

## Alienation and Identity in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Comparative study

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the themes of alienation and identity in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, emphasizing the cultural and social conflicts influenced by colonial and postcolonial contexts. Both works examine the intricacies of identity development in countries contending with the lasting effects of colonialism, caste systems, and cultural hybridity. Forster's depiction of colonial India underscores the alienation arising from the confluence of race, religion, and imperial authority, whereas Roy's tale examines postcolonial Kerala, revealing the rifts within family and community instigated by caste discrimination and cultural conflict. This research reveals a notable gap in comparative studies of colonial and postcolonial Indian contexts, highlighting the connection between personal and political aspects of alienation in the formation of identity .

### Introduction

Literature has historically functioned as a prism for examining the concept of alienation and identity, especially in environments influenced by colonialism and its consequences. E.M. Forster's A Passage to India and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things are two essential texts that provide deep insights into these subjects, but from different logical and

cultural perspectives. E. M Forster (1879- 1970), an English author and social commentator, dedicated a considerable portion of his life to India, where his insights into British colonialism significantly influenced his oeuvre. *A Passage to India*, published in 1924, explores the cultural conflicts and misunderstandings between the British and Indians during the British Raj. Arundhati Roy (1961) is an Indian novelist and political activist whose inaugural novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), examines the fragmented social structure of postcolonial India, emphasizing caste, gender, and familial relationships.

The concept of alienation is profoundly evident in both works, illustrating the separation of individuals from their cultural contexts and interpersonal connections. In *A Passage to India*, the division faced by characters such as Dr. Aziz and Adela Quested underscores the profound divisions of mistrust and misunderstanding between conquerors and the colonized. In *The God of Small Things*, characters like Velutha and Ammu exemplify the alienation caused by stringent caste and gender standards in postcolonial Kerala (a state in India, contains different cultures; Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism).

Identity arises as a primary issue, influenced and divided by the dynamics of culture, power, and memory. Both novels illustrate the dynamic and sometimes contentious essence of identity under circumstances characterized by oppression, whether under colonial governance or postcolonial social and economic divisions. Numerous academics have examined the issues of alienation and identity in these books, including the contributions of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha in postcolonial theory, which offer frameworks for comprehending the impact of colonialism on identity. A research vacuum exists concerning a comparative investigation of the relationship between cultural alienation and identity formation in these two books. This study will investigate how these ideas are represented in both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Through a comparative analysis of these two works, this paper seeks to discover the complicated relationship of alienation and identity, revealing

how both Forster and Roy illuminate the enduring complexities of cultural and personal fragmentation. By focusing on the contrasting settings of colonial India and postcolonial Kerala, this study will shed light on how these authors depict the continuing impact of colonial heritages on individuals and collective identities.

Themes of alienation and identity in *A Passage to India* and *The God of Small Things* have been extensively explored by various scholars within postcolonial studies. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains foundational to the study of cultural alienation, particularly in colonial contexts. Said argues that Western representations of the East are inherently alienating, as they construct the East as a monolithic, exotic "Other" in contrast to the civilized West. In *A Passage to India*, this dynamic is exemplified in the interactions between the British colonizers and the Indian characters. For instance, Adela Quested, a key British character in *A Passage to India*, and Dr. Aziz, a central character in the novel, misperceptions of India and frustrations with the colonial system highlight the cultural and racial divides that breed alienation (Said 34). Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) offers a critical lens through which to view the hybridity and liminality in postcolonial identity formation. Bhabha's concepts of cultural mimicry and the "third space" are useful for understanding the complex identity negotiations in *The God of Small Things*. Roy's characters, such as Ammu, as a mother and prominent character in *The God of Small Things*, and Velutha, a significant character in Roy's, are caught in this in-between space, where they must navigate the remnants of colonial rule, caste divisions, and societal expectations (Bhabha 24) .

In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft emphasizes that postcolonial literature contests the prevailing narratives of empire by offering voices and viewpoints from the colonized. Ashcroft's thesis is especially pertinent to Roy's *The God of Small Things*, since the novel exposes the postcolonial social frameworks that sustain injustice and alienation. Ammu, the heroine, confronts both gender-based oppression and the stigmatization of her lower caste origins, illustrating the entrenched

colonial and social inequalities that endure in postcolonial India. (Ashcroft 58).

Rukmini Bhaya Nair's *The God of Small Things: A Postcolonial Reading* (1997) emphasizes Roy's interrogation of historical memory and its impact on personal identity. Nair argues that Roy's characters experience a form of collective alienation as they are shaped by the oppressive social structures left behind by colonialism. This study highlights the psychological and emotional toll of alienation, especially in characters like Velutha, whose identity is not only marginalized by caste but also by the remnants of colonial oppression (Nair 82).

