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# Images of the Other: Race, Gender, and the Imperial Relationship in Heart of Darkness, a Passage to India, and Burmese Days

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**Images of the Other:  
Race, Gender, and the Imperial Relationship in *Heart of  
Darkness, A Passage to India, and Burmese Days***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Honors Studies in English

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J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

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## Introduction

I credit my interest in the history and literature of empire to a series of classes I took early in my college career. The cross-cultural perspective from which these courses approached history and literature highlighted the twisted rhetoric that went into justifying the domination of other peoples—a rhetoric that fascinated me to no end. It was with this in mind that I tackled Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, and George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*. Each of my texts engages with this “idea” of imperialism—two as seen by disillusioned imperial men, one as seen by the male subjects of imperialism. In *Heart of Darkness*, based on Joseph Conrad’s travels to the Congo in the late 1800s and published in 1889, Marlow aptly describes the conquest of the earth as “taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves” (*Heart of Darkness* 50). However, while Conrad disavows the exploitation he sees in the Congo, he defends the “idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence (sic), but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (*Heart of Darkness* 50). Flory’s perspective in George Orwell’s 1934 novel *Burmese Days* is exactly the opposite, reflecting the utter disillusionment his character feels in reaction to a crumbling empire. Flory calls this “pukka sahib pose” both boring and corrupting, and declares that “Anglo-Indians would be almost bearable if we’d only admit that we’re thieves and go on thieving without any humbug” (Orwell 38). E.M. Forster’s 1924 novel *A Passage to India* focuses less on the “idea” of empire, and more on its people, examining how big political and social ideologies affect individual people. However, the characters who do discuss the empire’s

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evils are the Indian men who are affected by it, rather than white men who benefit from it.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the very narrative structure facilitated the silencing of Africans and women, leaving the anti-imperial white, male voice as the only one that can pass along knowledge of the African interior. Marlow tells the story of Kurtz, another white man, to a group of male sailors with implied imperialist leanings. Anyone in Marlow's narrative who might share a different, marginalized perspective is either silenced—like the African men and women—or discredited—like the British women. In my first chapter, I explore the themes of silencing and agency in Conrad's imperial novella. These themes engage with some of the criticism surrounding *Heart of Darkness* and its treatment of race, especially Chinua Achebe's criticism that Conrad is a "bloody racist" (Achebe 9). Though I do not believe Achebe's critiques of race invalidate Conrad's complaints about the imperial project—especially his descriptions of its brutality and exploitative nature—it does draw attention to the fact that Conrad's condemnations of the imperial project only take into account the perspective of the white imperial male, thus making it an incredibly flawed critique.

A more nuanced criticism of imperialism can be found in Forster's *A Passage to India*. In the novel, the main criticisms of imperialism come from the Indian characters, with a lot of attention paid to the treatment of British women as symbols and justification for empire. Though the novel is written as if it takes place during the time of high empire before the First World War, there are inscriptions of Indian nationalism within the character's perspectives in the novel. Aziz, for example, moves from an Islam-based conception of Indian nationalism to one that is more inclusive of all Indians, including

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women. One place where Forster falters is in his treatment of Indian women, who are not only largely silent, but also largely invisible. Aziz's declarations that "the purdah must go" in order for India to be free speaks to issues that women at the time were already beginning to address through their involvement in women's rights movements and civil disobedience (Forster 329). Although *A Passage to India* includes a diverse range of perspectives, the main plot of the novel revolves around the friendship of two men. Their friendship, which is instigated by one white woman and destroyed by another, ultimately crumbles under the weight of empire.

*Burmese Days* is not so much about the relationship of the two men, but rather the relationship between a man and his imperial post. Orwell's novel casts a dim light on the imperial project, where many of the characters seem to do little more than act as puppets for the larger anti-imperial commentary. Unfortunately, this leads to stereotyping of its three main Burmese and Indian characters—U Po Kyin, the cartoon-like villain and puppet master; Dr. Veraswami, Flory's British-obsessed friend; and Ma Hla May, Flory's mistress and ultimate downfall. However, *Burmese Days* puts its British characters in a similarly critical, if less stereotypical, light. Flory constantly compares himself to an ideal of the imperial masculine explorer and always come up short. In comparison to the ultra-masculine standard against which he compares himself, Flory is corrupted, cowardly, and weak. Not only does Flory feel utterly corrupted, but he feels bored by that corruption, matching exploitation and industry with ambivalence and apathy. Once again British women are idealized—wrongly so, according to Orwell—this time as the savior of the corrupted imperial man. However, Elizabeth Lackersteen, like all of Orwell's characters,

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lacks any redemptive quality, and Flory's chance for change and redemption is ultimately frustrated.

Race and gender play an important role in defining the conceptions and justifications of empire. As such, those were the particular post-colonial lenses through which I chose to read *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, and *Burmese Days*. I picked texts with a stated anti-imperial message in order to explore the common themes among them. Each of these three texts meditates on the ideals of imperial masculinity, the systematic silencing and deprecating of non-white and female voices, and the role of British women as both the initiators and destroyers of interracial friendships. In the following chapters, I examine these three anti-imperial works in-depth in order to demonstrate that race and gender not only have profound repercussions for the literature of empire, but also to show how those works reflect the imperial relationships between colonized and colonizer.



## *Heart of Darkness*: The Silencing of the Imperial Other

Of the texts I have chosen to study, *Heart of Darkness* stands apart for several reasons. Joseph Conrad's novella was written in a different century than my other two works, it takes place on a different continent, and it was written in English by a Polish author. By addressing these differences up front, I hope to better highlight where these texts show similarities, namely in their treatment of race and gender. Unlike *A Passage to India*, which focuses largely on Dr. Aziz's perspective on the imperial project, and *Burmese Days*, which includes a cast of native characters with specific, if stereotypical, motives and desires, *Heart of Darkness* offers an entirely white masculine perspective on imperialism. Of the few individualized African and female characters Conrad includes in his novella, none are named and few speak. The novella, framed by an unnamed narrator and dictated by Marlow, revolves around the opinion of one man: Kurtz. Kurtz is the image of exploitative imperialism at its most extreme, an image which Marlow disavows in his narrative. However, neither Marlow nor Conrad proposes an alternative to the imperial reality. In *Heart of Darkness*, African and female experiences are described through a critical white male lens, complicating Conrad's anti-imperial message. Beyond the emphasis on the white male perspective inherent in the narrative structure itself, Marlow actively discredits all African and female voices he encounters. Throughout the work Marlow, and by extension Conrad himself, systematically silences the Imperial Other in favor of the views of two white men, reaffirming their authority as imperialists even as Marlow claims an anti-imperial stance.

**Introduction: “An Outpost of Progress” and Conrad’s Congo**

*Heart of Darkness* is perhaps Conrad’s most studied imperial work, but it is not his first or only discourse on the imperial African continent. “An Outpost of Progress,” published in 1897, tells the story of two European officers, Kayerts and Carlier, and their staffer from Sierra Leone Henry Prince, or Makola. Kayerts and Carlier, stranded with an ineffective staff and few Company resources at their disposal, must rely on Gobila, the chief of the neighboring village, for food. When an aggressive and armed group of Africans from Loanda comes to their little “outpost of progress,” Makola trades their ineffective staff into slavery for “six splendid tusks” so that they will avoid punishment by the company (“An Outpost of Progress”). This not only deprives Kayerts and Carlier of their workers, but sours their relationship with Gobila to the point that the men are practically starving at their post. A fight breaks out over the remaining sugar cubes after Carlier calls Kayerts a slaver. Carlier shoots Kayerts, not realizing that he is unarmed, and then hangs himself over his former friend’s grave. The last image Conrad leaves the readers with is the irreverent picture of the dead Kayerts “putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director” (“An Outpost of Progress”).

