



Cultural Boundary and Ethnic Identity in *A Passage to India*

YAN Jiansheng^{[a],*}

^[a]Department of Public Basic Education in Hezhou University, Hezhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Based on an Indian doctor Aziz's experience in contact with the British people and the subsequent "Aziz's Incidents", *A Passage to India* reflects the cultural clash between the suzerain and the vassal state and the crisis of ethnic identity caused by cultural conflict during the colonial times in India. Obviously, the Indian "Cultural Other" was marginalized and repressed by the British "Culture itself" at that time, human weakness revealed once again attributed by ethnocentrism. After the novel was published, it once aroused strong repercussion from readers, academic circles such as Criticism of Orientalism was incessant, the author Foster was also pushed to the top of the critical wave and was accused constantly. In fact, study shows that Aziz's story was both universal and symbolic, it was an inevitable result of the cultural boundary which existed between Britain and India during the colonial period, and this problem was the key factor for the unequal ethnic groups' identity between British people and Indian people.

Key words: *A Passage to India*; Cultural boundaries; Ethnic identity

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INTRODUCTION

Writings about India are not uncommon in English literature, from Scott to Thackeray and Dickens to Kipling, they all have descriptions of her. However, the best expression of Said's "Orientalism" is E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Unlike previous generations who wrote about India with a discriminatory eye, Forster concerned much more about the tragic situation of India under the colonial system, and boldly exposed the vanity and domineering of the colonial rulers. Hence, the publication of this novel once caused panic in Britain, criticism on it never stopped. Until the mid-20th century, with the rising of criticism of colonialism, the value of this fiction was redefined, and was even adapted for the screen by MGM film company in 1984, and the movie won more than ten awards, including the Oscar for best supporting actress the next year. Because *A Passage to India* intuitively reproduced the strong cultural conflicts between the colonial country and colonial vassal country during the colonial period and the reverse colonization thinking that was triggered by it, the critical review to this novel is still very favorable now. Just as Said pointed out that Orientalism belonged to the construction of the West world, aiming to establish a clear distinction between the East and the West, so as to highlight the superiority of Western culture; When France and Britain wanted to colonize some eastern countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and India, this ideology became politically useful. Thus deep observation to this novel finds that the character of Aziz is very universal and symbolic, his presence is the inevitable result of the unbridgeable cultural boundary existed between Britain and India under the colonial system, it is the true portrayal of the asymmetrical human rights relationship between the supremacist state and the vassal state.

THE UNCROSSABLE CULTURAL BOUNDARY BETWEEN BRITAIN AND INDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF EMPIRE

With the strength accumulated by the industrial revolution and the influence of domestic adventure novels, Britain vigorously pursued colonial expansion all over the world during the 18th century, and pursued a policy of overseas colonial controlling. By the end of 18th century they had built a “sun never sets” Empire in the world by possessing two-thirds of the world’s colonies in terms of a system of federalism, promoting their subject of “cultural self” in terms of repelling and suppressing the “cultural other”. It was during this period that India became a vassal state of Britain. On the surface, the Commonwealth was composed of independent sovereign states (including territories), and the British monarch had no right to interfere in the internal affairs of the Member States, and they could exercise internal autonomy. In fact, the British had never regarded the people of this state as citizens with equal status, they “regarded themselves as the special members of the God with the qualities and ideals of justice, freedom and peace, so they had ability and responsibility to project the ‘light of civilization’ to the ‘dark areas’ all over the world. Also they believed that the aborigines are often animalized or demonized in order to strengthen the image of themselves as the spokesman of human civilization, reflecting the nobility and superiority of themselves through the baseness and vileness of the other’s, as well as the enlightenment of themselves through the brutality of the other’s by mistake. Such racial superiority and the superiority of civilization of white people infiltrated the collective unconscious of the British.” (Zhang, 2012) As a result, when they saw the Indian’s ignorance and backwardness in India, they thought that they must save the chaos of the East world by advocating the Western civilization.

