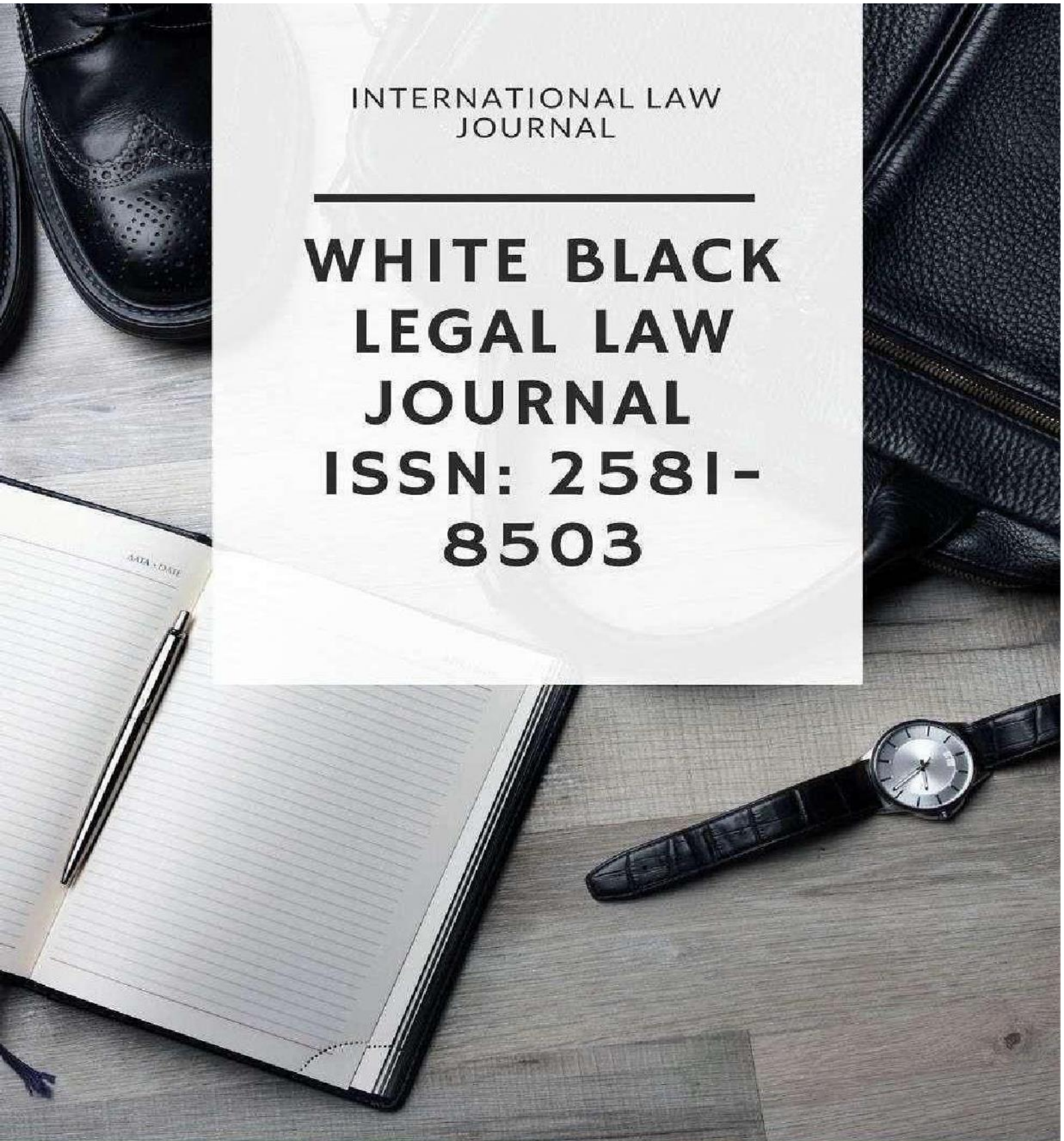




INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL**
**ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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THE LIMITS OF SYMPATHY: STEREOTYPE, SILENCE, AND POWER IN COLONIAL REPRESENTATION OF INDIANS

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Abstract:

This paper examines the tension between stereotype and sympathy with colonial representation at the centre. In *A Passage to India*, understanding does not replace prejudice; instead, feeling grows alongside hierarchy. Focusing on characterization, dialogue, and narrative voice, the study reveals how Indian characters are made emotionally intense yet remain confined by political limitations. Informed by Homi Bhabha's idea of ambivalence, it suggests sympathy in the novel does not fully change imperial power but reshapes it into a softer, more self-aware form. A shift that seems kind at first might actually control feelings. In this way, colonial humanism appears caring and humane on the surface while leaving structural inequalities intact. What emerges is not the collapse of empire, but it's quiet and subtle moral restructuring.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Colonial Representation, Orientalism, Sympathy, Ambivalence, Liberal Humanism.