Like *Heart of Darkness*, “An Outpost of Progress” focuses on white men driven to madness by their isolation on the African continent. However, Conrad’s short story is in many ways more representative of the African population than *Heart of Darkness*, with multiple individualized and complex African characters, two who have names and one who speaks. Makola’s action and intolerance for the incompetent white men are the driving narrative forces in the story, and he is granted the ability to speak in both English and French, an ability that few Africans in Conrad’s 1899 novella possess. However, the

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text is still incredibly Eurocentric and defines several of its African characters by their inability to communicate with Carlier and Kayerts. Gobila, the chief of the neighboring village is a good example of this:

A gray-headed savage, thin and black, with a white cloth round his loins and a mangy panther skin hanging over his back. He came up with long strides of his skeleton legs, swinging a staff as tall as himself, and, entering the common room of the station, would squat on his heels to the left of the door. There he sat, watching Kayerts, and now and then making a speech which the other did not understand. Kayerts, without interrupting his occupation, would from time to time say in a friendly manner: "How goes it, you old image?" and they would smile at one another. The two whites had a liking for that old and incomprehensible creature, and called him Father Gobila. ("An Outpost of Progress")

Here, the man who effectively keeps the two Europeans alive is belittled as a "friendly" and "incomprehensible creature" that serves as a source of amusement ("An Outpost of Progress"). Another time notable time where an African is silenced is when the ivory traders visit the outpost. While Conrad's descriptions imply that the visiting leader is dignified and formidable, he cannot communicate with the white men except through Makola:

Their leader, a powerful and determined-looking negro with bloodshot eyes, stood in front of the verandah and made a long speech. He gesticulated much, and ceased very suddenly.

There was something in his intonation, in the sounds of the long sentences he used, that startled the two whites. It was like a reminiscence of something not exactly familiar, and yet resembling the speech of civilized men. It

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sounded like one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams. (“An Outpost of Progress”)

In addition to alluding to imperial anxiety about organized violent resistance from the native population, the incomprehensibility of the Africans also contributes to the European’s perspective that they are surrounded by wilderness, “rendered more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained” (“An Outpost of Progress”).

Joseph Conrad, born in Poland in 1857, went to the Congo in 1890 as part of a routine business trip (White & Finston 8). On his twenty-eight day trip, he traveled up the Congo River from Kinshasa to Stanley Falls—now Kisangani (White & Finston 3). Critics have long assumed that it was Conrad’s experience on the Congo River that inspired Marlow’s travels in *Heart of Darkness*, attributing the inconsistencies with the actual Congo to Conrad’s interpretive license (White & Finston 2). However, White and Finston suggest that the murky language of the second half of the novella indicates not interpretation, but invention. They argue that the second half of *Heart of Darkness* takes place on the Kasai River, one of the Congo’s tributaries, because it matches Conrad’s description of the dark uninhabited African interior better than the Congo, which was well-developed by the time of Conrad’s travels and was an average of five miles wide (White & Finston 5, 9). In addition, Conrad was initially supposed to explore the Kasai with explorer Alexandre Delcommune, but the boat that he was meant to take was wrecked before he took command and Conrad traveled up the Congo instead (White & Finston 9).

*Heart of Darkness* takes place during the brutal rule of the Belgian Congo. Leopold’s reign in the Congo used conscription, torture, killing, and burning entire

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villages as means of controlling the imperial subjects (Wesley 21). However, these extreme means of control led to extreme resistance from the Congolese. Kandolo, an anti-imperial Congo leader, led several attacks on imperial posts from 1895 to 1897 and started a resistance that continued for thirteen years (Wesley 21). These riots, which took place soon after Conrad's time in the Congo and five years before *Heart of Darkness* was published, find their way into Conrad's novella through Marlow's anxiety towards the rebelling Africans (Wesley 22). Fresleven, who preceded Marlow in his post, was "killed in a scuffle with the natives" (*Heart of Darkness* 52), signaling "a creeping sense of disorder, loss of control, and the crumbling of hierarchies" (Wesley 25). Later this sense of disorder is realized in an attack on Marlow's steamboat. However, the readers later learn that it was not the natives, but Kurtz, who instigated the attack, simultaneously acknowledging and undermining native agency (Wesley 30). *Heart of Darkness* does incorporate aspects of the historical Belgian Congo, but it is only in passing—the voices of rebellion among the Congolese are not the concern of the novella. Instead, the central concern of the novella is the degeneration of one white man, isolated and ill at his imperial post in the Congo. If Conrad had raised the concerns of the men and women Kurtz is exploiting, it would distract from his own suffering.

*Heart of Darkness* had confirmed its place in the English canon by 1975, when Nigerian author Chinua Achebe made his famous lecture at the University of Massachusetts condemning Conrad's novella and calling its author "a bloody racist" (Mongia 154). Achebe's speech, later published as the essay "An Image of Africa," criticizes the constant comparisons between England and Africa, the Thames and the Congo, light and dark, the implication of which appeals to ideas of cultural evolution and

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social Darwinism (Achebe 3). The Nigerian author also notes that Conrad's Africa is described as "inscrutable," "unspeakable," and "incomprehensible," which he claims lulls the readers into ignoring his troubling racial constructs (Achebe 3). The imagery of difference is not limited to the landscape. Achebe claims that Africans in *Heart of Darkness* are depicted as savage and primordial in comparison to white imperialists; the few times they are granted speech serve only to underline that difference (Achebe 7). However, Achebe attributes this attitude not only to Conrad, but to the Western literary tradition as a whole, which sets "Africa up as a foil to Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison" (Achebe 2). Conrad is the specific target of his criticism not because his writing was exceptionally racist for the time, but because of his prominence as a writer, which cements *Heart of Darkness*' place as "permanent literature—read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics" (Achebe 2). In the end, Achebe's true subject is the perpetuation of an "Africa trapped in primordial barbarity," an Africa which Conrad depicts in *Heart of Darkness* (Achebe 13).

Achebe was the first to question Conrad's depictions of race in *Heart of Darkness*, and his extreme stance has led to the essay's "nearly universal condemnation" (Christensen 6). However, "An Image of Africa" has remained a central part of literary discourse surrounding *Heart of Darkness*, partly because it is so extreme, using binary thinking to deliberately shock and provoke literary critics into engaging with ideas of race and racism (Mongia 160). Padmini Mongia studies the techniques used to discredit the arguments in "An Image of Africa," focusing specifically on essays by Hunt Hawkins and Cedric Watts. Both critics claim that Achebe's depictions of race are a reductive lens through which to view Conrad's work (Mognia 155). They also compare Achebe's views

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to other African authors who do not see Conrad as racist, evading Achebe's argument altogether (Mognia 156-157). Finally, Hawkins and Watts counter Achebe's accusations that Conrad's novella relies on exclusively negative depictions of Africans by claiming that Europeans, too, are depicted negatively (Mognia 158). Not only that, but Africans are "vital" while Europeans are "hollow" (Mognia 158). Christensen, reacting to Achebe's essay, reinterprets Conrad's racial idea. While Achebe claims that Conrad's novella is built upon the supposedly essential differences between the races, Christensen claims the opposite—that it is their similarities which collapse the assumed distinctions in the imperial hierarchy (Christensen 17). Finding similarity with those "prehistoric men" on the banks of the Congo, "at the site for (sic) which [Marlow] seeks confirmation of absolute difference" is so traumatizing that "he can only articulate it indirectly" (Christensen 18). In this way, Christensen claims that *Heart of Darkness* engages with and criticizes the desire of Europeans to ease their anxieties through comparison with Africa (Christensen 23).

