

## A SOCIO-COGNITIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF COLONIAL IDEOLOGY IN E. M. FORSTER'S *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*: A VAN DIJKIAN PERSPECTIVE

<sup>1</sup>Munawar Abbas, <sup>2</sup> Kulsoom Hassan, <sup>3</sup> Aziz Ullah Khan

<sup>1</sup>EST (English), Government High School Jafar Wala, Tehsil and District Bhakkar

<sup>2</sup>M. Phil English (Linguistics), Abasyn University Peshawar

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English and Modern Languages, University of Science and Technology Bannu, KP, Pakistan

### Abstract

*This study investigates how language in A Passage to India constructs, reflects, and sustains colonial ideology through discourse practices embedded in the text. The primary objective is to examine how linguistic choices contribute to the reproduction of colonial power relations and racial hierarchies. The study is grounded in Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A qualitative research design is employed. The data consist of selected textual extracts from A Passage to India. These extracts are purposively sampled based on their relevance to ideological discourse. The analysis follows a three-level CDA framework: (1) discourse structures, (2) social cognition and (3) socio-political context. The analysis shows that linguistic features and expressions are ideologically charged. The study contributes by applying a fully integrated socio-cognitive CDA model to A Passage to India to demonstrate how discourse operates simultaneously at linguistic, cognitive, and ideological levels. The research advances CDA scholarship by illustrating how literary discourse not only represents colonial reality but actively constructs cognitive frameworks that sustain ideological systems.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, socio-cognitive model, ideology, colonial discourse, social cognition, power relations, E. M. Forster, Teun A. van Dijk

### 1. Background of the Study

Postcolonial literature often explores imperial domination and cultural misrepresentation. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) presents complex interactions between British rulers and Indian subjects under colonial rule. The novel demonstrates that colonial power is not only political but also cognitive, shaping how individuals perceive reality.

From a socio-cognitive perspective, discourse is grounded in mental models that guide interpretation (van Dijk, 2008). These models determine how colonial subjects construct meaning about themselves and others. The selected excerpts reflect how cognitive distortion and ideological framing lead to systematic misunderstanding in colonial encounters.

### 2. Literature Review on *A Passage to India*

Recent scholarship demonstrates a shift toward interdisciplinary and discourse-oriented approaches. Selina (2023) highlights the theme of dehumanization, arguing that British colonial discourse portrays Indians as inferior and irrational, reinforcing systems of power and exclusion. In the same year, Mechkarini et al. (2023) examine the novel's representation of

colonial memory, suggesting that *A Passage to India* reconstructs the past in ways that reveal the long-term psychological and cultural effects of imperialism.

The most recent studies expand into psychological and discourse analysis. Biswas, et al. (2025) argue that relationships in the novel are shaped by “slight, spite, and suspicion,” reflecting the emotional and psychological tensions embedded in colonial systems. The study shows how fear and mistrust dominate interactions between the British and Indians.

The most recent perspectives (2026) demonstrate a clear shift toward textual and ideological analysis, where language is examined as a site of meaning-making and power construction. In this regard, Elena Adami (2026) investigates how negation, expectation, and ideology function within written discourse. Her study uses *A Passage to India* as one of the illustrative texts to show that linguistic structures are not neutral; rather, they actively shape readers’ perceptions and reinforce particular ideological positions. Specifically, Adami argues that patterns of negation (what is denied or excluded) and expectation (what is presupposed or anticipated) contribute to constructing subtle ideological meanings embedded in the text.

However, while Adami (2026) successfully identifies the presence of ideological elements, her analysis remains limited in scope and depth. The study provides selective examples rather than a comprehensive, systematic examination of the text. Moreover, it does not fully explore how these ideological meanings operate across different structural levels of discourse.

In contrast, the current study extends this line of inquiry by applying Teun A. van Dijk’s (2008) three-level model of discourse analysis, which includes:

1. **Textual structures** (micro-level: lexis, syntax, rhetorical devices),
2. **Discursive practices** (meso-level: production and interpretation of text), and
3. **Social structures** (macro-level: ideology, power relations, and dominance).

