

REPRESSION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*: A FREUDIAN AND LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF ADELA QUESTED'S PSYCHOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN

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Abstract

This study examines Adela Quested's psychological breakdown in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India using Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories. Adela's emotional collapse, particularly her accusation against Dr. Aziz, is explored as a manifestation of repressed fears, colonial guilt, and hidden desires. Freud's idea of "the return of the repressed" helps explain how Adela's buried emotions resurface in distorted ways, while Lacan's theories on identity and perception provide insight into Adela's confusion and crisis of self. The novel highlights the conflict between Adela's idealistic views of India and the complex realities of colonialism, which ultimately contribute to her psychological disintegration. The analysis offers a deeper understanding of how personal identity and cultural misunderstandings are intertwined in the colonial context.

Key words: psychological collapse, repression, colonial guilt, Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacanian theory, identity crisis, *A Passage to India*, Adela Quested, colonialism, self-perception

Background of the Study

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* explores British colonialism in India, focusing on the interactions between British colonizers and the Indian population. A key character, Adela Quested, experiences a psychological crisis, which can be understood through psychoanalytic theories, particularly Freud's concepts of repression and the "return of the repressed" (Freud, 1915). Adela's emotional collapse, triggered by cultural misunderstandings and personal anxieties, reflects the interplay between internal conflicts and colonial dynamics. Lacan's theories on identity, misrecognition, and the mirror stage (Lacan, 1977) provide further insight into Adela's internal struggles, where colonial tensions and personal neuroses converge. The novel offers an opportunity to examine how colonialism impacts psychological development and identity formation, focusing on how Adela's psyche unravels in response to her encounter with India.

Statement of the Problem

This study examines Adela Quested's psychological disintegration in *A Passage to India* through a Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic lens. While cultural misunderstandings are often cited as the cause of her breakdown, a psychoanalytic approach reveals that Adela's actions may stem from repressed desires, colonial guilt, and unresolved psychological conflicts (Freud, 1915; Lacan, 1977). By applying Freud's concepts of repression, hysteria, and projection, alongside Lacan's theories on identity and misrecognition, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms behind Adela's collapse. The study seeks to offer a new psychoanalytic perspective on the novel, extending beyond traditional cultural readings to explore how colonialism and personal neuroses intersect.

Literature Review

Freudian theory, especially concepts of repression and hysteria, provides a vital lens for understanding Adela's breakdown and its symbolic significant. This area has not yet explored. Ali and Ubale (2023) conduct a psychoanalytic examination of the novel's female characters, applying Freudian concepts such as the id, ego, and superego. Their analysis reveals how characters like Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore experience psychological conflicts influenced by colonial tensions and patriarchal structures.

Hossain (2025) offers a postcolonial critique, highlighting the cultural and racial conflicts between the British colonizers and Indian subjects. The study emphasizes how colonial power dynamics and racial prejudices impact interpersonal relationships and societal structures within the novel.

Akte (2023) explores the psychological transitions of key characters, focusing on how experiences in the Marabar Caves lead to profound personal transformations. The study underscores the interplay between psychological development and cultural dislocation.

Iqbal and Haque (2022) analyze the politics of representation in colonial literature, comparing *A Passage to India* with *Twilight in Delhi*. They examine how colonial narratives construct identities and the implications of these representations on cultural understanding.

Khan (2023) applies a Marxist lens to the novel, discussing class consciousness and the exploitation inherent in colonial systems. The study draws parallels between economic disparities and colonial hierarchies, shedding light on the socio-economic dimensions of imperialism.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs textual analysis as its primary research method. The Marabar Caves episode and the subsequent courtroom trial are examined in detail through close reading and interpreted using Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, critical essays, and theoretical texts on psychoanalysis and colonial literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Freudian psychoanalysis, supported by Jacques Lacan's post-Freudian developments, to analyze Adela Quested's emotional collapse in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

The unconscious blocking of distressing thoughts, memories, or desires that are deemed unacceptable (Freud, 1915). Adela's psychological collapse and distorted perceptions of events reflect the return of repressed fears and desires.

