

Howards end and a
passage to india:
fictional barriers to
communication, and
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‘ He heard the will in his wife’s voice, and was at a loss. Her language was unintelligible to him’ (D. H. Lawrence).

In the novels *Howards End* and *A Passage to India*, EM Forster evokes the social backgrounds and priorities of his characters through the difference in their language, and the difficulties they have in communicating with each other. The marriage of Margaret and Henry in *Howards End* appears to reconcile two worlds by joining the moral, cultured Schlegels, primarily concerned with ideas and words, with the bullying, dynamic Wilcoxes and their ‘ outer life’ of ‘ telegrams and anger’ (this description by Margaret in Chapter 4 reduces them to modern brutality but also admits their superior ability for ‘ outer’ action.) The differences between husband and wife, however, are still prevalent in their conversations, as Forster exhibits in their disagreement over Helen in chapter 34. Forster expresses Margaret’s realisation that something could be wrong with Helen mentally as an epiphany about London: ‘ Helen seemed one with the grimy trees and the traffic and the slowly flowering slabs of mud... she felt that her sister had been going amiss for many years’. Margaret’s romantic ideas about the pollution of London compared to the idyllic countryside as embodied by *Howards End* are an impractical but characteristic part of her concern.

Henry, on the other hand, receives the news with clichéd remarks, like that it was ‘ just like Helen’ to worry her relatives. He is not concerned with any lists of original imagery or using language in a different way at all, and when Margaret asks why Helen’s nature is ‘ allowed to be so queer, and to grow queerer’ he replies ‘ Don’t ask me. I’m a plain man of business. I live and let live.’ His short sentences, often capturing common idioms, separate him

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from the Schlegels' meaning, and when Tibby says that he has not seen the point, Henry replies ' I don't suppose I ever shall' as though admitting the limitations of communication between him and the ' gifted but ridiculous family' he laughs at. The lack of verbal ingenuity is one barrier of characteristics between the married couple, but another, as Forster demonstrates a page later, is his inherent aggression: speaking of Helen as an object to be seized, he asks ' You want to get a hold of her?' and plots to lie to her so that ' we can run her up to a specialist in no time.' As the narrator comments, his intentions are good but the plan ' drew its ethics from the wolf-pack' and Margaret rejects it on the grounds that ' It's not the particular language that Helen and I talk'; the direct plan of action could not work due to the language-based sympathies of the sisters.

In A Passage to India, the contrast of the characters Mrs Moore and Adela lies in the ease with which Mrs Moore adapts to her surroundings through conversation, called a true ' Oriental' by Aziz, whereas Forster depicts Miss Quested as having a theoretical sympathy towards the native Indians rather than a natural one. The efforts of both Miss Quested in this novel and Helen in Howards End are seemingly well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed and result in them actively ruining the lives of those who they are trying to understand or help. The barriers between Adela and full understanding of India are evoked in the stilted conversation between her and Aziz: in their conversation amongst the Marabar Caves, she shocks him by asking with no knowledge of Indian marriage besides Mrs Turton's racism, ' Have you one wife or more than one?' Forster prefaces this blunder with the description ' in her honest, decent, inquisitive way' (the triplicate of adjectives appearing

almost hyperbolically defensive) and clarifies that the attachment to one wife is a 'new conviction' for an educated Muslim like Aziz at this time, as though to lessen the impact of her honest ignorance through narration. The comparative dishonesty of Aziz is also emphasised as though in her defence: he lies because he feels it is 'more artistic to have his wife alive for a moment' and tries to 'conceal his confusion' through the stuttering 'one, one in my own particular case'. Aziz is also speaking in a language foreign to him, and is exerting himself to impress Adela with little reciprocation; rather than shielding Adela by making him appear dishonest and therefore immoral, however, Forster uses these complications and barriers to natural communication to illustrate how little Adela is attempting to connect in comparison. While Aziz makes an effort to protect her feelings by hiding how offended he is, Adela is 'quite unconscious that she had said the wrong thing' and leaves 'not seeing him'. This ignorance demonstrates that the difficulties in communication they have stem from the fact that she is using him as a representation of his culture, rather than a person who she could offend. The condescension behind her thoughts, such as diluting the admiration in 'what a handsome little Oriental he was' with the diminishing caveats of 'little' and 'Oriental' rather than simply 'man', prevent her from speaking as honestly with him as Mrs Moore does.

Another example of an attempt to impress met with well-intended condescension is Howards End's Leonard. In Chapter 5 of Howards End, Leonard compares his conversation to that of the cultured Schlegel sisters wistfully: 'If he could talk like this, he would have caught the world. Oh, to acquire culture! Oh, to pronounce foreign names correctly! Oh, to be well

informed, discoursing at ease on every subject that a lady started!’ The poetic nature of this triadic structure, with the wistful interjections of ‘ Oh’ regretting his ignorance, may seem to contradict the character’s actual meaning as he can speak elegantly. During their actual conversation in chapter 14, however, the sisters treat him as a curiosity because he speaks so differently and is so separate from culture. By saying ‘ No’, that the dawn was not wonderful as Helen expected, he gains ‘ unforgettable sincerity’ by presenting a practical, working-class view of the world and ‘ down toppled all that had seemed ignoble or literary in his talk’. He excites the sisters by talking about how hungry he was instead of beauty or culture (indeed, the narrator mocks his cultural aspiration with the childishly rhyming ‘ Borrow, Thoreau and sorrow’.) Leonard wishes for the power that comes with cultured language, but only is remarkable to the sisters, and perhaps to the reader, as a contrast.

