

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Passage to India

by
E.M. Forster

Book Information

E.M. Forster, A Passage to India
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This account captures the clash of two cultures, East and West, in British India after the turn of the century.

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, India; History, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Dr. Aziz a Moslem Indian surgeon charged with assaulting an Englishwoman
Hamidullah a friend of Dr. Aziz and a respected barrister
Major Callendar a Civil Surgeon of the Hospital
Miss Adela Quested a young Englishwoman, the fiancée of Ronny Heaslop, who claims she was assaulted in the Marabar Caves
Mr. Cyril Fielding the Principal of the Government College and a friend of Aziz
Mr. Ronny Heaslop the City Magistrate of Chandrapore and son of Mrs. Moore
Mr. Turton the Collector of Chandrapore
Mrs. Moore a sensitive Englishwoman who visits India to escort Adela Quested, a prospective bride to her son
Nawab Bahadur an Indian proprietor and philanthropist whose opinion is respected
Professor Godbole a teacher at the college, a Hindu Brahman
Stella and Ralph Mrs. Moore's children from her second marriage, who are half-siblings to Ronny

Vocabulary

bounder a poorly bred man

entente an agreement between two or more parties for cooperation
muddle a disorganized condition
nullah a ditch or ravine
pedantry a wearisome focus on the academic or formal rules
prig a person overly concerned with propriety, a "stick-in-the-mud"
pukka first-rate
purdah a curtain or screen used to separate the sexes

Synopsis

As the story begins, a group of Indians are discussing the British presence in India and how, in a matter of months after arriving, the British men and women's personalities change. The servant of Major Callendar, the Civil Surgeon, summons Dr. Aziz from this discussion. When he arrives at the Callendars' bungalow, Dr. Aziz is informed that he is not there. On his return home, Dr. Aziz stops at a mosque where he meets Mrs. Moore, who has just arrived in India. She has escorted a Miss Adela Quested from England as a potential match for her son, Ronny Heaslop, the City Magistrate. Dr. Aziz senses that Mrs. Moore is different from other English people and compliments her by saying she is Oriental. He escorts her back to the club, which, because he is Indian, he is not allowed to enter. There, Miss Quested is quite candid to her English hosts and begs to see the "real" India. A Bridge Party is arranged where this might occur.

At this failed party, Mr. Cyril Fielding invites Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested to tea at the college where he is the Principal. He also invites Dr. Aziz and Professor Godbole. At tea, Miss Quested reveals she will be returning to England, apparently bothered by Ronny's attitude toward the Indian people. It is here that Dr. Aziz extends an invitation to Miss Quested and Mrs. Moore to tea at his home. They accept the invitation literally, and so he is bound, although he changes the location of the tea to the Marabar Caves that lie outside the city of Chandrapore. When Ronny comes to pick up Miss Quested, she tells him of her intent to return to

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England. In a turn of events, during a carriage ride later that evening, an accident occurs and Ronny and Miss Quested turn to each other and get engaged.

The Marabar tour, although so thoughtfully arranged, becomes a muddle. Extra servants are dismissed and Mr. Fielding and Professor Godbole, who were to accompany them as "an English presence," miss the train. Mrs. Moore experiences a sense of panic in the first cave, hears a reverberating echo, and declines to continue. Dr. Aziz, Miss Quested, and a guide, at the urging of Mrs. Moore, go on to investigate other caves. Miss Quested is tormented by thoughts of love and marriage as she enters a cave. She rushes out, claiming Dr. Aziz attacked her.

Upon his arrival in the city, Dr. Aziz is arrested for assaulting Miss Quested. Both the British and Indian sides demand fierce loyalty. Only Mr. Fielding is willing to straddle that line. Mr. Fielding comes to Aziz's defense, but the charges hold, evidence is collected, bail is denied, and a trial date is set. Since her experience in the cave, Mrs. Moore becomes despondent and ill-tempered. She does, however, believe in Aziz's innocence. Ronny arranges for her return trip to England so that she is not able to testify. She dies en route and is buried at sea.

Meanwhile, the trial day arrives and, amid the posturing of the British to have their chairs placed on the platform and the worship-like chant of "Esmoor," Miss Quested finally takes the stand. She relives the day in her mind, but at the very end, rescinds the charge against Dr. Aziz. Amid the confusion of the rejoicing Indian crowd in the streets, Mr. Fielding tries to protect Miss Quested and is not able to celebrate with his friend Dr. Aziz.

