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), Forster returned to his old themes of earth and imagination but in a new way. In India, the problem became even larger. The land itself seemed mysterious, overwhelming, and even alien to outsiders. Forster suggested that

the reconciliation between practicality and imagination was almost impossible in such a vast and divided place. The novel highlights misunderstandings, racial conflicts, and cultural barriers between the British and the Indians, showing how real human identity was nearly impossible under colonial rule. Scholars have found several sub themes in the novel *A Passage to India* and here one sees it as an "attempt to deal with colonialism (or post-colonialism or neo-colonialism) with respect to the destructive impact on personal relationships caused by the racist assumptions and psycho-pathology inherent in colonial imperialism" (Brandabur 1993, p.19).

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is a novel that explores the difficulties of friendship between Indians and the English during British rule in India. "E. M. Forster was the first English novelist to pit India against England as protagonists" (Mukherjee 1971:27). The story shows how colonization creates a deep divide between the two groups, making real understanding almost impossible. "The colonial situation manufactures colonialists, just as it manufactures the colonised" (Memmi 2003:21). Even when individuals try to connect, political and cultural pressures often break those ties. The novel is centred on Dr. Aziz, a young Indian Muslim doctor. He is a widower with three children and often feels lonely and unappreciated. At the very beginning, he is insulted when his English superior, Dr. Callendar, leaves without telling him, and then his cab is taken by two Englishwomen who do not thank him. This sets the tone for how the English colonisers generally treat Indians—with arrogance and lack of respect. The lack of giving a second thought to their presuppositions by the British, which are no more than prejudices against the natives, often ended in misunderstandings. Several such episodes are highlighted in essays edited by Childs such as the episode of collar stud of Dr. Aziz, the Bridge Party and few others which ultimately culminated in the debacle of misunderstanding at the cave (1999, p. 349). The main English characters are Mrs. Moore, her future daughter-in-law Adela Quested, Ronnie Heaslop (Mrs. Moore's son and the local magistrate), and Cyril Fielding, the liberal-minded head of the government college. Professor Godbole, an Indian Hindu, is another important figure who represents the spiritual side of Indian culture.

At first, Mrs. Moore and Adela are curious about India and want to meet Indians instead of just mixing with other colonisers. They are introduced to Dr. Aziz, and a tentative friendship begins. Aziz, who is warm and emotional, is deeply touched by Mrs. Moore's kindness, because she treats him as a human being rather than as a "native." The central event of the novel is a trip to the Marabar Caves. Aziz arranges the outing for Mrs. Moore and Adela. But the caves prove overwhelming—dark, echoing, and mysterious. Inside one of them, Mrs. Moore suffers a panic attack from the strange echo that seems to reduce all meaning to nothing. Meanwhile, Adela has a disturbing experience. She believes something has happened to her—possibly an assault—and when she runs outside in shock, she accuses Dr. Aziz of attacking her. Aziz is arrested, and this becomes the climax of the novel. The English community quickly rallies around Adela, convinced of Aziz's guilt, while the Indians stand firmly behind him. Tensions between the two groups grow stronger, showing how

colonialism turns every incident into a battle of "us" versus "them". Dolin reminds us of the salaaming order of the British imposed in Amritsar in the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre through the 'comic salam' of Dr. Aziz (1999, p.180). Such incidents and events further the divide between the British and the natives. Fielding, however, remains loyal to Aziz and insists he is innocent. Edward Said tries to peel off the surface and finds that:

> At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay what could be called an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism. This accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories; it studied them, classified them, verified them; but above all, it subordinated them to the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe. (Eagleton et al. 1990:72)

At the trial, Adela realises she may have been mistaken. On the witness stand, she admits she is not sure Aziz attacked her. In fact, she cannot be certain of what happened at all—it may have been an illusion or a misunderstanding. Aziz is freed, but the damage is done. The English colonisers are furious with Adela for backing down, and the Indians celebrate the victory as a blow against British arrogance. Afterward, relationships fall apart. Mrs. Moore dies on her journey back to England, disillusioned and bitter about the colonial system. Adela breaks her engagement to Ronnie and returns home. Aziz, deeply hurt by the whole experience, turns bitter against the English. Even his friendship with Fielding is strained, though Fielding tries to keep it alive.