By analyzing multiple extracts from *A Passage to India*, the present research offers a comprehensive and systematic ideological analysis. It moves beyond identifying isolated linguistic features and instead demonstrates how meaning is constructed across interconnected levels of discourse. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how colonial ideology is embedded, reproduced, and contested within the text, thus addressing the limitations observed in Adami’s (2026) study.

### 3. Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive literary criticism of *A Passage to India*, limited research has systematically examined how linguistic structures construct ideology through the integrated lens of van Dijk’s socio-cognitive CDA model. Existing studies often focus on thematic or postcolonial interpretations but neglect the interaction between discourse structures, social cognition, and socio-political power. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how language in the novel encodes mental models, reproduces ideological beliefs, and sustains colonial dominance through discourse.

#### 4. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretative and qualitative research design within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine colonial ideology in *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster. It follows a deductive approach, applying the socio-cognitive model of Teun A. van Dijk to the selected textual data, moving from theory to analysis (van Dijk, 1998, 2008).

The research is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, focusing on meaning-making and ideological construction through language (Fairclough, 2003). The data consists of qualitative textual excerpts collected through document analysis, with the novel serving as the primary source (Bowen, 2009).

A purposive sampling technique is used to select passages that reflect racial representation, identity construction, and colonial power relations. The unit of analysis includes words, phrases, sentences, and discourse segments.

Data is analyzed using van Dijk's three-level framework: discourse structures (micro level), social cognition (meso level), and socio-political context (macro level), to explore how linguistic features encode ideology and reproduce dominance (van Dijk, 1993, 2000, 2008).

Analytical tools such as the ideological square, lexical and syntactic analysis, pragmatic features such as politeness and implicature, and narrative strategies are employed to uncover implicit meanings. The study ensures validity through the use of an established theoretical framework and textual evidence, while reliability is maintained through systematic and consistent analysis.

#### 5. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which integrates three interrelated dimensions: discourse structures, social cognition, and socio-political context.

Discourse structures refer to linguistic choices such as lexis, syntax, and narrative organization that encode meaning and ideology within text. Social cognition involves the mental representations, attitudes, and ideologies that mediate how individuals and groups interpret discourse and construct social reality. The socio-political context encompasses broader structures of power, including colonial administration and institutional relations, which shape and are shaped by discourse practices.

Within this framework, van Dijk (2008) argues that ideology operates through socially shared mental models that guide the interpretation of events, thereby making relations of power appear natural, self-evident, and cognitively normalized rather than socially constructed or ideologically imposed.

#### 6. Data Analysis and Discussion: Three Levels of the Socio-Cognitive Dimension in CDA of *A Passage to India*

This analysis of *A Passage to India* is based on Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, which explains discourse through three interrelated levels: discourse structures, social cognition, and socio-political context. These levels together show how language functions as a carrier of ideology and power (van Dijk, 2008).

At the first level, discourse structures focus on linguistic choices such as lexis, syntax, and style that encode meaning. The second level, social cognition, explains how mental models, beliefs, and ideologies shape and are shaped by discourse. The third level, socio-political context, situates discourse within wider systems of power, dominance, and inequality. Together, these levels demonstrate how discourse both reflects and reproduces colonial ideology in the text.

### 6.1. Discourse Structures

Discourse structures are the linguistic organization of the text including lexis, syntax, rhetorical devices, and narrative patterns. Van Dijk (2008) illustrates that linguistic choices are not neutral but ideologically loaded and meaning-making. For instance, lexical items such as “*indescribable splendor*” and “*beautiful and significant*” construct a highly subjective and evaluative representation of experience, reflecting how meaning is discursively shaped (Forster, 1924, p. 230). Similarly, the shift in perception is marked by the evaluative term “*dull*” (p. 230). Emotional states are also encoded through affective vocabulary such as “*scared*,” “*snap*,” and “*calmly*” (Forster, 1924, p. 231), which reflect tension within interaction.

