

Alex Phuong

The Trouble with Forming Meaningful Bonds in E.M. Forster's "A Passage to India"

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The Trouble with Forming Meaningful Bonds

Human relationships help define people. That is because humans, by nature, are social creatures. In spite of the possibility to connect, there are often times cases in which differences would result in separation rather than unity. Specifically, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized created tension for both English people and foreigners as they attempted to create a society in which they could coexist harmoniously. The conflict that exists between the different races and cultures in twentieth century England and India formed the basis for E.M. Forster's critique on friendships between people of different cultures. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* utilizes failed inter-racial friendships to reveal how divisions between people separate them, and implies that universal harmony between people is impossible in a diverse world.

There are instances in the novel in which the desire to establish friendships between cultures create complications. For example, Dr. Aziz, an Indian man, attempts to assimilate himself with the English culture, which creates complications between himself and the people around him. Specifically, he attempts to become part of a culture that he admires by associating himself with people like Mr. Fielding. Nevertheless, Dr. Aziz "was rooted in society and Islam" (Forster 131). Thus, part of the issue why Dr. Aziz cannot form a meaningful bond with Mr. Fielding is because the culture forbids such an interaction. In fact, "[Dr. Aziz] belonged to a tradition, which bound him, and he had brought children into the world, the society of the future" (Forster 131). The children represent the people who might live in the world at a later time. Dr. Aziz might have issues with interacting with other cultures presently, but the children represent the ideal of what society hopes for as people yearn to live harmoniously.

Tensions heighten when Adela Quested, an Englishwoman, yearns for a projected image of India rather than a dreary reality. Specifically, she mentions, "I want to see the

real India” (Forster 22). Adela’s perception of what is “real” (Forster 22) presents a double-entendre. On one level, she wants to see what India is really like. On another level, she can only see the bleak reality of India instead of the mystified version of India that she dreams about encountering. Thus, part of the conflict between herself and her associations with other people involve the misconception of what India is actually like. Therefore, having unrealistic expectations about a specific culture contributes to the issue of people attempting to form friendships.

The strain that exists between the different cultures culminates into the climactic scene in the court, which reveals how friendships between different cultures are hard to form. Specifically, while Adela was in the court, she was fixated on the “punkah wallah” (Forster 241). Her fascination with this man indicates that she is still attracted to the alluring façade of India that she has in her mind. She might have expressed the sentence, ““I want to see the *real India*”” (Forster 22), but she is still, again, just focusing on an ideal rather than a reality. Additionally, when she finally revokes her accusation against Dr. Aziz, the entire court room bursts out into chaos. Thus, the British and the Indians still resent each other even though the idea that Dr. Aziz did not rape Adela appears to be a positive truth. The idea of Dr. Aziz raping Adela also holds significance because it implies that the British and the Indians do not want their cultures to blend and create a hybrid monstrosity. That also reveals how sexual relationships between cultures are not that appropriate either. Ultimately, the friendships between cultures have trouble materializing because the two groups would rather be separate rather than blend together.

In spite of the anxiety that exists between people, Forster reveals the universal truth of the commonality that people share with each other. A “pleasant voice” (Forster 23) mentions, ““Come on, India's not as bad as all that”” (Forster 23). The character then adds, ““Other side of the earth, if you like, but we stick to the same old moon”” (Forster 23). The

usage of the moon implies that all people are universally the same in spite of the differences that attempt to separate them. Such an idea suggests that part of the reason why tension happens between people is because they forget that they are fundamentally the same even though they might be different superficially. For example, Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding might come from different cultures, but both of them are still human nevertheless. That is because the friendship that they shared prior to the court trial implies that it is possible for people of different races to mingle, but never fully combine due to their differences. The two men might have tried to be friendly with one another, but they still cannot completely unify because they forget about their basic humanity. Thus, part of the reason why tension exists between people of different cultures is because they fail to acknowledge their common universal nature, and that they are all human.

