

# Colonialist Representations in “A Passage to India” By E. M. Forster

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**Abstract –** *In this article, we have tried to examine the nature of colonial literature and how postcolonial critics have also tried to understand it or even deconstruct it. It would be pertinent to look at the various literary terms that we have been using and discussing through this esteemed paper. When we talk of imperialism/ imperial, what is meant is the political authority with which a state assumed control and power over another state/ nation/ country. Imperialism would therefore, mean the British Empire assuming complete control over India or her other colonies. Imperialism (Colonialism).is normally reflected through the use of symbols and symbolism and pageantry, which once again is indicative of another dominant culture. England was, no doubt, an imperial power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Colonialism is a result of imperialism. A consolidated imperial power involves capturing of territories, settlement, very often the exploitation of resources of the conquered territory and an attempt to rule the native inhabitants of a newly colonised land and India was one of the beautiful examples. Britishers left an indelible impression on India and its people.*

**Key Words –** Colonial, Postcolonial, Deconstruct, Imperialism, Political Authority, British Empire, Pageantry, Symbolism, Culture, Territory, Exploitation etc.

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In this paper, an attempt will be made to focus on the use of language by colonial powers for the purpose of cultural colonisation. We need to first comprehend how language originates and develops along with the culture of a community and how it is used for communication and cultural interaction. We need to analyse the effect of the adoption of the coloniser's language on the culture and self-definition of the colonised people. In this article, we will take up readings of two canonical texts: one by one of the foremost writer of postcolonial literature, Chinua Achebe, and the other by a prominent postcolonial critic, Abdul R. Jan Mohamed.

Abdul R Jan Mohamed's essay, The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature was published in the well-known scholarly journal Critical Inquiry in the Autumn of 1985 in a special volume entitled "Race," Writing and Difference'. Jan Mohamed starts his essay by voicing his concern with the fact that most of the critical material on colonialist literature does not take into account the political context of culture and history. Due to this, there is a systematic avoidance of any analysis of domination, manipulation, exploitation and disenfranchisement that forms part of any relationship. However, it certainly is part of all colonial relations. He posits that to understand colonialist discourse we have to map the ideological function of this discourse with the actual imperialist practices. When we study

colonialist fiction, we will find that the ideological functions can be understood, indeed must be analysed, in terms of the politics and culture of the European and the colonialist, in terms of the colonised and their land in which this fiction is set.

In order to enable the postcolonial critic to analyse colonialist literature by examining the politics of culture and history Jan Mohamed gives us his model of the Manichean allegory:

Just s imperialists "administer" the resources of the conquered country, so colonialist discourse "commodifies" the native subject into a stereotyped object and uses him as a "resource" for colonialist fiction. The European writer commodifies the native by negating his individuality, his subjectivity, so that he is now perceived as a generic being that can be exchanged for any other native (they all look alike, act alike, and so on). Once reduced to his exchange-value in the colonialist signifying system, he is fed into the Manichean allegory, which functions as the currency, the medium of exchange, for the entire colonialist discursive system. The exchange function of the allegory remains constant, while the generic attributes themselves can be substituted infinitely (and even contradictorily) for one another. As Said points out in his study of Orientalism, such strategies depend on a flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient

without ever losing him the relative upper hand." Within such a representational economy, the writer's task is to "administer" the relatively scarce resources of the Manichean opposition in order to reproduce the native in a potentially infinite variety of images, the apparent diversity of which is determined by the simply machinery of Manichean allegory. (p. 64)

In colonial societies, Jan Mohamed argues, the dominant model of power is the Manichean opposition between the supposed superiority of the European and the alleged inferiority of the native. In colonialist literary representation this gives rise to diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between "black and white, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilisation and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, Self and Other, subject and object." The power of this Manichean opposition is so great that even those writers who are reluctant to acknowledge it, and are critical of imperialist exploitation, are sucked into it.