Terms such as “*sahib*,” “*natives*,” “*our community*,” and “*one of us*” construct ingroup/outgroup boundaries and reinforce identity politics (Forster, 1924, pp. 47–48). Similarly, expressions like “*Army of Occupation*,” “*deposition*,” and “*prisoner*” reflect an institutional and legal register that encodes colonial authority and control (Forster, 1924, pp. 47, 231). Sensory and perceptual lexis such as “*heat strike her face*,” “*pale masses of the rock*,” and “*moon’s reflection*” foreground visual and tactile imagery, enhancing experiential representation (Forster, 1924/2005, pp. 230, 46), while “*echoing walls*” and “*murmur of deprecation*” emphasize auditory imagery and communicative breakdown (Forster, 1924, p. 62).

Syntactically, the complex structures of the text mirror psychological processes. The sentence “*The fatal day recurred... and this double relation gave it...*” employs parataxis and hypotaxis to reflect cognitive complexity (Forster, 1924/2005, p. 230). Fragmentation and ellipsis in “*I am not... I am not quite sure*” indicate hesitation and epistemic uncertainty (Forster, 1924, p. 231), while the minor sentence “*Snakes also.*” adds emphasis and fear (p. 43). Interrogatives such as “*Why had she thought the expedition dull?*” function as rhetorical devices reflecting introspection (Forster, 1924, p. 230), while modal expressions like “*I think you ought not...*” express obligation and social regulation (p. 43). Imperative structures such as “*Let us go on. I will read...*” reflect institutional authority and control of discourse (p. 231).

Forster also makes a significant use of figurative language and stylistic devices. Metaphors such as “*pale masses of the rock flowed*” personify nature, giving it agency (p. 230), while “*echoing walls of their civility*” metaphorically suggests emptiness within politeness (p. 62). The simile “*revealed like a god in a shrine*” elevates colonial authority (p. 172). Repetition in “*Oh no, oh no, no*” intensifies emotional panic (p. 172), and “*ate, ate and ate*” emphasizes behavioral excess and characterization (p. 89). Paradox in “*of it and not of it*” reflects dual consciousness (p. 230), while binary opposition in “*heard and didn’t hear*” suggests ambiguity and instability of meaning (pp. 114–115).

Narrative techniques further contribute to meaning construction. Free indirect discourse in “*Why had she thought the expedition dull?*” blends narrator and character voice, producing internal focalization (Forster, 1924, p. 230). Shifting focalization between internal perception (Adela’s confusion) and external institutional narration (courtroom and club scenes) creates multiple perspectives and undermines narrative certainty (pp. 47, 231). Psychological narration such as “*She saw herself... also outside it...*” reflects fragmented cognition (p. 231).

Pragmatic features also play a significant role. Politeness strategies such as “*I am afraid I startled you*” function as negative politeness (Forster, 1924, p. 43), while hedging in “*If I may venture to say so*” softens disagreement (p. 173). Power relations are evident in “*he silenced her with a motion of his hand*”, indicating non-verbal discourse control (p. 47). Institutional discourse in courtroom settings reflects structured turn-taking and authority over truth production (p. 231). Implicature is also present in “*We appeared to be alone*”, which suggests doubt indirectly (p. 230), and “*You are newly arrived in India*”, which implies naivety (p. 43). Cohesion is achieved through conjunctions such as “*but,*” “*and,*” and “*though*”, which signal contrast and continuity (Forster, 1924, p. 230), while “*meanwhile*” ensures temporal cohesion (p. 47). Pronouns such as “*she,*” “*they,*” and “*we*” construct group identity and alignment (pp. 47–48), and inclusive terms like “*our community*” mark ideological belonging (p. 43).