### **Marlow, Women, and the Imperial Idea**

*Heart of Darkness* begins on a boat on the Thames River in "the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth," according to the novella's unnamed narrator (*Heart of Darkness* 45). Throughout this opening frame sequence, the narrator is set up as an imperial sympathizer, especially in his descriptions of the Thames and the explorers who sailed it:

Nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, "followed the sea" with reverence and affection than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames... Hunters of gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had

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not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires. (*Heart of Darkness* 47)

Charlie Marlow does not share this opinion about the glory of empire, calling the conquest of the earth “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale” and accusing imperialists of “taking [land] away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves” (*Heart of Darkness* 50). Immediately Marlow recognizes the violence and racial dimensions of imperialism, but this recognition does not ultimately lead to a condemnation of imperialism itself. Instead, he establishes a false dichotomy between British “colonists” and Belgian “conquerors,” between enlightenment and exploitation (*Heart of Darkness* 50). Later in Marlow’s narrative, he criticizes the Eldorado Exploring Expedition for exactly this reason, saying that “there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world” (*Heart of Darkness* 82). In these instances, readers can call Marlow’s anti-imperial stance into question, for while he disavows exploitation and racism, he cannot escape the “idea at the back of it” (*Heart of Darkness* 50).

The specifics of Conrad’s “idea” remain unclear, but Marlow’s attraction to Africa and other parts unknown revolves around an imperial masculine ideal of discovery. When Marlow was a child, he pointed to uncharted areas on the maps and said “When I grow up, I will go there” (*Heart of Darkness* 51). It is this way that Marlow discovers the Congo:

“But there was one yet—the biggest and the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after.



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“True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness...And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can’t trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water—steamboats! Why shouldn’t I try to get charge of one?”

(*Heart of Darkness* 51-52)

In this passage, boyhood is linked to imagination and discovery of which the imperial project is the logical outcome. It is here that white masculinity and imperialism are first connected in the novella. This ability to travel across borders and identities that is so integral to the narratives of Marlow and Kurtz is not extended to women in the text. Instead, “the principal women of the text are always positioned in transitional spaces in either the colony or the metropole, while they are decidedly static and unable to wander between cultural, ideological, and national boundaries” (McIntire 258).

*Heart of Darkness* features a total of eight women, none of whom are named. Much like the Africans who will appear later, the women in the novella are rarely allowed to speak for themselves, leaving it to Marlow to interpret their thoughts and emotions. One critic draws parallels between Achebe’s discussion of race in *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad’s treatment of gender in the novella, since women are also depicted as “‘rudimentary souls’...[who] also speak only to convict themselves, to confirm ‘how out of touch with truth women are’” (London 239). Marlow’s first interaction with women in the work is the two women sitting in the offices of the Company, who act as

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eerie gate keepers to Conrad's dark continent, one "introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned eyes...Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way" (*Heart of Darkness* 55-56). These silent Fates act as a mythical border to England and civilization in Marlow's mind. Beyond them is darkness. However, they can only convey this significance through glances, since it is ultimately Marlow's perceptions that matter in *Heart of Darkness*. In order to maintain Marlow's view that women are "out of it," Conrad silences all but two women in his novella—Marlow's aunt and Kurtz's Intended. When these women do speak, "they are misunderstood, deliberately misled, or represented as profoundly lacking a comprehensive understanding of the events in which they participate" (McIntire 265).

This is perhaps most clear during Marlow's interaction with his aunt who secures his place at the Company. Before Marlow's departure, his aunt describes his commercial work for the Company as "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrible ways," a statement which reasonably makes Marlow uncomfortable (*Heart of Darkness* 58). However, instead of reciting his specific condemnation of imperialism to his aunt as he does to the unnamed narrator, he gives her a half-hearted objection before using his aunt to come to broad conclusions about women in general. It might be said that he had not encountered the traumas of imperialism yet, and thus could not object as passionately as he had before. However, that does not excuse the sexist assessment of women that follows his conversation with his aunt:

"It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the

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first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with  
ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.”

(*Heart of Darkness* 58)

Women, in Marlow’s mind, are completely out of touch with the world around them, despite women’s historical involvement in the suffrage and abolition movements and in African missions. This, in addition to being demeaning and historically inaccurate, is ultimately false based on Marlow’s own characterization of his aunt. Marlow himself says that his aunt’s views echo the “rot let loose in print,” meaning she has some understanding of the world outside of her living room, even if it is the skewed views from the newspapers (*Heart of Darkness* 58). Marlow’s aunt also had the great distinction of finding him the Company job; she is, “quite significantly, partly responsible for originating his story” (McIntire 265). Marlow robs the British women of their names, their voices, and ultimately, through his derogatory rhetoric, their agency, making himself the only person capable of commenting upon the imperial project.

If women are silenced in Conrad’s novella, then Africans are nearly erased. The first Africans Marlow sees as he approaches the coast are six emaciated prisoners, with “meagre breasts” and expressions of the “deathlike indifference of unhappy savages” (*Heart of Darkness* 62). This is one of the first times that Conrad uses “savage” to describe the Africans in his novel, a descriptor that critics would latch onto for decades to prove the author’s racism. However racist, this savagery provokes in Marlow an anxiety about uprising, insisting on acknowledging Africans’ ability to enact violent resistance—he does not let them out of his sight. According to Charlie Wesley, the fact that their very presence makes Marlow justify defending himself “anticipates their agency” (Wesley

26). Soon he imposes a much more insidious characteristic on the Africans. Instead of being emaciated humans, they become shadows:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were doing nothing earthly now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. (*Heart of Darkness* 64)

Although Marlow perceives a slight threat from the first Africans he encounters, the next are barely alive. These “shadows” will haunt Marlow as he travels deeper into the interior. In Marlow’s descriptions of Africans, there is an eternal tension between total vitality and total immateriality. By likening colonized Africans to “shadows” and “air,” Marlow emphasizes their suffering while also making it apparent that they are not a threat. Later in his narrative Marlow characterizes the Africans attacking the steamer in similar ways, calling them “vague forms” while also describing the lithe and athletic movements of their opponents on the bank (*Heart of Darkness* 105). This tension highlights African difference while also invalidating African agency.

### **The Search for Kurtz and Native Resistance**

The entirety of Marlow’s narrative is framed round the search for Kurtz, one of the two characters besides Marlow himself whom Conrad names. The search for Kurtz, however, plays into a common imperial trope—that of the masculine imperial encounter. In her essay “Conradian Alienation and Imperial Intimacy,” Sarah Cole relates this to the encounter between Henry Morton Stanley and David Livingstone in Stanley’s account

Images of the Other: Race, Gender, and the Imperial Relationship in *Heart of Darkness*, *A Passage to India*, and *Burmese Days* *How I Found Livingstone*. This piece of travel writing, published in 1872 at the beginning of the “scramble for Africa,” documents Stanley’s travels through Central Africa to find Livingstone (Cole 254). The work builds upon ideals of masculine bonding through exploration, creating a textual community “perpetuated by boys and men who read the stories of their heroic predecessors, passing along their own tales to imagined protégés” (Cole 257). In addition to drawing upon similar metaphors of darkness and primitivism when describing Africa, Stanley’s work is similar to Conrad’s because of their narrators’ infatuation with the person they are seeking.

Marlow’s image of Kurtz shifts throughout the novella as he gains more information about the man. One of his first images of Kurtz is of him alone and dignified at his imperial post:

“The lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home—perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I did not know the motive. Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake.” (*Heart of Darkness* 86)

This image paints Kurtz as a brave and civilizing presence in an uncivilized landscape. Like Stanley, Marlow seeks Kurtz as “the practical and psychological goal towards which he travels,” affirming the strong male community of conquerors in the “landscape of primeval Africa,” traditionally characterized as feminine in such imperial narratives (Cole 259, 255). However, when Marlow does get to Kurtz’s camp, he does not find affirming male friendship—Kurtz has been fundamentally corrupted by his greed in the imperial landscape. In Kurtz’s report for the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs,” he espouses the same kind of paternal and idealistic imperialism that

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Marlow endorses. However, by the time Marlow reaches him, Kurtz has become a purely exploitative agent of imperialism, like the men of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition whom Marlow so despised. Marlow attributes to the “unspeakable rites” that Kurtz takes part in, the Africans, their religion, and the interior itself an element of corrupting contagion and madness (*Heart of Darkness* 111). It is for this reason, Marlow claims, that Kurtz added “at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment” the statement that “blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’” (*Heart of Darkness* 111).

