

# Modern nationalism and global conflict in e.m. forster's a passage to india



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While Walt Whitman's poem "A Passage to India" romanticizes the idea of blended Indian and British nationalities, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* realistically explores the emergence of Indian nationalism in opposition to British imperial rule. The novel unfolds in post-World War I British India and illustrates the growing tensions between the British Empire and its colonial subjects. India contributed munitions, funds, and troops to the British war effort, and these wartime contributions led to an increase in demands that India gain independence from the British Empire. The British did not simply refuse to grant India self-government: they implemented harsher anti-sedition legislation and extended the power of the colonial government. The Indians who had played a significant role in the Great War felt slighted, which provoked vigorous, widespread anti-British sentiment. Simultaneously, many prominent citizens became critical of nationalism's prevalence in the European continent. The emergence of nationalism in Europe led to the alliance system that transformed World War I into a global affair rather than simply a dispute between two countries. Through the antagonistic relationships between British and Indian characters, Forster portrays nationalism as a source of conflict instead of unity and critiques the global fixation on nationalism.

Throughout the novel, Forster presents the emergence of Indian nationalism as a response to British imperial control rather than as a reflection of a strong Indian identity. While discussing the relationship between England and India with Cyril Fielding, the British principal of a local college, Aziz, says, "until England is in difficulties we keep silent, but in the next European war... Then is our time" (Forster 360). Aziz's comment reveals the residual

post-war anti-British sentiment that ubiquitously taints Indian life. By calling World War I a “European war,” Aziz references the complex, nationality-based alliance system that dragged the entire European continent into a disastrous conflict. The sentence directly links opposition to “England” and “European wars” to Indian nationalism when Aziz says “our time,” which implies that he includes all Indians in his statement. The connection between anti-British views and Indian nationalism reflects the reactionary nature of Indian nationalism. Later in the novel, when Aziz discusses Indian nationalism with Fielding, he says, “down with the British anyhow. That’s certain. Clear out you fellows...We [Indians] may hate one another, but we hate you most” (Forster 361). Aziz’s statement reflects the intense anti-British sentiments present among native Indians. He hints at the power of nationalism by saying “we [Indians] may hate one another, but we hate you most,” which also suggests that, much as British nationalism unites Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and England, Indian nationalism unites all Indians regardless of the religious divisions between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Aziz uses the word “hate” twice to indicate that although the different religious groups actively despise each other, their shared hatred of the British overcomes religious divisions. Forster’s depiction of reactionary nationalism reveals his disdain for nationalism formed through anti-foreigner sentiments. During a debate about Indian nationalism, Aziz exclaims, “India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one!” (Forster 361). Aziz believes wholeheartedly that India should be a united nation state, free of foreigners and British control. The use of multiple exclamation points signifies the urgency and passion behind Aziz’s remark. He connects the word “nation” to anti-foreign views, and thus

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alludes to the idea that nationalism fuels xenophobia and jingoism rather than international cooperation. Forster concludes the novel with clear disdain for nationalism and, specifically, for the divisive effects of anti-foreigner, hate-fueled nationalism.

Through the novel's condemnatory portrayal of the Anglo-Indians, Forster criticizes the inflated sense of British nationalism that led to the nation's aggressive imperialist tendencies. After a group of Englishmen discusses the highly contentious trial between an Englishwoman and the Indian accused of assaulting her, the narrator says, "[those] simple words had reminded them that they were an outpost of Empire" (Forster 202). The trial inflames the imperialistic views of the Anglo-Indians. They remember that they represent "an outpost of Empire," which separates them from the Indians. Much like the anti-British sentiments that catalyze Indian nationalism, a sense of paternalism and racial superiority fuels British nationalism and imperial conquests. The Anglo-Indians' perception that they represent the empire allows them to channel their patriotism and feel proud of their national identity. However, the perceived superiority that accompanies imperial rule causes conflict when the British and Indians interact. At the Bridge Party, when the British stand on one side of the lawn and the Indians stand on the other, Mrs. Turton tells Mrs. Moore, "you're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India" (Forster 42). Mrs. Turton highlights the racism that pervades British nationalism. She represents the British viewpoint and interprets British nationalism as racial superiority rather than as a common cultural identity. Her ethnocentric opinion of "superiority" characterizes the foundation of British nationalism and

imperialism. Through the negative depiction of British characters, Forster criticizes British nationalism's reliance on racism and violence to bolster national pride.

Forster uses his novel as a platform for criticizing nationalism through the relationship between India and Great Britain. He criticizes the general trend of reactionary nationalism as a response to the Age of Imperialism because the intensified nationalism attributed to the outbreak of World War I. Forster also critiques the perception of racial superiority that many nations adopt as a validation of nationalistic pride and as a justification for imperialism.

Although he uses India and Great Britain as prime examples of destructive nationalism, the criticisms in his novel apply to all nations in the twentieth century whose nationalism triggered the Great War. Forster's novel and harsh critique of nationalism foreshadow the imminent outbreak of the world's most destructive war, itself caused by nationalism: World War II.

#### Works Cited:

Whitman, Walt. "A Passage to India." *Leaves of Grass*, 1871. Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984. Print.