

COM 325 Intercultural Communication /Fall 2025

Dr. Chen

Writing Assignment: A Film Review Essay on *A Passage to India* (1984)

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The 1984 film, *A Passage to India*, explores how cultural identity, power, and perception intersect within colonial India: with specific focus on the complex dynamics between the Indian communities and the British colonizers within Chandrapore. The driving conflict within the film occurs as a result of an accusation by a young British woman, Miss Adela Quested, that is visiting India. During Adela Quested's exploration of the nearby Marabar Caves, she alleges that a local Muslim physician, Dr. Aziz, attempted to assault her during the cave expedition (*A Passage to India* 1:31:46). Miss Quested's allegations serve as a turning point, bringing forth a trial and revealing the cultural estrangement, distrust, and resentment that had been simmering between the British colonizers and the colonized Indians. Previous camaraderie, or harmony between characters are corroded after the incident in the Marabar Caves, highlighting how these unequal systems created fragile and unstable relationships across the cultures. Even after the accusation is withdrawn by Miss Adela Quested, it neither brings resolution nor restores peace, rather it illuminates the complexities and conflicts within the colonial setting.

Within the film, we watch Miss Adela Quested start her journey as an open-minded, independent woman, that wants to connect with the people and see the "real India" (*A Passage to India* 25:30). This perspective dissolves when she has a bewildering experience within the Marabar Caves, the echo within the caves causes her openness to falter and overwhelms her creating fear and panic (*A Passage to India* 1:21:50 – 1:22:46). During Dr. Aziz's trial, Adela Quested is asked to recall the events that took place in the Marabar Caves through questioning from Major McBryde, and Judge Das (*A Passage to India* 2:07:16). Through flashbacks which serve as Miss Adele Quested's self-reflection, she withdraws her accusation, telling the court: "I'm afraid I've made a mistake." And "Dr. Aziz never followed me into the cave." (*A Passage to India* 2:09:02 – 2:09:10).

We see similar character transformation within Dr. Aziz, who at the start of the film shows deep admiration for certain parts of Western civilization, he is seen trying to bridge the culture gap between the British and Indians; showing an interest in befriending British citizens and is shown as being warmhearted and hospital (*A Passage to India* 31:52 – 34:44). This changes after he is accused by Miss Quested, Aziz evolves this previous admiration having been plagued by the prejudice and suffocating inequalities within British India. Dr. Aziz reclaims his identity, after the trial, moving outside of British rule, and proclaiming he wants nothing more to do with the British (*A Passage to India* 2:20:51 – 2:22:50).

In the film, Mrs. Moore is shown as a character who has become disillusioned, and has a guarded, melancholic view of human relations this can be seen in her early quote: “Life rarely gives us what we want at the moment we consider appropriate.” (*A Passage to India* 16:15). While Professor Godbole’s perspective on cross-cultural interactions is much different, originating from his Hindu worldview, it contrasts with others who believe they may have control over events. Godbole dialogue in the film encompasses Hindu fatalism, he speaks on patterns, karma, and destiny: “My philosophy is you can do what you like, but the outcome will be the same.” (*A Passage to India* 1:41:41).

This fatalist perspective sharply contrasts with Mr. Fielding’s view on the situation, who staunchly believed in the innocence of Dr. Aziz and wanted to help and seek the truth rather than give into prejudice as many others were; we see this in his words and actions: “If he is found guilty, I shall resign from the college and leave India. I resign from the club now.” (*A Passage to India* 1:45:10). Fielding’s views on unity between cultures are seen in his actions trying to bridge the gap in interactions, trying to act as a mediator, he understands the complexities of the situation; in the aftermath of the trial, he asks Adela: “Might this whole thing have been a hallucination?” (*A Passage to India* 2:15:05). The injustices that Dr. Aziz faced from his trial resulted in Aziz’s inability to fully trust Mr. Fielding, though Fielding’s intentions are to start the forgiveness process between Aziz and Quested, it is not taken that

way by Dr Aziz, who acts with suspicion, “You’re going to ask me to let her off paying,” and “You English always stick together.” (*A Passage to India* 2:20:51 – 2:22:50).