The further Marlow gets into the interior, the closer he becomes with the Africans that surround him. He gets along well with the cannibals on his crew, calling them “fine fellows” and “men one could work with” with little irony (*Heart of Darkness* 89-90). Notably, only two of these so-called cannibals speak and are never depicted eating other humans—once again, readers must take Marlow at his word. However, there remains a strong distinction between the Africans on the crew and the ones Marlow sees from the steamer. As they move into the “prehistoric” interior, Marlow observes a “burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage” (*Heart of Darkness* 91). In this moment, Marlow seeks essential difference between himself and the Africans on the shore, but he cannot find it.

“It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman... They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.” (*Heart of Darkness* 91)

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To Achebe, this is the epitome of Conrad's racism, symbolic of a greater fascination that Africa and its peoples held over the Western mentality (Achebe 5). Even in declaring kinship with the Africans on the shore, the strongest statement Marlow makes about their humanity is that they are "not inhuman." However, Tim Christensen sees this moment as part of the slow breakdown of Marlow's conception of such a dichotomy between African and European. Like other imperialists, Marlow looks at African bodies for evidence of fundamental difference, but "unlike the typical imperialist...Marlow repeatedly discovers in these bodies only a vertiginous emptiness rather than an affirmation of his own self-consistent identity" (Christensen 19). In this interpretation, the fact that Africans share a "remote kinship" and are "not inhuman" contributes to Marlow's anti-imperial stance, rather than reinforcing an imperial mentality.

It is at this point in the narrative, after Marlow declares his kinship with the Africans on the shore, that he begins to describe Africans as more than black bodies. Of the general cannibals that make up the crew, Marlow singles out the fireman in charge of stoking the boiler. Though the man is filled with "improving knowledge," Marlow still resorts to comparing him to an animal, since "to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs" (*Heart of Darkness* 92-93). Another individualized black crew member is the helmsman, whom Marlow calls the "most unstable kind of fool [he] had ever seen," working exceptionally hard when he is under scrutiny and stopping when he loses sight of Marlow (*Heart of Darkness* 103). In each of these cases – though they have been given some sort of Western instruction, thus conforming to the civilizing "idea" that Marlow claims saves the imperial project – these Africans are seen as aberrant. According to Marlow, the

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fireman “ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank” (*Heart of Darkness* 93). However, Marlow faults the helmsman for “lifting his knees high, stamping his feet, champing his mouth, like a reined in horse” when the boat is under attack (*Heart of Darkness* 104). Although Marlow can recognize the basic human similarities between himself and his African crew, he cannot accept their movement towards developing Westernized skills.

In the attack on the steamer, Conrad plays upon the anxiety surrounding the colonial encounter that would have been common among readers of the era (Wesley 24). Native resistance was a constant threat, and was first mentioned in *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow reveals how his predecessor Fresleven lost his life “in a scuffle with the natives” (*Heart of Darkness* 53). Fresleven was beating the chief of a village for a bad deal involving two hens, and the chief’s son stabbed him in the back with a spear. However, Marlow presents this resistance in a way that diminishes the Africans’ agency – instead of saying the chief’s son killed Fresleven, he “made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man – and of course, it went quite easily between the shoulder-blades” (*Heart of Darkness* 53). Conrad’s construct of native resistance “attempts to deny what it implicitly acknowledges: that resistance is a consequence of human beings’ capacity to be outraged and to organize” (Wesley 22). This human capability for resistance appears to come to fruition in the steamer attack, playing on the anxieties of the imperial audience. The anxiety of the confrontation is heightened by Marlow’s inability to see his adversaries; he can only see “vague forms of men running, bent double, leaping, gliding, distinct, incomplete, evanescent” (*Heart of Darkness* 105). Here again, Marlow describes Africans as both solid and immaterial, implying both agency and ghost-like impotence. It



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is as if Africa and its “darkness” are attacking, not humans. This lack of agency makes sense when later it is revealed that it was not the Africans, but Kurtz who instigated the attack.

The attack has only one casualty—Marlow’s foolish helmsman. He is hit by a spear and dies a particularly grisly death, but in the moments before he is almost granted speech “in an understandable language”—something that no African up until this point has gained (*Heart of Darkness* 106). However, he dies without a word, leaving Marlow to interpret the somber, brooding, and menacing nature of his frowning black “death mask” (*Heart of Darkness* 107). Marlow interprets this look as another hallmark of his kinship with a black body—this time, with an individual:

“Perhaps you will think it strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don’t you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.”

(*Heart of Darkness* 112)

Of course, the fact that this kinship is only realized during death is significant—the helmsman has no voice to confirm or deny Marlow’s kinship. When he is not characterized as a fool, the helmsman is likened to an instrument—as voiceless as the “vague forms of men” that attacked him. This native silence will be broken only twice during the text: once to discuss cannibalism, once to announce Kurtz’s death.

### **Controlling the Narrative through the Final Lie**

Despite the fact that the entire novella is premised on Marlow's interactions with Kurtz, Marlow does not meet him until the third act, when he is a shell of the once-great man that Marlow's fellow imperial officers described at length. This image is best espoused by the motley Russian whom Marlow meets near Kurtz's camp. The Russian is a zealot for Kurtz, insisting that the man's brilliance exempts him from ordinary human judgment. Marlow, having traveled hundreds of miles to retrieve Kurtz, is no longer subject to such attachment to the man and finds the young Russian's attachment to Kurtz as "the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far" (*Heart of Darkness* 120). Early on, Kurtz is introduced as a "prodigy...an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (*Heart of Darkness* 75). While Kurtz supposedly brings art and science to the African interior, his main attribute is his voice:

"The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts, the one that stood out preëminently (sic), that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness." (*Heart of Darkness* 107)

Kurtz is defined by his voice in ways that Africans and women are not. He, by the mere virtue of being a European male in the Congo, is able to have opinions and ideas most of the people Marlow encounters cannot. Here is where the silencing of Africans and women is most pronounced by comparison, especially in the descriptions of the African woman commonly presumed to be Kurtz's mistress.

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Of the different demographics described in *Heart of Darkness*, African women are the least visible. Aside from the African woman at Kurtz's camp, the only other African woman is the accountant's laundress shown early in the novel. Like the fireman on the steamer, the laundress is "'useful' insofar as she has 'been instructed' for she possesses no real relationship to subjectivity [n]or the power attendant with critical knowledge" (McIntire 274). The woman on the banks of Kurtz's camp seems to escape such utilitarian classification—her warlike appearance conjures a power that many Africans simply are not granted in Conrad's novella.

"She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul."

(*Heart of Darkness* 127)

Her connection to the landscape in this moment makes her an "untranslatable fixture" of the dark African landscape. She, like all of the British women in Conrad's novella, cannot travel. However, it's important to note that while the "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" is implied to be Kurtz's mistress, she is not named in his famous list of possessions the same way as his Intended. In fact, her presence implies the strongest agency of any African or woman in the novella—one critic even equates her to an Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and war (Viola 164). André Viola proposes that when she cries out as Marlow's steamer departs with Kurtz she is calling for the rest of Kurtz's African supporters in the inner station to refrain from attacking the ship, knowing that they would be slaughtered by the Europeans' superior weapons (Viola 168). In this

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interpretation, the woman loves Kurtz and wants to keep him, but recognizes that a bloodbath would ensue if she tried to attack Europeans, who had far superior weapons (Viola 168). A more compelling interpretation might be that her final cry, accompanied by “a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance,” is the Africans’ final attempt at rebellion, their final attempt at language. But it’s a language Marlow cannot understand, and which Kurtz will not translate. Except for the declaration that Kurtz is dead to come later, the Africans have been effectively silenced by Marlow’s narrative.

