

## Dehumanization, A Mechanism of Colonialism Resulting in an Unbridgeable Gulf between the Colonizer and the Colonized: An Analysis of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*



Nur Selina

Lecturer, Department of English, Uttara University, Dhaka-1230, Bangladesh

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study is to analyze the dehumanizing attitude exhibited by the British colonizers towards the native Indians in E.M Forster's *A Passage to India*. The very attitude is responsible for widening the gap between the two groups. This paper investigates how the colonial mindset of the British characters leads them to view the Indian characters as inferior, subjects of subjugation which creates an unmitigated gap between the Anglo Indians and the native Indians in a colonial setting. Moreover, the ambivalent nature from both parties disrupts the meaningful relationship between the native Indians and the Anglo Indians. The colonizers never wanted to bring the colonized to their same standing that made the attempt of bridging the gap futile. In this qualitative study, textual references from the novel, *A Passage to India* have been investigated to unveil the impact of dehumanization resulting from colonization. This study has successfully presented the predicament of the colonized and the inhumane treatment of the British bureaucrats through the portrayal of a Muslim Indian doctor, Dr. Aziz, a British bureaucrat, Ronny Heaslop and some other characters. The paper has tried to trace out the reasons of unbridgeable gulf between the colonizers and the colonized resulting from dehumanization of the British colonizers. It has explored how the ambivalent relationship, superiority complex, racial discrimination and the bureaucratic compulsion have led to the collapse of social relationships creating hatred and distrust between the colonizers and the colonized.

**KEY WORDS:** Dehumanization, ambivalence, colonialism, bureaucracy, Anglo-Indians, racism

### INTRODUCTION

In *A Passage to India* (1924), E.M. Forster depicts the wide gap between the colonizer and the colonized as a direct result of the dehumanizing treatment by the British colonial rulers. Bureaucrats who played the key role in continuing the state affairs run by the British government are major mechanisms of colonialism. Every bureaucrat is bound to adapt to the prevailing customs, attitudes, manners, and other factors when working in a new environment. The significant alterations concern something that entails cruel interactions with the local people. The British characters' propensity to view Indians as stereotypes, and tools of their own ambitions serves as an example of the dehumanizing mentality in *A Passage to India*. This mindset is a reflection of colonialism in general, which is characterized by the deliberate suppression of the subordinate group's identity, and humanity. Native Indians are depicted as powerless, voiceless, and often portrayed as passive victims of British colonialism. During colonization, the English lost their humanity which gave rise to all of the dehumanizing feelings toward the Indian. They began to think of the indigenous people as being an inferior, subservient, ugly, erotic and filthy race. According to the British colonizers, the native Indians lack manners and etiquette and "the streets are mean... filth deters all but the invited guest" (Forster, 1989: p.31).

The colonizers begin acting godlike when in charge of the colonized. These are the gods that the native people worship, and the colonizers are content to be regarded as such. Forster has truly said, "At Chandrapore the Turtons were little gods; soon they would retire to some suburban villa, and die exiled from glory" (Forster, 1989: p.50). Additionally, it is part of their duty to corner the Indians due to their dominance over them. Dr. Aziz's words "When we poor blacks take bribes, we perform what we are bribed to perform... The English take and do nothing" shows the dishonesty of the colonizers (Forster, 1989: p.34). It denotes the egoistic and narcissistic nature of the colonizer. This also exposes the British as the most privileged in a foreign setting. They are devoid of good human qualities in the process of colonization; they are bound to exploit the Indians in every way as their position requires so. This is traceable in Ronny's chat with his Mom. He says, "We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly" (Forster, 1989: p.69)! The superiority complex of the English involves them in torturing the natives. Forster has exposed the despotic English bureaucrats' mental degeneration. The Indians often suffer at the hands of Ronny, Major Calendar, and Mr. and Mrs. McBryde. They are notorious for inflicting the Indians. The natives are quite aware of being dehumanized. As a result of their powerlessness at the hands of the English, they were kept apart, and now they even fear developing friendships with the English because friendship

## Dehumanization, A Mechanism of Colonialism Resulting in an Unbridgeable Gulf between the Colonizer and the Colonized: An Analysis of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

is a connection between people of the same mentality. The colonizers never wanted the colonized to be of their same standing. They just wanted to dominate the native Indians by capitalizing imperialistic strategies. If they don't maintain master slave relationships, the natives will gain grounds on which they can find out their limitations and their mission at imperialism founded on unjust causes will be shattered.