In *A Passage to India*, the city of Chandrapur was completely governed by the British, the army and hospital were under the control of Major Cullen, the schools were under Headmaster Fielding, and the magistrates’ courts were under Ronnie, a white section of the official station spread out along the city road on a second rising slope, which stood out from the main city, making the station very striking. Looking down from the station, the city of Chandrapur looked like a forest with scattered huts in the middle of it, making the city’s ingenious layout allow the station to serve as a lookout center of a “modern panoramic open structure prison”, and it was easy for the British to watch from above these Hindus, who were naturally dull and unable to govern themselves. The whole city of Chandrapur became a dominant, ubiquitous “gaze”, and the panoramic open “gaze” covered the true intention of the colonists, which ensured the performance of the rights of the British and reflected the racial superiority of the white people. For example, from the railway station to the official station you had to go through the centre of the city, which gave the white people from the British

mainland a chance to take a car and have a sight of the whole city, feeling the preferential services offered by black Indians to their white masters, and observing the Indians’ messy appearance when they avoid their cars. Although the most visible building in the main city is the circular mosque houses, the Indians could also maintain their religious beliefs, compared with British Christianity, the Hindu religions were powerless, the Indians here are either poor or lack of dignity, even Mrs. Moore, the good white people, told Quest to “give one by one, and not too much” when dealing with the Indian beggars. What’s more, the British here were always in the habit of misreading the Indian culture, they had wantonly broken the rules of mosques’ and even accused the Indian civilians of arbitrary and fictitious crimes. No Indians were allowed to enter the white circle around The “Society of British Expatriates”, where the only official language was English. It can be seen that the excessive suppression of the Indian subordinate class by the British not only resulted in the clarity of the cultural boundary between the British people and the Indian people, but also aroused strong resentment among some Indians, and the Indian mutiny of 1857 was an example.

The novel highlights the existence of cultural boundaries and its impossible span through the misfortunes of the protagonist Aziz and his sympathizers. Aziz, a British-trained Indian doctor, with some local renown, was meek, friendly and considerate. Although he did not think it was reasonable for the British to rule India, he was completely defenseless against them and always approached them in the most friendly manner. When his companions gave President Fielding the slightest affront, he was quick to criticize them; When a button fell off Fielding’s shirt, he took off a button from his own shirt and sewed it on Fielding’s; when Mrs. Moore took off her shoes and entered the the Muslim temple, following the Muslim custom, he thought she was one of the most desirable Englishmen to be worthy of association, and even offered to be a guide himself to take them to the Malabar cave to pay a visit. Mrs. Moore and Miss Quest had come to Chandrapur to visit Ronnie and experience the foreign country’s culture by the way, but after their arrival, they were deeply disturbed by what they had seen and heard. Apart from the headmaster Fielding, all the Englishmen, including Ronnie, were incompatible with the Indians, they took the “The Society of British Expatriates” as a position to inculcate the idea of imperial superiority, any attempt to sympathize with or integrate with the colonial underclasses would be regarded as inappropriate and would require isolation and exclusion; Externally, it emphasized the normal operation of imperial power in the colonies and never allowed any Indians to have the right of speech. Fielding was an enlightened schoolmaster who realized that the colonial policy had not brought local benefits, but had led to a deepening cultural clash between England and India, and that Britain would sooner or later pay the price for it. However, such a group of sober people who tried

to cross the cultural boundary could not gain a standing room in Chandrapur city due to the “Aziz’s Incident”, and eventually became the inappropriate cultural “border men”, they had to flee from the city one after another.

