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Topic:

***The influence of British imperialism and racism on relationships to Indians in E. M. Forster's "A Passage to India" and how this topic is presented in the film by David Lean***

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## **I. Introduction**

This paper deals with E. M. Forster's novel "A Passage to India" and with its filming by David Lean. I am examining imperialism and racism as topics in the story. I would like to show in which ways these two terms influence the major characters and relationships between these characters in Forster's work. The analysis will mainly refer to the contents of the film.

I am starting with a little background information about Forster, theoretical definitions and some historical aspects. The main part of the paper deals with the 'bad'- and 'good'-working relationships. I will focus on filmic devices as well as on contents.

## **II. Background: E. M. Forster and British**

### **Imperialism**

#### **II.1 E. M. Forster in India**

E. M. Forster was in India twice, in 1912 and in 1921. During the last visit, Forster was in the service of a Maharajah as a private secretary. In the book "A Passage to India" he worked in his own experiences and attitudes which he saw. The book was published in 1924 and the last of his big novels.

It is widely regarded as a "telling attack on British imperialism", and is a book about relationships as well as about politics. It is written in the tradition of his former novels which also deal with relationships and love. But the political part in it, Forster's criticism on British rule in India, is based more on his ethical convictions than on political ones. Friendship for him was very important, perhaps even more important than love.

Forster experienced a multifaceted India which seemed strange to him. He was "appalled by the corruption of personal relationships produced by imperial rule". In India, there existed other divisions than in England. There were not only the class divisions that are produced by birth and wealth, but also a racial and religious division between people. There was a strong hierarchy in British India. We find this experience again in "A Passage to India".

## **II.2 Some definitions of British Imperialism and racism**

When Forster stayed in India, the so-called British India, the colony belonged to the British Empire. Over several centuries, the British conquered countries and made them into colonies of the crown. The practice of conquering and then governing foreign countries is called imperialism. It is an important subject in the story and of my further analysis.

### ***Imperialism is defined as:***

State policy, practice, or advocacy of extending power and dominion, especially by direct territorial acquisition or by gaining political and economic control of other areas. Because it always involves the use of power, whether military force or some subtler form, imperialism has often been considered morally reprehensible and the term is frequently employed in international propaganda to denounce and discredit an opponent's foreign policy.

There is a second term that is important for my examination: racism.

### ***Racism is defined as:***

Racism, also called Racialism, [is] the theory or idea that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and certain traits of personality, intellect, or culture and, combined with it, the notion that some races are inherently superior to others.

It is difficult to establish the origins of racist thinking, but certainly one of the most influential of such thinkers was the French writer and diplomat Joseph-Arthur, comte de Gobineau [...], who published his four-volume *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* in the middle of the 19th century. He taught the superiority of the white race over all others, and, among the whites, of the Aryans as having reached the heights of civilization.

Ramsay MacDonald said something interesting about the connection of these two terms: “National pride may be a valuable possession, but when it becomes a consciousness of racial superiority, it ceases to be an Imperial virtue.” (I will refer to this in point IV.)

In my paper, I would like to show how the terms described above influence the development of the relationships in “A Passage to India”.

### **II.3. Historical British attitudes towards Indians**

I found some historical documents that describe British life in British India and the British attitudes towards native people in India. I would like to remind the reader that Forster's book has a realistic background that is the impetus of the story. Keeping this in mind can help to understand the circumstances better.

It does not seem that the Indians were very well-liked by their rulers. The British ruled them, that was all. They did not appreciate them, they did not invite them to take part in the rule. The following statement illustrates a common attitude of those times:

“The natives, as far as I have seen, have nothing attractive in their character; indeed, as Gil Blas said, when he was with the actors, “I am tired of living among the seven deadly sins.”

This is a very harsh and cruel attitude towards the natives of India, but it may have been a widespread one among the ruling class. English people came to India for a job on her Majesty's order, not to find a new and better home than in Great Britain. In India, they found a different society, built up by imperialism. The natives belonged to the lower class and the British to the upper one. They found privileges in India, they would never have had in their home country. This prescribed way of life made it impossible to have close relationships to Indians. In addition, there were religious and cultural barriers that were hard to cross.

We find support of this in Ronny Heaslop's statement. He explains to his mother why the British are in India. It is not in order to become friends. They rule the Indians and try to do justice in an underdeveloped country.