INTRODUCTION

Colonial literature did not just reflect imperial rule, it helped build it. By shaping perception through narrative choices, descriptive language, and crafted characters, British colonial texts construct view of how colonized societies were imagined and understood. Literature became a cultural space wherein power works quietly but effectively. How Indians are represented was never neutral; it leads to the ideological framework that justified the domination. By defining who Indians were, colonial authors implied who the British believed themselves to be: rational and morally fit to govern.

Occasionally, Indian figures appear through persistent stereotypes – emotional rather than rational, spontaneous at the cost of order, spiritual minded but politically immature. These portrayals quietly justify control, framing imperial rule as calm amid chaos. Yet colonial literature also contains moments of apparent generosity. Indian characters are sometimes

framed with warmth, intelligence, and emotional understanding. Still, sympathy finds its way into the narrative, complicating the image of simple domination. Here lies a central puzzle: if the colonized are recognized as fully human, why does structural inequality remain unquestioned?

This tension between sympathy and stereotype shapes how colonies are represented. Sympathy feels like a step forward, even humane. It suggests the possibility of forming bond across racial boundaries. However, feeling for others does not automatically translate to political change. Sympathy might ease the words of empire while the control remains unchanged. It can turn political injustice into moral discomfort, allowing imperial rule to appear reflective and moral while preserving inequality.

This study explains this contradiction through E. M. Foster's *A Passage to India*, frequently praised for its empathetic portrayal of Indian characters. Rather than retelling the story, it examines how characterization, dialogue, and storytelling shape Indian perspective, questioning whether sympathy genuinely challenges empire or quietly reaffirms its limits by offering emotional connection without real political equality or autonomy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study is established within a broad perspective of postcolonial scholarship that look into colonial discourse, representation, and power, specifically with reference of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. There are many existing research papers which have extensively explored Orientalist stereotyping, colonial authority, and dehumanization; that said, the role of sympathy as a functional mechanism within the colonial discourse remains understudied. This literature review traces the major scholarly discussion, their insights acknowledged, though space between them reveals the critical gap that this research seeks to address. The absence of focus on feeling, not just force, marks where this work steps in.

2.1 Orientalism and Colonial Representation

Edward Said, in his work *Orientalism* (1978)¹ provides a framework for understanding colonial depiction. Said argues that West portrays the Orient as its inferior "Other" emerges through the structured stereotypical system of thoughts. Fixed labels such as irrational, unchanging, foreign depicts Eastern societies as lesser counterparts. Such representations provide more than stereotype; they function as tools of power. According to Said, Western societies shapes

¹ Said, E.W. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

knowledge in such a way that it supports imperial control under scholarly guise. This framework has been applied generally to literary texts, including *A Passage to India*, that invites analyse and scrutiny, not just as story, but as a artifact of perspective of how colonial narratives shapes the view of Indian society and identity.

Some scholars probe Said's insights by focusing on Orientalist stereotyping in Forster's novel. Not far from this line of research, Muhammad Ehsan's study, *A Study of Denizen Thought of Empire and Place of Indians as Subhuman in Forster's India*², shows a neo-Orientalist approach of how Indians are constantly positioned as subhuman within imperial mindset. Through this study, it becomes evident that colonial ideology frames Indians as incapable of rationality and autonomy, thus reinforcing hierarchical power structures between the British and the colonized. Similarly, Delis Aprianti's *The Portrayal of Orientalism and Occidentalism in the Novel A Passage to India* (2022)³ examines how both Eastern and Western identities are shaped through mutual representation, uncovering embedded biases despite surface-level resistance to imperial narratives.

While such studies effectively explain how Orientalist stereotypes function in the novel, their view remains limited to treating Orientalism largely as a static and monolithic system. Fixed portrayals receive focus; yet tensions buried within colonial discourse often go unnoticed. Moments arises when sympathy, liberalism, or humanism complicate outright domination. Moreover, it fails to address the moral complexity and narrative ambiguity in the novel that challenge fixed colonial beliefs.