Elaine Showalter's *The Postcolonial and the Postfeminist: The God of Small Things* (2002) analyzes the convergence of gender and postcolonial identity in Roy's oeuvre. Showalter delineates the methods by which the female characters, especially Ammu, experience alienation in a patriarchal and casteist culture. Her work highlights the dual predicament encountered by women in postcolonial India, where colonial legacies meet with gender-based oppression, hence complicating identity construction (Showalter 115). In *A Passage to India*, the alienation of female characters such as Adela Quested is influenced by the gendered expectations of the colonial system, wherein women are frequently ensnared in the power relations between colonizer and the colonized.

Sandeep Banerjee's *Colonialism, Alienation, and Identity in Forster's A Passage to India* (2011) examines how colonialism fosters alienation both among the colonized and inside the colonial authority itself. Banerjee believes that Forster depicts British colonists as alienated from the Indian population, highlighting the psychological and cultural splits established by colonialism. The alienation felt by characters such as Mrs. Moore, Adela Quested, and Dr. Aziz stems directly from the colonial encounter, resulting in a fractured sense of self for both the colonizer and the colonized (Banerjee 72).

*A Passage to India* and *The God of Small Things* have both been studied widely in the context of alienation and identity, there is limited comparative analysis that examines these themes across the colonial and postcolonial

divide. This research addresses the gap by exploring how alienation and identity are shaped by cultural hybridity, social conditions, and historical contexts, highlighting the evolution of these themes from Forster's colonial India to Roy's postcolonial Kerala .

Forster's *A Passage to India* portrays the profound alienation of individuals within the framework of British colonial rule. Dr. Aziz's character exemplifies the psychological toll of being a subject in a system that denies his humanity. His interactions with the British colonizers are fraught with mistrust, as seen in his strained relationships with Cyril Fielding and Adela Quested. These relationships underscore the unbridgeable cultural chasm that colonial hierarchies create, leading to alienation on both sides (Forster 140).

The Marabar Caves, a symbol, and a place near the fictional city Chandrapore in the novel, incident is particularly significant in illustrating the theme of alienation. The echo in the caves, described as an "empty nothingness," symbolizes the breakdown of communication and understanding between cultures. As Edward Said notes, colonialism inherently conceives the colonized as an "Other," continuing elimination and alienation (Said 34). This dynamic is evident in Adela Quested's delusion of the caves' events, which fuels her false accusation against Aziz, further establishing cultural and racial divisions.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores alienation in a postcolonial setting, where characters are shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism, caste, and gender oppression. Ammu and Velutha, central to this narrative, represent the multi-faceted alienation of postcolonial subjects. Ammu, as a divorced woman, is marginalized within her patriarchal family, while Velutha's identity as a broken subjects him to systemic dehumanization (Roy 72).

The sad connection between Ammu and Velutha highlights the enduring estrangement in postcolonial countries. Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" is especially necessary, since it embodies the transitional realm where identities are negotiated and denied (Bhabha 24). Ammu and



Velutha's third space serve as a point of connection and alienation, as their love challenges society standards while being restricted by caste and colonial legacies.

Both works confront the notion of cultural hybridity, but within distinct situations. In *A Passage to India*, the attempted connection between Fielding and Aziz exemplifies a period of cultural hybridity. Nonetheless, the demands of colonial power dynamics ultimately render this endeavor ineffective, as both characters withdraw into their own groups at the conclusion of the story (Forster 230). This illustrates Bhabha's claim that hybridity serves as both a point of potential and conflict, capable of both opposing and strengthening power dynamics (Bhabha 36).

In *The God of Small Things*, hybridity is profoundly embedded in the protagonists' identities. Rahel and Estha, as heirs to both colonial and traditional Indian legacies, exemplify the divided identities of postcolonial individuals. Their estrangement is grounded not just in their family's terrible history but also in the complexities of a society currently contending with its colonial legacy (Roy 102). This hybridity generates a conflict between belonging and exclusion, so confusing their self-identity. The convergence of gender with alienation and identity is a significant issue in both works. In Forster's oeuvre, Adela Quested's experiences underscore the gendered aspects of isolation within a colonial context. Her failure to align her expectations of India with its realities results in her alienation from both the British and Indian populations (Forster 180). Mrs. Moore's disenchantment with colonialism signifies her growing estrangement, as she grows further estranged from both the British Empire and her family.

