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**‘Something out here doesn’t suit them’: E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*
(1924) and the experiences of women in early twentieth-century colonial
India.**

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‘rapid waste of nervous tissue more injurious...to women than to men’ (Diver 8-9)

The depiction of the experiences of female characters in the 1924 novel *A Passage to India* (APTI) elucidates E.M. Forster's anti-colonial goals. He both parodies women and uses them as voices to oppose imperialism. Despite this, through his critique of colonialism, Forster also creates a nuanced image of their experiences, somewhat disputing imperialist stereotypes. The novel presents the colonial tensions in early twentieth-century India, framed around the arrival of British women Miss Quested and Mrs Moore in fictional Chandrapore. This is subsequently followed by Miss Quested's false accusations of Western-educated Indian Doctor Aziz for sexual assault, who is supported only by fellow Indians and his British friend Fielding, principle of the Government College. The experiences of three female groups are explored throughout the novel, British, 'Anglo-Indian', referring to British colonial settlers in India, and indigenous Indian women. This paper first locates the novel within historiography of 20th century colonial India and discusses contemporary Western perceptions of women in India, followed by demonstrating how *APTI* connected to such viewpoints. It concludes that the novel presents a nuanced appraisal of female experiences in India, demonstrating female imperial accountability as well as somewhat disputing orientalist narratives on Indian women. Forster's experiences in India and friendship with Syed Ross Masood (1890-1937), the inspiration for Aziz and dedicatee of the novel shape his narrative, although his identity as a Western man somewhat undermines his authority as a primary source for women's lives (Singh 276).

A Passage to India was published in 1924, situated between the 'high imperial period' of 1880-1914, Indian Independence on 14th August 1947, a period when Indian nationalist opposition to colonialism increased. The Indian National Congress formed in 1885, becoming more focused on *swaraj* (self-rule) in the 20th century, particularly following the return of non-violent nationalist figure Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) from South Africa in 1915 (Midgley 2). Similarly, the nationalist Muslim League was formed in 1906, seeking

independence and religious partition (Singh, 266). Gyan Prakash highlights that Nationalist histories focused on figures including Gandhi as the driving force for historical change (Prakash 1476-77), while postcolonial histories have been written by historians including Dipesh Chakrabarty, rejecting Eurocentric ideas and highlighting the ongoing effects of empire on indigenous lives (Chakrabarty 3-6). Feminist historiography critique these approaches for excluding women, for example Padma Anol argues that women's 'agency' has been obscured through focus on imperialist and nationalist narratives (Anol 603).

APTI somewhat fits into the nationalist tradition, focusing upon Western educated Aziz and his development of anti-colonial views. However, the subaltern studies framework can be used to critique Forster's primary focus on high-caste, male Indians including Aziz and Godbole. Anol's critique is thus also important, as Indian women are excluded from Forster's depiction of changes in Indian society and British women are appropriated as stereotypes (Anol 2008: 603), corroborating Benita Parry's argument that Forster's sought to 'parody' Anglo-India (Parry 28). Similarly, as Edward Said argues, it was impossible for Western novels produced in this period to avoid imperialistic influence, no matter their intentions, which is important to consider when assessing Forster's presentation of Indian women (Said xxii). His goal to uplift the status of Indian men also creates additional female stereotypes. However, when compared with contemporary Western perspectives of women in colonial India, *A Passage to India* demonstrates relatively nuanced depictions of female experiences, stemming from Forster's opposition to imperialist stereotypes.

Some of the contemporary sources assessed below are late nineteenth century, yet Clare Midgley's analysis of early imperial historiography from the 1880s to 1940s which idealises the 'high imperial period' highlights that ideas of British superiority remained throughout this period. Such historiography sought to 'foster popular enthusiasm for Britain's role as an imperial nation', propagating colonialist ideology (Midgley 2). In Britain, there

were considerable social changes for women following the First World War. For example, women over thirty were granted the vote in 1918 and there was growing gender equality in marriage, including an increase in maintenance in 1922 given to female divorcees (Thane 2019: 59-60). This change largely did not reach Anglo-Indian women in the colonies, for example Maud Diver (1867-1945), an English memsahib and writer, expressed her disappointment in 1909 that ‘the modern advance in the intellectual and social position of women’ had not been accepted by Anglo-Indian society (Diver 25).

