

THEORY OF MIND AND NARRATIVE OPACITY IN E.M. FORSTER'S A PASSAGE TO INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores E.M. Forster's A Passage to India through the lens of Theory of Mind (ToM), which refers to the ability to understand others' thoughts and emotions. The main aim is to examine how Forster's characters show or fail to show this ability and how the novel's unclear narration engages the reader's own ToM. Using a qualitative, text-based method grounded in cognitive literary theory, especially the work of Premack and Woodruff (1978), the study closely analyzes key scenes. The findings reveal that emotional stress, cultural conflict, and colonial power structures often lead to breakdowns in understanding between characters. These failures are most visible in scenes like the Marabar Caves and the trial, where meaning becomes unclear and trust collapses. Forster's use of narrative gaps and shifting perspectives invites the reader to fill in missing emotional cues, but also shows how difficult true understanding can be in a divided world. The study argues that Forster uses this uncertainty to highlight the failure of colonial relationships to foster real human connection. The research suggests that cognitive approaches like ToM offer new insights into how literature reflects and challenges social and political realities. This contribution deepens the understanding of both Forster's work and the broader field of cognitive literary studies.

Keywords: Theory of Mind, A Passage to India, E.M. Forster, colonialism, cognitive literary theory, narrative ambiguity, intersubjectivity..

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) stands as a seminal literary work that probes the complexities of colonial relationships, not just through political and racial dynamics, but also through profound psychological and cultural dissonance. The novel's central concern revolves around the characters' repeated inability to understand one another an issue rooted in colonial hierarchies, cultural alienation, and individual

psychological limitations (Said, 1993; Boehmer, 2005). Throughout the narrative, characters misread, doubt, or remain unaware of each other's true thoughts and emotions, which reflects a broader commentary on the difficulties of cross-cultural empathy under imperial rule (Forster, 2005).

This cognitive and emotional disconnect is further emphasized through Forster's unique narrative technique. Drawing upon insights from Theory of Mind

(ToM, the cognitive ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others contemporary literary scholars argue that Forster deliberately constructs moments of “narrative opacity” where the internal states of characters are left ambiguous or inaccessible (Zunshine, 2006; Palmer, 2004). Such gaps in characterization require readers to engage actively in interpretation, effectively simulating the characters’ own struggles to comprehend one another (Zunshine, 2006).

In this way, *A Passage to India* functions on two cognitive levels. First, it illustrates the limitations of empathy within a deeply hierarchical and culturally fractured colonial context (Mukherjee, 1971). Second, it challenges readers to exercise their own Theory of Mind by interpreting character behavior in the face of narrative ambiguity. Thus, Forster’s novel becomes both a literary critique of imperial systems and a cognitive experiment in how individuals and readers process and misprocess the minds of others.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on *A Passage to India* increasingly foregrounds the cognitive and psychological implications of its narrative style, especially in the context of colonial miscommunication. Zunshine

(2006) argues that readers instinctively engage in “mindreading” while interpreting fiction, but this process is often destabilized in postcolonial narratives due to cultural and power asymmetries.

Childs (1999) and Said (1993) demonstrate how colonial ideologies complicate intersubjective understanding. Forster’s use of free indirect discourse and symbolic motifs especially the Marabar Caves accentuates this instability. Ali and Khan (2023) offer a comparative feminist reading, noting that both British and Indian women, such as Mrs. Moore and Adela, experience gendered and cultural silencing. Chansoria and Syed (2023) analyze the breakdown of Aziz and Fielding’s friendship as emblematic of how colonial hierarchies erode trust and mutual comprehension.

Shahparan (2023) critiques the illusion of British empathy, showing how it reinforces colonial superiority and fosters resistance. Rizvi, Khan, and Hussain (2022) examine Forster’s use of ambiguity and symbolism especially the echo as devices that destabilize colonial certainties and reflect psychological disorientation.