Regarding register variation, formal lexical items such as “*deposition,*” “*Superintendent,*” and “*Collector*” reflect institutional hierarchy (Forster, 1924, p. 231), while informal expressions such as “*Isn’t it jolly?*” highlight social intimacy and contrast (p. 48). Religious and cultural registers such as “*God is here,*” “*Jehovah,*” and “*mosque*” reflect intercultural discourse systems (pp. 43, 47).

Sound patterns also contribute to stylistic effect, as seen in alliteration in “*murmur of deprecation*” (p. 62) and rhythmic repetition in “*Oh no, oh no, no*”, which creates oral immediacy (p. 172).

Finally, ideological encoding is strongly evident through binary oppositions such as “*us vs. natives*”, constructed through repeated lexical and syntactic choices that reinforce colonial ideology and social division (Forster, 1924/2005, p. 48).

According to van Dijk (2008), such linguistic features are not neutral; rather, they encode ideological meanings, often aligning with the *ideological square* by structuring how reality and social relations are represented.

## 6.2 Social Cognition

The linguistic analysis of *A Passage to India* not only explores micro-level structures but also points to the second level of Teun A. van Dijk’s socio-cognitive CDA model, namely *social cognition*. This level mediates between discourse and society and involves mental models, shared knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies that shape how individuals produce and interpret discourse (van Dijk, 1998, 2008)

At the lexical level, evaluative expressions such as “*indescribable splendor,*” “*beautiful and significant,*” and “*dull*” reflect not objective reality but subjective mental representations of experience (Forster, 1924, p. 230). These choices indicate how characters cognitively reconstruct events, demonstrating what van Dijk (1998) calls mental models, i.e., personal interpretations of specific situations. Similarly, affective terms like “*scared,*” “*snapped,*” and “*calmly*” encode emotional states that reflect internal cognition and psychological processing during interaction (Forster, 1924, p. 231). Such linguistic markers show how discourse expresses underlying beliefs and perceptions.

The presence of ideological lexis such as “*sahib,*” “*natives,*” “*our community,*” and “*one of us*” reflects not only social division but also shared group ideologies stored in social memory (Forster, 1924, pp. 47–48). These terms reflect how colonial actors mentally categorize social groups, aligning with van Dijk’s (2000) concept of ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation within the ideological square. Thus, discourse encodes socially shared beliefs that guide perception and interaction.

Syntactic structures further disclose cognitive processes. Fragmentation and hesitation in expressions like “*I am not... I am not quite sure*” indicate epistemic uncertainty and incomplete mental models (Forster, 1924, p. 231). According to van Dijk (1998), such structures reflect the speaker’s limited or unstable knowledge about events. Similarly, interrogatives like “*Why*

had she thought the expedition dull?” function as cognitive self-reflection, showing the re-evaluation of prior beliefs (Forster, 1924, p. 230). These linguistic forms highlight how discourse represents ongoing mental processing.

Narrative techniques, particularly free indirect discourse and shifting focalization, further illustrate social cognition. The blending of narrator and character voice allows access to internal thought processes, as seen in Adela’s shifting perceptions and confusion (Forster, 1924, pp. 230–231). This reflects what van Dijk (2008) describes as the role of discourse in expressing subjective mental representations of events, where reality is filtered through cognition rather than directly presented.

Pragmatic features also point to cognitive mediation. Politeness strategies such as “I am afraid I startled you” and hedging expressions like “If I may venture to say so” reflect context models, i.e., participants’ mental representations of the communicative situation, including power relations and social norms (Forster, 1924, pp. 43, 173). Van Dijk (2008) argues that such context models control discourse production by determining what is appropriate to say in a given situation. Similarly, implicatures like “We appeared to be alone” reveal indirect meaning shaped by assumptions, beliefs, and uncertainty (Forster, 1924, p. 230).

Pronoun use and cohesion also contribute to social cognition by constructing group identity and shared knowledge. The use of “we,” “they,” and “our community” reflects collective mental representations and ideological alignment (Forster, 1924, pp. 43, 47–48). According to van Dijk (1998), such discourse structures rely on socially shared knowledge and beliefs that enable group members to interpret meaning in similar ways.

