

DECONSTRUCTING COLONIAL MEANING IN E.M. FORSTER'S *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*: A DERRIDEAN READING OF INSTABILITY AND CONTRADICTION

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Abstract

This article applies Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction to selected passages from E.M. Forster's A Passage to India. It argues that the novel resists fixed meaning through linguistic instability, contradictory perceptions, and collapsing binary oppositions such as truth/illusion, presence/absence, and colonizer/colonized. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that meaning is continuously deferred and never fully stabilized. The analysis reveals that colonial discourse, identity formation, and narrative authority are inherently unstable. The study concludes that Forster's text exemplifies Derrida's concept of différance, where meaning is produced through difference and deferral rather than fixed reference.

Keywords

Deconstruction, Derrida; E.M. Forster; A Passage to India; binary opposition; colonial discourse; instability of meaning; post-structuralism.

Introduction

Colonial discourse has remained a foundational concern in postcolonial literary studies, particularly in texts that stage ideological tensions, cultural misrecognition, and power asymmetries between the colonizer and the colonized (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994).

Within this critical framework, *A Passage to India* occupies a pivotal position as it dramatizes the contradictions of British imperial rule in India and exposes the instability underlying colonial authority through interpersonal, cultural, and institutional encounters. Rather than presenting a coherent imperial worldview, the novel constructs meaning through fragmented representations of identity, culture, and power, thereby rendering it a productive site for ideological and theoretical inquiry.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that Forster's narrative both critiques imperialism and simultaneously destabilizes its own representational authority through ambiguity and contradiction (Childs, 2007; Buriro et al., 2025).

Recent critical studies further argue that the novel operates within a space of epistemological uncertainty where meaning is continuously negotiated rather than fixed. While earlier humanist readings emphasized liberal critique and cross-cultural understanding, postcolonial and poststructuralist interpretations highlight that the text also reproduces orientalist assumptions even as it interrogates them (Aprianti, 2021; Iqbal & Haque, 2022).

Anglo-Indian relations in the novel are thus portrayed as ideologically unstable, where colonial authority functions less through mutual comprehension and more through discursive dominance and misrepresentation. This instability is intensified through character construction, as Aziz, Fielding, and Adela embody

fragmented identities shaped by colonial power structures rather than stable cultural essences (Yan, 2021; Buriro et al., 2025).

Linguistic and discourse-oriented studies further reinforce this position by showing that communication in the novel is marked by ambiguity and interpretive breakdown, where dialogue and institutional language consistently generate uncertainty instead of resolution (Kamran et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2022).

A particularly significant instance of this instability is evident in Adela Quested's Marabar cave experience, where perception collapses into epistemological uncertainty and subjectivity becomes fractured. The narrative statement "*she was of it and not of it at the same time*" (Forster, 2007, p. 230) encapsulates a fundamental contradiction in identity formation, suggesting that subjectivity is neither fully inside nor outside colonial space but suspended within an in-between condition. Psychological readings similarly interpret this episode as evidence of fragmented consciousness and perceptual disorientation, further reinforcing the unreliability of experience within the novel (Habib et al., 2021).

Despite extensive scholarship on ideological representation, orientalism, and discourse instability in *A Passage to India* (Kazmi & Ashfaq, 2020; Khan, Zeb, & Ahmad, 2025; Khan, Akbar, & Farooqi, 2025), there remains a limited number of studies that systematically apply Derridean deconstruction to micro-textual linguistic contradictions.

This gap is particularly evident in analyses that move beyond thematic interpretation to examine how instability is produced at the level of language itself. Grounded in Derrida's notion of *différance*, which posits that meaning is always deferred and never fully present (Derrida, 1978), this study therefore investigates how the novel enacts deconstructive instability through linguistic representation, narrative ambiguity, and ideological contradiction, thereby revealing the inherent limits of colonial discourse.

1. Theoretical Framework: Deconstruction

This study is based on Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, which rejects the idea that language can produce fixed and stable meanings. Derrida (1978) explains that meaning is always delayed and created through *différance*, where words gain meaning through their relationship with other words rather than from a fixed source.

As a result, binary oppositions like truth/falsehood, presence/absence, and reason/irrationality are not stable and tend to break down when closely analyzed. From this view, meaning is relational, contextual, and constantly changing, and texts often contain internal contradictions that weaken their apparent unity. In *A Passage to India*, these deconstructive features appear in the form of unstable colonial authority, where attempts to present rational control and certainty are repeatedly disrupted by contradiction, misunderstanding, and gaps in communication.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative close reading approach as its primary methodological framework for analyzing selected passages from *A Passage to India* (Forster, 2007). Close reading, as developed within the tradition of New Criticism, emphasizes detailed textual analysis by focusing on language, structure, ambiguity, and internal contradictions within the literary text rather than external biographical or historical factors (Richards, 1929; Brooks, 1947; Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954). In this sense, the method allows for an intensive examination of how meaning is generated through textual features and interpretive tensions. However, the present study extends this

approach through the theoretical lens of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, which challenges the stability of meaning and argues that language is inherently unstable, differential, and open to multiple interpretations (Derrida, 1978). Accordingly, the analysis combines close textual scrutiny with deconstructive reading strategies to identify textual contradictions, linguistic ambiguity, and the collapse of binary oppositions, such as presence/absence and truth/illusion, within the narrative structure. This integrated approach enables a deeper understanding of how meaning in the novel is continuously deferred and destabilized rather than fixed or absolute.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Instability of Perception (Cave Episode)

Adela's experience in the Marabar caves demonstrates radical instability of perception: "she was also outside it, watching its entrance" (Forster, 2007, p. 230).