### **III. How the British and the British Empire are presented in the film**

#### **III.1 The British**

##### ***The Turtons***

The first British couple, Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested meet in India, are the Turtons. They are a typical example of the ruling class in India. They have all the typical character traits of snobs.

Adela and Mrs. Moore get an impression of what India can do to the British who live there.

The first view of the Turtons is at the port when the ship from Europe arrives. Mrs. Moore and Adela go their way through the crowd to find a taxi to the station. The Turtons do likewise. We see that Mrs. Turton is very unimpressed by the Indian surrounding. The smell does not suit her nose. India and Indians seem to her to be very unpleasant. In contrast to the Turtons, Adela and Mrs. Moore, new arrived as they are, look curiously around, open to their new surroundings and not immediately critical.

In the train, they meet the first time. Mrs. Turton finds her way into the comfortable carriage of the newcomers. It is not a very pleasant meeting, and Mrs. Turton is presented to us as unsentimental, prying and importunate.

At dinner, they have a little talk with each other. Mrs. Moore says that they would like to meet the Indians the Turtons come across socially. This seems to be an embarrassing question for Mr. Turton, and he answers, that they do not have dealings with such people. In his answer lie other questions, that Mrs. Moore and Adela do not dare to ask, newcomers as they are. It is a subtle hint to the differences between races in India.

More astonishing is Mrs. Turton's answer: "East is East, Mrs. Moore. It is a question of culture." No need to say that she thinks the British culture is the right culture to live in.

At their arrival in Chandrapore, there is a committee awaiting the Turtons. They shake hands with British gentlemen, but the Turtons go past the Indian ladies in their coloured dresses as if they do not see them.

At the arrival in Chandrapore, we get a clear impression that the Turtons do not have any inclination toward Indians. This attitude must be widespread in British India. We also get introduced to one of the major problems of the story: The division of cultures and races in the British colony – and that this division is man- (and woman-) made.

### ***The Callendars***

We first hear of Major Callendar. Dr. Aziz who, coming from a patient, arrives home to a dinner with his friends, had got a note during his absence from Major

Callendar. He is his boss, so Aziz goes to see him immediately. But at Callendar's house, Aziz learns that Callendar went out without leaving a note for him. So he feels like Callendar pulled his leg. We get the impression that Aziz is not taken seriously by his British boss.

The second time we hear of Major Callendar is when Aziz is ill. The hot weather has begun and Aziz gets a fever. Callendar sends out another doctor to look after him. Fielding, his friend, visits the patient and gets to know that Callendar's 'spy' – the other doctor - had just been there. Aziz is not only not taken seriously but seems not to be a trustable person, too. Through this exchange, we get a very negative picture of the British 'gentleman'.

Later in the story, during the courtroom scene, when Adela gives her evidence, Callendar is upset by the expected outcome. He tries to stop the hearing "on medical grounds", and in doing so, it is quite clear that he is completely on the British – the anti-Indian – side.

His wife adds to this anti-Indian picture of pre-convictions the following word after the trial: "bitch", addressed to the poor Adela, who although British, sided with the natives. Mrs. Callendar wanted the Indian to be convicted – she does not believe he is not guilty.

### ***Ronny Heaslop***

Ronny and Adela meet to decide whether to get married or not. The decision is hard for Adela, because Ronny has apparently changed since their previous meeting in England. During the story, we get to know that Ronny is more like the other British 'imperialists' in the colony. He seems to have adjusted to the life and culture of divisions in the East.

He does not understand his mother's and his nearly fiancée's interest in trying to get to know India and its people. For him, there is no need to meet the Indians. A quotation by Dickinson (who accompanied Forster during his first Indian visit) is very fitting to describe the situation: " [...] And why can't the races meet? Simply because the Indians bore the English. That is the simple adamant fact."

So it seems to be with Ronny. He has a little quarrel about multi-racial meetings with his mother during the bridge party. Mrs. Moore is ashamed by the way the British treat their Indian guests. But Ronny seems to find this normal and right. He

tells her that the British are not there to be friendly, they are there to do justice and to keep the peace. That and his career are more important than an approach to a better understanding between cultures.

### **III.2 Filmic devices**

In the following I would like to describe the scene of the military parade in the beginning of the film. I will refer to this scene in my analysis.