A psychological condition where repressed emotions manifest through physical symptoms like confusion, speech fragmentation, and emotional withdrawal (Freud & Breuer, 1895). Adela's fragmented speech and post-trauma detachment are indicative of hysteria.

The psychological defense mechanism by which one attributes their own unacceptable desires or emotions to others (Freud, 1924). Adela's projection of internal conflict onto Aziz illustrates how her mind externalizes repressed colonial guilt and anxieties.

Adela's shattered self-image in the caves mirrors Lacan's theory, where her rational self-image as an Englishwoman is disrupted.

The realm of experience that cannot be fully symbolized or integrated into language, remaining outside of understanding (Lacan, 1949/2006). The caves, as a site of miscommunication and disintegration, symbolize the Lacanian Real where language fails to capture the trauma.

A distorted perception of oneself or others that arises due to unconscious tensions and external influences (Lacan, 1949/2006). Adela's misrecognition of Aziz as the "Other" reflects Lacan's idea of how colonial and gender anxieties influence identity perception.

Analysis and Interpretation

Applying Freudian psychoanalysis and Lacanian theory to these selected passages from *A Passage to India* provides deep insight into Adela Quested's psychological instability and colonial subjectivity. Her emotional and mental breakdown, particularly during and after the Marabar Caves episode, can be interpreted as a psycho-symbolic crisis rooted in the unconscious, repressed desires, hysteria, and projection.

Adela's experience in the cave can be read as a projection of her repressed fears and desires. The oppressive silence and echo within the cave symbolize the void within her unconscious. Her cultural isolation, sexual confusion, and internalized imperial superiority manifest in a hallucinatory episode where Dr. Aziz becomes the scapegoat of her inner turmoil. The trial scene reveals how colonial justice is less concerned with factual truth and more with preserving imperial dominance. The British officials, particularly Mr. McBryde and the Superintendent, embody a paternalistic authority that seeks to validate Adela's accusation despite her growing doubts (Forster, 1924, pp. 230-231). Her eventual confession that she "made a mistake" illustrates the breakdown of this imposed narrative and challenges the legitimacy of colonial authority.

1. "I want to see the real India."

Adela's statement reveals a displaced desire—her yearning to understand India mirrors a deeper psychic conflict. This quest to "see" the Real is a projection of her own internal anxieties and unmet desires, ultimately leading to a confrontation with the Lacanian **Real** in the caves (Forster, 1924).

2. "I do so hate mysteries," Adela announced. "We English do."

This line highlights Adela's discomfort with ambiguity and the unknown. Her need to repress uncertainty aligns with Freud's (1915) theory of defense mechanisms. Her insistence on rational clarity also indicates a deep unease with the symbolic instability India presents (Forster, 1924).

3. "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that."

Mrs. Turton's statement exposes the racialized colonial ideology that Adela is expected to internalize. Her ambivalence reflects the tension between her conscious liberalism and the unconscious assimilation of colonial superiority—a classic Freudian repression (Forster, 1924).

4. "She had a horrifying experience with the cave's echo just as Mrs. Moore did."

The echo in the cave functions as a **symbol of the unconscious**—it returns Adela's repressed thoughts in a disorienting, meaningless form. This scene embodies Freud's (1915) "return of the repressed" and Lacan's concept of the **Real**, which resists symbolization (Forster, 1924).

5. "She had felt, while she recanted, no passion of love for those whom she had wronged."

Adela's emotional detachment during her retraction is a symptom of psychic dissociation. Freud (1917) argues that such emotional numbness can occur when individuals repress guilt or trauma, and Lacan would read this as a failure to symbolically reintegrate her experience (Forster, 1924).

6. **“Our letter is a failure for a simple reason... you have no real affection for Aziz, or Indians generally.”**

Fielding’s remark reveals the gap between Adela’s **conscious intentions and unconscious drives**. Her failure to connect emotionally underscores the limits of her liberal identity—what Lacan might call **misrecognition** within the symbolic order (Forster, 1924).

7. **“Perhaps life is a mystery, not a muddle; they could not tell.”**

This reflection marks a shift in Adela’s psyche. Rather than resist mystery, she now entertains it, suggesting a loosening of her previous symbolic constraints. In Lacanian terms, she approaches the Real, accepting that life exceeds rational comprehension (Forster, 1924).