Elisabeth Buettner argues that Anglo-Indian culture differed from twentieth-century British society, largely attached to ‘archaic’ conventions (Buettner 23). Thus, the difference between British women, reflected in the novel through Mrs Moore and Miss Quested, and memsahibs was significant, yet many contemporaries believed that all women were at risk of gaining such Anglo-Indian characteristic upon arrival in the colonies. For example, Western commentators including Sara Duncan, a Canadian journalist, presented in her 1886 novel the inevitable transformation of British women into ‘dull’ memsahibs (Duncan 310). The climate of India was viewed as unsuited to women, partially triggering this transformation, causing personality changes and ‘hysteria,’ as Indrani Sen identifies (Sen 1997: 371). This stereotype was used by Anglo-Indians to excuse their own actions, for example Diver attributed Anglo-Indian women’s ‘irritability’ to a ‘rapid waste of nervous tissue more injurious...to women than to men’ caused by inhabitancy in India, as well as by observers such as Duncan to critique them (Diver 8-9). This played into imperial ideology, blaming Indian customs and weather for female transformation, just as it was blamed for British men ‘going native’ and losing their perceived Western sensibilities (Buettner 6).

The British women in *APTI*, Mrs Moore and Miss Quested, juxtapose Anglo-Indian women, represented by Mrs Turton. The arrival of British women from the mid-nineteenth century, increasing to 45,000 by 1921 according to census records, was blamed for tense

imperial relations (Buettner 4). Margaret Strobel labels this blame ‘the myth of the destructive female’, which she identified in colonies across the Empire. She claims that the arrival of women, encouraged by the colonial government after the 1957 mutiny due to a desire to decrease British and Indian relationships, reducing concubinage, officially banned in parts of the Empire in 1909 (Strobel 6-7). Thus, women were blamed for reduced interactions with Indians through this practice. Concerns about women inciting indigenous male sexual desire and causing increased colonial tensions throughout the Empire form the second part of the myth, highlighted through the introduction of the death penalty for sexual assault of white women in Papua in 1926 (Strobel 6-7). This law, enacted two years after the publication of *A Passage to India* where such concerns were disputed through Aziz’s acquittal, demonstrates the role of *APTI* in providing a more nuanced approach to British imperialism and female experiences (181).

Furthermore, memsahibs’ daily lives were viewed as idle and ‘frivolous’ due to their isolation in social clubs and continued Victorian manners (Sen 2017: 206). Buettner convincingly highlights their self-proclaimed isolation from those in the metropole, labelling them as ‘exile[s].’ (Buettner 2). The continuity of outdated social customs in the colonies is demonstrated by the parallel example of colonial Nigeria in 1940, where women had to process to the bathroom at dinner parties in order of their husbands’ ranks (Strobel 11). Similarly, Sen demonstrates the strict social divides specifically within colonial India, lower status women including missionaries looked down on by memsahibs including Diver who criticised them for living ‘on the same lines [as]...the Orientals.’ (Sen 1997: 361; Diver 133). While Strobel attributes such structure to the desire to maintain one’s ‘cultural self-identity’, isolation created perceptions of Anglo-Indian women as increasingly prejudiced towards Indians (Strobel 11). Duncan’s novel demonstrates this stereotype, highlighting that upon transformation, the memsahib viewed Indians as ‘nasty.’ (Duncan 310) However, as Diver’s

comment demonstrates, white women in India were not a homogenous group (Diver 133). Forster focuses on memsahibs' experiences, yet lower-class white women, doctors and missionaries were also present in India.