Upon arriving in India, the first thing we see is a parade for the arriving Viceroy and his wife. In this scene, we can see how the Empire is created for the people and the viewer. First, there is a long shot to establish the setting. There is a big square with soldiers and a big monument-like gate. We, the viewers, see it from a worm's eye view. It demonstrates to us the power of the British Empire. Then we see the gate filling the picture and two human beings going through it. It must be the Viceroy and his wife, because of the red carpet. They are very little in comparison to the gate. But they are only servants of the great British power in the East. They pass from a lighted area into a shadowy area in front of the gate.

The next shot shows some Indian soldiers and behind them Indian men crying hurra. There are strong diagonal lines in this shot. They all seem to end in one vanishing point. That gives the shot something strong and very lively. It all underlines the picture of power that is made up with the parade. Then there is a shot with British women on the board of the ship. Adela and Mrs. Moore are among them. They all have white clothes on and either umbrellas or hats against the sun, a topic which will be addressed later.

Then we see again a tilt shot of the gate. The Viceroy and his wife get on a coach. Against this shot, some Indian women are presented. They look sceptical, not jubilant. Their traditional clothes are brightly coloured. The Viceroy and his wife are shown in profile with strong faces. They seem to look away from the women. As the coach is departing, we see a colourful crowd of Indians, not richly dressed, seeming to address the British, who not (want to) hear them; they leave the ship with Adela and Mrs. Moore then.

This is a very important opening scene, I think, and I will analyse it under several perspectives and add some other examples from the film.

### ***Perspectives***

I mentioned before the worm's eye view in the parade scene. The way the gate is presented helps to create an imperial atmosphere. The tilt shot gives us an impression of the strength and power displayed by the British Empire (the power they want to show the people, not real power). We find this tilt shot again in other scenes in the film. It is always used to present us an imperial British 'monument'. Ronny's house is showed in this way. As Adela and Mrs. Moore approach the door, we see the inscription (1892 Fairholme, the name of the house) from a worm's eye view. The house belongs to a member of the civil service, servant of the Empire.

The next thing we see in this perspective are some street signs showing the way. There are English street names on it. The colony seems to be completely adjusted to British rule.

The last point I want to mention is the statue (perhaps of the queen or the greek god Themis who is god for justice) on the way to the court. She represents (British) justice, as does Ronny, who is a judge. We see him in the court from the worm's eye view. The Indians always have to look up, which means that they are beneath the British – in society and intellect.

### ***Colours***

Colours play an important role in the presentation and distinction of British and Indians. On arriving, the British women are dressed in white. It is a bright white, not a wool-white. We find this again during the whole film. British women prefer to dress in white. Also their surroundings are white. The chairs in the club, the tablecloth. During the meeting in the club before the trial starts, men and women nearly all wear something white or (the men) grey. It is the same in the courtroom. The British seem to be a mass of white-grey snobs.

This white colour underlines the importance for the British to be a member of the white race. It stands in stark contrast to the richness of colours of the suppressed Indian people, whose women particularly wear brightly coloured dresses. Some Indian men are also shown in white dresses (for example Aziz and his friends at dinner) in the development of the story, but it is more a wool colour, ranging into a light beige. I connect this colour and the richness of other colours in the

womens' dresses with Indian culture and tradition, naturalness and Indian emotionality.

The British white, I connect with clarity, punctuality, coldness and a feeling of superiority. An exception is Mrs. Moore's clothing in the (light of the) mosque: It is a milky tender white that addresses Aziz and impresses him.

### **Lighting**

There is another filmic device that shows how British and Indians are separated and different from each other. It is the way lighting is used.

In addition to the clarity of the white colour surrounding the British, there is also a clear use of light. A high-key lighting represents the British characters. There are fill lights to lower the contrasts between the bright and dark areas in the shots.

Light is more 'white' than in shots with Indians.

There, the contrasts are a bit sharper. The dark and bright areas are more divided and we see more shadows, even on the bodies and faces. The spot-light technique is more often used with Indians than with British. It creates the same atmosphere I described above. The nature, the tradition, the emotions of Indians against the coolness of the British rulers.

Exceptions are scenes where British and Indians are shown together in a friendly atmosphere. One example is of Aziz and Mrs. Moore in the soft, spot-lighting darkness of the mosque or the last meeting of Aziz and Fielding in the Indian state. Their saying goodbye is in a soft light that symbolizes their friendship.

Clear daylight is preferred for British and official meetings. Aziz and his friends are often shown in the twilight, for example in the evenings at dinner – or the mosque.

Adela has one adventure in the daylight with the apes of the temple. The hard and hot light makes the danger more clear to us. It is perhaps a little hint to the lighting of the Marabar scene that is also connected with danger.