Even with the acknowledgement of the commonality that people share, Forster also provides the warning that it is difficult for people to unite completely. Specifically, the end of the novel implies that the world is not ready to become one. For example, as Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding were talking to each other while they were on their horses, Forster reveals, “But the horses didn’t want it—they swerved apart” (362). The horses hold symbolism because they are an example of domesticated animals. Even though human civilization domesticated animals, like horses, the horses represent the fundamental fact that people are still animals even though they created social establishments throughout history. In a way, the horses do act like people because they “didn’t want it” (Forster 362), meaning that people do not want to unite. Forster immediately follows that detail with the phrase with, “the earth didn’t want it” (362). The Earth is an interesting example of diction because it implies that all living beings, including people and animals, do not want to come together completely. Ultimately, even when people try to bond with one another, some friendships cannot form simply differences separate them.

Forster concludes the novel with the message that the world is not ready to completely assimilate all cultures. For example, Forster mentions very symbolic objects, such as “the temples, the tank, the jail, [and] the palace” (362). These objects present an allegory about the different institutions that make up human society. For example, Forster mentions “the temples” (362) that represent religion, especially eastern religion. That specific diction holds importance because the contrast between the East and the West is a major facet to the themes that Forster explores in *A Passage to India*. Additionally, the mentioning of “the tank” (Forster 362) and “the jail” (Forster 362) implies that war is still prevalent, and that times of peace cannot last forever. The mentioning of “the jail” (Forster 362) also brings about the idea of criminals, and it also implies that there really are some people out there who are so vile that they could never form meaningful friendships with others simply because of their heinous qualities. Thus, it is practically impossible for people to combine together, in terms of friendship, because the differences between them are that great. Forster also concludes the novel with the words, “they said in their hundred voices, ‘No, not yet,’ and the sky said, ‘No, not there.’” (362). The phrase, “‘not yet’” (Forster 362) implies that the world simply is not ready for universal peace. The sky also holds significance because it relates to how “the overarching sky” (Forster 5) encompasses all of Chandrapore, and implies that all people are only superficially united since they all live beneath the sky. However, the sky also said, “‘no, not there,’” (Forster 362) which suggests that even the sky cannot provide a safe haven for all people to come together and unite as one. Perhaps Forster uses this ending to suggest that friendship between people is possible, but the world simply is not ready for that kind of universal friendship yet.

Even though some of the characters might know about their common human nature, the idea of being foreign still creates problems nevertheless. There is a fear of foreigners mainly because of a lack of understanding. For example, according to the scholarly article

entitled, “*A Passage To India: The Colonial Discourse and the Representation Of India and Indians As Stereotypes,*” by Mohammad Ayub Jaija, Jaija reveals, “The Indians are portrayed as ashamed of themselves and of their culture. This reflects the impact of imperial culture upon the native culture and identity” (42). The English colonized the Indians, which contributed historically to the “impact of imperial culture” (42) that Jaija describes. In a way, Forster utilizes Dr. Aziz as a character who represents the consequences associated with colonization. He feels like a victim because he is among the colonized, and yearns to have that sense of power associated with being a colonizer. In fact, Dr. Aziz is a character who is essentially a victim of colonialism, which prevents him from forming meaningful bonds with the English. Additionally, Jaija reveals, “Dr. Aziz is constructed as a man, who has assimilated the Western culture to the extent that he has developed an Orientalist vision, leading to self-pity and self-hatred” (43). Ultimately, the English and the Indians have trouble forming meaningful bonds because the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized tarnished their hopes of uniting together. Furthermore, power and domination ultimately subjugates the Indians who would rather obtain power from the Englishmen rather than simply associate themselves with them on friendlier terms. Therefore, the damage associated with colonization reveals that the struggle to obtain power results in dire consequences that can prevent people of different cultures from coming together harmoniously. Thus, power is a major contributor to why different people have trouble assimilating together.