Throughout the novel, British characters consistently stereotype Indians, viewing them as an inferior race. This dehumanizes Indians by reducing them to simplistic, one-dimensional caricatures. For example, Mrs. Callendar, a British woman who is invited to an Indian tea party, dismisses the Indians as "natives" and remarks that "they are all the same". This type of dehumanization is particularly evident in the British characters' interactions with Dr. Aziz, the Indian protagonist of the novel, who is often viewed as exotic and mysterious. The British treated the Indians as objects and this type of dehumanization strips the Indians of their individuality reducing them to dependent and passive recipients of British benevolence. Mrs. Moore tells Dr. Aziz that he is "a dear boy" and that "we must take care of you." This kind of language reinforces the idea that Indians are not capable of looking after themselves and need the guidance of their British superiors. Fielding, an Anglo-Indian schoolmaster and Mrs. Moore struggled a lot to bridge the gap between the two groups. Even though Fielding has developed intimate connections with several Indian characters, he is conscious of the constraints placed on him by his role as a representative of the British colonial power. He notes that even though he may feel sympathy for the Indian characters, he cannot fully understand their experiences because of his own privileged position (Forster, 1989: p.129).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* shows how the Indians are denied basic human rights, including the right to self-determination, and are subjected to various forms of discrimination and violence. The denial of giving due importance to the individuals as a fellow human being having the same right, worth and standing is associated with cruelty and afflictions. According to Haslam, "Dehumanization, corresponding to the denial of other individuals' humanity, is based on the refutation of uniquely or essentially human characteristics (e.g. civility, refinement, moral sensibility, emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, or cognitive openness;)" (Haslam, 2006). It becomes easier to justify inhumane behavior against people when they are viewed as subhuman.

Many postcolonial critics argue that *A Passage to India* exposes the dehumanizing effects of colonialism on both the colonizers and the colonized. For example, in his essay "The Burden of Englishness: Race, Class, and Imperialism in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*", Paul B. Armstrong argues that the novel "exposes the moral confusion and psychological disintegration that result from the imperialist enterprise" (Armstrong 2002, p. 66). According to Armstrong, the British characters in the novel are unable to recognize the humanity of the Indian characters because their colonial mindset has conditioned them to view the Indians as subservient.

Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* showed the otherness by giving reference from E.M Forster's *A passage to India* where he describes the futile attempt at friendship between Fielding and Dr. Aziz as a cultural remnant bridging the East and the West. Said conveys both the ability to form a deep bond and the inaccessible foreignness of the Orient. *A passage to India* is not different from other colonial writing for proper differentiation between the colonizers and the colonized. Forster as an Englishman also expressed his opinion that portrayed the English as "us" and the Indians as "others". It is a clear distinction to present the inferiority that is a completely racial and inhumane attitude towards the natives. Aime` Ce`saire in his essay, *Discourse on Colonialism* points out that in a colonized setting, there will be 'no human contact, but relations in dominance and submission' (Ce`saire, 177, 1). According to him, a colonized society has been reduced to officialdom where every human relationship suffers. (Ce`saire, 200, 2). In *A passage to India*, both the Indians and Anglo- Indians act according to the colonial rule. Nobody acts as an individual and this mechanical relationship is the ultimate barrier to a meaningful relationship.

*A passage to India* deals with the ambivalent relationship between the British colonizers and the native Indians that poses the difficulty in bridging the gap between them. Ambivalence refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action (Young, 1995: 161). Homi Bhabha in his discourse theory describes that the relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Forster portrays Dr Aziz as a sympathetic character who is kind-hearted and hospitable to the British visitors. At the same time Forster shows how Aziz is affected by the colonial power structure and experiences a sense of frustration and resentment towards the British. Similarly Forster presents the British characters in a complex and enigmatic manner. He highlights the arrogance of the British colonizers towards the Indians. However, he shows the humanity and vulnerability of some British characters. In this regard we can reference Homi Bhabha who states that the colonial relationship is always ambivalent, it generates the seed of its own destruction (Bhabha, 1994). In her article "The Ambiguities of *A Passage to India*", Deborah Baker argues that "Forster's novel is filled with ambiguities that reflect the complexity of India, the difficulty of communication between cultures, and the impossibilities of final resolution" (Baker, 1995: p.51).

The Europeans try to justify the colonization in the name of civilization but the whole process of imperialism is not logical and justified as it requires grabbing lands, territories near and distant, bringing others under foreign rule, and subduing human rights. The sustenance of colonization is safeguarded by the dehumanized British bureaucrats. They function as a system to expand and sustain the British Empire. Elleke Boehmer has rightly said, "For though the natives' lands were occupied in the name of civilization,

## Dehumanization, A Mechanism of Colonialism Resulting in an Unbridgeable Gulf between the Colonizer and the Colonized: An Analysis of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

they themselves, judged from the perspective of Europe, could not become completely civilized. Reason and authority were posited in relation to unreason, lack of civilization, disorder, which were located in the colonies" (Boehmer, 2005).