As a miniature of the vassal states of British Commonwealth in the colonial period, *A Passage to India* fully reflected the real India in the colonial times. Here, human rights were completely violated, inequality of cultural relations were prominent. Superficially, the city of Chandrapur was managed in an perfect order by the British official station, the markets were thriving, the white people were respected, and all the Indians led a free life. When the train carrying Mrs. Moore and other people from the continent slowly pulled into the city, the white people and Indians lined both sides of the street to welcome them, an honor guard played music briskly, and a crowd of poor Indians ran after the train with a joy and so on. In fact, the colonial rule of the British Empire strengthened the operation of imperial power, which enabled the British mainstream culture to override the Indian subculture, and prevented the Indian people from having national consciousness by suppressing and belittling the Indian “cultural other”. In order to highlight the British “cultural self”, they regarded the Indian religions as a low, uncivilized barbarian games that the British could ignore. Therefore, Major Cullen could summon Aziz to his mansion at any time and the Major could leave at any time before Aziz arrived, Mrs. Cullen could forcibly occupied the carriage hired by Aziz but let Aziz walk home, Mrs. Dutton was disturbed to hear Indian women speaking English at the Match-Making Party, Fielding’s determination to investigate the “Aziz’s incident” was frustrated because of the interference of the “The Society of British Expatriates”, and Ms Quest was eventually thrown out of the white people circle because of reversing the verdict for Aziz. Thus this “non-individualized panoramic open gaze was an effective tool of discipline society, and it was the ‘eye of power’, which turned people into their own monitors, and power operated automatically and efficiently, as far as the gaze went, the social discipline network would cover them.” (Zhao, 2006) As a result, there was nothing ugly in the official station, and the scenery of the city was quite beautiful, the local residential area became a “Ghetto” under the watchful eye of the official station, and the people living there were almost speechless.

REFLECTIONS ON ETHNIC IDENTITY CAUSED BY CULTURAL BOUNDARY

It is well known that in the history of human development, groups with the same ancestral identity or the same religious belief are more likely to form a stable social relationship, to constitute a community or a nation or a country, hence the identity of an ethnic group is largely rooted in culture. In general, a nation’s culture is relatively fixed, while ethnic identities can cross cultural boundaries,

so that mutual identification among different ethnic groups is established through mixed living mode, unless this identity is interrupted by some external factor and forced to terminate. Max Weber notes, “Ethnic groups are groups that have a subjective belief in a common lineage, either because they are similar in physical features or customs, or because they have both, or because of the memories of colonization and immigrants; This belief is certainly important for group construction, but whether or not there is an objective kinship is irrelevant.” (Li & Kang, 2018) It is the inseparable relationship between culture and religion that determines the irreplaceable role of religious belief in maintaining the identity, stability and development of ethnic groups, and it is enough to influence the mindset and habits of the group. Therefore, religion itself is a culture with faith at its core, different beliefs, different cultures, cultural coexistence are based on the respectation for each other’s religious beliefs.

However, as we have perceived from *A Passage to India*, the Christian British colonists had nothing to do with the local people who believed in Islam and other religions. On the contrary, conceiving themselves as the chosen people of the God, the British colonists thought that they shouldered the duty of spreading civilization abroad, and showed no respect for local cultures and customs, and even gave a completely favorable explanation for the British’s arbitrary trampling of Indian religious beliefs when they did so, for in their minds the Indians were already a people of lazy, degenerate, savage, and ferocious in nature, who extremely needed to be saved and influenced by the “Christian culture” of the British Empire, non-negotiable room existed. As for the various religious beliefs of the Indians’, they should be treated with strict distinction as witchcraft or demagogic cancer, which were deliberately exaggerated by the existence of their bad habits. As a result, the British executed economic and cultural control in the name of aid wherever they went, they actually had no sense of danger. The city of Chandrapur was originally a less developed area, the colonists built a railway here, built a hospital and a school, and set up an official station, but the aim was not to improve and develop this region, but to plunder its resources and gain more wealth, and continuously to transport them back to Britain by railway for the enjoyment of the British upper class. In order to achieve the efficient operation of imperial power, they kept a firm grip on the management of all institutions here, creating a network of social discipline with imperial standards. Under its influence, the original ethnic structure of Chandrapur City was broken, making the residents who had had a unified ancestral identity lose their directions. On the one hand, they were amazed by the advanced science and technology of the British Empire and unconscious about their own culture, so they had to gain a sense of community through integrating into the discourse system of the British Empire; On the other hand, when the British wantonly denigrated and misinterpreted the Indian

culture with ethnic prejudice and trampled on the local people's religious beliefs, the strong sense of national regression forced the Indians to go back to their cultural roots. Aziz's final introspection showed that the cultural awakening of a few aspiring Indians had appeared.