Ammu's isolation in Roy's story is exacerbated by her gender and social status. Elaine Showalter notes that Roy's depiction of Ammu illustrates the "double alienation" experienced by women in a patriarchal, postcolonial context (Showalter 115). Ammu's marginalization within her family reflects wider cultural frameworks that ostracize women who challenge conventional roles.

The settings in both novels play a critical role in emphasizing alienation. Forster's Marabar Caves symbolize the void of colonial communication, where attempts at understanding collapse into chaos and misunderstanding. The echo in the caves attends as a metaphor for the alienation experienced by both colonizers and colonized, highlighting the psychological impact of colonialism (Forster 158). On the contrary, Roy's Ayemenem, the fictional village in Kerala, House serves as a microcosm of postcolonial alienation. The decaying family home reflects the fragmentation of traditional structures and the psychological fragmentation of its inhabitants. The house becomes a space where past traumas are preserved and where alienation is deeply rooted in the characters' lives (Roy 45).

A comparative examination of the two novels shows that alienation and identity are influenced by historical and cultural settings. In Forster's colonial India, alienation mainly stems from the racial and cultural hierarchies constructed by imperialism. In contrast, Roy's postcolonial India illustrates the continued existence of inequalities in caste, gender, and social structures. Regardless of their distinct backgrounds, both works emphasize the human impact of estrangement. Forster analyzes the artificial divisions established by colonialism, whereas Roy examines the persistent repercussions of these divisions in a purportedly independent country. These two works demonstrate the intricate relationship between history, culture, and identity in influencing both individual and collective experiences of loneliness.

Both novels critically analyze how power relations in colonial and postcolonial countries foster alienation. In *A Passage to India*, the disparity of power between the British colonists and the Indian populace infiltrates every contact, engendering suspicion, and alienation. Aziz's experience throughout the trial illustrates this disparity, since the colonial legal system naturally advantages the British, rendering any Indian defense ineffective (Forster 200). The trial transforms into a public spectacle, highlighting the structural isolation imposed on the colonized. Said claims "that colonial institutions function as mechanisms of "cultural hegemony," hence deepening the alienation of the oppressed" (Said 56).

In *The God of Small Things*, power relations based on caste and gender create alienation in postcolonial India. Velutha's status as a fractured worker illustrates how entrenched power structures, rooted by colonial legacies, persist in marginalizing the most vulnerable populations. His affection for Ammu, a lady of a superior social class, confronts these inequalities but eventually culminates in tragedy, exemplifying the omnipresent nature of these power systems (Roy 176). Bhabha's notion of mimicry is pertinent since Velutha's efforts to maneuver around these systems reveal the constraints of agency inside established hierarchies (Bhabha 42).

The employment of language in both works emphasizes estrangement. In *A Passage to India*, the British characters frequently employ English as an instrument of subjugation, so cementing their cultural supremacy over the Indian populace. Aziz's irregular use of Urdu or Hindi in discussions with the British reflects his difficulty in affirming his cultural identity within a colonial context that diminishes it (Forster 160). According to Spivak, language in colonial situations frequently functions as a kind of “epistemic violence,” suppressing the voices of the colonized (Spivak 80) .

On the other hand, in *The God of Small Things*, Roy utilizes language hybridity to illustrate the fragmented identities of her characters. The blending of Malayalam and English in the tale reflects the cultural and historical relationships that characterize postcolonial Kerala. Their utilization of English, acquired through colonial educational frameworks, juxtaposes their family and cultural heritage, epitomizing their estrangement from both (Roy 89). This language contradiction embodies the fundamental challenges of postcolonial identity.

Historical trauma significantly influences the formation of alienation and identity in both works. Forster's portrayal of India during the British Raj encapsulates the collective anguish of colonization, shown in the alienation of individuals such as Aziz and broader populations. The Marabar Caves, characterized by their unsettling echoes and confusing spaces, symbolize this pain, embodying the psychic emptiness engendered by colonial subjugation (Forster 198) .



In Roy's story, the agony of colonialism is worsened by local histories of caste and sexual assault. The recurring catastrophes within the Ayemenem family—Velutha's demise, Ammu's banishment, and Sophie Mol's drowning—illustrate the interconnection of historical and personal traumas that sustain alienation (Roy 154). Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, highlighting the challenges of expressing previous suffering, is significant in this context. Roy's disjointed narrative structure exemplifies this challenge, demonstrating how memory and trauma influence identity in postcolonial settings (Caruth 15).