Sometimes there are also hard contrasts used for British scenes, for example in the dinner scene with Ronny, his mother, and Adela after the meeting at Fielding's house. There is a little quarrell and the candles (that are supposed to give a tender light) are manipulated so that the shadows are more sharp and clear. This illustrates the inner-British problems.

#### **IV. Presentation of Racism in British India in the film**

The way racism is presented is clearly shown in the British behaviour towards Dr. Aziz. He is the first and most obvious victim of the racist attitudes around him. As Ramsay MacDonald said, imperialism, nationalism and racism belong together (see II.2). The first two terms, of course, can exist without the latter, but not vice versa. I described above how imperialism and also nationalism is shown in the film. The next step, racism, is demonstrated in the treatment of the Indian people by the British. There's a lack of concern, respect and even acceptance. The Indians are ruled from above but also overseen.

The best example is Aziz. The first view we get of him, is after the arrival of the train from Bombay. The Turtons are driving home along the road, and Aziz and his friend are cycling on the street. The chauffeur does not take care, so he nearly runs over the two Indians. After this little accident, the Turtons are not in the least interested if something has happened to the Indians. This shows a lack of concern for the other race.

The next event is Major Callendar's note. He is away when Aziz arrives. Two women come out of the house. They pretend not to see him and take his coach. It is a clear way of showing disrespect for others.

British do not want to have anything to do with Indians except on duty. The social ostracism of the Indian people is widespread. Only newcomers like Mrs. Moore and Adela, and Fielding, see the discrepancy between the praised British liberalism and reality.

There are also some filmic devices I would like to mention. As I said above, the worm's eye view is used to present Imperialism and the power of the nation Great Britain. For Indian 'inferiority', the high-angle shot is used. When Aziz is sitting in his cell in prison, we see him several times, always from a bird's eye view. He seems to be defeated, the outcome of the trial seems to be decided because of his nationality.

On their way to court, Adela and the Callendars have to drive through a pro-Aziz Indian demonstration. The police try to keep the wild crowd away from the car. In a high-angle shot, we see the car drive over a demonstration sign. This is what the British would actually like to do with the Indian(s), spoken in pictures.

In the trial, McBryde starts his prosecuting speech with a prejudice: The darker races are attracted by the fairer ones, and not vice versa. His accusation is based on the fact that Aziz's skin is darker than Adela's, so he must be a devil and therefore guilty.

I think all these examples show that the British are convinced of their racial superiority, which is, as MacDonald said, an imperial 'virtue', but not a necessity for ruling a country.

## **V. Pro-Indian British attitudes**

### **V.1 Adela Quested**

From the beginning on, Adela is curious to get to know the 'real' India. Fielding suggests to get to know Indians first. So Adela and Mrs. Moore go to the bridge party to meet some Indians.

She and Adela are very open-minded and not at all prejudiced against the 'darker' races. Adela's further interest in the native people is shown in her proposition to invite Aziz to dinner at Fielding's house. She does not care about the unconventionality of meeting an Indian who is – according to the 'colonial' meeting – not of her class. After dinner, she is left alone with Professor Godbole and Aziz. Ronny is very upset when he finds her. He wants her to leave at once. Adela replies that this is not a way to leave the other guests. She cares about friendliness to all people without recognizing their colour.

On their way home, Mrs. Moore and Adela are arguing with Ronny. He says that he knows about India and the Indians. Adela is ironical and even a bit cynical in her very short answers. She seems to be too upset to take an active part in the talk between Ronny and his mother.

In the evening, at dinner, the room is not very high illuminated. We see dark and hard shadows. The atmosphere created by this tells us about the deep-lying differences between Ronny and the two women.

In the end, Adela does not give the evidence her people want to hear. She sacrifices her reputation to save Aziz from a misunderstanding.

### **V.2 Mrs. Moore**

Mrs. Moore is like Adela very tolerant and keen to meet Indians. She does not make any differentiation between races. We see this at the meeting in the mosque.

She is full of respect for the strange religious building and to Aziz, too. Because of this, Aziz is very impressed by Mrs. Moore's kindness. He feels at once that Mrs. Moore is different from her countrymen and especially her fellow British women. During the bridge party, Mrs. Moore argues with her son. She says she cannot "understand people inviting guests and then not treating them properly". She feels ashamed for her people. But her son sees this as normal. He explains to her why the British are there. Not to be friendly, but to do justice. But Mrs. Moore replies that loving and helping another is the main reason why we are on earth.