The dehumanizing effect of British colonialism on the colonized in *A Passage to India* has similarity with Chinua Achebe's depiction of British colonialism on the Igbo people of pre colonial Nigeria in his *Things Fall Apart*. The way the colonial government treats the Igbo people's religious practices is absolutely dehumanizing. The British see the Igbo religion as primitive and uncivilized, and they attempt to stamp it out in order to impose their own values and beliefs on the people. This is evident in the character of Mr. Brown, the Christian missionary who takes a more sympathetic and understanding approach to the Igbo people, but is eventually replaced by Reverend Smith, who takes a more aggressive and parochial attitude towards the Igbo religion. Reverend Smith views the world in simplistic terms and sees the Igbo people as inherently evil and in need of salvation by the British. His attitude reflects the dehumanizing nature of colonialism, which seeks to erase the culture and traditions of the colonized people in order to impose the values and beliefs of the colonizer. "He [Reverend James Smith] condemned openly Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness" (Achebe, 1958: Chapter 22).

### DISCUSSION

*A passage to India* is a product of E.M Forster's visits to India. From his visit, he came to realize that the way Anglo Indians treated natives wasn't right. The British became inhuman in the colonial setting where they are placed in a position to keep everything well with the British Raj. As they are a part of the colonization, they are under the compulsion of the indispensable dehumanized process. We learn that the attitudes of the British in India are entirely different from those who are in the local setting because the same Britishers demonstrated their polished behavior in Britain for Dr. Aziz who traveled there for higher education. In the process of colonialism the British underwent radical changes in order to contend with the authoritarian body to which they belonged. They function as a system to expand and sustain the British Empire. The way Ronny responded to his mother's expectation shows how the colonizers in India were forcibly reduced to the status of exploiters. He is aware of the expectations of the locals, but because of his bureaucratic compulsion, he is unable to meet those expectations. Ronny's change is a conscious change that a person would not choose unless forced to. The whole process of imperialism was not logical and justified as it required grabbing lands, territories near and distant, bringing others under foreign rule, subduing human rights. Sustenance of colonization is safeguarded by the inhuman British bureaucrats. They are bound to change to implement their motif of colonization. The changing process took two years in case of men who are the direct part of the British rulers whereas women took six months to be changed as Hamidullah says, "I give any Englishman two years, be he Turton or Burton, it is only the difference of one letter. And I give any English woman six months. All are exactly alike" (Forster, 1989: p.34). In *Shooting an Elephant*, Orwell expresses the same opinion by saying "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys."

It is pretty evident that the colonizers are conscious of their own degradation as civilized citizens. The conquerors unfairly usurped the native Indians because of their weakness. When Mrs. Moore was shocked at her son's comment over the Indians, she was pondering over that and said 'the essential life of him had been slain' (Forster, 1989: p.55). Her observation shows that colonization has made Ronny inhuman. In George Orwell's essay *shooting an Elephant*, he knows that the locals don't deserve to be subjugated or oppressed. Still, he kills the elephant for avoiding being laughed at by the Burmese. The barbaric behavior of the colonizers reminds us of the dehumanized behavior of Ronny Heaslop when he expresses his notion that Indians don't deserve to be behaved pleasantly. The colonizers are just tools to exercise the power. They became tyrants in the process of imperialism. They lose their freedom of choice and become objects to implement the task of the government. He said, 'I am out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched country by force...I'm just a servant of the Government' (Forster, 1989: p.69).

The British bureaucrats look at the Indians as stereotypes, which is completely dehumanizing that strips of individuality. Despite his close proximity to the British, Aziz remains an outsider, excluded from the inner circle of Anglo-Indian society. He is often subject to racist comments from the British characters. For instance, Mrs. Callendar's dismissal of Dr. Aziz as just another "native" doctor indicates her lack of regard for him as an individual and her propensity to view him through the lens of colonial stereotypes (Forster, 1989: p.39). In response to Adela Quested's request to be friends, he highlights the importance of respecting a person's individuality and personality, which is often ignored by the British who view the Indians as a homogenous group to be controlled and exploited. Adela accuses Aziz of assaulting her that might be the result of hallucination. But without showing any thoughtful activity, Adela stereotyped Mr. Aziz like other Britishers in India. This type of dehumanizing mindset reminds us Edward Said's citation of George Orwell in *Orientalism* about the colonized who "arise out of the earth, they sweat and starve for a few years, and then sink back into the nameless moulds of the graveyard and nobody notices that they are gone [and] even the graves themselves soon fade back into the soil" (Said, 1979, 254).