In the final part of the novel, Dr. Aziz has moved away from Chandrapore and now works as a doctor in a Hindu state. Two years have passed since the trial. Cyril Fielding, who once defended him, returns from England and visits Aziz. Aziz is angry with Fielding because he wrongly believes that Fielding married Adela, the woman who falsely accused him. In reality, Fielding has married Stella, Mrs. Moore's daughter, and has returned with her and her brother Ralph. At first, Aziz remains cold and distant. He now sees himself as fully Indian and resents all ties with the British. But during a Hindu festival, after the death of the local rajah, Aziz and Fielding spend some time together. Riding through the countryside, they manage to restore their personal friendship. Yet, Aziz knows deep inside that their bond cannot last. Fielding, through marriage and social position, is tied to the English community, while Aziz has become more nationalistic and loyal to India. They part, never to meet again. The heart of the novel lies in the Marabar Caves. These caves, with their strange echo, represent the emptiness and confusion of human communication. To Mrs. Moore, the echo seems to destroy all meaning—it reduces every word and feeling to the same meaningless sound: "ou-boum." Courage, love, kindness, or cruelty—everything comes back the same, without value. For her, this shows that the universe is indifferent to human hopes. This realization crushes her spirit, and she dies soon afterward. Although the novel has humor and sharp observations about both Indians and English, Forster's deeper message is pessimistic. He suggests that under colonialism, and perhaps in life itself, true understanding between people is almost impossible.

The novel presents identity crisis as a consequence of colonialism, which destabilizes the social structure, erodes cultural identity, and impedes genuine human connections between the British and Indians. "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 1987:5).Forster demonstrates that cultural differences, colonial hierarchies, and social expectations erect barriers that individuals cannot easily transcend. Characters frequently oscillate between their private selves and public roles, with personal relationships succumbing to the pressures of colonial duty, prejudice, and communal loyalty. The newly arrived immigrants are swiftly taken over by the established notions of identity realization.

> Many immigrants who, having recently arrived, timid and modest, suddenly provided with a wonderful title, see their obscurity illuminated by a prestige which surprises even them. Then, supported by the corset of their special role, they lift up their -heads, and soon they assume such inordinate self-confidence that it makes them dizzy. Henceforth they will defend it aggressively; they will end up believing it to be right. In other words, the immigrant has been transformed into a colonialist. (Memmi 2003:91)

Forster himself explains his intention in writing the novel. In a letter to Syed Masood in September 1922, he states that:

> When I began the book I thought of it as a little bridge of sympathy between East and West, but this conception has had to go, my sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable. I think that most Indians, like most English people, are shits, and I am not interested whether they sympathize with one another or not. (Forster-15)

Further, Fielding tries to convince Aziz that India is not Indian property. He claims that "it's nobody's India" (p.273. Fielding is one of the few Englishmen who genuinely tries to treat Indians as equals. He is friendly, honest, and fair-minded, which makes him stand apart from most of the British officials. Fielding fits in the sample of Memmi who have refused the colonization, Memmi says about such individuals, "Since his rebellion has closed the doors of colonization to him why not knock at the door of the colonized whom he defends" (Memmi 2003:66). However, when it comes to the question of India's independence, Fielding shows a very different attitude. He tries to convince Dr. Aziz that India will never be able to become a free and united nation. Fielding tells Aziz that independence is impossible because of India's own internal divisions. He points out that Indians follow many different religions, languages, and traditions. Hindus, Muslims, and other communities often have conflicting interests, which, according to Fielding, makes unity very difficult. He believes that because of these differences, India cannot govern itself successfully. At the same time, Fielding suggests that the British are the best rulers India could have. He argues that the British understand Indians better than other colonial powers, such as the French or Portuguese, and therefore rule more effectively. In saying this, Fielding shows the contradiction in his character. On the one hand, he criticises the arrogance of his fellow Englishmen. On the other hand, he himself