Moreover, contemporary British views of Indian women, represented fleetingly by Forster through Mrs Battacharya, Mrs Das and Hamidullah's wife, were largely 'Orientalist', defined by Said as defining those from the East as entirely 'other' to Western values (Said 1-2). Sen argues that the practice of *purdah*, the isolation of Indian women from unrelated men, left women almost 'invisible' to white men, leading to Orientalist curiosity about their lives (Sen 2001: 6). Her view is convincing, highlighted by large numbers of missionary accounts on *purdah* sent to the metropole, largely presenting women as victims of exploitative Indian men, or as idle and controlling. While missionary Mrs M. Weitbrecht described *purdah* women as 'birds in a cage' imprisoned by indigenous men (Weitbrecht 168), Diver claimed in 1909 that their 'power was supreme' (Diver 168). Like the practice of Sati (widow immolation) prohibited in 1829, *purdah* was used to justify the British colonial 'civilising mission.' Just as the Calcutta Review praised 'Englishmen' for saving 'the aging woman from the flames' (1861), critiques of *purdah* justified colonialism (Sen 2001: 26).

The rest of this paper places *A Passage to India* within the context of such perceptions, demonstrating Forster's nuanced, yet incomplete, account of women's experiences. Forster's opposition to colonialism differentiates his characterisation of women in colonial India, avoiding stereotypes that labelled India as destructive for British women, lifted blame from colonial men or justified continued oppression of Indians. Forster's depiction of British women through Mrs Moore and Miss Quested accurately demonstrates the different experiences of women in colony and metropole, although the precise social changes described above are not directly referred to. Despite this, literary critic Michael Enos' argument that Miss Quested represented the 1920s British 'New Woman' is

convincing, as her presence at the start of the novel disrupted the 'archaic' social norms of Anglo-India (Enos 23). This corroborates Sen's argument that there was significant opposition to increased women's liberties amongst Anglo-Indians (Sen 2001: 17). For example, in Part I ('Mosque') Miss Quested's potential fiancé Ronny, the city magistrate, expressed to his mother Mrs Moore, that Miss Quested's conversation with Fielding alone at the 'boundaries of the club' during the bridge party held in their honour had been noticed disapprovingly by Mrs Callendar. Forster thus identifies the isolated nature of Anglo-Indian society which caused increased scrutiny, and focus on strict social 'conventions', which even Mrs Moore, an elderly woman, found to be outdated (41). Similarly, Miss Quested and Mrs Moore's attitude to Indians highlighted their more open-minded nature, keen to get to know Indian women, requesting to 'call on [them]' (37). This juxtaposes Mrs Turton's attitude, advising the newcomers that they were superior to almost 'everyone in India' (36). Although such differences are exaggerated, Forster using the voices of Miss Quested and Mrs Moore to criticise colonialism, the differing attitudes and customs reflect the realities of the different societies of colony and metropole which Sen and Buettner identify (Sen 1997: 360; Buettner 16).

Forster's depiction of British women's experiences plays into contemporary stereotypes that British women's transformation into Anglo-Indians was inevitable, as evident in Duncan's critical novel (Duncan, 310). While Forster's depiction of Miss Quested, for example through critique of her looks as 'plain', suggest elements of misogyny, his novel mainly serves to critique such stereotypes, not perpetuate them (56). Characters frequently refer to this inevitable transformation, allowing *APTI* to be used as a source for this contemporary perception. For example, at the end of Part I, Fielding informs Aziz that British women 'are much nicer in England' as there is 'something out here [that] doesn't suit them' (95). Thus, even Fielding, the primary British voice of anti-colonialism in the novel,

seemingly believes in this stereotype. Despite this, the characters of Mrs Moore and Miss Quested largely dispute the idea that India as a country had a negative impact on women, connecting to Forster's desire to oppose imperial ideologies. Mrs Moore, despite her increased melancholy following Aziz's arrest, never changes her attitude towards Indians, stating when pressed by Miss Quested that she knows Aziz is not guilty (162). Miss Quested's accusation of Aziz in Part II ('Caves') appears to signal her transformation as she viewed him as 'the principle of evil' (174), connecting to Duncan's depiction of memsahibs' 'irritation' towards Indians (Duncan 310). However, Miss Quested's withdrawal of her charges against Aziz halts her transformation, disputing this stereotype (181). Thus, while Forster's intent was to uplift the status of India, likely opposing the blame given to the country for some women's poor behaviour, the novel attributes agency to British women in India, and presents the reality of their differing experiences in the metropole and colony.

