

**REWRITING TO THE EMPIRE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DOUBLE-EDGED
CONSCIOUSNESS IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S *TWO LEAVES AND A BUD* AND E.M. FORSTER'S *A
PASSAGE TO INDIA***

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Abstract

This paper examines the narrative consciousness in Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, arguing that both texts embody a "double-edged consciousness", simultaneously critiquing and reproducing colonial ideologies. Although Anand aims to expose the exploitative machinery of the British Empire through characters like Gangu and de la Havre, the native consciousness remains marginal, as the European voice becomes the vehicle of intellectual realism. Anand's attempt to demythologize the Empire, though compelling, is undermined by his partial reliance on orientalist imagery and a Eurocentric narrative framework. Similarly, Forster's treatment of India is framed through the lens of mystery and muddle, symbolized by the Marabar Caves. While characters like Fielding and Mrs. Moore reflect moments of cultural insight and detachment from imperialist dogma, the narrative ultimately fails to resolve the tension between colonizer and colonized. The symbolic and literal separation of Aziz and Fielding at the novel's end reiterates the impossibility of genuine coexistence. The paper also considers gender and racial hierarchies, highlighting how Adela's hallucination is legitimized due to her whiteness, while the sufferings of native women like Laila are made invisibilized. Both novels, in their distinct ways, perpetuate a dual consciousness, constructing and deconstructing the image of India as a paradox of oppression and resistance. Despite their anti-colonial overtones, both texts are double-edged; their authors' narrative positions contribute to a diluted representation of the subaltern voice. Thus, the resolution remains suspended, revealing not a triumph of decolonization, but the continuation of ideological tension, historical amnesia, and structural inequity.

Keywords: Colonial ideologies, Colonial narratives, Double-edged consciousness, *Passage to India*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*

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Introduction

This paper articulates the ways in which English consciousness and Indian consciousness operate in Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. As a comparative study, the paper also examines the authors' conscious or unconscious contributions to exoticizing India and presenting an Orientalist perspective that caters to the expectations of a Western audience. The paper concludes that the consciousness presented in both novels is double-edged; it simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the 'real' Indian consciousness, which is notably absent from both narratives. While Forster's *A Passage to India* has long been discussed as a colonial text reflecting Western paranoia, this paper argues that both Forster and Anand present a "double-edged" narrative consciousness: one that critiques colonial power while simultaneously reinforcing colonial perspectives. This approach moves beyond the simple colonizer/colonized binary by showing how even a so-called anti-colonial text like Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud* reproduces orientalist tropes. Thus, the paper's contribution lies in demonstrating how the narrative voices of both texts function as sites of ambivalence rather than straightforward critique.

Comparative Analysis of Narrative Consciousness

Anand's novel, in many ways, resembles Forster's, and readers can trace several clear connections between the two. The plots of both novels center on the relationship between colonizer and colonized; a relationship that is inherently dialectical. These novels depict this relationship within two entirely different social classes: "the poorest of India's poor" (Harrex, 1977) and the anglicized Indian middle class. Although both novels critique the pitfalls of the Empire, they fail to address the full complexity and nuance of the dialectical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

Anand's explicit social realism and naturalism are absent in Forster's work. Forster's plot, themes, settings, and characters are confined to a privileged class. Even the British administrative figures in Forster's novel are portrayed as more 'refined' and adhere more strictly to sophisticated British values, especially when compared to Anand's British characters, who appear more 'nativized' and relatively inferior. Forster's portrayal of Indians aligns with what Fanon describes as a "national middle class which [will take] over power at the end of the colonial regime" (Fanon, 1961, p. 119–120). This social class, represented by characters such as Aziz, Hamidullah, and Professor Godbole, lacks solidarity. They appear to embody an "under-developed middle class" with "practically no economic power" and are "easily convinced that [they] can adventurously replace the middle class of the [colonizer]" (Fanon, 1961, p. 120). This "willful narcissism" (Fanon, 1961, p. 120) of the native middle class is especially evident after Aziz's trial and acquittal. Mr. Das's role as magistrate and the way "he had controlled the case" suggests that an Indian can preside (Forster, 1936, p. 216). However, it remains unclear whether Forster genuinely admires the natives' ability to defend themselves against colonial oppression or is being sarcastic about the overestimation of the power of the native middle class.