From an ethical standpoint, Sonal (2021) invokes Aristotle's concept of *philia* to argue that true friendship between colonizer and colonized is untenable. Chauhan (2021) similarly identifies hegemonic ideologies as barriers to reconciliation. Hossain (2024) interprets the Marabar echo as a postcolonial metaphor for epistemic dislocation.

Khan (2021) employs Text World Theory to analyze how Forster constructs the *mind styles* of characters such as Aziz and Mrs. Moore. His work demonstrates how spatial deixis, modality, and psychological verbs influence narrative empathy and reflect internalized colonial ideologies. Collectively, these studies highlight the novel's complex treatment of failed communication and cognitive alienation, reinforcing the relevance of a ToM-centered analysis.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis approach grounded in cognitive literary theory, specifically applying Theory of Mind (ToM) as conceptualized by Premack and Woodruff (1978).. Selected passages from E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) were analyzed for evidence of mental-state attribution, misattribution, and psychological opacity.

Close reading and interpretive analysis were employed to identify moments of cognitive dissonance, intersubjective failure, and empathic breakdown. The method allows for examining how characters perceive, misperceive, or fail to understand each other, reflecting the cognitive and socio-political complexities of colonial India.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in **Theory of Mind (ToM)** by Premack and Woodruff's (1978), Baron-Cohen's (1995), Zunshine's (2006). Together, these theoretical strands support a reading of *A Passage to India* as a narrative that exposes the cognitive and ethical limits of empathy under colonialism, and challenges both characters and readers to confront the failures of mutual understanding in divided societies.

ToM refers to the human capacity to attribute mental states such as beliefs, intentions, desires, and emotions to oneself and others (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Applied to E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), ToM serves as a diagnostic lens to explore how interpersonal understanding collapses in colonial and emotionally turbulent contexts.

In this framework, Theory of Mind (ToM) breakdowns are not merely individual cognitive failures but are contextually triggered, particularly by environmental stress and ideological distortion. For example, misattributions of intentions can be seen as failures of first-order ToM, often provoked by anxiety and cultural dissonance (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Likewise, epistemic isolation—characterized by exclusion from mutual mental-state recognition reflects what Baron-Cohen terms epistemic opacity, wherein systemic mistrust obstructs the possibility of reciprocal understanding. This framework also acknowledges second-order ToM, the ability to think about what others are thinking about others, a faculty that becomes crucial in interpreting psychological states and assessing moral character (Baron-Cohen, 1995). In contrast, institutional ToM failure occurs when ideological biases override individual inference, effectively erasing the psychological agency of marginalized subjects (Childs, 1999).

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Marabar Caves and the Collapse of ToM

The Marabar Caves episode dramatizes a psychological void where the echo, “Boum,” erases semantic content and

disrupts mental-state attribution (Forster, 1924, p. 163). Following Premack and Woodruff (1978), ToM is the ability to attribute beliefs and intentions to others. Yet here, both Adela and Mrs. Moore experience a sensory and existential overload that destabilizes this capacity. Baron-Cohen (1995) emphasizes that heightened emotional arousal or environmental chaos can impair ToM. The cave, as a space of unstructured stimuli, causes a temporary collapse in both women’s ability to separate thought from perception, a cognitive disintegration that Forster symbolically amplifies through the echo.

Mrs. Moore is overwhelmed by the “terrifying echo” that “seemed to mock human feeling” (Forster, 1924, p. 163), reflecting her cognitive disorientation. Adela is confused by “the inarticulate sound” and interprets it as part of an assault, blurring sensory experience with imagined intent (Forster, 1924, p. 168).

The caves are described as “nothing attaches to them,” suggesting a space where cognition detaches from meaningful interpretation (Forster, 1924, p. 165).