To illustrate his point Jan Mohamed re-reads some canonical novels, including Heart of Darkness and Rudyard Kipling's Kim. For our work we shall focus on his reading of E M Forster's *A Passage to India*. Jan Mohamed begins his analysis of Forster by observing that in *A Passage to India* Forster very consciously and deliberately brackets the values and basis of his own culture so that he can look beyond them, so that he can perceive other cultures without being biased by his own. He does this in order to appreciate the common ground between Self and Other, or the term that Jan Mohamed uses, an alterity. Thus, Forster is harsh in his satirisation of the stereotypes of colonialist racism and is able to present accurately and concretely differences between Muslim and Hindu beliefs, or the differences between Anglo-Indian and English values.

Forster makes a sincere attempt to examine the possibilities of cultural and racial rapprochement – a coming together, or union – of the two faces, of the East and the West, the colonizer and the colonised. However, the very devices he uses for this eventually guarantee their failure. Jan Mohamed's analysis of Forster's use of the landscape of India – the Marabar caves – the spirituality and religion that symbolizes Indians, and the ambiguity of the metaphysical and mystical experiences of the British in India expose the inevitability of failure in forging a union between the two cultures at even the minutest level. He points out that India is characterised as a land of pathos, of an ontological homesickness that is embodied in the Marabar Hills and caves. He further shows that Forster stresses on the ambiguity of the caves, the Jain religion that has for its goal the absolute Nothing, and more important, on the Indian mind which is so steeped in ambiguity that it confuses a branch with a snake. Thus, metaphysical difference is embodied in the very landscape, religion and mentality of India. The implication of Forster's use of the metaphysical difference can be seen in the end when Fielding asks Aziz why they cannot be friends.

Forster portrays friendship of Fielding and Aziz as the only one that bears the potential of transcending racial barriers.

Fielding is rational, lacks racial prejudice and is humane. Aziz has matured through his experiences with the British Raj. Both want to be friends, but the negative reply does not come from either of them, or from any of the political, social, historical and cultural structures that have so painstakingly been examined and analysed in the novel; rather, they come from the many inanimate objects that form India, the objects both "ridiculous and august", the objects that had said "Come" with their many mouths earlier in the novel. Jan Mohamed comments:

In the final analysis, racial difference is once again supported and justified by metaphysical difference. ...The narrative decision to turn India into a metaphysical protagonist inherently antithetical to Western liberal humanism probably stems from a sense of larger cultural differences, the machinery of which is similar to that of the Manichean allegory.

Jan Mohamed's conclusion, then, like Achebe's, is that it is impossible for Forster to completely put aside his own cultural value perspectives, and that is why he finds it difficult to end his novel with a union, a rapprochement, between his own supposedly superior European protagonist and his Other, the allegedly inferior colonised native. What makes Jan Mohamed's reading of *A Passage to India* so much more complex than Achebe's reading of Heart of Darkness is his ability to use the tools of the postcolonial critic to expose the colonialist discourse of a novel that is valorized as being different from other colonialist fiction, a novel that is seen as representing Indian from within and not with the usual racist bias that is inherent in other colonial works. Jan Mohamed shows that even when a writer belonging to the colonial power deliberately and consciously sets out to expose the stereotypes that his countrymen have indulged in, and to move towards breaking down of the barrier between Self and Other, he cannot move out of his own cultural background completely.

Abdul R Jan Mohamed started his essay by voicing his concern with the fact that most of the critical material available on colonialist literature does not acknowledge the influence of the political context of culture and history. He suggests that in order to understand the colonialist discourse one would need to trace the ideological function of this discourse with what was the actual imperialist practice of that time. He then goes on to re-read E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Through his re-reading of *A Passage to India*, he manages to show that even though Forster tried very hard to expose the stereotypes that his countrymen have indulged in, and to move towards a breaking down of the barrier between the Self and the other, he cannot move out

of his own cultural background completely as is evident from his ending of *A Passage to India*.

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