The British attitude towards their role in India is characterized by a sense of entitlement and superiority. The British assumed that they had the right to rule India indefinitely, and are threatened by any attempt by the Indians to assert their own agency and autonomy. Dr. Aziz recognized that British power cannot last if they treat the locals well; therefore, they deliberately mistreat them

## Dehumanization, A Mechanism of Colonialism Resulting in an Unbridgeable Gulf between the Colonizer and the Colonized: An Analysis of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

to demonstrate their superiority over those who were subjected to British colonial rule. In the beginning we see that Doctor Aziz was summoned by his boss Major Callendar for no reason and he didn't come to leave a note when he left the office after calling the poor subordinate "I am just a subordinate, my time is of no value, the veranda is good for an Indian," (Forster, 1989: p.45) Being a colleague, Dr. Abdul Aziz finds the honor to be the least. He felt embarrassed and humiliated by the way his responsible professional acted. The boss's insensitivity as a result of the dehumanization process stunned Abdul Aziz. He went to the mosque even though it wasn't the time for regular prayer since he was feeling professionally frustrated. Even Mrs. Callendar didn't care to take the permission of Aziz when she took the tonga of Dr. Aziz. He said, "She has just taken my tonga without my permission-do you call that being charming?"(Forster, 1989: p.44)

The psychological effects of colonization were felt by the locals. Here, Dr. Aziz is not showing anger or protest. He knows that the native Indians are destined to accept the tyrannical attitude of the colonizers. Their aggression subdued human fine feelings of the enlightened natives. The Indians were treated as slaves by the Anglo Indians. "Windows were barred, lest the servants should see their mem-sahibs acting.." (Forster, 1989: p.45). Despite being an English colonial author, Foster criticizes the dehumanizing actions of bureaucrats. When Ronny says that he is a 'sun dried' bureaucrat we see a bigger change that comes over him in the process of imperialism. He has undergone this change like other British colonizers. It is a pre-planned strategy to deal with the Indians that his prolonged presence in the colonial context has made him rude, haughty, and inhuman. On one occasion, Ronny was tempted to retort to Dr. Aziz but he said nothing because as a bureaucrat his job is to avoid incidents.(Forster, 1989: p.93). They all have the same approach towards the natives. They are shaheeb and burra shaheeb to the Indians to distinguish the breach between the master and the subject. When Ronny says to his Mom, "We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do"(Forster, 1989: p.69), we find a similarity with Joseph Conrad's reference to Europeans as 'faithless pilgrims' in *Heart of Darkness*. Apparently they are giving efforts to civilize the uncivilized people but in fact they are busy to accumulate ivory. Kurtz, the protagonist of the novella underwent a radical change through the loss of his refinement as an educated European. All his feelings of humanity were overcome by his instinct of brutality. Kurtz became corrupted over the course of his stay in Africa. Americans in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and British in *A Passage to India*, both have violated human rights through exploitation. The mechanisms of racism and colonialism are intimately related to one another. When *A Passage to India* and *Native Son* are closely analyzed, it becomes clear how the British government in India and white Americans in the United States both used exclusion as a tool of dominance and control over Indians and blacks, respectively. Racism and colonization both harm native people in similar ways. They have behaved inhumanely toward the underlings. E.M Forster uses the word 'niggers' in his novel. A British lady says, "her husband was away in the district, and she dared not return to her bungalow in case the 'niggers attacked' (Forster, 1989: p.188). In *Native Son*, Americans were portrayed as Racist, and they treated the natives as niggers. Similarly native Indians are treated as slavish niggers by the British colonizers that is absolutely dehumanizing.