still clings to the colonial belief that Britain has a natural right to govern India. The inherent modus operandi developed by the imperialists over the years has seeped in the 'liberal' Fielding and as Ngugi finds that it is a 'cultural bomb' which annihilates the peoples belief in their identity, their heritage of struggle, their unity, their capacities and ultimately themselves (Ngügï 1986:3). Fielding's attempts to make Aziz despair reflect his deeper doubts. Even though he is more liberal than most colonisers, he cannot imagine a world where India is free and fully independent. This shows how hard it was for the English, even the sympathetic ones, to separate themselves from the power and privilege they enjoyed under colonialism. Forster uses Fielding's attitude to highlight the deep barriers that prevent true friendship and equality between English and Indians. Despite Fielding's attempts to frustrate Aziz, he remains determined:

> India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one! … India a nation! What an apotheosis! …. Fielding mocked again. And Aziz in an awful rage … cried: 'Down with the English anyhow …. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then' – he rode against him furiously – 'and then,' he concluded, half kissing him, 'you and I shall be friends. (Foster-315)

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is mainly about whether true friendship can exist between the English and the Indians during colonial rule. Throughout the novel, Forster shows that colonialism makes friendship difficult, even impossible, because the coloniser and the colonised are never on equal ground. The novel begins with the possibility of friendship—Dr. Aziz with Mrs. Moore, Adela, and Fielding—but ends with the recognition that such friendships cannot last in the face of politics, race, and power.

At one point in the novel, Fielding tries to convince Aziz that India will never become a united nation. This already creates distance between them, because Aziz, after his painful trial experience, believes in India's future independence. Fielding, though critical of the British arrogance, still benefits from his position as part of the English ruling class. This is also Forster's own contradiction—he attacks colonisation in the novel but, as an Englishman, he too benefits from the very system he criticises. One of the most symbolic moments comes during the Hindu festival of Shri Krishna. Aziz and Fielding fall into the water, which is described like a rebirth. In Hinduism, Shri Krishna saves people from sorrow, and this festival celebrates renewal and joy. Their fall into the river metaphorically purges them of their prejudices as a holy dip in the river purges the sin of a devotee. They lose their bitterness, laugh again, and seem to return to friendship. For a brief moment, India feels like paradise—bright, colourful, and full of life. The imagery of butterflies, sunlight, and trees suggests harmony. But this paradise cannot last. The cobra and custard-apple trees remind us of the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Just as temptation caused the Fall from Paradise, so too will the reality of colonial politics destroy the brief sense of

unity between Aziz and Fielding. Temptation, sexuality, and mistrust foreshadow that the renewed bond is only temporary.

By the end of the novel, Aziz and Fielding realise that their friendship cannot survive. Forster shows that while individuals may try to transcend racial and political barriers, the larger structure of coloniser and colonised will always interfere. The English cannot escape their position of power, and the Indians cannot forget their humiliation. Even if the British were to leave India, Forster suggests that the cultural and racial gulf between East and West might still remain. Critic Edward Said calls this a "disappointing conclusion." For him, the ending leaves readers with a sense of separation, with the Orient (the East) permanently marked as "foreign" and estranged from the West. Said argues that Forster relocates the problem of friendship from racial difference to power structures. In other words, Forster pleads for the possibility of individual friendship, but as long as one side holds more power, the bond will always be fragile. In short, *A Passage to India* shows both the hope and the failure of human connection. Friendship is imagined, briefly experienced, but never fully achieved. The gulf—racial, cultural, and political—remains too wide to cross.

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