2.2 Dehumanization, Law, and Colonial Power

Another significant aspect of scholarship focus on dehumanization and institutional power, particularly the role of legal frameworks, racial hierarchies, and authority in maintaining colonial control. From this angle, Nur Selina's study, *Dehumanization, a Mechanism of Colonialism Resulting in an Unbridgeable Gulf between the Colonizer and the Colonized*⁴, reveals how Indians are systemically stripped of humanity in *A Passage to India*. Her work suggests that colonialism operates by creating an unbridgeable separation between rulers and subjects, making meaningful cross-cultural understanding impossible. In this view,

² Ehsan, M., Mustafa, A. and Zeeshan, S. (2016) 'A study of denizen thought of empire and place of Indians as subhuman in Forster's *A Passage to India*: Neo-Oriental approach in the eyes of Edward Said', *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature* 13.

³ Aprianti, D. (2022) 'The portrayal of Orientalism and Occidentalism in the novel *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster: Post-colonial approach', *Channing: English Language Education and Literature* 7.

⁴ Selina, N. (2021) 'Dehumanization: A Mechanism of Colonialism Resulting in the Denial of Indigenous Identity', *Journal of Language and Literature* 230.

dehumanization works as a mechanism that justifies exclusion, violence, and legal injustice. Similarly, Nijat Ullah Khan and Abdul Hamid Khan, in *A Colonial Worldview in A Passage to India*⁵, explores how colonial administrative frameworks uphold imperial control through racial hierarchies and legal institutions. Their study highlights how British authorities rely on law and bureaucracy to maintain dominance, especially during Dr. Aziz's trial. These scholars emphasize that what appears impartial, such as law, is instead shown carrying the traces of inherited bias and colonial power.

However, across these studies, sympathy is generally treated as ineffective or irrelevant. Liberal gestures and emotional concern shown by British figures are frequently disregarded as superficial or powerless in face of structural domination. Such studies overlook the possibility that sympathy might operate with purpose: easing opposition, reinforcing power, or disguising force through moral concern.

2.3 Liberal Humanism Meets Colonial Sympathy

A minor yet significant aspect of research examines liberal humanism in colonial writings, especially individuals who were portrayed sympathetically towards the colonized. In *Passage to India*, figures such as Mrs. Moore and Fielding are often interpreted as representatives of liberal conscience within the imperial structure. According to critics, these characters resist explicit racial prejudice while revealing moral unease about colonial practices.

Yet, current studies rarely explore sympathy as a part of colonial expression. Rather than being seen as tied to power structures, liberal humanism tends to be treated as noble yet powerless, or merely private.

The lack of steady focus on sympathy as a discursive strategy narrows our understanding of colonial dynamics within the novel. Without examining how sympathy may soften conflict, maintain hierarchy, or delay political break, scholarship work may repeat an oversimplified contrast between domination and resistance.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship examines stereotype, dehumanization, and colonial domination extensively but it fails to specify how sympathy itself operated within colonial discourse as a stabilizing, rather than subversive, force.

⁵ Khan, N.U. and Khan, A.H. (2020) 'A Colonial Worldview in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*', *Sir Syed Journal of Education & Social Research (SJESR)* 117.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses the postcolonial theories of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha to understand how sympathy is viewed within colonial relationship in *A Passage to India*. Rather than deepen complexity, these theories serve instead as clear, precise instruments that explain how power, representation, and emotional response function together in colonial framework.

3.1 Edward Said and the Idea of Orientalism¹

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism explains how colonial power works through representation. Said argues that West did not merely portray the East, it actively shaped East as inferior, backward, irrational, and dependent. Through this process of othering, differences become absolute under imperial dominance, as colonized subjects appears as opposites of their rulers. Orientalism also involves speaking for the colonized, where Western powers claim responsibility to interpret Eastern cultures, experiences, and identities, often silencing indigenous perspectives. This lens shows how even moments resembling sympathy in the literature may still work within a framework of unequal power relations.

3.2 Homi Bhabha- Ambivalence⁶

While Said emphasizes organized dominance, Homi Bhabha's concept of ambivalence reveals the inner splits within colonial power. Bhabha states that because of how unstable colonial control really was, the colonizer often felt both attraction and fear about those they ruled. The colonizer wants the colonized to resemble Western values, yet never wanting them truly alike. This creates tension between care and command. While sympathy may not challenge colonial authority directly, they can coexist with it, even helping to stabilize it.