While the voices of his former subjects fail, Kurtz’s voice “rang deep to the very last” (*Heart of Darkness* 137). However, it is at this point in the narrative Marlow realizes that while his voice and legacy are deep, Kurtz’s words are hollow. Despite the promises of a meaningful male imperial relationship made at the beginning of Marlow’s yarn, “*Heart of Darkness* presents men as profoundly and irredeemably isolated from one another...The condition of solitude and linguistic failure derives from the loss of stable, reliable relations of male camaraderie” (Cole 261). Instead, Marlow is doomed to watch Kurtz descend into the madness brought on by his imperial station.

“The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas—these were the subjects for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments. The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham, whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth.” (*Heart of Darkness* 137).

While Marlow systematically silences the imperial Others he encounters throughout the rest of the novella, here it is one of his fellows who fails to speak, and thus he places

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importance upon it. Kurtz's final words—"The horror! The horror!"—are nothing like the eloquence for which Kurtz was so praised early in the novella (*Heart of Darkness* 139). Marlow attributes this to the darkness Kurtz faced during his time in the Congo. However, Kurtz's death makes Marlow the final voice in the narrative, as Marlow has framed the narrative so that all other voices have been silenced or discredited all of the others. This puts Marlow in the perfect position for his final lie to Kurtz's Intended.

Marlow's final undermining action will be to lie about Kurtz's last words to the explorer's Intended. As he does with his aunt at the beginning of the story, Marlow declares that that the Intended is "out of it" (*Heart of Darkness* 108). However, this time the Intended's removal from reality is not seen as ignorance, but as a safe haven. Of women, Marlow declares "we must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (*Heart of Darkness* 108). He does so because he sees the woman's world as a sanctuary into which he can retreat after the unknown of the Congo: "in turning to women, he wants to return his life to a state of order, certainty, and predictability" (Peters 100). However, in order to maintain that comforting and ignorant retreat, Marlow must lie to Kurtz's Intended. But while the end of the novella rests on the lie about Kurtz's last words, Marlow also lies when he tells the Intended he knew him "as well as it is possible for one man to know another" (*Heart of Darkness* 146). This phrase is purposefully deceitful; while the Intended interprets this as meaning Marlow knew Kurtz well, Marlow means something else entirely – that the communication between imperial men is so corrupted that to know Kurtz as well as possible is to barely know him at all. The rest of their conversation is riddled with falsehoods about Kurtz, but Marlow's answer to her final query is the ultimate betrayal.

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“I—I—I have mourned so long in silence—in silence... You were with him—to the last? I think of his loneliness. Nobody near to understand him as I would have understood. Perhaps no one to hear...’

“‘To the very end,’ I said, shakily. ‘I heard his very last words...’ I stopped in fright.

“‘Repeat them,’ she murmured in a heart-broken tone...

“I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.

“‘The last word he pronounced was—your name.’” (*Heart of Darkness*

149)

Here, once more, the theme of silence arises. Kurtz’s Intended has suffered silently, mourning the man she loved without a person to speak to about it. However, when she finally has someone to speak to, he deceives her in order to protect some feeble ideal about the feminine disposition. While Marlow condemns women for being “out of it,” he does nothing to help them understand, reasserting his masculine domination over the imperial narrative.

### **Conclusion**

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad plays with perceptions of reality in the imperial landscape. Conrad has been heavily critiqued for his treatment of race and gender in his dark continent. Though I do believe Marlow’s distaste for the exploitation he sees in the Congo is genuine, as is Conrad’s by extension, he approaches imperialism through a very limited white male perspective. Not only that, but Conrad systematically silences all other perspectives in his novella. With women, he does this through anonymity and disdainful characterizations—women are “out of it,” and any attempt they make at understanding something greater, including the imperial project, is something to be ridiculed. In

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addition to the anonymity, Africans are silenced by being robbed of their agency and their bodily autonomy. While Conrad's depictions of African men as "savages" can certainly be interpreted as racist, his more insidious descriptors are the ones that turn whole populations into shadows on the shore of the river. The few Africans that are granted individual identities are defined by their seemingly pathetic attempts at Western education and assimilation. The few African women who Conrad does describe are similarly silenced. Even Kurtz's presumed mistress, who has the regalia and stance of a warrior, cannot prevent him from being taken from her and her final appeal for resistance goes untranslated. However, it is in the last scene, with Marlow's final lie, that all of the imperial Others are truly silenced as the truth of Kurtz's corrupted horror dies with him.

## *A Passage to India: The Condemnation of Imperial Friendship*

Whereas *Heart of Darkness* leaves the natives voiceless and women nearly so, and *Burmese Days* describes the feud between Dr. Veraswami and U Po Kyin only indirectly, *A Passage to India* brings the voices of Dr. Aziz and the other Indians to the forefront. The first character the readers encounter is Aziz, a Muslim Indian surgeon, quickly followed by his friends Hamidullah and Mahmoud Ali. It is in this scene that they introduce the main question of the novel: whether an Indian man can befriend a British man. The three parts of the novel each add a new perspective on this theme. The first part, "Mosque," establishes the friendships between Aziz and the English; the second part, "Caves," breaks these relationships; the final part, "Temple," implies the hope of reconnection once the British have left India (Lan 493). Though the main focus of the novel is the friendship between Aziz and Cyril Fielding, English women instigate and complicate each part of the novel. Aziz befriends Mrs. Moore first, leading to his further association with Fielding. After Adela Quested's accusation of rape and subsequent retraction, Fielding chooses to harbor the disgraced woman, causing a rift in his friendship with Aziz. When Fielding returns to India with his new wife, Mrs. Moore's daughter Stella and her brother Ralph, it becomes clear to both Aziz and the reader that by marrying an Englishwoman, Fielding has chosen to side with the British empire. British women are constantly depicted in opposition to Indian men throughout the novel; British officers must choose between their wives and developing friendships with Indian men. Those who choose Indian men, like Fielding, are seen as traitors when the British close ranks around their women and children. In E.M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India*, English women and their intolerant attitudes toward the Indians are initially



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implicated as the main obstacle to male friendship between colonized and colonizer.

However, Aziz's nationalist demands in the third part of the novel make it clear that it is not women who stand in the way of his friendship with Fielding, but rather the imperial structures that oppress the Indians.

### **Introduction: Forster's India**

Forster's background in India came from two separate trips to the country, one for six months in 1912 and one for a year beginning in 1921 (Meyers 329). These two trips were prompted by Forster's long-time Indian friend Syed Ross Masood, to whom the novel is dedicated and on whom the character of Aziz is loosely based (Galgut); years later Forster would reflect that "But for him, I might never have gone to this country, or written about it...I didn't go there to govern it or to make money or to improve people. I went there to see a friend" (qtd. in Galgut). Forster wrote *A Passage to India* over a period of twelve years that included the first World War and the rise of Indian nationalism, including the beginning of Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience in 1920 (Meyers 331-332). However, Forster's novel, published in 1924, does not describe these events—it is as if the novel, which takes place in a fictional city and rarely alludes to the specific events of colonial India, is set apart from time. Many critics have called attention to Forster's willful ignorance of the current events surrounding his topic; Martin Green said that "no other intelligent book published in 1924, and so concerned with the modern mind, so completely ignores what just happened in the world," while Indian diplomat Natwar-Singh said "It seems odd that a person of Forster's awareness could have been so oblivious of what was going on in India in 1921" (qtd. in Meyers 331).