As mentioned earlier, the reader encounters two entirely different worldviews in Anand and Forster. It would be problematic to claim that either novel presents a complete microcosm of colonial India. Given the vastness of India, there exist multiple layers of relationships between colonizer and colonized. These diverse relationships are often narrated either by a benevolent white persona; typically condemned by their own community, or by an anglicized Indian representing a privileged class. In *A Passage to India*, the narrative consciousness is largely centered on Dr. Aziz, an anglicized Muslim physician who initially makes great efforts to please the colonizer. Forster depicts Aziz as both sensitive and naïve. However, readers may find a lack of dignity in his character, which tends to vanish when he interacts with representatives of the Empire. An early encounter between him and Mrs. Moore in the mosque exemplifies how his dignity becomes fragile:

'Another pillar moved, a third, and then an English woman stepped out into the moonlight. Suddenly he was furiously angry and shouted: 'Madam! Madam! Madam!'

'Oh! Oh!' the woman gasped.

'Madam, this is a mosque. You have no right here at all. You should have taken off your shoes. This is a holy place for Moslems.'

'I have taken them off.'

‘You have?’

‘I left them at the entrance.’

‘Then I ask your pardon.’

(Forster, 1936, p. 17)

Here, the ‘native’, though seemingly refined and cultivated, is portrayed as having an unstable identity. The tea party at Fielding’s home and the Marabar expedition provide many more instances where Aziz’s behavior is subject to ridicule by both the author and the reader. This is symptomatic of Forster’s double-edged narrative consciousness. On the one hand, the novel critiques racial prejudice and exposes British arrogance. On the other, it undermines its own sympathetic native character by rendering his dignity fragile and unreliable. Such ambivalence suggests that while Forster questions the Empire’s morality, he cannot imagine India or Indians outside a Eurocentric framework; a hallmark of what Said (1979) terms the “textual attitude” of Orientalism.

In contrast, Anand mercilessly satirizes nearly all of his major characters. Even de la Havre is portrayed with elements of ridicule, particularly regarding his lack of courage. Both novels include clearly delineated ‘black’ and ‘white’ characters. De la Havre and Fielding, despite being the authors’ protagonists, are not without flaws. Fielding, unlike de la Havre, is relatively powerful. As a school headmaster, he enjoys the support of his students. Though Fielding’s consciousness reflects a broadly humanistic view, it is sometimes biased and even racist:

“The buildings of Venice, like the mountains of Crete and the fields of Egypt, stood in the right place, whereas in India, everything was placed wrong. He had forgotten the beauty of forms among idol temples and lumpy hills; indeed, without form, how can there be beauty? Form stammered here and there in a mosque, became rigid through nervousness even, but oh, these Italian churches!”

(Forster, 1936, p. 265)

His consciousness comprises diverse facets, which seem to justify the notion that India is both a ‘muddle’ and a ‘mystery’.

In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, the primary narrative consciousness is presented through de la Havre. Through this character, Anand attempts to demythologize the Empire, a task he successfully accomplishes, notably because it is carried out by a member of the Empire itself. However, this approach raises questions about the author’s failure to give proper recognition to the ‘native’ consciousness. This tension emphasizes Anand’s own double-edged position. His novel denounces colonial exploitation with searing clarity, yet its reliance on de la Havre’s English perspective perpetuates the very marginalization it seeks to oppose. As Spivak may argue (1994), the subaltern Gangu ‘cannot speak’ because his story must be mediated through a colonial intermediary. In this sense, Anand writes not so much ‘back’ to the Empire as ‘through’ it, producing a critique that is itself complicit.