This analysis work lies in how Said and Bhabha complement one another, showing colonial power as both structured and unstable. While Said explains how representation creates hierarchy, Bhabha focuses on the hidden instability within that hierarchy. Together, they provide insights for closer look at sympathy in colonial narratives- not as mere resistance, but as a complex force. Though distinct in approach, their ideas form a shared view, showing contradiction and connection at once.

⁶Bhabha, H.K. (1984) 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 125.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative textual analysis to examine how Indians are represented in British colonial literature, particularly with a focus on the interplay between stereotype and sympathy. This analysis is based on observation of narrative voice, key dialogues, and recurring symbols. Rather than research built on quantitative data or historical comparison, this method relies on careful interpretation on how meaning is produced within the literary text itself.

The method focuses on three primary elements of analysis. First, characterization is examined to acknowledge how Indian figures appear through emotional feelings, social roles, and racial stereotypes, especially focusing on Dr. Aziz, shown as sympathetic yet confined by limitations. Second, exploration of sympathy such as gestures of camaraderie, moral concern, or shared emotion, are closely examined to interpret their scope and limitation within the imperial rule. Third, narrative authority is scrutinized to determine how narrator shaped or silences Indian perspectives, while subtly reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

This methodological approach is suitable for the research questions, as it allows for detailed analysis of how colonial ideology works through word choice, point of view, and narrative structure. Through textual analysis, tensions between apparent humanization and colonial power relations, revealing how sympathy is used as a ideological tool to uphold imperial authority.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

5.1 Stereotype as Colonial Knowledge

Colonial rule doesn't merely misrepresent; it shapes knowledge and understanding to stabilize power. In the novel, stereotypes about Indians- such as being overly emotional, irrational, and morally instable, act as tools of colonial knowledge that normalize dominance. Indians are not simply described; they are interpreted through racial expectations.

In the starting of the novel, Mahmoud Ali remarks on the British: "They all become exactly the same, not worse, nor better". His words suggests that colonial power shapes uniformity among those who rule. However, the opposite is also true; colonial talks enforce uniformity among the ruled. Indians are often seen as being driven by emotion instead of logic. Aziz, for instance, enters the story as impulsive, poetic, and predictable. He laughs, his gestures widen every story, exaggerates how he sees things, feelings flare at imagined insults. While such traits make him more humane, almost familiar, they also relate with Orientalist construction of the "emotional East" in contrast to logical and rational West. That pattern slips in quietly, shaping perception

without notice.

This distinction becomes clear during the moment when Mrs. Moore tells Aziz, “You are an Oriental”⁷, while her remark is not overtly hostile, it places Aziz firmly inside a broad cultural label. The statement turns individuality into essence. What appears as personal insights into Aziz, is now understood through a racial lens which predetermines his characteristics. Because of this, stereotypes do not merely describe; they define the limits of understanding itself.

Aziz emotionality is further shown negatively after incident. Mrs. Moore recalls “He had begun by bullying her... had alternately whined over his grievances and patronized her” (p.29). The same kindness once read, now appears erratic and childish. Emotional expressiveness becomes evidence of irrationality, shifting shape but never fading. The shift shows how stereotype is dynamic yet persistent; sympathy might briefly ease bias, but crisis reactivates them.

Still, stereotypes carry judgements about character. The colonial club excludes entry of Indians categorically: “Indians are not allowed into the Chandrapore Club”⁷. Such policies suggest Indians do not meet expectations of decorum or trustworthiness required for social equality. Exclusion is normalized, not justified. Over time, hierarchy appears naturally.

Still, stereotype functions like an unseen infrastructure of imperial rule within the narrative. It shapes perceptions, actions are filtered through its logic, and segregation gains legitimacy because of it. Sympathy may briefly suspend it, but the stereotype persists as the main lens defining how Indians appear. What holds steady is not care, but patterned assumption.

5.2 Sympathy Within Liberal Colonialism

Though stereotypes create differences, sympathy may seem to soften it. However, the novel shows how colonial sympathy functions only up to a certain limit. Kindness emerges, but never meets equality. Moral concern arrives, yet leaves system unchanged.

Mrs. Moore early interaction with Aziz is generally read as a moment of cross-cultural connection. The narrator observes that “She had proved her sympathy by criticizing her fellow-countrywoman to him”⁸. Although brief, it draws attention because she chooses him as her confidant. Rather than staying loyal to her own, she distances herself through words. Her words look like disapproval becomes, in fact, quiet solidarity. Her comment shifts the balance between them, forming connection not through agreement but critique. Still, this sympathy is private and conversational; it does not challenge exclusion of Indians. The Chandrapore Club remains closed. Administrative systems built long ago hold their shape, untouched by soft

⁷ Forster 1989, p. 20

⁸ Forster 1989, p. 19

words.

