MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI
ROMÂNIA
UNIVERSITATEA DE MEDICINĂ, FARMACIE, ȘTIINȚE ȘI TEHNOLOGIE „GEORGE EMIL PALADE" DIN TÂRGU MUREȘ

FACULTATEA DE ȘTIINȚE ȘI LITERE „PETRU MAIOR"

Acta Marisiensis. Philologia
Volume 2 (2020), Issue 1
p-ISSN: 2668-9537, e-ISSN: 2668-9596

sciendo

10.2478/amph-2022-0024

CULTURAL INTERACTION IN A PASSAGE TO INDIA

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Abstract: *The article focuses on cultural interaction from a historical, social, religious, and economic point of view in A Passage to India, book, and film. Can an Englishman and an Indian be friends? Two conflicting cultures, which, through the lens of a holistic approach, will be observed through elements of ethnology, ethnocentrism, human thinking, and behavior. The conclusion of the article will highlight the fact that, despite apparent cultural reconciliation, the characters, both British and Indian, are not ready yet to eradicate the racial tensions and prejudices inherent in both cultures, and hence, are incapable of cultural and human cooperation in a productive way.*

Keywords: *cultural interaction, cultural anthropology, socio-cultural interpretation, cultural conservatism, conflict and cooperation*

The article focuses on observing features of culture and cultural interaction in *A Passage to India* (1924), written by Edward Morgan Forster and in the movie (1984) with an identical title, directed by David Lean. Cultural interaction can be observed on several levels and from various perspectives. According to EOLSS.net, cultural interaction is "…a complex process involving different human beings within different formations. It is an interactive process between two or more partners." (Arlt 2012: 2)

Cultural interaction can imply both conflict and cooperation. Usually, when two cultures interact, they either assimilate and become the same or become completely different due to futile cultural negotiations and failing cultural communicational channels. In other words, cultures can interact in productive, less productive, or non-productive ways.

The article will examine British and Indian cultures and cultural differences in terms of how they work socio-politically and how they affect people and the interaction between cultural groups. The question the article raises is whether different cultures need one world to manifest themselves or cultures shape and embody different worlds?

Considering today's globalization, we see today's cultures tend towards becoming the same. In the case of *A Passage to India,* the time setting is the 1920s, so the answer is different: the British and the Indian cultures were and remained fundamentally different, due to the political and the disharmony inherent in cultural politics. Each culture, in its turn, shapes the novel's everyday interaction under different views and interpretations.

We will analyze cultural interaction in the novel from a political, economic, and religious point of view, concerning global or local situations. We will observe elements of ethnology, ethnocentrism, human thinking, and behavior in different cultural situations. We will use a holistic approach, intending

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not to judge, but to try to understand and explain the events or facts. Nonetheless, we will inspect the infrastructure, social structure, and the superstructure of the analyzed society.

Socio-cultural interpretations are constructed through and during cultural interaction. They involve social and cultural aspects. Studying the text from a socio-cultural perspective can make us aware of how individual behaviors are affected specifically by their surroundings, social, and cultural factors, such as values and attitudes.

Such being the case, cultural interaction can be connected to cultural conservativism (i.e., enculturation/preservation of the heritage of one nation) or cultural cooperation (i.e., acculturation/preservation of the old culture but also willing to adopt values and attitudes from the new culture).

In *A Passage to India*, we have two nations, the British and the Indians, which are seen traditionally as conservative. The British rulers/colonizers in India seek to preserve religion and property rights, to emphasize social stability and continuity. The British were able to take control of India because India was not united. India was religiously divided into Muslims and Hindus. We have, in the novel, on the one side, the Muslims Aziz and Hamildullah, and, on the other side, the Hindu Professor Godbole.

The British are also subdivided into viciously racists, rude, prejudiced, cruel, and intolerant people, such as Mrs. Turton, Ronny Heaslop, and Major Callendar, or more open-minded and tolerant people, such as Cyril Fielding and Mrs. Moore. The ending of the novel focuses on these characters again in Forster's attempt to show how shallow different racial or religious encounters, meetings, and friendships can be in British India in the 1920s. Fielding was an individualist, who, in the beginning, was a lover of Indian culture and people, while later he is quite easily convinced to quit India; Mrs. Moore does not take sides with Aziz when he is unjustly accused of Adela Quested's sexual assault, and Aziz and Professor Godbole are both indifferent to their roles as Indian culture supporters.