5.2 Adela’s False Belief

Adela's accusation of Aziz stems from a breakdown of first-order ToM. She fails to accurately attribute a mental state to Aziz, misinterpreting ambiguous stimuli through a lens of fear and internal conflict (Forster, 1924, p. 170). According to Baron-Cohen (1995), emotional dysregulation and anxiety can trigger ToM failure, particularly in uncertain or high-stakes contexts. Her later admission, "I am not quite sure," demonstrates a partial recovery, but only after her cognitive system has recalibrated from the traumatic episode. Premack and Woodruff's framework helps identify this as a fundamental failure of belief attribution, exacerbated by psychological stress.

Adela believes Aziz followed her into the cave, though "nothing definite had happened" (Forster, 1924, p. 170). During the trial, she blurts out, "I don't think he did," marking a shift from false belief to uncertainty (Forster, 1924, p. 223). Her own internal questioning "Did I do wrong?" indicates retrospective doubt and cognitive recalibration (Forster, 1924, p. 226).

5.3 Aziz's Epistemic Isolation

Aziz remains cognitively excluded from the minds of both the British colonizers and Adela herself (Forster, 1924, p. 173).

Premack and Woodruff (1978) outline that ToM involves reciprocal awareness of mental states. Aziz, however, experiences what Baron-Cohen (1995) would call epistemic opacity: an inability to access the internal experiences of others due to systemic mistrust. In such an environment, ToM is not merely unavailable but denied. Gallagher and Frith (2003) stress that successful mindreading depends on shared social frameworks—something Forster shows to be absent in the colonial courtroom.

The British officers interpret Aziz's behavior with suspicion, not curiosity, assuming guilt without considering his intentions (Forster, 1924, p. 176).

Adela's inability to "picture" Aziz's face during the trial illustrates his psychological erasure (Forster, 1924, p. 222).

Aziz laments, "They all hate us," underscoring his belief that mutual understanding is unreachable (Forster, 1924, p. 179).

5.4 Fielding's Perspective-Taking

Fielding's defense of Aziz represents a successful application of second-order ToM: he evaluates Adela's state of mind and recognizes her confusion (Forster, 1924, p. 199). Baron-Cohen (1995)

identifies such nuanced social inference as “mentalizing,” a skill that allows individuals to interpret emotional subtleties and moral intentions. Fielding's moral stance demonstrates an advanced ToM capability that resists collective bias. His position also validates Premack and Woodruff's view that attributing independent mental states is essential for ethical action in social systems.

Fielding tells Adela she is “not well” and that her mind is “overstrained,” indicating emotional insight (Forster, 1924, p. 198).

He argues that Aziz “could never have done such a thing,” showing he imagines Aziz's moral character (Forster, 1924, p. 199).

Fielding criticizes his colleagues: “You're prejudiced, you start with the assumption of guilt,” exposing their ToM failure (Forster, 1924, p. 201).

5.5 Mrs. Moore's Empathic Exhaustion

Post-caves, Mrs. Moore experiences profound emotional and cognitive fatigue: “She had no use for anyone” (Forster, 1924, p. 182). Her refusal to engage reflects what Baron-Cohen (1995) terms ToM fatigue, where prolonged emotional stress can result in detachment from social cognition. While Premack and Woodruff (1978) view ToM as a general

capacity, Baron-Cohen contributes the understanding that this capacity can become impaired not just developmentally, but situationally, especially in response to overwhelming experiences.

She exclaims, “What is the use of it all?” reflecting a deep psychological detachment (Forster, 1924, p. 182).

Mrs. Moore avoids seeing Adela or speaking on Aziz's behalf, showing social withdrawal (Forster, 1924, p. 183).

Her final silence on the boat marks her complete withdrawal from empathy and community (Forster, 1924, p. 185).

5.6 Colonial Misattribution

The colonial authorities' assumption of Aziz's guilt is a collective ToM failure, shaped not by individual psychology but by ideological distortion. Baron-Cohen (1995) notes that groupthink and prejudice can block accurate mindreading by replacing inference with stereotype. Premack and Woodruff's framework helps identify this as a systemic failure to recognize psychological agency in the colonized subject. The result is not simply miscommunication but the political erasure of mental life, what Childs (1999) calls the “colonial unconscious.”