Identity assertion creates opposition. In *A Passage to India*, Aziz's rejection of British reconciliation reflects his cultural reclamation. His move to a princely state free from British influence was an attempt to escape colonialism (Forster 245). According to Fanon, decolonization is a political and psychological process that requires the colonized to reject internalized myths of inferiority (Fanon 44). Velutha and Ammu's defiance of caste and patriarchal expectations in *The God of Small Things* are also acts of rebellion. Their rebellion ends tragically, but it shows how identity can fight alienation and injustice (Roy 182). Roy criticizes alienation systems and celebrates human strength in opposing them. Religion greatly influences alienation and identity in both stories. Forster's *A Passage to India* depicts colonial India's religious conflicts between Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The story shows how colonial power confuses religion as a key part of Indian identity .

The concluding section of the novel, set during the Hindu festival of Krishna's birth, is one of the most important and widely worshipped gods in Hinduism, suggests an alternative vision of unity, contrasting sharply with the earlier tensions in the narrative. However, The Hindu philosophy provided by Professor Godbole is ambiguous and detached. Godbole's spiritual worldview gives him a sense of transcendence but separates him from colonial India's political and social conflicts. (Forster 275).

Dr. Aziz's identity is closely tied to his Muslim faith, which shapes his interactions with others and his resistance to colonial oppression. Islam provides Aziz with a sense of belonging within a marginalized community, yet it also isolates him from the larger Indian populace, where Hinduism dominates (Forster 60). The Christian religion, exemplified by British figures such as Mrs. Moore, is seen as simultaneously restrictive and redemptive. Mrs. Moore's empathetic comprehension of Indian culture indicates the possibility of interfaith unity, although the dominant influence of Christianity within the colonial government sustains systematic alienation. Said attacks this dichotomy, contending that colonial Christianity frequently functioned as a cultural instrument for asserting power. (Said 95). Religion, caste, colonial legacies, and relationships are all connected in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Roy examines religion's relationship to oppression and pain, unlike Forster. Kerala Christianity is shown as a dynamic force that both protects and maintains inequality. Paravan Velutha, a lower-individual Christian, represents this paradox. Velutha is excluded after turning to Christianity, showing how caste hierarchies persist (Roy 138). For power and influence, the Church typically supports these structures.

Hindu sect standards and rituals influence the Ayemenem family's existence. Hinduism produces alienation by conforming to these rules, as shown by Baby Kochamma's hostility to Ammu and Velutha's connection. Roy criticizes religion's use to police identification and preserve order (Roy 189). Kerala's distinctive culture and postcolonial citizens' broken identities are reflected in the narrative's mix of Christian and Hindu traditions. Rahel and Estha's mixed religious atmosphere shows their cultural dislocation (Roy 56) .

Both works illustrate religion as a dual-edged weapon, capable of promoting togetherness while also deepening divide. Forster used religion to exemplify India's cultural variety, frequently emphasizing its intellectual and spiritual dimensions. Nevertheless, religion may also serve as a cause for misunderstanding and separation, especially in the interactions between conquerors and the colonized. Roy has a more critical stance towards religion, highlighting its role in sustaining caste and gender inequality. Forster examines religion from a colonial perspective, frequently idealizing its spiritual aspects, whereas Roy bases her critique on the real experiences of oppressed individuals, revealing the concrete damage caused by religious organizations .

Both works show how religion affects power and identity. Religion depicts the cultural conflict between British and Indians in *A Passage to India* and postcolonial society's fractures in *The God of Small Things*. Both writers wonder if religion in these situations can overcome alienation and promote togetherness. Personal connections in both works mirror societal dynamics, showing how alienation and identity are handled. In *A Passage to India*, Aziz and Fielding's friendship is tense and misunderstood. Despite their early friendship, community forces and colonial framework separate them. The novel's last scene, where their horses diverge, illustrates the difficulty of reconciliation within colonial society (Forster 250).

In contrast, Personal tragedy and cultural expectations break relationships in *The God of Small Things*. Rahel and Estha's strong love is overshadowed by their family history and caste structure. Their estrangement shows postcolonial cultures' unwillingness to reconcile with their pasts (Roy 210). This connection fragmentation highlights the continual battle for identity in a colonial society.

## Conclusion

Finally, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* illustrate the influence of colonial and postcolonial contexts on themes of alienation and identity. Forster examines the cultural and racial divisions of colonial India, emphasizing the obstacles between the colonizer and the colonized. Roy redirects attention to postcolonial India, analyzing caste, gender, and individual trauma as elements that disrupt identities and sustain exclusion . This comparative analysis shows the progression of postcolonial literature, transitioning from the examination of colonial interactions to the critique of internalized systems of oppression. Both novels emphasize the ongoing quest for self-definition and social belonging, demonstrating how writing endlessly confronts and mirrors the complex issues of identity in a worldwide context.

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