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Others critics have said exactly the opposite: that Forster's novel draws extensively on the current events of the time, even if he avoids naming them directly. For example, the uproar the Anglo-Indians make over Adela Quested's alleged rape mimics the circumstances of the "crawling order" that followed the Amritsar massacre in 1919. During the riots that followed demonstrations against the Rowlatt bill, which allowed political prisoners to be tried without a jury or appeal, an English missionary Marcella Sherwood was beaten with sticks and left for dead, though she was found and revived by Hindu shopkeepers (Sharpe 114). In retaliation, General Dyer ordered open fire on unarmed Indian protesters, killing 379 and wounding 1,200 more (Sharpe 114). He also enforced martial law, including a "crawling order," which forced Indians to crawl on all fours through the street where Sherwood was attacked (Sharpe 114). This crawling order is alluded to in *A Passage to India* when Mrs. Turton says that "they ought to crawl from here to the caves on their hands and knees whenever an Englishwoman's in sight, they oughtn't to be spoken to, they ought to be spat at, they ought to be ground into dust" (Forster 240). Similarly, Forster alludes to the Mutiny of 1857, known to Indians as the First War of Independence, when McBryde says that the Mutiny records "rather than the Bhagavad Gita, should be your Bible in this country" (Forster 187). Jenny Sharpe argues it was the Mutiny of 1857 that began the European fear of interracial rape, since the revolt was associated with the violation of white women in the literature of the time (Sharpe 2). However, magistrates who investigated allegations that rebels raped, tortured, and mutilated British women during the Mutiny found no evidence to substantiate them (Sharpe 2). Forster's use of the themes of interracial violation and the white backlash

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show that Forster was aware of the goings-on of India at the time, but his novel deals with these issues on a personal rather than political level.

Another idea Forster reflects in the novel is the multiplicity of the India and its independence movements. The divide between Islamic and Hindu ideologies not only colors Aziz's interactions with his Indian friends, it also informs Aziz's changing nationalism. Early in the novel, Aziz recites Persian, Urdu, and Arabic poetry on themes of "the decay of Islam and the brevity of Love" (Forster 12). These themes echo the works of Islamic leaders like Mohammed Iqbal and Mohammed Ali, who imparted their poetry with Islamic history and sources to make Muslims realize that "since their religious and cultural traditions were so different from those of the Hindus, their political destiny also lay apart from their Hindu neighbors" (Singh 265). When a Hindu man asks Aziz to write a poem for Indians in general, Aziz tells him that "there is no such person in existence as the general Indian" (Forster 296). Singh interprets this to mean that early in the novel Aziz, like the Muslim politicians in the Young Party, internally divides society into Hindu and Muslim sects. However, Aziz's final dream of an independent India with Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh is much more inclusive than that of the Young Party, indicating that the young doctor is also influenced by Gandhi's model for Indian independence. Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915, between Forster's two visits to India (Singh 267). Gandhi's creed was one of cooperation between religious groups; he believed that because so many religious groups are contained within the country's borders "Indian nationalism had to take this pluralism into account when it formulated a concept of India" (Singh 267).

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Despite Forster's many allusions to various aspects of the Indian national movement, he omits the perspectives of Indian women in his novel. The 1920s saw the rise of women's movements in India, which sought both sexual equality and national liberation (Sharpe 130). Even Indian women who were not active in the urban middle-class feminist organizations participated in civil disobedience and other demonstrations against colonialism (Sharpe 130). Though Forster does describe the protests of Muslim women during Aziz's trial, he reinforces their futility: "a number of Mohammedan ladies had sworn to take no food until the prisoner was acquitted; their death would make little difference, indeed, being invisible, they seemed dead already, nevertheless it was disquieting" (Forster 238). Though Indian women are not entirely invisible in Forster's novel, there are no major female Indian characters and the few who play a significant role in the plot are hidden behind the purdah and only presented in relation to Indian men: Hamidullah's wife, and Aziz's wife and daughter. Even during the Bridge Party, when "those purdah women" come out to mingle with the English, they are visibly uncomfortable speaking with Adela and Mrs. Moore (Forster 43). However, Nancy Paxton argues that Indian women of the time were beginning to break out of such roles, and "their power to disrupt the colonial imaginary was enormous since they could no longer be portrayed as mute victims of Indian men" (Paxton 237).

*A Passage to India* shares its title with the Walt Whitman poem "Passage to India," in which Whitman praises the building of the Suez Canal connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and Europe to Asia (Lan 497). Whitman's poem, part of his masterwork *Leaves of Grass*, imagines a world united through this technology:

Passage to India!

Lo, soul! seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

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The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work.  
The people to become brothers and sisters,  
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,  
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,  
The lands to be welded together. (Whitman 30-36)

Forster's novel deals directly with the American poet's themes of togetherness, but his conclusions – reflected by the character of Aziz in *A Passage to India* – do not project hope for an interconnected world, but rather highlight the divisions created by race and gender in the colonial landscape. His final image in the novel is not one of connection, but rather one of separation. While Aziz and Fielding want to be friends, everything from their horses to the Indian landscape itself sends the two men in different directions (Forster 362). This friendship, which was established by one English woman, destroyed by another, defines Forster's ideas about the imperial relationship; so long as one race is held to be inferior, friendship is impossible.

**Mosque: The Establishment of the Imperial Friendship**

The main question of the novel – whether an Indian man and British man can be friends – is enacted through Dr. Aziz and his relationship with Cyril Fielding, the British schoolmaster. The question is first raised in the second chapter during one of Aziz's many talks with fellow Indians Hamidullah and Mahmoud Ali. Hamidullah, who has spent a long time in England, believes that it is possible – but only on British soil, because when the British are sent out to India, "They come out [there] intending to be gentlemen, and are told it will not do" (Forster 7). Mahmoud Ali has a harsher view of the English, stating that there is no difference between the white officers "be he Turton or Burton" (Forster 7). Mahmoud Ali gives an especially condemning sentence to

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Englishwomen, who he says are exactly alike and will last only six months before they become insufferable. Aziz stays out of this particular argument, joining in only to divert the conversation away from the English. At this point in the novel Aziz has a poor opinion of English women because he “generalized from his disappointment,” but he seems to have no particular opinions of English men (Forster 9). Aziz will not give his final condemnation of friendships between the British and their imperial counterparts until the end of the novel, after the erosion of his friendship with Fielding.

Mahmoud Ali’s condemnations of British women are echoed throughout the novel by Indian and Anglo-Indian alike. At the Bridge Party, as well as in day to day relations with the Anglo-Indians, it is the women who segregate, the women who cannot stand associating with the colonized race. British women and Indian men are portrayed as if they are competing for the attention of British officers, perhaps because they share similarly marginalized positions in the imperial hierarchy. Fielding is the Englishman who best expresses this tension between native men and white women:

He took no notice of them, and this, which would have passed without comment in feminist England, did him harm in a community where the male is expected to be lively and helpful...He discovered that it is possible to keep in with Indians and Englishmen, but that he who would also keep in with Englishwomen must drop the Indians. The two wouldn’t combine. (Forster 65-66)

Maria Davidis attributes this way of thinking to the chivalric code enforced by the British in India, which encourages both praise and obscenities towards the British women and establishes a structure where white women are kept in a liminal position (Davidis 264). British women in Forster’s India are silenced, sexually victimized, and used as justification for imperial rule, but their race puts them in a status superior to the native

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population (Davidis 264). For instance, while white women are blamed for the segregation that arises after some half-hearted mingling at the Bridge Party, men are not blamed for the rules of their club that exclude Indian men even as guests. British clubs began as institutions exclusive to men, with some clubs offering associate membership and specific “Hen-House” spaces to members’ wives by the turn of the nineteenth century (Sinha 498). However, when the clubs migrated to imperial India, the white women who were traditionally excluded became an excuse not to extend membership to natives, since it was believed “Indians held lascivious yearnings” for white women (Edwardes qtd. in Sinha 502).