Dr. Fielding and Aziz's relationship becomes strained, and Ronny breaks off his engagement to Miss Quested, who returns to England. Dr. Fielding asks that Aziz forgive Miss Quested of her fine, even though Fielding had dishonored the British before the trial by failing to stand when Ronny had entered the room at the club. When Dr. Fielding announces

he will go to England, Dr. Aziz is sure he will find Miss Quested and marry her. It is because of this assumption that Dr. Aziz does not respond to Mr. Fielding's letters and even fails to open some.

When Mr. Fielding returns to India two years later with his wife, Dr. Aziz is almost hostile towards him. Even when it is finally revealed that Fielding has married Stella, Mrs. Moore's daughter from her second marriage, the tensions continue. At the end of the story, tensions have finally eased, but they realize that they must go separate ways. Their friendship cannot exist in this place or time.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Aziz describes the criss-crossing streets of Chandrapore, named after victorious generals, and says they "were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India." What feelings do they invoke in Aziz?

He is seized with depression and "feels caught in their meshes." Aziz's life is focused on the city, so he must feel suffocated and oppressed to a large extent, whenever he steps outside. He fears being snubbed whenever he approaches a British residence and wishes to escape "the net" and be back among the manners and culture with which he is familiar.

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Literary Analysis

E. M. Forster uses an omniscient narrator point of view in *A Passage to India*. How would the book have been different if it were narrated by a character in the first person?

The book would have been written through the eyes of either an Anglo-Indian or an Indian. Depending on the character, it could have a decided slant or perspective, and contain more anger, emotion, or condescending thoughts without necessarily a counter opinion stated. The readers would have to draw their own conclusions as to the feelings of other characters.

Inferential Comprehension

Existential philosophy regards the individual as existing in a hostile or indifferent world and human existence as unexplainable. How is Mrs. Moore's experience in the cave an existential experience?

She realizes the despair she feels is her own, and the world will continue to go on indifferently. The words of her Christianity, which had once given her solace, only amount to "boum" now, a hollow echo--they have no meaning. She is given over to horror at this realization, and does not want to communicate with anyone--not her children nor her God.

Constructing Meaning

The word "muddle" is used a number of times in the story, as is the word "mystery." What is the difference between the two words and what distinctions do the characters convey by their use?

Muddle indicates disorder and confusion, while mystery implies something that is inexplicable by natural laws. Muddle focuses on the earthly and human chaos, while mystery speaks to the spiritual wonders. By using the word muddle, Fielding and Aziz probably wish to convey that the problems and confusion that occur are due to the human condition rather than some spiritual principle beyond the grasp of understanding. Mrs. Moore believes India is spiritual, while Miss Quested initially holds no opinion. In the end, however, Fielding and Miss Quested are left wondering. The narrator states, "Perhaps life is a mystery and not a muddle; they could not tell." They sense there is something beyond the tangible, that Mrs. Moore understands it, and that there may be a higher unity beyond the endless squabble. Later, Dr. Aziz comes to the same realization.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting This story takes place during the 1920s in India. Research the British colonization of India. When did it occur? What were the reasons for British interest in the Indian subcontinent? How was British rule established? Report your findings to the class in a three to five minute presentation.

Understanding the Author's Craft *A Passage to India* was written as a result of E. M. Forster's visit to India in 1912-13. He got stuck in his writing, however, and put the novel aside. After his second journey to India in 1921, he was able to complete the novel. Research E. M. Forster's life and write a short biographical sketch about him. Forster kept a diary of his travels in India. If these can be referenced, note any parallels that exist between his experiences in India and those in the novel. These may be along character, geographical, or cultural lines.

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Recognizing Details Forster describes in detail the Marabar Caves, their circular shape, polished stone interior, and their haunting echo. He also reveals the feelings they invoke in the characters of the story. Have the students go to a nearby location where there is a natural formation of some kind or provide a picture for them. Have them describe it in detail. Note also the feelings that are elicited in them while they are studying the formation. While they are reading their descriptions to the class, have the others sketch the formation from the details the speaker is providing.

Responding to Literature Misunderstandings arise and intentions are sometimes misconstrued when two cultures must co-exist together. These culture clashes may be along national, regional, racial, or economic lines. Have the students recall a time in their own lives when cultural differences created misunderstandings. Do social divisions exist in their school or town? What is the basis of the division? This may lead to a class discussion on the beginnings of prejudice and how people generalize to include all people of a particular group when they have a negative experience with one person of that group.