The conflicts within the film *A Passage to India*, come as a result of clashing cultures, faith, history, and worldviews between the British that are colonizing India, and the Indian’s who are being colonized. The British have western ideals, valuing individualism, freedom, personal choice, and secularism, which is much different than the cultural values within India. The British only further this division through colonization, bringing social segregation, and hierarchy; they do not treat Indians as equals, they treat them as subjects, creating systemic biases. Miss Quested’s fear could be the result of culture shock, and psychological stress and pressures she is facing in the film. The echo in the caves creates fear and panic within Miss Adela, this confusion, or hallucination ends up being projected onto Dr. Aziz. Her accusation already aligns with the stereotypes created by the British: “Darker races are attracted to the fairer, but not vice versa.” (*A Passage to India* 1:53:53). Although it comes out, that he had been falsely accused and then acquitted, the humiliation Dr. Aziz faced, and the damage done to his character created a hatred in him towards the British, of the systems colonization of India had created and subjected him to. At the end of the film, we see Dr. Aziz reject colonial rule, expressing his intentions to leave British India and being done with the British people (*A Passage to India* 2:20:51 – 2:22:50).

The plot in the film, *A Passage to India*, is fueled by a series of unverified assumptions, these views are built into the structure of British rule, perceptions are distorted by these, and they directly influence the interactions between these two cultures. The colonial elite are strong believers that they are not only morally superior to Indians, but racially superior as well. This is seen within Major McBryde’s quote about attraction of darker races, and from the views of Mr. and Mrs. Turton: “He’s become a proper sahib. Just the type we want.” And “We don’t come across them socially.” Then again with “East is East, Mrs. Moore. It’s a question of culture.” (*A Passage to India* 7:25 – 8:13). This showcases the views of the

British colonial elite, the belief that the division of cultures is necessary, that the segregation and prejudice is part of principle and etiquette.

This divide can even be seen in the opposing cultural patterns between the groups. While the British are a product of their rigid social hierarchy, they view themselves and enforcers of order in India, “We’re out here to do justice and keep the peace.” (*A Passage to India* 30:25). In contrast, the Indian perspectives we see from both Professor Godbole and Dr. Aziz, are more focused on religion, and spirituality; Godbole views of Karma oppose the British view of control, while Dr. Aziz worldview more emphasizes family and faith. The cultural identity is a foundational element of this film; it fuels the misunderstandings and escalates the conflict in the plot. The strong separation between cultures is what furthers this, it breeds suspicion and alienation between the two cultures, which only further fuels each culture creating stereotypes from misunderstandings and prejudices. The power imbalances built into the foundation of British India contribute to this as well, transforming dynamics socially and legally, into oppressive systems filled with bias. When combined, these all play a role in the colonial context, and create the difficulties that make it unfeasible for forgiveness to be found between Dr. Aziz and Miss Quested. Her word is immediately viewed as truth in the British ruled India, while Dr. Aziz is automatically viewed as guilty by the British system. Afterwards, Dr. Aziz cannot let go of the humiliation he faced, built by the oppression of colonialism; while these systems are still in place, reconciliation is not possible.

From the tragic estrangement, we can find consequences that are the result of unsuccessful intercultural communication, failure to embrace and understand a culture different from your own, and the effects of ethnocentrism. If I was Miss Quested, I would not retreat; rather I would confront the harm I had caused and do my best to atone for what had happened and try to repair the harm that I had caused. Mr. Fielding, I would continue to fight for fairness and friendship, further mediate these clashing cultures and continue trying to bridge the divide between these two worldviews. Lastly, If I were Dr. Aziz, I would try to take my hatred and

resentment and channel this into fighting against colonization, try to seek peace despite the injustice.

Word Count: 1489

References

A Passage to India. Directed by David Lean, Columbia Pictures, 1984.