The characters in *A Passage to India* also have difficulty forming friendships because of the idea of difference needing to be acknowledged. For example, according to the scholarly article, “Reading India: E.M. Forster and the Politics of Interpretation,” Paul D. Armstrong reveals that *A Passage to India*, “invokes the ideal of non-reified, reciprocal knowledge of other people and cultures only to suggest that interpretation invariably requires

distancing, objectifying prejudgments” (367). The phrase, “requires distancing” (Armstrong 367), implies that separation is actually necessary in order for people to understand each other. For example, Dr. Aziz is different from the Englishmen, which is part of the reason as to why he could understand the power that the Englishmen hold. After becoming aware of that power, he decides he wants to associate himself with such people. Therefore, Dr. Aziz might want to emulate the English as a way to attack the dehumanizing nature of colonization, and to obtain personal power that could go against white supremacy as well. Additionally, the article also mentions that, “The novel’s primary victim of Anglo-Indian prejudice, the Moslem Aziz is full of his own prejudgments about his Hindu countrymen” (Armstrong 372). Such an interpretation implies that Dr. Aziz is essentially a person ashamed of his own race because he does not want to associate himself with people who hold less power. Instead, he wants to form friendships with people of higher ranking, such as the Englishmen. Therefore, part of the issue with forming friendships is the desire for power. In reality, Dr. Aziz wants to be among the Englishmen because he yearns to have the sense of domination related to being a colonizer rather than just simply being among the colonized. Thus, there is an issue between different races in which there is both prejudices between races as well as prejudice within races. The desire for power is essentially a major contributor as to why friendships across different cultures are hard to form because of the notion that one culture is superior to another. The people from different cultures would prefer power.

With the idea of a power struggle between people of different cultures, there is also the issue of race, and how the characters interpret that specific notion. For example, according to the scholarly article, “Bearing The White Man's Burden: Misrecognition and Cultural Difference In E. M. Forster's *A Passage To India*,” Timothy Christensen reveals, “Race, on the other hand, specifies the imaginary relationship of the English to the traumatic kernel of the real” (171). Christensen also describes the “real” (171) relationship as

“experienced within the novel as a resistance to the creation of full and satisfactory meaning within intercultural communication, and materialized within both the psychic and geographical space of the novel as the Marabar Caves” (171). The Marabar caves are symbolic of the mystery within the Indian landscape as well as within the Indian culture. Furthermore, the caves imply that there will always be a gap between cultures that could never be filled simply because such people will remain separate. Thus, the Marabar caves hold the significance that it symbolically represents the idea of a sense of emptiness that exists between people of different cultures. Christensen also adds that, “This limitation of understanding that the English characters confront when encountering their Indian other is almost universally resolved into the conviction that Indians are perpetually concealing some important truth about themselves” (172). The idea of the Indians having “some important truth” (Christensen 172) relates to the misunderstandings that could happen between the English and the Indians. Also, a possible reason as to why the English could never understand the Indians completely is because the Indians also do not completely understand who they are. Such confusion also relates to colonization because the English colonizers could have destroyed the original identity of the foreign Indians, and damaged the possibility of the two cultures ever uniting. Therefore, the act of colonization, and the desire for power, ultimately results in a strained relationship between the English and the Indians that is practically long-lasting.

Despite the enduring suffering of stressful interactions between cultures, Forster provides a sense of hope for the possibility of friendships that transcend the divisions of race and culture. Forster reveals that, when it comes to Mr. Fielding, “The world, [Fielding] believed, is a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence” (65). The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized might be destructive, but such a relationship also involves human interaction in

spite of the grim effects of colonization. The idea of “intelligence” (Forster 65) also relates to knowledge. Knowing more about a different culture could help alleviate some of the pain associated with strained friendships. Therefore, understanding a different culture, and understanding oneself, can help people of different cultures interact with one another more harmoniously rather than simply relying on stereotypes and misconceptions about foreigners. Different people might not know each other initially, but learning more about them can help relieve some of that social anxiety.