Nevertheless, one may question whether the mere act of demythologizing the greatness of the Empire is sufficient to resolve the problems and suffering of the proletariat class. As S.C. Harrex notes, most of Anand’s early novels present “life in terms of a proletarian experience and commentary on that experience” (Harrex, 1977, p. 97–98). He also states that these two aspects are “artificially separated at certain points of the central characters” (Harrex, 1977, p. 98). To support his argument, Harrex illustrates how this artificial separation operates in *Two Leaves and a Bud*. In the novel, the oppressed coolies “do most of the theorizing” (Harrex, 1977, p. 98):

But why didn’t it occur to anyone, the simple, obvious thing that people don’t need to read Marx to realize here. The black coolies clear the forests, plant the fields, toil and garner the harvest, while all the money-grubbing, slave-driving, soulless managers and directors draw their salaries and dividends and build up monopolies. Therein lies the necessity of evolution in this country.

(Anand, 1937, p. 95)

De la Havre stands for justice, but it is evident that he fails to take meaningful action to deliver it. In contrast, Cyril Fielding in Forster’s *A Passage to India* is more aware of the status quo, where class and race-based social

hierarchies are continuously produced and reinforced. Moreover, he openly criticizes his own community and resists it by boycotting the English club; a symbol of exclusive colonial space. His efforts to save Dr. Aziz from false accusations are genuine, and he commits himself to proving the native physician's honesty and integrity. When comparing de la Havre and Fielding, the latter appears to be the true hero. However, it is clear that these characters cannot be judged by the same standards, as they originate from different colonial contexts.

Symbolism, Gender and Power

The Marabar Caves, too, are symbolic of 'muddle' and 'mystery'. In fact, Forster acknowledges his deliberate effort to mystify the plot and arouse reader curiosity about what really happened to Adela in the caves. In a letter to his friend William Plomer, Forster links the mystery of the plot to India itself: "I tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an explainable muddle; Miss Quested's experience in the cave" (Symondson, 2016). Even Aziz is unable to explain what the caves truly are. The Marabar Caves, which serve as the central backdrop of the plot, symbolize the 'incomprehensible' nature of India. The novel can thus be interpreted as an effort by Forster to capture this incomprehensibility within the framework of a mainstream European narrative. In doing so, the narrative consciousness deliberately perpetuates elements of Orientalism.

The so-called 'insult' to Adela in the caves evokes the 19th century colonial anxiety surrounding the rape of the white woman by the hyper-sexualized black or brown man. The entire British community (except Fielding) in the fictional town of Chandrapore is in uproar because an English woman has allegedly been dishonored. The colored man is reduced to untamed sexuality. This reaction reflects Fanon's observation: "Whoever says rape says Negro" (Fanon, 1952, p. 166). White colonial rulers, while asserting dominance over brown men and women; and saving brown women from brown men (Spivak, 1994, p. 93), also see themselves as responsible for saving white women from brown men. Forster suggests that this fantasy is constructed and reinforced by the 'incomprehensible', mysterious, and chaotic nature of the Indian landscape. In this sense, Adela's hallucination is not only depicted but also justified. Her privileged possession of white skin legitimizes her hallucinations.

In contrast, Anand's portrayal of poor native women reveals a disturbing reality. These women are denied justice even when they are openly assaulted and sexually abused by colonial figures such as Reggie Hunt. They cannot accuse their abuser because they do not possess white skin. Anand, by inverting the stereotypical depiction of the man of color, instead portrays the colonial entrepreneur and administrator as the embodiment of evil. Reggie Hunt is depicted as arrogant and cruel, often unleashing his lust on native women. Yet, the problem lies in the fact that history, as a Western construct, fails to recognize the white man's capacity for such malevolence.

For a brief moment, Adela becomes the heroine of the white community. She is the center of attention, and nearly everyone sympathizes with her. In stark contrast, there is no one to celebrate Laila's courage in resisting Reggie Hunt, or to sympathize with her plight. Even Barbara Croft-Cooke is unwilling to undertake 'the burden of the white woman'. She is as inconsistent as Adela and seems to engage with the plight of the poor only through de la Havre. Her political consciousness is awakened and shaped by him, but she quickly abandons this political awareness, retreating into the comfort of being a typical white woman who detests the native and perceives him as a threat.

On the other hand, Mrs. Moore is diplomatic and practical. She does not extend sympathy to the natives but appears to reconcile with them. Her simple words to Aziz during their initial encounter; "I don't think I understand people very well. I only know whether I like or dislike them" (Forster, 1936, p. 20), mirror a political awareness of the status quo and reflect a deliberate detachment from it.