Aziz responds to this rare understanding with intensity: “You understand me, you know what others feel. Oh, if others resembled you!”⁷. His comment reveals both power and rarity of sympathy. It feels remarkable only because of its scarcity. This line highlights imbalance of the relationship, not mutual but one-sided, where Aziz expresses gratitude for simply being seen as human.

Still, during the Bridge Party, liberal colonialism seeks harmony while maintaining colonial hierarchies. Mr. Turton states that “We don’t come across them socially”⁹, reveals how shallow the event really is. The party is organized as a gesture of goodwill, yet differences exist. Sympathy is ceremonial rather than transformative.

Ronny Heaslop’s comments, “Nothing’s private in India”¹⁰, shows how privacy slips away under colonial eyes. Because of this, relationships and emotional trust bend beneath constant observation. Even though some wish for openness, colonial control tends to win. Liberal goodwill cannot supersede the vital duty to govern.

Within this system, sympathy acts as a boundary. It doesn’t break down injustice, rather it just personalizes inequality. Emotional gestures construct image of moral sensitivity while leaving colonial hierarchy untouched. Colonizers see themselves as good and ethical, even when they keep command. In this way, dominance is maintained by softening its image.

5.3 Ambivalence: Humanization Without Voice

Homi Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence is useful here. It helps understand how colonial discourse humanizes and diminishes at the same time; praising yet unsettling at once. Indians in the novel show feelings, stand out, and even admired but they don’t carry authoritative voice. Aziz is richly characterized, yet his perspective is filtered through narrator’s observations. He is seen as “a poet at heart,” he leans into feeling, drawn to dreams more than facts. Because of such qualities, he feels real and humane but gets confined within aesthetic categories instead of political power. While emotion flows freely from him, influence does not; silence surrounds his place in larger events.

Even moments meant to connect deepen imbalance. Mrs. Moore may understand Aziz emotionally, her words fix Aziz within race: “You are an Oriental”⁷. The observation of difference is framed as knowledge. Aziz is spoken about, sorted, interpreted. Differences turn into declaration.

⁹ Forster 1989, p. 24

¹⁰ Forster 1989, p. 28

Bhabha argues that ambivalence destabilizes authority, yet it survives by preventing clear opposition. In the novel, Indian characters gain moral visibility while remaining without actual decision-making power. They are acknowledged as feeling subjects but not as equal citizens. Their complaints are heard as personal suffering rather than as demand for justice and fairness. Ambivalence becomes particularly visible when sympathy shifts into suspicion. The reinterpretation of Aziz's behaviour after the Marabar incident shows how quickly humanization can break. The colonial gaze reshape itself. Aziz's voice fades as he is judged through colonial discourse.

Thus, novel presents a paradox: Indians stand at the centre, yet remain on the edge; visible yet filtered through others' terms. They are recognized ethically but silenced politically. Ambivalence allows colonial power to be seen as flexible and open-hearted while preserving ultimate control.

Moreover, Aziz never gains full control over how his story unfolds. Even when he speaks passionately, his words are reshaped, interpreted, and sometimes subtly ironized by the narrator. His turn towards political awareness shows strong emotion, yet it lacks clear belief structure. According to Bhabha, he becomes a subject shaped by colonial discourse- visible, layered, psychologically rich, but not structurally empowered. So, being seen as human happens inside limits. Acknowledgement does not translate into shift in power. control persists because colonial narratives mimic reflection and kindness, this contradiction keeps dominance intact.

5.4 Breakdown of Sympathy Under Crisis

The trial sequence exposes how fragile liberal sympathy can be. Racial bonds tighten just as quickly as understanding fades. What seemed like cross-cultural friendship collapses under colonial pressure. The trial scene makes visible what was always there; a boundary that kindness cannot cross.

The Marabar Caves incident splits people's opinion sharply. The colonial administration closes ranks. Loyalty along racial lines outweighs personal bonds. Aziz is no longer a friend but a suspect.

Earlier, Mahmoud Ali's remark "They all become exactly the same, not worse, nor better"¹¹ starts to sound different. Under tensions, individual differences among the English fade away. When an empire exerts force, sameness follows.