The linguistic features identified in the analysis clearly demonstrate the social cognition level of socio-cognitive CDA. They illustrate how discourse encodes mental models, shared ideologies, contextual assumptions, and subjective interpretations. As van Dijk (1998) emphasizes, social cognition forms the crucial interface between discourse and society, explaining how ideological meanings are mentally represented and reproduced. Thus, the transition from linguistic structures to cognitive processes highlights how meaning in the text is not only constructed linguistically but also shaped by underlying systems of knowledge, belief, and perception.

### **6.3 The Socio-Political (macro) Level**

The detailed linguistic analysis of *A Passage to India* clearly leads to the identification of the socio-political (macro) level that analyzes how the linguistic choices are ideologically motivated and embedded within broader structures of power, dominance, and inequality (van Dijk, 2008).

At the lexical level, the use of terms such as “sahib,” “natives,” “our community,” and “one of us” directly constructs ingroup versus outgroup distinctions, which are central to colonial ideology (Forster, 1924, pp. 47–48). These are not merely descriptive labels but socio-politically loaded expressions that reinforce racial hierarchy and exclusion. The repeated use of such vocabulary demonstrates what van Dijk calls the ideological square, where discourse emphasizes positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk, 2000). Thus, micro-level lexical choices reflect macro-level power relations between colonizers and the colonized (van Dijk, 1998).

Similarly, the presence of institutional and legal register seen in words like “deposition,” “prisoner,” “Superintendent,” and “Collector” signals the operation of colonial authority through discourse (Forster, 1924, p. 231). These linguistic features point to the dominance of colonial institutions in shaping truth and controlling narratives. As van Dijk (1996) argues, access to and control over institutional discourse is a key mechanism of social power and dominance.

Syntactic and pragmatic features further reinforce this macro-level interpretation. Imperative structures such as “Let us go on. I will read...” and non-verbal discourse control like “he silenced her with a motion of his hand” reflect asymmetrical power relations (Forster, 1924, pp. 47, 231). These forms of control illustrate how authority is enacted in interaction. Likewise, modal expressions (“you ought not...”) encode social regulation and discipline (Forster, 1924, p. 43). Van Dijk (2008) emphasizes that such everyday discourse practices contribute to the reproduction of dominance and inequality.

Figurative language and narrative techniques also contribute to the socio-political dimension. The simile “revealed like a god in a shrine” symbolically elevates colonial authority (Forster, 1924, p. 172), while metaphors like “echoing walls of their civility” expose the superficiality of colonial relations (Forster, 1924, p. 62). These stylistic choices reflect ideological tensions and contradictions, linking aesthetic expression with political meaning (van Dijk, 1993).

Moreover, pronoun usage and cohesion strategies such as “we,” “they,” and “our community” construct collective identities and ideological alignment (Forster, 1924, pp. 43, 47–48). These linguistic elements contribute to group formation and social categorization, which are central to ideological reproduction (van Dijk, 1998). The persistent division between “us” and “them” reflects broader socio-political structures of colonial domination.

The linguistic features identified though situated at the micro level collectively point toward the macro (socio-political) level of analysis. They demonstrate how discourse is embedded in and reproduces colonial power relations. As van Dijk (2008) argues, discourse structures are ideologically shaped and play a fundamental role in sustaining dominance, while earlier he asserts that discourse is central to “the reproduction of social inequality” (van Dijk, 1993).

## 7. Discussion

Importantly, these three levels are dynamically interconnected. The colonial socio-political context shapes shared ideologies (e.g., racial superiority), which are internalized as social cognition and then expressed through discourse structures such as lexical choices and syntactic patterns. At the same time, discourse reinforces these ideologies and sustains the broader system of power. For instance, racialized expressions like “*natives*” (Forster, 1924, p. 48) are not merely linguistic choices but reflect and reproduce colonial ideology at all three levels. As van Dijk (2008) emphasizes, this cyclical relationship demonstrates that discourse is a powerful mechanism for constructing social reality and maintaining dominance.