Even though Forster critiques the pitfalls of Empire and exposes the notorious nature of some of its representatives, his conclusion does not appear to reject British rule altogether. Like Anand, he too can be seen as a propagandist. Forster seems to suggest that the success of the British cause in India depends on mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence between colonizer and colonized. This idea is reflected in the reunion of Aziz and Fielding at the end of the novel. However, the ending does not seem to offer much hope. The friendship

and co-existence desired by Fielding function more as an emotional appeal than a realistic resolution (Symondson, 2016). Forster seems to yearn for connection and mutual understanding amidst the prevailing mystery and muddle:

“India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last come to the drab nineteenth-century sanctuary sisterhood! Waddling in at this hour of the world to take her seat! She, whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps! Fielding mocked again. And Aziz, in an awful rage, danced this way and that, not knowing what to do, and cried: ‘Down with the English anyhow. That’s certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don’t make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it’s fifty or five hundred, yes, we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall get rid of every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then’, he rode against him furiously, ‘and then,’ he concluded, half-kissing him, ‘you and I shall be friends.’ ‘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 a path must pass single file, the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued 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.’”
(Forster, 1936, p. 306)

This final scene is a blend of passion, hatred, affection, and chaos. It does not project a sense of closure. Rather, it confirms that the resolution of friendship and co-existence is not yet possible, suggesting that the dialectical relationship between colonizer and colonized will persist. The endings of both *A Passage to India* and *Two Leaves and a Bud* lack hope or stability. The only stable elements are the continuation of oppression, varying degrees of resistance, and a tense, unresolved relationship between colonizer and colonized. The reader does not reach a final conclusion but is instead returned to the same ambiguous position from which the narrative began.

Instead of offering a critique solely of the Empire’s partial and oppressive functioning, Forster’s *A Passage to India* can also be read as a critique of the failure of the colonized to accept the terms of friendship and co-existence extended by the colonizer. On the other hand, Anand’s *Two Leaves and a Bud* presents a direct and severe condemnation of the Empire’s operational mechanisms, highlighting how its economic and political power depends entirely on the brutal exploitation of the colonized.

Anand’s criticism of the Empire can be likened to a sharp sword without a grip; the more he attacks, the more he wounds himself. Consider the following description:

“As Gangu drifted into the street of regular shops, the cries of the hawkers grew louder, the congestion of men and women, sticks and umbrellas increased, and a new sensation assailed him—the mixed odour of cow-dung, decayed fruit, the sweat of warm bodies and the strange, inexplicable, almost fetid smell which oozed from the puddles of water and animal urine on Hill Road.”
(Anand, 1937, p. 57)

Consciously or otherwise, Anand paints a reality that is ‘strange’ and ‘inexplicable’, thus creating an orientalist image of India as a land of ‘mystery’ and ‘muddle’. In this sense, one could argue that he does not write back to the Empire, but rather re-writes to the Empire. He seemingly adheres to the stereotypical depictions of India introduced by European narratives. However, the deliberateness of this depiction remains open to interpretation.

Conclusion: Double-edged Consciousness

In Forster’s case, he openly acknowledges his adherence to a normative, Eurocentric narrative consciousness. Thus, while both authors differ in their narrative positions, their narrative consciousnesses are double-edged and serve dual purposes. Forster’s position is more transparent and deliberate, while Anand’s critique is itself shrouded

in a kind of ‘mystery’, much like Forster’s depiction of India. Ultimately, this duality in authorial intention contributes to the portrayal of a dilapidated image of India.

By foregrounding this double-edged consciousness, the paper reveals how both texts destabilize the binary of Empire vs. resistance. Forster’s novel, often dismissed as merely colonial, reveals its own contradictions, exposing imperial arrogance even as it reinscribes orientalism. Anand’s text, hailed as anti-colonial, similarly exposes exploitation while relying on Western narrative frames. Recognizing this ambivalence provides a more nuanced understanding of colonial-era literature: not as simply for or against Empire, but as a site where critique and complicity co-exist, shaping how ‘India’ was, and still is, imagined in literature.

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