Despite the racial tension between Indian men and white women, it is Mrs. Moore, not Fielding, who first befriends Aziz. Mrs. Moore holds a unique place in the social order of Anglo-India for several reasons. She is only a visitor, “a temporary escort, who could retire to England with what impressions she chose,” giving her more freedom from the social mores of the club culture (Forster 31). She is also a spiritual figure in the novel, representing Christianity in the way that Aziz represents Islam and Godbole represents Hinduism. Finally, she is old, a “withered priestess,” well past the age of childbearing and sexual desirability that causes the anxiety about interracial rape that segregates other white women (Forster 231). These factors, in addition to her claustrophobia at the club, are what lead her to explore the mosque and meet Aziz. Mrs. Moore and Aziz share a genuine connection, despite the differences in age, gender, and race that separate them. They both have three children, two boys and one girl, and both have lost their spouses. Mrs. Moore is also willing to criticize other white women, setting her apart from the women who snubbed Aziz earlier in the evening:

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She had proved her sympathy by criticizing her fellow countrywoman to him, but even earlier he had known. The flame that not even beauty can nourish was springing up, and though his words were querulous his heart began to glow secretly. Presently, it burst into speech.

“You understand me, you know what others feel. Oh, if others resembled you!”

Rather surprised, she replied: “I don’t think I understand people very well. I only know whether I like or dislike them.”

“Then you are an Oriental.” (Forster 21)

Aziz’s connection with Mrs. Moore, though never as strong as his relationship with Fielding, is central to the plot of the novel. Mrs. Moore’s presence is never as strong as it is in the first act of the novel, but her missing testimony makes her an almost spiritual figure to the Indians during the trial, who chant “Esmis Esmoor” to evoke the woman who could have testified to Aziz’s character and innocence (Forster 250). Even after her death on the passage home, Mrs. Moore’s spirit is revived through her son Ralph in the third section of the novel.

While Forster premises his entire novel on the friendship between a British man and an Indian man, as well as the intimacy between an Indian man and an elderly British woman, he prevents white women and Indian women from forming meaningful relationships. During the Bridge Party, so named because it is meant to bridge the gulf between East and West, Adela and Mrs. Moore’s efforts at establishing friendships with Indian women are unsuccessful. Even once a few of the Indian women reveal that they speak English, as every action the British women make is rebuffed by the uncomfortable Indian women:



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Miss Quested now had her desired opportunity; friendly Indians were before her, and she tried to make them talk, but she failed, she strove in vain against the echoing walls of their civility. Whatever she said produced a murmur of deprecation, varying into a murmur of concern when she dropped her pocket handkerchief. She tried doing nothing, to see what that produced, and they too did nothing. Mrs. Moore was equally unsuccessful. Mrs. Turton waited for them with a detached expression; she had known what nonsense it all was from the start. (Forster 43)

Mrs. Turton, the least tolerant of the British women, insists that the Indian women hate such integrated affairs as much as the English. However, it seems that uncertainty is the main deterrent for the Indian women, who “sought for a new formula which neither East nor West could provide” (Forster 43). Such interaction is so uncommon that neither Indian nor British know the etiquette for setting up social calls. Even after Adela and Mrs. Moore successfully make plans to call upon Mr. and Mrs. Bhattacharya, the carriage that was supposed to take them there never arrives. The cultural difference that act as a mere point of conversation between Fielding and Aziz is presented as insurmountable gap for Indian and British women.

It is only through Mrs. Moore’s recommendation to Adela Quested, and then Adela’s subsequent prompting of Fielding, that the two central male figures meet. Fielding and Aziz have an instantaneous connection that defies the stereotypes that are put forth by the individual races. Aziz is so eager to please the schoolmaster that he gives up the back stud of his collar so that Fielding does not go without. This gesture of generosity, ironically, is interpreted as a sign of laziness by Mrs. Moore’s son Ronny Heaslop, who goes so far as to call the missing collar-stud “inattention to detail; the

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fundamental slackness that reveals the race” (Forster 87). This stereotyping, which defines the interracial relations throughout the book, is not exclusive to the British. Hamidullah and Mahmoud Ali’s dismissal of all British officers at the beginning of the novel takes a similar, if more justified, tone. Brenda Silver explains that for the English “the mania for reductive categorizing goes hand in hand with the dramatization of difference and superiority inherent in their position of power: power not only to define the categories but to enforce the truths they supposedly convey” (Silver 92). Ronny uses this power to reduce an entire race to a missing collar stud. Fielding, by looking past blanket stereotypes, is able to form the genuine connection with an Indian that Hamidullah and Mahmoud Ali thought impossible. However, this connection comes at the expense of Adela and Mrs. Moore, who in this moment of connection become impediments to the friendship, so much so that Aziz is disappointed to hear that they would be joined by the women who initiated the get together, “for he preferred to be alone with his new friend” (Forster 69). In this scene, Forster values male intimacy over Aziz’s previous connection with Mrs. Moore, implying that the author’s true interest is with the question of male interracial friendship, and not with the connections between men and women. Women, after all, will become one of the final impediments to Aziz and Fielding’s friendship.

Beyond the initial meeting, Aziz and Fielding build intimacy with each other through their relationships with women, living and dead. Brenda Silver explains that the friendship between Fielding and Aziz—as well as the friendships between Anglo-Indian and Indian men in general—is based upon the objectification and silencing of women (Silver 91). Because the imperial social structure takes away much of Aziz’s power based

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on his race, it makes sense that in his attempts to connect with Fielding as equal subjects, he would vocalize their shared power to “appropriate women” (Silver 97). Most of Aziz’s interactions with women throughout the book are already tinged with objectification: he is disappointed to find that Mrs. Moore is elderly and his insult from the women who take his tonga is lessened because they are overweight. Even Aziz’s deceased wife was subjected to this shallowness; though Aziz would grow to love his wife, when he first met her, “she disappointed him, and he begat his first child in mere animality” (Forster 57). Early in their friendship, Aziz shows Fielding the photo of his late wife, replicating the intimacy of lifting the purdah, an intimacy Fielding immediately acknowledges:

“You would have allowed me to see her?”

“Why not? I believe in the purdah, but I should have told her you were my brother, and she would have seen you. Hamidullah saw her, and several others.”

“Did she think they were your brothers?”

“Of course not, but the word exists and is convenient. All men are my brothers, and as soon as one behaves as such he may see my wife.” (Forster 125)

Fielding attempts to match Aziz’s intimacy by telling him about the fiancée who rejected him and by explaining his apathy toward children and passing on his name. However, eventually the conversation circles back to Adela Quested, whom both the men criticize; Fielding calls her “one of the more pathetic products of Western education” while Aziz comments that “She has practically no breasts” (Forster 129-130). Though these two will go on to discuss religion, family, and empire in-depth, Fielding and Aziz become fast friends based on the exchange and commodification of women. This homosocial interracial relationship uses women as a subject of appraisal and condemnation perhaps

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because it distracts from the larger issue at hand—the British control of India that oppresses Indian men like Aziz. Their relationship will be broken when Fielding befriends Adela after she accuses Aziz of rape; for Aziz, Fielding’s choice to support Adela is not only a personal betrayal, but also a betrayal of their shared power.