Aziz, in his early years, studied in London, England, he had received the British education, understand the English etiquette, He was a gentleman, after returning to Chandrapur city he practiced medicine for a living. In order to eliminate the cultural prejudice between the British and the local Indians, he went back and forth between the two. On the one hand, he was eager to cure the local people's diseases, managing to help them out, on the other hand, he tried his best to make friends with the white English people by taking advantage of his doctor's profession, Principal Fielding, Major Cullen, Sheriff Ronnie, Mr. And Mrs. Dutton were all his good friends. When Mrs. Moore and her party arrived in Chandrapur, Aziz offered to invite her and Miss Quest to pay a visit to the Malabar Caves, he himself would act as a guide out of admiration for Mrs. Moore's understanding of Muslim rules. During the visit to the cave, Aziz took a good care of Mrs. Moore and Miss Quest, but accidentally, Miss Quest went into a cave alone and got some hallucinations. Out of panic, she hurried down the mountain and was picked up by Dutton. Guided by the Duttons, Quest accused Aziz of plotting impolite manners against her, all the members in the "Society of British Expatriates", except Fielding, tried to list the crimes on Aziz. At the trial court, Major Cullen suggested that Quest should insist on the charges, or no one in the "Society of British Expatriates" would come to her aid. Although Aziz had repeatedly protested his innocence, no white people trusted him except Fielding and Mrs. Moore. It was not until Miss Quest regained her memory, driven by her conscience, that she admitted Aziz had not done any harm to her, now the court was in uproar in an instant, Aziz was exonerated but Miss Quist was banished from the white people circle. Having got this experience, Aziz realized that the mixed ethnic identity between the British and the Indians in the context of the empire was a fantasy, he had to leave Chandrapur to live in seclusion in the mountains on the border between India and Nepal.

Among the white people, President Fielding was a man of good understanding, who knew Aziz well and was willing to get close to the Indians. After the Aziz's incident, he was running around and tried his best to prove Aziz's innocence. Although he was criticized by Dutton and the others in "The Society of British Expatriates", he did not flinch. It's worth noting that Mrs. Moore is also convinced of Aziz's innocence and tried to persuade her son Ronnie to find out the truth, but Ronnie refused. To escape his mother's interference, Ronnie sent his mother Mrs. Moore back to England, only to see her die on the way. Miss Quest did not intend to frame Aziz up, it was Dutton and other white people that deluded her to accuse Aziz in the case of delirium. Once she recovered her

memory, Miss Quest still choose to restore the truth. It should be said that after these white people like Fielding came to India, they witnessed with their own eyes the imperious behavior of the British in India and realized that colonial rule could not eliminate the cultural differences between Britain and India, but would aggravate racial conflicts. However, their sense of reverse colonization was not taken into consideration seriously, instead, they were ostracized by "The Society of British Expatriates", who had no choice but to return home. Facts once again proved that as long as the cultural boundary existed, the mixed identity of ethnic groups between the British and the Indians was impossible to realize.

CONCLUSION

A Passage to India follows a traditional narrative pattern with its distinctive themes and dramatic plots. From the beginning to the end, it closely revolves around the social interaction and personal fate of the Indian doctor Aziz, involving both the British white people and the local residents of India. From the appearance, Chandrapur was full of goodwill each other under the management of the white people, but in fact, the cultural boundary formed by the difference in cultures and beliefs between the British and the Indians had never been broken through because of the colonial system, the problem of asymmetric discourse power had not been solved as well, this made it difficult to realize the ethnic identity in different races. Here, the author takes an objective attitude to deal with the incident, and uses descriptive techniques to make the readers go deep into the situation, and then reflect—Chandrabur is obviously a microcosm of India, and the fate of Aziz's represents the common destiny of all Indians in the colonial period, which together constituted the false context of the so-called federal autonomy under the colonial system of the British Empire. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said pointed out the Eastern world in the eyes of the Western countries in the 19th century was actually an imaginary place without any real evidence, the Western world had a strong prejudice against the people and culture of the Arab-Islamic world, which led to a misreading of the eastern culture. As soon as the British first set foot on the land of India, conflict was inevitable.

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