8. **“Adela is overwhelmed. Her attention is captured by a lowly Indian servant... who is operating the room’s fan.”**

This moment signals a **psychic breakthrough**. Adela’s sudden focus on the servant reflects her unconscious guilt displacing itself into a moment of clarity, showing the beginning of her recognition of injustice (Forster, 1924).

Discussion

The analysis of Adela Quested’s character in *A Passage to India* through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis and Lacanian post-structuralist theory reveals the deep psychological undercurrents that drive her experience in colonial India. Freud’s concept of the unconscious, particularly the idea of repression and its inevitable return, is pivotal to understanding Adela’s mental collapse in the Marabar Caves. Her confrontation with the echo—a formless, unsettling sound that resists interpretation—symbolizes the eruption of repressed content from her unconscious. This moment destabilizes her rational identity and triggers a hallucinated assault that may be read as the projection of her internal fears, sexual anxieties, and colonial guilt. Freud’s theory of the “return of the repressed” (1915) provides a framework for interpreting the caves as a psychic space where unacknowledged emotions and taboo desires force their way into consciousness. Adela’s failure to articulate what happened to her not only reflects a personal crisis but also a symbolic breakdown, as language and reason fail to capture the trauma she undergoes.

From a Lacanian perspective, Adela’s journey marks a profound crisis of identity structured by the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. Her initial desire to “see the real India” reflects a naïve fantasy rooted in the Imaginary—a mirror-world where she believes coherent self-knowledge and mastery over the Other are possible. However, her disorientation in the cave aligns with Lacan’s concept of the Real: an encounter that exceeds language and disrupts symbolic coherence. The echo acts as a Lacanian Real that undoes her illusions of cultural and moral clarity, forcing her to confront the fragmented nature of her self-perception. Moreover, her interactions with other characters—such as Fielding and Mrs. Turton—highlight the structural misrecognitions (*méconnaissances*) that characterize her subjectivity. Adela’s inability to genuinely connect with Indians, despite her liberal pretensions, stems from an unconscious complicity in the very colonial ideology she seeks to reject. Ultimately, her psychological disintegration becomes a site where personal neurosis and imperial discourse collide, exposing the fragile boundaries between self, other, and the structures of power that mediate their relations.

Findings and Conclusion

The study concludes that Adela’s hallucination is a psycho-symbolic event that unveils her repressed anxieties surrounding gender, identity, and empire. The Marabar Caves act as a psychological space where the repressed returns, and the boundaries between reality and illusion blur. Colonial justice, as depicted by Forster, is shown to be susceptible to personal biases and racial prejudices. Ultimately, the novel suggests that truth in colonial contexts is deeply fragmented and often manipulated by power structures.

The findings of the analysis reveal that Adela Quested's emotional and psychological collapse in *A Passage to India* can be understood through Freudian and Lacanian theories of the unconscious, repression, and the crisis of identity. Her breakdown in the Marabar Caves, marked by the alleged hallucination of Dr. Aziz's assault, is a manifestation of repressed fears, colonial guilt, and possibly unacknowledged sexual desires. Freud's concept of the "return of the repressed" helps explain how these buried emotions resurface through distorted perceptions, while Lacanian theory illuminates Adela's struggle with her identity, shaped by the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. The clash between her idealistic liberalism and the harsh realities of colonialism contributes to her inability to integrate her fragmented self-image, leading to the ultimate dissolution of her sense of self.

In conclusion, Adela's psychological disintegration in *A Passage to India* serves as a powerful reflection of the complexities inherent in colonial encounters, where personal identity, cultural misunderstanding, and repressed emotions intersect. By applying Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, we gain a deeper understanding of how Adela's internal turmoil mirrors the broader tensions of colonial rule. Her breakdown is not merely a personal crisis but also a symbol of the impossibility of achieving a coherent and compassionate identity within the colonial context. For Adela, the echo in the Marabar Caves becomes a metaphor for the dissonance between her desires, her social role, and the irreconcilable differences between the colonizer and the colonized.

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