In an almost comically literal metaphor, Leonard is ultimately killed by a representation of the upper classes and collapses in a ‘ shower’ of books due to a misunderstanding: his desire to associate with and speak the same language as his social “ superiors” has brought about his downfall. The language of his perspective shifts to simplistic, infantilised short sentences in his final moments as well, as though to heighten the contrast: ‘ The man took him by the collar and cried: “ Bring me a stick.” Women were screaming. A stick, very bright, descended. It hurt him, not where it descended, but in the heart. Books fell over him in a shower. Nothing had sense.’ He has no understanding of who ‘ the man’ is or why books are falling over him, and the childish simplicity of language like ‘ It hurt him’ or ‘

Nothing had sense' echoes the narrator calling him a 'naive and sweet-tempered boy' in Chapter 14. He is overwhelmed by this world and the language of it (even when it is not intended maliciously, as when he is 'hurt terribly' by Helen's supposedly kind letter in Shropshire), and Forster reflects that in the language of his final moments.

Forster's characters use language to bridge the gap of West and East in *A Passage to India* in a manner unlike the real Anglo-Indians for whom Forster had an admitted 'lack of sympathy'. The friendship between Cyril Fielding and Aziz begins when the former casually says 'Please make yourself at home' at his house, as Aziz is honoured by the familiarity. While it may seem like basic etiquette, the actions of the English at the garden party in which they ignore their Indian guests and in Chapter 1 when Mrs Callender takes Aziz's tonga clearly portray a society in which polite language is used as a conduit for further association only amongst certain groups. The Anglo-Indians often ignore polite convention with the Indians, which is why this formal show of etiquette is paradoxically familiar, and incites a friendly relationship. Fielding and Aziz are, however, separated by Fielding's empathy towards Adela after the trial: language here does not come between them but their identities, as Aziz has chosen to reject the Western world after being so badly misunderstood by it. In the original 1913 draft, Forster had Aziz revealed as guilty, but the final version embodies a lot more sympathy for his character and for falsely vilified Indians (perhaps influenced by the Amritsar Massacre of 1919 – there is a clear parallel in the idea of forcing Indians to crawl past a certain spot where an English woman had been supposedly hurt, which was enforced by General Dyer in real life.) This

empathy, creating what Leonard Woolf called ‘ the most absolutely “ real” Indian to be found in fiction’, makes his choice understandable for British readers who may more naturally align themselves with Fielding. The argument does therefore appear realistic on both sides and inevitable, happening despite communication rather than because of it.

After they reunite at the end, Forster writes that ‘ Tangles like this still interrupted their intercourse. A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry’. Even between these natural friends, misunderstandings still arise because of specific social barriers complicating their language. The natural world itself rejects the idea of them being true friends in the final lines as ‘ the earth didn’t want it... the palace, the birds, the carrion... they didn’t want it, they said in their hundred voices “ No, not yet,” and the sky said, “ No, not there”’. The emphasis by disrupted anaphora of ‘ yet’ and ‘ there’ make it clear that the time and place of their acquaintance is to blame. This failure is an example of an originally shared affinity through language not being sufficient, and their fundamental beings as Western and Eastern sabotaging a connection.

Edward Said described the barriers to their friendship as ‘ ontological’, rather than ‘ political’ or an inability to speak the same language, so in his view Forster unfortunately neutralises the Indian nationalism movement, as they are not a political force eloquently capturing the need for freedom in words.

The use of language unspoken within the narrative but clearly from a certain characters’ perspective is complicated by the presence of a narrator. For example, in Howards End, the extent of the Schlegel’s hypocrisy in treating

Leonard, and how that may impact the miscommunications between them, is <https://assignbuster.com/howards-end-and-a-passage-to-india-fictional-barriers-to-communication-and-the-creation-of-real-empathy/>

uncertain as the particularly cruel inner comments of Margaret used by Bradshaw as evidence of her snobbery such as describing Leonard as metaphorically trailing 'odours from the abyss' could be coloured by the narrator. The commentator of *Howards End* does interject their opinion, and does exhibit classist attitudes when, for example, sneeringly describing the Basts' living room as fitted with 'one of the masterpieces of Maude Goodman' (a saccharine artist very popular at the time.) The narrator's role in this novel is clearly biased and that may obscure the unspoken language of the characters; this may be Forster's intent, however, as it evokes the sense of miscommunication that the Schlegels, Wilcoxes and Basts live through. The narration in 'A Passage to India', on the other hand, grants unprecedented amounts of sympathy to an Indian character as Aziz, who speaks in a foreign language to all the English characters, is a victim of miscommunication rather than the perpetrator. The social context of these novels lend relevance to the barriers the characters face. The class differences as well as differing methods of dealing with a changing world of class in *Howards End* prevent clear communication, and the ultimate lack of empathy towards those of a different race in *A Passage to India* means that the English and the Indian cannot maintain friendship 'now'. Through the novels themselves, however, Forster managed to communicate the biases and motivations of his characters in a language the reader would understand, creating a revolutionary empathy.