When Fielding asks Godbole for his opinion about Aziz's guilt or innocence, the latter avoids a clear answer. Similarly, Aziz turns from an obedient, even supporter of the British colonialism into a fervent British anticolonialist.

The title of the novel, *A Passage to India,* is quite difficult to explain: a "passage" can symbolize the British rule in India, which was a `passing` (temporary) thing, as the British were not expected to remain in India to rule for eternity.

In his novel *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster wrote about a clash of cultural identities in British India in the 1920s when England was still firmly in control of India. The action spins around three English newcomers to India (Miss Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore, and Cyril Fielding) and their interaction with the Indian Dr. Aziz.

When they arrive in India, they are impatient to become familiar with the Indian culture. They find Dr. Aziz a perfect companion: educated, westernized, and open-minded. Moreover, Mr. Fielding and Dr. Aziz seem to become closer and closer friends.

However, they also become familiar with other British people with racial views about the Indians: "Why the kindest thing one can do to a native is to let him die," said Mrs. Callendar. "How if he went to heaven? asked Mrs. Moore, with a gentle but crooked smile." "He can go where he likes as long as he doesn't come near me. They give me the creeps." (*A Passage to India* 1924: 10)

Although Miss Adela Quested, Mrs. Moore, and Cyril Fielding seem not to approve of these racial attitudes, in the end, the facts show that it was just an appearance. It took little to turn affection and friendship into hatred. The Marabar caves incident when Dr. Aziz is accused of sexually assaulting Miss Adela Quested is enough to the inevitable breach between the British and the Indians.

Both the novel and the book are set in the time of the British Raj in the fictive town of Chandrapore, India. A recurring and frequently used geographical name is the Marabar Hills, which is an important place, determining key events in the story. After checking these hills and the afferent caves on Google Maps, we concluded that this place exists in real-life India, and it is called the Barabar Hills and Caves. Our assumption has been enforced by an Indian website, claiming that the Marabar Caves from the novel and the movie are, in reality, the existing Barabar Caves. (C.P.R. 2018) Reading the very first page of the book, we get a rather interesting depiction of Chandrapore, a depiction that illustrates the city's duality. At first glance, we get conflicting information about the city, but soon we realize that the different depictions are because the narrator described the place where the Indians were living, then the place where the higher class and the English people were residing. The first passage

describing Chandrapore is rather boring "…the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary…" and even brings out disgust:" …scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely" (Forster 1924: 1). The author associates the city and everything within it with mud "The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving." (Forster 1924: 1) This association makes the people and the entire place look boring, shallow, trivial. All the place lacks arts, lacks design and creativity: "There is no painting and scarcely any carving…" (Forster 1924: 1). In this hopeless place, even death appears in a very bizarre form, and the choice of words does not spare the reader of the cruel reality "houses do fall, people are drowned and left rotting…".(Forster 1924: 1). Thus, the city's infrastructure does not look very promising for a bright future, not even for a decent place to live. This bizarre and frightening scenario suddenly changes, as the narrator himself changes his position and starts to look at the city from another place and another perspective. This perspective is opposite to the previously described one, and this place is where the English people reside. Here Chandrapore is a "city of gardens" (Forster 1924: 1), with beautiful flowers and filled with sunshine. Thus, we can conclude from these two antagonistic descriptions that Chandrapore is a dualistic city, having two faces. One is the face for the poor Indians, and the other in the face for the British ruling class.

The characters from both the film and the book represent types of people in society. We can observe various human traits while analyzing and comparing them through the lenses of cultural anthropology. We meet the first characters in the second chapter of the novel, these being Hamidullah, Mahmoud Ali, and Dr. Aziz. From the very beginning of their conversation, we encounter a specific trait of the Indian people, which is that of being late. Dr. Aziz was late for dinner with Hamidullah and Ali, who were discussing the relationship between Indians and the ruling English class. They argued whether it was possible or not to be a friend with an Englishman on the territory of India. This conversation is a key element in both the novel and the movie because, in the end, we get an obvious answer to this question about friendship.