¹¹ Forster 1989, p. 10

The law itself revealed as mechanical rather than moral. Driven by process, not principle, the system treats doubt as grounds for a charge. Individuals may doubt Aziz's guilt privately, but public structures implement suspicion. Belief in innocence matters little once procedure takes hold.

Nowhere does Mrs. Moore's earlier sympathy manage to intervene effectively. Though emotional recognition is present, it falters when faced with rigid structures. The courtroom becomes the stage on which liberal ideals stop working.

The crisis shows that sympathy depends on stability. When imperial power feels insecure, emotional understanding replaces with rigid unity. Truth gets decided by law, never bonds between people. Thus, the trial proves the central argument: colonial sympathy works under strict conditions. It survives only when hierarchy remains absolute.

5.5 From Moral Concern to Political Silence

By the novel's conclusion, sympathy has not broken imperial power; it has merely softened its moral image. The systems of unfairness still stand unchanged.

Aziz's declaration, "India shall be a nation!"¹², marks a turning point. Where emotional bonds once held sway, political awareness now takes root. Equality was never won through sympathy; therefore, nationalism steps forward instead of closeness. Sovereignty demands more than friendship can offer.

The last conversation – "Why can't we be friends now? ... No, not yet"¹³, operates as the novel's ethical verdict. The refusal is not because of feelings between them, but instead due to deeper forces at play. The landscape itself appears to block any reconciliation. Equality remains on hold while imperial rule continues.

The conclusion is deliberately uncomfortable. Rather than offering comfort, it leaves behind an emotional emptiness. Sympathy appears as fragile, temporary but it fails to shift colonial structures. Doubts may come into British prejudices, yet the system remains untouched. Persistence defines the empire, long after the sympathy stumbles.

Sympathy shifts attention from structural injustice to individual's morality. It interprets inequality as misunderstanding rather than structural domination. By centring feelings over power, it lets hierarchy survive under moral light.

The novel eventually suggests that genuine equality cannot develop within colonial control. Compassion does not amount to political justice. When structure remains intact, sympathy

¹² Forster 1989, p. 279

¹³ Forster 1989, p. 280

offers a temporary relief, not a lasting justice.

Edward Said idea of Orientalism further help explain this mechanism. Orientalism is not always rooted in hatred, it often mixes admiration, fascination, or even reverence. When Indians are shown as spiritual, emotional, or rich in culture, colonial literature can appear respectful yet position them within the framework of difference. Such portrayal keeps meaning-making power in Western hands. The Colonizer remains the one to explains, categorizes, and finally judges.

Hence, sympathy shifts into a tool shaped by language. Rather than just an emotion, it transforms domination into moral responsibility. Survival of empire focuses on narratives of ethical behaviour, not just violence. The colonizer may feel troubled, compassionate, even doubt about their role; yet they still hold the authority. The discomfort showed in the novel's ending comes from that gap: reconciliation is postponed, not because of individual failure, but because the system resists equality. Sympathy exposes injustice but does not break it. As long as emotion stands in for change, power survives; its edges less sharp, yet its core untouched.

Conclusion of Analysis

The text portrays a consistent pattern through stereotype, sympathy, ambivalence, crisis, and conclusion: Indians are humanized but constrained. From crisis to resolution, Indian characters gain depth but not agency. Sympathy appears under imperial rule, though it does not lead to equality.

Sympathy does not overturn empire. It stabilizes it.

And that is exactly what makes it dangerous.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that sympathy in colonial texts seldom challenge imperial power, despite when it appears kind or humane. While Indian characters receive warmth and emotional depth, such attention hardly ever leads to equality. Sympathy softens prejudice, but it doesn't change hierarchy. Compassion becomes possible without restructuring the power. In this way, colonial writing can be morally sensitive while remaining politically unchanged.

What this suggests about colonial literature is important. These texts are not just instruments of clear power, they are more complex. Although they can question bias, show moments of shared experiences, or criticize imperial arrogance, the foundation of empire remains untouched. Representation becomes a quieter form of control. Inequality gets reframed, not as

systemic fact but as individual sorrow or feeling; avoiding any real confrontation with its roots. This matters today because empathy often gets confused with fairness. Feeling concern for marginalized group rarely change the systems that disadvantage them. Sympathy can create comfort, even reconciliation; while deeper inequalities continue to exist. Empire stays unchallenged by colonial sympathy; instead, it refines, reshapes domination into moral responsibility while leaving inequality untouched.

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