We can clearly see that these are the colonists' predetermined methods for instilling in the locals a sense of disillusionment with their own identity. Dehumanization is thus a planned and inevitable result of colonialism. On the one hand the behaviors of Ronny and other bureaucrats expose their preconceived bitter and unfavorable treatment towards the Indians in order to make room for the colonizers. On the other hand Dr. Aziz suffers greatly as a result of Adela Quested's accusations against him. Had he not been an Indian, he might have avoided the trials. The Marabar Caves incident highlights the gap between the two groups, as the British characters rush to defend their own at the expense of the Indian characters. When Dr. Aziz was accused of assaulting Adela Quested, the entire British community turned against him and the British characters immediately rally around her, assuming that she must be telling the truth. The Indian characters are marginalized and disbelieved, and their attempts to tell their side of the story are dismissed as irrational and incomprehensible (Forster, 1989: p.255- 276 ). Adela's accusation of physical assault against Dr Aziz reveals the inhumane treatment of the British colonizers to the native Indians. The unanticipated and perplexing events that took place in the Malabar caves eventually led to "the complete trial of hostility, evil, and negation" (White-647). The trial of Dr. Aziz calls attention to all the racial tensions between the native Indians and the Anglo-Indians that foil the mutual relationship. It is also shown in this novel that as soon as the police officer, McBryde was reported about the charge made by Adela Quested, in no time he arrested Aziz. He ransacked the house of Dr. Aziz with an evil objective of tarnishing the image of a respectable Indian physician. He ransacked Dr. Aziz's personal belongings and sorted out things accusing him of moral degradation. The charge of molestation and immediate ransacking frustrated Mr. Aziz utterly and fortified the notion of impossibility of bridging the gap between the natives and the Anglo Indians. This trial exposed not only the improbability of friendship but also enmity that was prevailing for centuries between the colonizers and the colonized. Their continued insistence on Dr. Aziz's guilt demonstrates the dehumanizing effect of colonialism on the British characters, who prioritize their own sense of superiority over justice and truth.

In Mau, when Fielding approaches Dr Aziz to be friend, he arrogantly avoids him and expresses his conviction that friendship is not possible between Britain and India until India is free. In spite of being very impartial and supportive to Aziz, Fielding is misunderstood because of his giving shelter to Adela in his residence after the trial. The situation gives the impression to Dr. Aziz that Fielding will marry Adela. As most of the British bureaucrats are mechanically against the natives, Fielding's being an exception couldn't change the deep rooted ideas of Indians like Dr. Aziz. His denial of making friendship with the English until driving the

## Dehumanization, A Mechanism of Colonialism Resulting in an Unbridgeable Gulf between the Colonizer and the Colonized: An Analysis of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

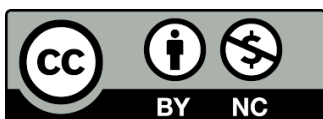
English out of India expresses his earnest longing of becoming free from colonial domination. Dr. Aziz duly said, "If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then.. you and I shall be friends"(Forster, 1989: P.316).

### CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates how the dehumanizing treatment of the British colonial rulers leads to a wide gap between the native Indians and the Anglo-Indians. The unbridgeable gulf between the colonizer and the colonized that predominates in the colonial setting is depicted by E.M. Foster in *A Passage to India*. All of the bad aspects of the human race are a product of the inequality between them. The British characters in the novel utilize their position of authority to emphasize their superiority and exclude the Indian characters from their social circles, demonstrating how racism and colonialism work to maintain this division. The analysis of the text shows that the human bond between Indians and Anglo Indians was not improved by shared regard and empathy because of the English people's overall dehumanizing attitude.

### REFERENCES

- 1) Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies, The Key Concept*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
- 2) Abu Baker, Ali. "The Master-Slave Relationship in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*". *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 26-33.
- 3) Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 2002.
- 4) Armstrong, Paul B. "The Burden of Englishness: Race, Class, and Imperialism in E.M. Forster's 'A Passage to India'." In *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*, edited by Brian W. Shaffer, 63-77. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
- 5) Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, London, Reprint 1969.
- 6) Baker, Deborah "The Ambiguities of *A Passage to India*". *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1995, p. 51.
- 7) Bhabha, H. K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- 8) Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2005
- 9) Césaire, Aimé, and Joan Pinkham. *Discourse on Colonialism*. NYU Press, *JSTOR*. 2000.
- 10) Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, Coyote Canyon Press, 1902.
- 11) Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. Penguin Books, 1989. Reprint.
- 12) Haslam, Nick. "Dehumanization: An Interrogative Review." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 10, No. 3, 2006, pp. 252-264.
- 13) Kellman, Steven G. "*The Political and Psychological Context of A Passage to India*." *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 53-61
- 14) Orwell, George. *Shooting an Elephant*. New Writing, UK, 1936.
- 15) Said, Edward, W. *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, London, 1994.
- 16) Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, London, 1979. Print.
- 17) Wright, Richard. *Native Son*, Perennial Classics, Herper & Brothers, New York, 1940.
- 18) White, Gertrude, M. *A Passage to India: Analysis and Publication PMLA*, 1953.
- 19) Young, R. J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London: Routledge, 1995.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.