

# A passage to india



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The Limits of Friendship: Cyril Fielding and Dr. Aziz A Passage to India, by E. M. Forster, is at times a complicated novel. One of the most difficult complications is the relationship that exists between Cyril Fielding, the schoolmaster of Government College, and Dr. Aziz. This relationship is dynamic and represents, to some extent, the larger relationship of Great Britain and India. How Dr. Aziz comes to distrust the British is a major element of the novel. This essay will examine the particular characteristics which allowed Fielding to befriend Dr. Aziz, the very real limits of this friendship as constrained by issues of law and nationalism, and whether an egalitarian friendship might ever transcend the larger structure of imperialist oppression.

As an initial matter, it is quite true that Fielding and Dr. Aziz established a genuine friendship. This owes a great deal to Fielding's fiercely independent nature. Unlike other British officials whom adopted a condescending attitude toward the native people, Fielding treated the Indians with a sense of decency and respect. He wasn't an idealist, but he did tend to approach issues and people from an objective and open-minded point of view. He didn't allow his perceptions of India to be affected negatively by bias or stereotypes. These qualities attracted Dr. Aziz and distinguished Fielding from the other British officials. Indeed, when Dr. Aziz was subsequently accused of assault by Adela, Fielding broke with the British and lent his support to the Indians. In short, the qualities that allowed Fielding's friendship with Dr. Aziz to flourish were his independence of mind, his personal conviction in the notion of an objective justice for all, and his strength of character in declaring and acting on his beliefs. Fielding was a principled man and Dr Aziz respected him in this way.

That there were very real limits to this friendship, however, is beyond doubt. There are moments, in the beginning of the novel, when Dr. Aziz is very accommodating and accepting of the British. He is generous to his British friends, particularly Fielding and Mrs. Moore. The assault charges filed by Adela, however, are a turning point in the novel; indeed, this is where the limits of the friendship between Fielding and Dr. Aziz are most particularly defined and drawn. These men are not equals under the law. The Indians are not entitled to a presumption of innocence; quite the contrary, they are presumed guilty. More, they are not considered honest and their testimony is frowned upon and disbelieved under British law. There is a double standard at work, an in-egalitarian double standard which serves as a barrier to friendship between the British and the Indians.

Issues of nationalism only serve to exacerbate the tensions. If the unequal application of the law functions to separate people, then the competing senses of nationalism tend to inflame the passions of the people trying to co-exist. How can Fielding ever defend an oppressive imperialism given his stated beliefs in justice. Indeed, he cannot and his disgust and frustration ultimately persuade him to leave India. In sum, the friendship between Fielding and Dr. Aziz is limited in very real ways. The law treats them unequally, there are competing struggles for influence and power, and nationalism sharpens the disputes. It sharpens the disputes because people are compelled to take sides. Friendships are casualties of these types of conflicting loyalties.

The final issue is whether, in a context such as Fielding and Dr. Aziz existed, egalitarian friendships are truly able to persist. This is an extraordinarily difficult question. One might refer to the American Civil War as an analogy.

In this case, fathers, sons, and brothers went to war on opposite sides. Families were divided, destroyed, and friendships damaged beyond repair. There were similar issues of unequal treatment under the law, and a fierce sort of nationalism which erupted. In the North, the nationalism manifested itself in terms of the need to preserve the Union. In the South, the nationalism manifested itself in terms of actual declarations of secession and calls for independence. This analogy is illuminating because it happened within a country with similar ethnic groups, legal principles, and religious backgrounds. In Fielding and Dr. Aziz's case, the differences were far more significant. The point is that the forces at work, the emotions and injustices felt, were much stronger in the case of the British oppression of India than those experienced during the American Civil War. The differences, such as religion and culture, were far greater. That said, I don't believe that friendships can endure the oppression of imperialism. The strains are too great, and people do have to choose sides. At best, friendships which might survive are badly damaged.

In the final analysis, Fielding and Dr. Aziz had much in common. They were both educated men and they were both willing to offer their friendship to people of other nationalities. The unequal treatment of Indians under British law, and the resulting nationalism, however, set up barriers to the development of this friendship. Their friendship, perhaps, was doomed from the very beginning.

#### Work Cited

Forster, E. M. (1924). *A Passage to India*. Penguin Classics: New York.