Mrs Turton represents the negative Anglo-Indian stereotype that Miss Quested avoids. Forster's depiction of Anglo-Indian isolation in India is again historically revealing, highlighting the isolation of memsahibs through the setting of the Chandrapore social club. Indians are prohibited, as demonstrated when Aziz can only escort Mrs Moore to the boundaries of the club in Part I (21). Similarly, Mrs Turton's inability to speak Urdu except 'in the imperative form' (36) corroborates Sen's observation that following the decline of concubinage, the main interaction between colonisers and the colonised was through domestic service (Sen 2001: 5). Moreover, Forster also demonstrates the strict social hierarchies in Anglo-Indian society, connecting to Diver's critique of missionaries above (Diver 133), through his description of a young mother with 'corn gold hair' (144). Following Aziz's accusations in Part II, she is viewed as the quintessence of Britishness in need of protection, however the narrator states that she was previously 'snubbed' due to her

lower status as the wife of a railway official (144). Thus, *APTI* is significant as a source for the social customs of high-status memsahibs.

Moreover, Forster's engagement with the 'myth of the destructive female' appears ironic, highlighting that women alone were not responsible for poor colonial relations. Memsahibs are still depicted in an 'unflattering' manner, and their prejudice towards Indians is apparent (Strobel 7). Before Aziz's trial in Part II, Mrs Turton declares that Indians 'ought to be spat at, they ought to be ground into the dust', causing her husband 'discomfort' (172). Enos thus argues that *A Passage to India* is an unconvincing historical source, presenting all Anglo-Indian women as 'tyrant[s]' (Enos 90). However, while certainly playing into negative Anglo-Indian stereotypes, reflecting Duncan's description of memsahibs' 'irritation' towards Indians, contemporary writings of Anglo-Indian women reveal similar prejudices (Duncan 310). For example, Maud Diver described female Indian servants ('ayah[s]') as 'bone-bred gossip[s]' whose 'tongues[s are] stranger[s] to the golden fetter of truth' (Diver 87). Thus, Forster's writings, although likely influenced by 20th century patriarchy and his position as a male author, can somewhat be placed into Jane Haggis' critique of works which she claims 'recuperat[e]' white women in colonial India. Haggis argues that Anglo-Indian women must be held accountable for their colonial privilege, avoiding presenting them as 'victims', which the depiction of Mrs Turton's cruelty and ignorance certainly achieves (Haggis 48).

Moreover, *APTI* also holds male colonial officials accountable. Forster demonstrates awareness of the 'myth of the destructive female' repeatedly throughout the novel, although it is somewhat critiqued (Strobel 1-15). Mr Turton's 'discomfort' jarringly juxtaposes his wife's call for genocide, inferring that he is concerned with public image, not sympathy towards Indians (172). Similarly, in Part I, when Miss Quested criticises her Anglo-Indian hosts for their rudeness towards indigenous guests at the bridge party, the excuse the narrator ascribes was the presence of 'womenfolk' for whom the men had to 'fetch tea' and 'advise about

dogs' (39). Thus, while women were seemingly blamed, men's choice of 'tea' and 'dogs' over duty (39) presents them as equally 'frivolous', as Sen labels the Anglo-Indian female stereotype (Sen 2017: 206). Thus, while Anglo-Indian women's experiences are somewhat depicted through misogynistic stereotypes, the novel is equally disparaging about colonial men, connecting to Forster's critique of imperialism and revealing his somewhat accurate and more nuanced portrayal of women's lives.