We can spot several differences between the book and the film representation. In the movie, Ali and Aziz were riding a bicycle and almost got hit by a car, which transported Englishmen. Hamidullah is absent, and just the two of them discuss whether it is possible or not to befriend any of the Englishmen. The book, however, introduces the reader first to Hamidullah and Ali, who are at home, and only Aziz is the one who comes on a bicycle and is late for dinner. During the conversation, they smoke hookah, which, according to an online dictionary, was "invented in India as a means of smoking tobacco" (Urban Dictionary 2003).

A remark from Hamidullah's wife, Begum, shows another characteristic trait of Indian people, which is that of postponing things, as shown in the following quote: "That is why India is in such a plight because we put off things." (Forster 1924: 4). As the plot proceeds, Dr. Aziz is put in a weird situation with two English ladies, Mrs. Lesley and Mrs. Turton. The ladies take Aziz's carriage and driver without permission and hurry to the Club. They act as if Aziz did not even exist, and rudely hop into his tonga. They call the driver a fool and do not thank Aziz for offering the carriage, even after realizing that they took it from him. They act as if everything was normal, and they take his generosity for granted.

Another memorable scene where we can observe cultural interaction is the mosque scene. According to a 2018 internet census, India is not a very cohesive country, not even from a religious point of view. We can find many religions, from which "the most popular among Indians is Hinduism, then Islam, then different branches of Christianity." (World population review 2003). In the story, Dr. Aziz is a practicing Muslim, who in the evening, went to pray in an Indian mosque. We can observe, in the movie as well, specific Muslim practices, such as washing and cleaning the hands and the feet before prayer.

Aziz, although he was a doctor, was not wearing his suit and formal attire in the mosque. Instead, he wore a traditional white and modest Indian clothing, and he took his shoes off before entering the holy place. This attire is mandatory even nowadays for every Muslim before they enter any mosque. It is a sign of respect, purification, humbleness, and modesty. While Aziz was praying alone in the mosque, an English lady, Mrs. Moore, showed up in the same spot and scared the praying Muslim. Firstly, he aggressively reacted because he was shocked to see an English lady to come where only Muslim men could enter. He shouted at her that she should not enter with shoes, but she was aware of certain Muslim practices, and she covered herself and her hair, and she was barefooted. Seeing that his accusations were false, he changed his tone, and while still being shocked, he started to inquire about

her reason for being there. Mrs. Moore acted very naturally and answered the Muslim's questions very calmly. She even surprised him with her answers and proved herself to be a better Muslim woman because she respected all the laws, while many of them did not. Mrs. Moore was bored with the noisy and earthly shows in the Club, and she longed for something quiet and spiritual. The two started to talk about their lives and had a very friendly conversation, opening up about family and marital topics. They realized that both of them were in the "same box" (Forster 1924: 7) and had a similar destiny in terms of marriage. Mrs. Moore soon went back to the Club, escorted by Aziz. She intended to invite him in, but she could because she was not yet a member of the Club. In the movie, Aziz tells her that "Hindus cannot enter," whereas, in the book, he says that "Indians are not allowed" (Forster 1924: 8). These words caused a bit of confusion in the film because it seems that Aziz is a Hindu. This information is wrong because several aspects point to the fact that he is a practicing Muslim. For example, he refuses the idea of pork to be served to his guest in his home, he prays in a mosque and follows Islamic rules.

In the majority of the situations, Dr. Aziz is an open-minded individual who is capable of interacting with people from other cultures than his own. He is being invited with one of his friends, professor Godbole, to meet Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested. They have an afternoon tea, where they have a conversation about Indians and India. The ladies learn about Indian traits and realize that Indians are culturally and behaviorally different from Englishmen. An Englishman is always punctual and keeps his word, but Indians are always late and forget that they have promised something. The ladies were astonished by the fact that a day before they were invited to an Indian's home, but the host did not show up to take them to his house and seemed as if he had completely forgotten about the invitation. Aziz knows what this is all about and explains to the ladies that the man did not forget that he had invited them to his house, but he just grew ashamed of his household. Many Indians think very low of their homes and never invite guests because of being ashamed of their properties. He told them that his situation is different, and he would show them his Indian household. Aziz, out of courtesy and hoping that the ladies would not accept, offered to invite them to his humble home. To his biggest surprise, the ladies agreed to visit his house. He started mumbling and suddenly came up with another idea, offering to take them to a picnic to the Marabar Caves, instead of taking them to his house. He preferred this option rather than take them to his own house and show them that he was no better than an average Indian. Although the trip to the Marabar Caves implied more costs than a simple dinner in his house, he carried out his plan.