Here, subject and object collapse. She is simultaneously observer and participant. This contradicts stable identity formation and produces epistemological uncertainty. Her inability to locate Aziz further intensifies this ambiguity:

"She failed to locate him" (Forster, 2007, p. 230).

Meaning becomes fragmented, reflecting Derrida's idea that interpretation is never complete (Derrida, 1978).

4.2 Collapse of Truth in Legal Discourse

Colonial legal authority attempts to construct truth:

"I will read you the words of the deposition..." (Forster, 2007, p. 231).

However, this legal narration does not restore clarity. Instead, it multiplies versions of truth. The courtroom becomes a site of textual instability rather than objective justice. Adela's shifting memory demonstrates this:

"I am not quite sure" (Forster, 2007, p. 230).

Thus, truth is not recovered but constructed through language, reinforcing Derrida's critique of logocentrism (Derrida, 1978).

4.3 Colonial Binaries and Their Breakdown

Colonial discourse depends on rigid binaries such as civilized/uncivilized and ruler/ruled. However, Forster destabilizes these categories.

British identity is shown as performative:

"it reminded every member... that he or she was British" (Forster, 2007, p. 47).

Identity here is not essential but ritualized. The national anthem scene reflects emotional instability rather than ideological certainty:

"they were strengthened to resist another day" (Forster, 2007, p. 47).

The need for "resistance" suggests insecurity, not dominance.

4.4 Failure of Communication

Communication repeatedly breaks down between characters:

"What was the name of the play?" "Cousin Kate" (Forster, 2007, p. 43).

While structurally coherent, the exchange fails to produce deeper understanding. Similarly:

"Whatever she said produced a murmur of deprecation" (Forster, 2007, p. 62).

Language becomes empty circulation rather than meaningful exchange, supporting Derrida's claim that meaning is never fully present in speech (Derrida, 1978).

4.5 Instability of Colonial Authority

Colonial officials attempt to assert control, but their authority is unstable:

“he's the type we want, he's one of us” (Forster, 2007, p. 110).

This attempt to fix identity is undermined by constant suspicion and administrative anxiety. Even Ronny's behavior reveals contradiction:

“Ronny stormed, shouted, howled...” (Forster, 2007, p. 111).

Yet this aggression is described as habitual, not emotional truth, suggesting performance rather than authenticity.

4.6 Cultural Contradictions and Ideological Instability

Colonial ideology claims order, yet produces disorder:

“One knew what happened next...” (Forster, 2007, p. 110).

The repetition of predictable conflict shows structural instability rather than resolution. British justification for rule:

“there would certainly have been bloodshed without them” (Forster, 2007, p. 110),

is ideological rather than factual, revealing constructed meaning.

4.7 The Marabar Caves as Deconstructive Symbol

The caves represent ultimate undecidability:

“she saw herself in one and she was also outside it” (Forster, 2007, p. 230).

This paradox collapses subject-object distinction entirely. The cave experience demonstrates Derrida's notion of infinite deferral, where meaning cannot be fixed or located (Derrida, 1978).

5. Findings

The study finds that meaning in *A Passage to India* is fundamentally unstable and self-contradictory, as evidenced in Adela's cave experience where perception collapses into uncertainty and fragmented awareness. It further reveals that colonial binaries such as civilized/uncivilized and ruler/ruled are consistently destabilized throughout the narrative, particularly in moments where British identity is shown as performative and dependent on ritual rather than essence (Forster, 2007, p. 47).

The analysis also shows that language fails to guarantee stable communication or truth, as dialogues frequently produce misunderstanding, ambiguity, and interpretive gaps rather than clarity (Forster, 2007, p. 62). In addition, colonial authority is exposed as performative and ideologically constructed rather than objectively grounded, as official discourse repeatedly relies on narrative framing to maintain legitimacy (Forster, 2007, p. 110).

From a Derridean perspective, identity itself appears fragmented and unstable, since the subject is continually produced through shifting linguistic and cultural structures rather than fixed essence (Derrida, 1978). Overall, the novel exemplifies Derrida's concept of *différance*, where meaning is never fully present but continuously deferred through an endless chain of differences, making interpretation inherently open-ended and undecidable (Derrida, 1978).

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* through the lens of Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction theory, focusing on how meaning is constructed, destabilized, and ultimately left undecided within the text. The analysis demonstrates that the novel does not offer fixed or authoritative meanings; instead, it consistently

produces contradictions, ambiguities, and interpretive gaps that resist closure. Adela's cave experience, colonial interactions, and courtroom discourse all reveal that perception, truth, and identity are not stable categories but shifting constructs shaped by language and context (Forster, 2007, pp. 230–231).

The study further concludes that the binary oppositions on which colonial discourse depends such as East/West, truth/falsehood, and colonizer/colonized are repeatedly destabilized within the narrative, exposing the fragility of imperial certainty. Language itself is shown to be insufficient in securing meaning, as it generates multiple interpretations rather than definitive truths (Forster, 2007, p. 62). From a Derridean perspective, this instability confirms that meaning is always deferred and never fully present, a process Derrida terms *différance* (Derrida, 1978).

Ultimately, *A Passage to India* emerges not as a text of resolved meanings but as a site of continual interpretive movement, where authority

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Authors' Contribution

1. Dr. Syeda Sadaf Munir Kazmi

Contributed to the conceptualization of the study, developed the theoretical framework, supervised the research process, and critically reviewed and finalized the manuscript.

2. Hamza Shahzad

Assisted in data collection from *A Passage to India*, conducted textual analysis based on Derridean deconstruction, and contributed to drafting and structuring the manuscript.

3. Inam Ullah Khan Tajik

Provided textual and theoretical support, refined the analytical discussion, ensured coherence of arguments, and contributed to the revision and improvement of the manuscript.