She has other arguments with her son during the film over the same topic. When Aziz is in prison, the question of his being guilty is also a problem for them. Mrs. Moore is completely convinced of Aziz innocence.

There is another important incident that shows us how Mrs. Moore trusts Indians as much as her own countrymen (or even more). She lets Aziz go off with Adela, with only the guide to accompany them. This is another British convention she and Adela break in favour of the Indians.

At the very end of the film, when Fielding visits Aziz for a last time, Aziz calls out "Mrs. Moore" as he hears of her daughter being his friend's wife. So Mrs. Moore lives on after her death as a symbol for friendship and friendliness.

### **V.3 Fielding**

Fielding is the one who brings Mrs. Moore, Adela and Aziz together. He is a total exception to the other British around him. The conventions do not seem to have such an influence on him. We see this in his first meeting with Aziz at his house. They talk to each other like people of the same class and race. They do not worry about unconventionality or other people's opinions about them. It is the beginning of an extraordinary friendship.

This friendship is challenged throughout the whole story. When Aziz is arrested, Fielding immediately takes responsibility for his friend. He wants to help him, and there is no question for him of his friend innocence. Fielding accompanies his friend through the crowd to the police. I think this action demonstrates his real and deep affection for Aziz. Another Englishman would have abandoned the Indian. Later, Fielding goes to McBryde, who is in charge of the prosecution. He tries to do everything he can for his poor friend. After this talk, he meets Aziz's Muslim

friends. They discuss the further proceedings. The Muslims are happy that Fielding is on their side and not that of his own people. This decision is clearly shown in the scene in the club. It seems that all Indian-haters are there. We can feel Fielding's disgust of living under such people. He remains unswayed in his opinion of Aziz's innocence and resigns from the club. It is open disapproval of the current attitudes in his British surrounding.

In the last section, when everything is over and Aziz and Godbole have moved to a native Indian state, Fielding comes to visit his friend to rebuild their relationship.

When he and his wife drive along the road to Aziz they come through a tunnel. It is as though they come from the darkness to the light. There is a little hope that friendship will be possible in another country without imperialistic and racist attitudes. But in the end, when they depart again, Aziz knows that this is the last time they will see each other. They know that the gap between imperialism and tolerance is too big to bridge.

## **VI. The influence of racism and imperialism on relationships**

The most important outcome of the influences described above is that relationships between different races do not work in imperial India. There is the problem of status, career, and power that divides the British from the native people. There are in addition prejudices and feelings of superiority by the British. So the Turtons, the Callendars and Ronny Heaslop have to deal with Indians, since they cannot avoid them completely, but they keep these relationships to Indians as minimal as possible.

Because of that unacceptance and intolerance Aziz and his friends have to deal with the problems described above. They do not get proper jobs, they are treated like animals and not with the respect human beings deserve.

But There is still a little group that tries to have relationships to Indians. Adela, Mrs. Moore and Fielding do not care about the differences or so-called differences between races. Especially Mrs. Moore's and Fielding's tolerance are very admirable. This is also true of courage, which these three need to have the relationships.

Imperialism and racism in British India reveal the worst character traits people can have in their behaviour to other people and also the best ones, the virtues in human society like courage and real affection.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The whole story is a story of failures. Adela and Ronny are not able to find each other, Mrs. Moore is not able to help Aziz because she is sent away and then dies. The complete city of Chandrapore, the officials, the British 'imperialists', they do not gain the sympathy of the viewer/reader or achieve a state of ruling acceptable convenient to the Indians. Adela has an uncertain future, because she cannot stay in India where she lost her reputation among her own people. Aziz and Fielding do not manage to bridge the gap between their races.

In the end, the story leaves us very unsatisfied. The last passage in the books says: "No, not yet. [...] No, not there." But anywhere at all? The story gives us no answer as to whether or not friendship is possible under and against such circumstances. Imperialism and racism are too strong. But we have seen and appreciated the efforts of the main characters to solve the problems and, from our point of view, we know the solution: time.

## **VIII. Filmography and bibliography**

### **VIII.1 Filmography**

A Passage to India

GB 1984

D: David Lean, A: Peggy Ashcroft, Judy Davis, James Fox, Alec Guinness, Nigel Havers, Victor Banerjee

### **VIII.2 Bibliography**

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