Mr. Turton urges everyone to “stand together,” assuming guilt without inquiry (Forster, 1924, p. 174).

The courtroom crowd cheers at Adela’s accusation, despite having no evidence (Forster, 1924, p. 220).

The judge’s initial posture favors the British side, revealing presumption over fair cognition (Forster, 1924, p. 222).

5.7 Narrative Opacity and Reader Engagement

Forster’s manipulation of narrative perspective requires the reader to exercise ToM by constantly inferring characters’ motives, especially around Adela’s partial retraction. Zunshine (2006) argues that literature stimulates ToM by forcing readers to model mental states. Baron-Cohen (1995) would see this as an imaginative exercise in mentalizing. Yet Forster withholds resolution, aligning narrative technique with the epistemological confusion experienced by characters. This aesthetic decision dramatizes the limits of human understanding in a politically fractured world.

The narrative abruptly shifts perspectives without closure: readers must infer Mrs. Moore’s internal disintegration (Forster, 1924, pp. 163–185).

Adela’s internal monologue is fragmented, reflecting cognitive instability and demanding reader interpretation (Forster, 1924, p. 170).

Aziz’s character is often described through others’ biased viewpoints, forcing readers to mentally reconstruct his intentions (Forster, 1924, p. 173).

5.8 Final Epistemic Disillusionment

Aziz’s closing words “Not yet ... No, not yet” (Forster, 1924, p. 293)—signal the final collapse of trust in cross-cultural empathy. Under colonial pressure, the novel suggests, the very cognitive faculties that enable Theory of Mind—mutual recognition, emotional inference, ethical perception—become defunct. As Baron-Cohen (1995) asserts, empathy and ToM are fragile faculties, susceptible to cultural distortion and emotional injury. For Aziz, psychological disillusionment coincides with political realism: the dream of mutual understanding is deferred indefinitely.

Aziz declares, “India shall be a nation!” rejecting the hope for interpersonal reconciliation (Forster, 1924, p. 292).

He rebuffs Fielding’s attempt at friendship, stating, “We may hate each other, but we must never meet again” (Forster, 1924, p. 291).

The horses parting at the end symbolize the cognitive and emotional rift that cannot yet be crossed (Forster, 1924, p. 293).

5. *Findings and Conclusion*

The analysis of *A Passage to India* through the lens of Theory of Mind (ToM) reveals that the novel foregrounds the failure of characters to understand one another's inner thoughts and feelings due to cultural divides, colonial hierarchies, and personal psychological limitations. Characters like Adela and Mrs. Moore exhibit fragmented perceptions, particularly during the Marabar Caves episode, where emotional ambiguity and cognitive overload result in misinterpretations (Forster, 1924). Forster's narrative strategy especially his use of free indirect discourse and deliberate opacity requires the reader to engage in mental state attribution, mimicking the novel's own theme of failed empathy and misunderstanding (Zunshine, 2006).

These findings suggest that Forster not only critiques British imperialism but also exposes the fragility of intersubjective understanding in cross-cultural settings. Theory of Mind, typically a tool for interpreting others' minds (Premack &

Woodruff, 1978), is shown here as vulnerable to distortion under pressure from power structures and emotional confusion (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Gallagher & Frith, 2003). Thus, the novel ultimately portrays human consciousness as isolated and interpretation as uncertain, offering a powerful literary case study of the limits of empathy in colonial discourse.

In *A Passage to India*, failures in Theory of Mind are not incidental but structural, mirroring the psychological fragmentation and cultural misrecognition at the heart of colonial interaction. The novel's symbolic motifs particularly the Marabar echo emblemize the futility of mutual understanding in an empire predicated on inequality. By examining these breakdowns through a ToM framework, this study reveals how Forster crafts a narrative of opacity that challenges both character and reader to confront the limits of empathy, cognition, and connection.

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