The analyses demonstrate that social cognition operates at three interconnected levels: mental representations, which shape perception and uncertainty as seen in Adela’s confusion; attitudes, which encode prejudice and evaluative judgments such as colonial superiority; and ideologies, which structure collective belief systems including imperialism and racial hierarchy. Collectively, these levels show that discourse in the text is not neutral but is mediated by cognitive processes that construct and legitimize social reality (Forster, 1924).

Furthermore, it evaluates that the socio-political context is organized through colonial institutions such as law, administration, and clubs, alongside entrenched power hierarchies between the British and Indians and dominant ideological discourses of the civilizing mission and racial superiority. These structures not only shape discourse through legal, administrative, and social language but are also reinforced by it through everyday interaction, narrative representation, and communicative practices. Thus, the text clearly illustrates how language functions as a powerful tool that both reflects and sustains colonial socio-political systems (Forster, 1924).

First, the analysis shows that British and Indian characters operate within fundamentally different cognitive frameworks, leading to persistent misinterpretation and communicative breakdown. Second, colonial ideology is repeatedly reproduced through stereotype activation, where Indians are cognitively framed as irrational, dangerous, or inferior, while British

characters are constructed as rational and authoritative. Third, institutional discourse particularly legal and administrative language functions as a mechanism for epistemic control, pre-structuring truth and reinforcing colonial authority. Fourth, group identity is cognitively strengthened through ritualized practices such as club culture and national symbols, which reinforce in-group cohesion and out-group exclusion. Fifth, cognitive disruption is evident in key narrative moments (especially the Marabar caves), where existing schemas fail to interpret unfamiliar experiences, producing ambiguity and epistemic instability. Finally, miscommunication between characters such as Aziz and Fielding demonstrates that colonial conflict is not merely cultural but deeply cognitive, arising from incompatible mental models. Collectively, these findings confirm that colonial discourse in the novel operates as a cognitive system of power reproduction.

### **8. Findings**

The analysis reflects that discourse structures, including lexical, syntactic, and stylistic features, are strongly ideologically charged in *A Passage to India*. Terms such as “sahib,” “natives,” and “one of us” construct clear colonial binaries, while institutional vocabulary like “deposition” and “Collector” reflects authority, hierarchy, and control. In addition, figurative and narrative devices deepen ideological meaning and highlight psychological and experiential complexity. It is further found that discourse reflects social cognition, including mental models, attitudes, and shared ideological systems. Expressions such as “I am not quite sure” indicate cognitive uncertainty and unstable mental representations, while terms like “natives” and “community” examine ingrained ingroup/outgroup categorizations and colonial belief systems.

At the socio-political context level, the text reproduces colonial power relations through legal, administrative, and social discourse. Institutional terminology and racialized expressions reinforce dominance, hierarchical ordering, and the ideology of the civilizing mission (van Dijk, 2008).

Overall, the three levels operate in a cyclical relationship: colonial ideology shapes social cognition, social cognition structures discourse, and discourse in turn reproduces and sustains ideology and power.

### **9. Conclusion**

The study concludes that language in *A Passage to India* is not neutral but deeply embedded in ideological and power structures. Through the socio-cognitive framework of Teun A. van Dijk, it is evident that discourse structures reflect mental models and collectively reproduce colonial socio-political dominance. The analysis demonstrates how discourse functions as a mechanism for constructing reality, shaping cognition, and sustaining inequality. Ultimately, CDA concentrates on how language is a powerful tool for both representing and maintaining colonial ideology.

### **10. References**

- Adami, E. (2026). Negation, expectation and ideology in written texts: A textual and communicative perspective. *Discourse & Communication*.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.

Forster, E. M. (1924). *A Passage to India*. Edward Arnold.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. Pantheon Books.

van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan.

van Dijk, T. A. (2014). *Discourse and knowledge: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge University Press.