Finally, the least visible group of women *APTI* are indigenous Indians. Their partial absence is historically revealing, connecting to the 'invisibil[ity]' of *purdah* women to white men and their separation from Anglo-Indian life (Sen 2001: 6), also reflected by Aziz's friend Hamidullah's wife's refusal to be seen by Fielding (214). Despite this, Forster presents a more nuanced depiction of *purdah*, albeit likely designed to raise the status of Indian men, disputing views of missionaries such as Mrs Weitbrecht that they mistreated their wives (Weitbrecht 104). The stereotype of *purdah* women's idleness was held before and after the publication of *Passage to India*, as stated in Margaret Urquhart's 1927 study of Hindu ladies, calling them 'hysterical and neurotic' (Urquhart 67). However, Forster somewhat disputes this through the depiction of Hindu *purdah* women attending the bridge party, Mrs Battacharya and Mrs Das, who are educated and able to speak English, juxtaposing Mrs Turton's own limited knowledge of Urdu (36). While their male relatives largely speak for them, leading Syeda Kazmi and Samina Ashfaq to accuse Forster of racist misogyny, this somewhat reflects the nature of gendered expectations in twentieth-century India (Kamzi and Ashfaq 31). Partha Chatterjee argues that nationalists such as Gandhi propagated a new patriarchy in which *purdah* was critiqued, yet women were fashioned guardians of the uncolonized domestic sphere, meaning men were more dominant in public spaces (Chatterjee 244).

Beyond this, the concept of male exploitation of *purdah* women is disputed by Forster. Hamidullah's wife's decision not to meet Fielding infers that she was not 'passive', central to Anagol's analysis of the highly different circumstance of Christian conversion (Anagol 1998: 99). *Purdah* is presented as a choice, Hamidullah stating that his female relations had declared in writing that they would break *purdah* in support of Aziz (214). While this does not come to pass, this statement infers Forster's view that Indian women did not experience forcible imprisonment by their husbands. Similarly, Hamidullah critiques the mistake of missionary women in believing that *purdah* women were 'downtrodden' (214). While certainly a critique of missionaries including Mrs Weitbrecht, this somewhat reflects Diver's Anglo-Indian views, who also used the word 'downtrodden' to argue for *purdah* women's unnatural power over men (Diver 68). Thus, while Forster's depiction of Indian women's experiences is more nuanced, his view appears to have been impacted by Western perceptions. Thus, Said's argument that imperial influences were impossible to avoid is corroborated (Said xxii).

Similarly, Forster does not adequately demonstrate the changes Indian women experienced during this period. The changing position of women is only revealed through Aziz's nationalism and escape from Anglo-Indian society. After taking up poetry in Part III ('Temple'), he writes solely on the topic of 'Oriental womanhood', claiming that '*purdah* must go' (234). However, no Indian woman is depicted stating the same desire, allowing Anagol's critique of women's agency being lost through the 'imperialism-nationalism' narrative to be applied (Anagol 2008: 603). Aziz's critique of *purdah*, while demonstrating Forster's accuracy in reflecting nationalist redefinitions of womanhood, undermines female contributions towards social change (Chatterjee 247). Unlike the women depicted by Forster, not all women followed *purdah* by the twentieth century. Madras and Calcutta Universities granted female degrees before the same policy was embraced by the University of London in

1878 (Raman 132). Similarly, Muthulakshmi Reddy graduated as the first Hindu female doctor from the Madras University in 1912, and the Women's Indian Association (WIA) was formed in 1917, of which Reddy was an original member (Raman 134-5). Such opportunities, although only available to higher caste and class women, demonstrate the female agency which Forster omits, focusing solely on critiquing the British and uplifting the status of Indian men. Therefore, while rejecting missionary accounts of exploitation and intrigue, the depiction of female experiences in *APTI* is incomplete.

Overall, *APTI* provides a more nuanced depiction of female experiences than contemporary British accounts. It connects to modern scholarly debates about British female colonial complicity and the agency of Indian women. However, Forster's understanding of women's experiences was impacted by his male, Western perspective and his opposition to imperialism. Thus, while a more sympathetic account of the experiences of women in India, which reveals the differing experiences of the three groups depicted, the novel is most useful for demonstrating an alternative British male perspective, rather than allowing a complete reconstruction of women's daily lives in the colony.

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