The trip to the Marabar Caves is a key event in the story. Here we have a triggered conflictual situation between a representative member of the Indian culture and one member of the British culture. The two representatives are Miss Quested and Dr. Aziz. The guests and Aziz visit a cave, but they soon get bored and start to have tea. The only excited one about the caves is Miss Adela Quested, who goes a bit further from the other guests to discover more caves with Aziz and the guide. At one point, Aziz loses her out of sight, and she wanders in a cave alone, where she panics and runs away to Mrs. Derek's car. In the movie, she runs to Mrs. Callendar, who was also in a car. She gets cactus spines in her flesh and needs quite a long period to recover from the trauma. Aziz is tried for assaulting Adela, and he almost gets convicted. He is in a very good relationship with Fielding, a British educator. Fielding is one of the most successful Englishmen who can sustain and build a relationship with the native Indians. He becomes friends with Aziz and protects him against his people when on trial. Fielding is convinced that Aziz is innocent and dares to go against every British who opposes that. Observing the relationship between Fielding and Aziz, a remarkable scene is when Aziz offers Fielding his collar stud. He took off his precious collar stud, to help his friend out: "…a gold stud, which was part of a set that his brother-in-law had brought him from Europe" (Forster 1924: 26). He does this generous thing without hesitation. A little bit later, he gets judged by Ronny that he does not have a collar stud, and his collar sprung up at the back. Ronny generalizes and concludes that all Indians try to dress fancy to hide who they are, but their missing collar stud shows they are not elite people. This kind of judgment is a sign of ethnocentrism. Soon after Adela's recovery, the trial begins, and she admits, to everyone's amazement, that the whole thing was a misunderstanding, and she just got scared, and Aziz did not harm her in any way. Aziz was released, and the whole crowd who came to support him and ask for his liberation started cheering. After this awful experience, Aziz started to hate the English and wished they would leave for good from their lands. His friendship with Fielding decreased, especially after thinking that Fielding married Adela. But he was wrong because Fielding did not marry Adela, but Mrs. Moore's

daughter, Stella. They met again but concluded that they could not be true friends until the British did not leave India for good.

In India, reputation is a very fragile and very important social matter. The prison and trials ruined Aziz; thus, his reputation suffered. In eastern countries, reputation is a key element of social life as well. A person can end up being a social outcast if he/she gets into situations that are detrimental to his/her reputation. Aziz was considered an outcast because he did not remarry after his wife's death. Hamidullah's wife even pressured him about that situation, but he always found an excuse. After a talk with Fielding, we can realize that marriage is also a cultural matter. Aziz cannot "travel light" (Forster 1924: 52) because children bound him, and he was "…rooted in society and Islam." (Forster 1924: 52). The ideas shared by Fielding intrigued him, but he could not pursue his ways, because "he belonged to a tradition which bound him, and he had brought children into the world, the society of future." (idem).

In conclusion, from the cultural interaction between the Indians and the British in the book and film, we can observe differences, rooted in the structure of society, religion, customs, and worldview. While the English are controlled, ordered, and punctual people, the Indians are spontaneous, unpredictable, unreliable. They are warm-hearted and caring people, while the English are more rigid, formal, and cold. Indians can show their excitement, and they fully express their emotions, while the English are good at concealing them. In the end, we can conclude that there cannot be trust, mutual affection, or true friendship between an Indian and an Englishman as long as they are socially unequal; racial tensions and prejudices are too early to be eradicated in *A Passage to India* (1924).

The last lines of the novel indicate Forster's dual vision upon imperialism and colonialism: while acknowledging it is too early for such a world, he puts forward the avant-gardist idea of globalization or universality: to live in a world where cultures will tend towards becoming the same, while each preserving its characteristics, due to a political consensus inherent in both cultures: "Why can't we be friends now?" said the other, holding him affectionately. "It's what I want. It's what you want." But the horses didn't want it — they swerved apart: the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temple, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they emerged from the gap and saw Mau beneath they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices "No, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there." (*A Passage to India* 1924: 141)

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgements to Albert Judit, MA student, for the contribution to this article

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