In the end, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* presents many different facets of race, culture, and what it means to be human. Forster employs characters from different cultures in order to reveal the misconceptions and prejudices that attempt to separate them. Additionally, there are misunderstandings that try to categorize them in terms of race, culture, and behavior. However, there is still the sense of hope that people can interact with each other on friendlier terms if they choose to increase their knowledge about one another. That is because knowledge is necessary for understanding. Forster might suggest that all of the people in the world are too different to ever fully come together as a unified human race, but there is still the possibility of at least relieving some of that tension. Not all people would want to interact with each other, but they can still learn more about one another only if they choose to seek such knowledge. Ultimately, *A Passage to India* is like a passage towards discovering oneself and one another.

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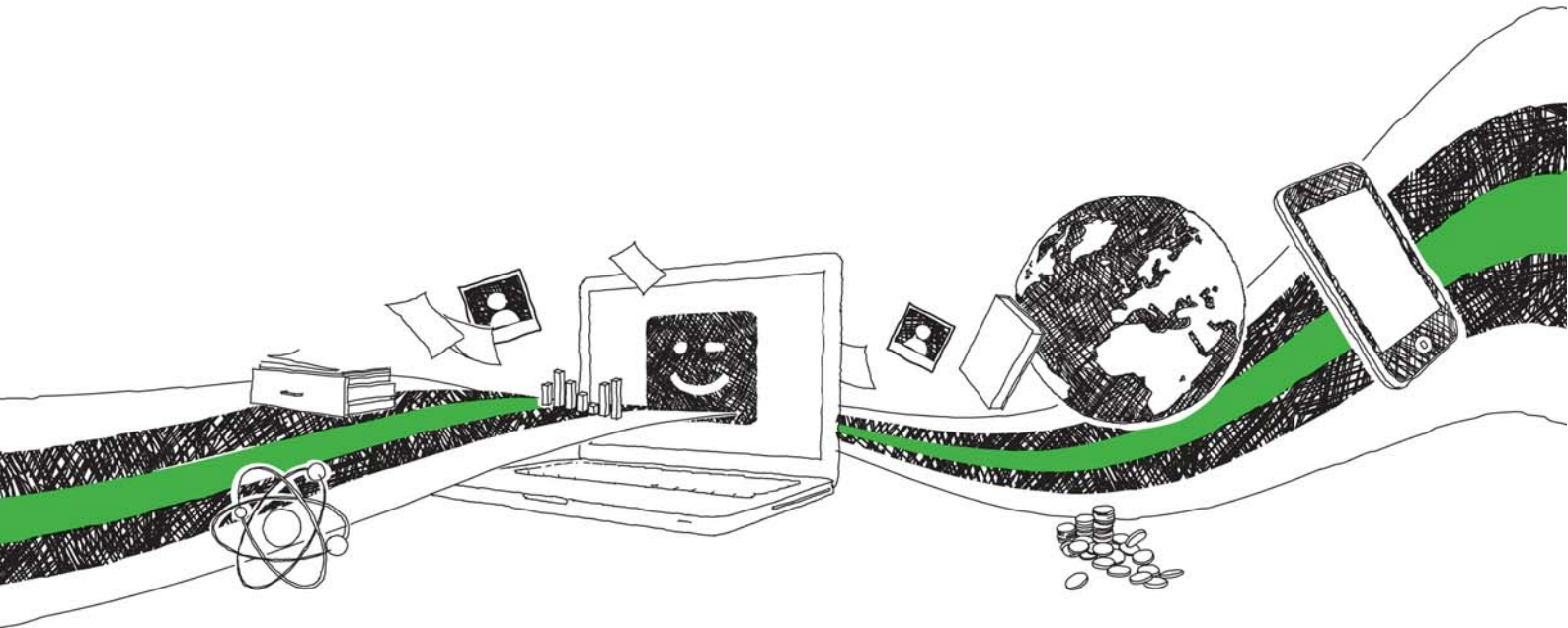
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