**Caves: Rape and the Destruction of Connection**

Drafts of *A Passage to India* show that the author always intended the novel to focus on two white women from England, one old and one young, and their travels in imperial India (Levine 284). Their stated goal is to discover the “real India,” a goal which both women fail to achieve after a traumatic experience at the Marabar Caves. Forster himself said “When I began *A Passage to India* I knew that something important happened in the Marabar caves, and that it would have a central place in the novel—but I didn’t know what it would be” (Forster qtd. in Shahane 281). Readers of the novel do not learn what Adela experienced in the cave until after Aziz is arrested. Mrs. Moore becomes faint in the first cave, so Aziz and Adela explore the caves alone with their guide. After Adela asks Aziz whether he has more than one wife, an “appalling, hideous” question to the Muslim doctor, they both duck into a cave—whether it is the same cave is not clear (Forster 169). Aziz emerges from the cave to find Adela has disappeared and looks for her until he catches sight of her speaking to Miss Derek. On his way back to camp, he picks up Adela’s fallen field glasses, which will be used as the main piece of evidence against him in his arrest. However, Adela’s experience in the caves remains vague throughout the novel. Though she accuses Aziz of assaulting her, her memory of the event is imprecise:

“I remember scratching the wall with my finger-nail, to start the usual echo, and then I was saying there was this shadow, or sort of shadow, down the entrance

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tunnel, bottling me up. It seemed like an age, but I suppose the whole thing can't have lasted thirty seconds really. I hit him with the glasses, he pulled me round the cave by the strap, it broke, I escaped, that's all." (Forster 214)

The vague nature of this and other passages regarding Adela's memory of the caves has shaped the critical discourse surrounding *A Passage to India*, namely, whether Adela was actually assaulted in the caves, and, if she wasn't, what caused her to suffer the very real trauma which resulted from her visit.

However, Adela is not the only one to be traumatized by the caves. Mrs. Moore was traumatized as well. What begins as mere claustrophobia as the "influx of villagers swept her back" into the cave leads to an intense existential crisis when Mrs. Moore hears the echo:

The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same—"ou-boum."... Devils are of the North, and poems can be written about them, but no one could romanticize the Marabar because it robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness, the only quality that accommodates them to mankind. (Forster 165)

Mrs. Moore is changed by the caves. Her Christian spirituality, which so defined Mrs. Moore's character in the first part of the novel, collapses under the oppressive and apathetic echo of Marabar. It is replaced by "a hardness, a just irritation against the human race" (Forster 221). Although Mrs. Moore's spiritual disintegration within the

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caves is the lesser of the traumas that come out of their trip to the caves, it has profound effects on the plot. The old woman's perceived instability, as well as her respect for Aziz, renders her useless to the British in Aziz's trial and prevents her from testifying. Her missing testimony gives Mrs. Moore spiritual life even after she dies on the passage home. She also plays an important role in convincing Adela of Aziz's innocence—after Adela's conversation with Mrs. Moore, the younger woman begins to doubt her testimony, which has been appropriated by the rest of the British community for the consolidation of colonial power.

Critics disagree as to why Adela accuses Aziz of a rape and then alters her testimony at the trial. Some, like Levine, claim that the assault was entirely imagined by Adela, whose breakdown "like Mrs. Moore's, is based on a sudden, powerful – but in Adela's case, subverbal – realization that all discriminations are meaningless" (Levine 288). In this interpretation, Adela mistakes mental trauma for physical assault. Others relate Adela's experience in the cave to the psychological realization of what it means to be rapable; "Before the caves, Adela had defined herself, as Fielding does, through her intelligence, her honesty, and her belief in talk...After the caves, having been absorbed by the male discourse that surrounds rape, she herself disappears" (Silver 100-101) While the published version of the novel sheds little light on the events at the Marabar caves, drafts of Forster's novel describe Adela's assault in detail:

She struck out and he got hold of her other hand and forced her against the wall, he got both her hands in one of his, and then felt at her breasts...The strap of her field glasses tugged suddenly, was drawn across her neck, she was to be throttled as far as necessary and then...Silent, though the echo still raged up and down,

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she waited and when the breath was on her wrenched her hand free, got hold of  
her glasses and pushed them into her assailant's mouth. (qtd. in Levine 288)

This quote would indicate that at one time the story revolved around a physical violation, but Forster's final edit makes it seem like a mental violation by the caves themselves. In doing so, Forster eliminates the possibility of a sexual critique of empire, and instead focuses again on the animosity between Indian men and white women. The increased ambiguity in Forster's final draft makes Adela's purported assault symbolic—what actually happens in the cave holds little importance to most of the characters in the novel. Aside from Aziz, who is freed from a wrongful accusation, and Adela, who faces the backlash of her community, the characters of *A Passage to India* are much more interested in the idea that a white woman could be raped by an Indian man than whether the actual event transpired or not. It is this idea, not the violation itself, that drives the British to rally around Adela during Aziz's trial.

Adela becomes a symbol of white womanhood, but due to her plainness and her lack of prominence in the community, she does not prove to be a very good one. When the white women gather in the club, it is the beautiful wife of a railway official that symbolizes "all that is worth fighting and dying for; more permanent a symbol, perhaps, than poor Adela" (Forster 200). When the men begin discussing the safety of women and children "Each felt that all he loved best in the world was at stake...the chilly and half-known features of Miss Quested vanished and were replaced by all that is sweetest and warmest in the private life" (Forster 203). Even Ronny, Adela's betrothed, becomes a more powerful symbol than the woman herself; "Miss Quested was only a victim, but young Heaslop was a martyr...he was bearing the sahib's cross" (Forster 205). In a landscape of intense racism and British nationalism, Fielding defies his countrymen

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twice. He defies them first by siding with Aziz, believing whole-heartedly in his innocence and affirming their friendship. Then, when Adela changes her testimony on the stand, he defies the English again by taking her in when no one else will. However, this second defiance costs Fielding his friendship with Aziz.

After Aziz is arrested, Fielding insists that there must have been some mistake made, going so far as to call Adela mad for accusing the Indian of assault (Forster 181). Fielding knows of the antagonism between native men and British women. Forster initially depicts this antagonism as the two demographics competing for the attention of British men, but following Adela's accusation of rape, it becomes a matter of physical safety, since Indian men are presumed predators of white women. Fielding knows that by helping Aziz and quitting the club, he is effectively choosing a side, and that he would be called "anti-British" and "seditious" (Forster 193). However, his actions toward Adela seem to indicate the opposite. Fielding is the only Anglo-Indian to side with Aziz, but he is also the only person, aside from Mrs. Moore who was also traumatized by the caves, to treat Adela as an individual. Instead of joining the collective hysteria of "women and children," he continues to see Adela as a person rather than an idea, speaking her name and trying to reach her through his letter. Silver says that this action "resists the periphrasis that destroys subjectivity and identity and reduces both her and Aziz to metonymic figures in a morality play of violated innocence and evil, whose end is to reaffirm the power of the white male" (Silver 96). This continued power of the white male is the ultimate goal of the trial as well as of McBryde, Adela's lawyer. However, Adela's testimony—that Aziz is innocent, that she has made a mistake—upends McBryde's goals.



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The British have been certain of Aziz's guilt since Adela returned from the caves.

After Fielding comes to plead Aziz's innocence, Turton at once declares the Indian guilty, denounces interracial friendships, and justifies the culture of segregation in Chandrapore:

“I have had twenty-five years' experience of this country...and during those twenty-five years I have never known anything but disaster to result when English people and Indians are intimate socially. Intercourse, yes. Courtesy, by all means. Intimacy—never, never...Newcomers set our traditions aside, and in an instant what you see happens, the work of years is undone and the good name of my District ruined for a generation.” (Forster 182)

Although the British men surrounding Adela are convinced of Aziz's guilt, Adela is not as certain. She attempts to corroborate her story with Mrs. Moore, who was with her in the caves early in the day, but the older woman refuses to take the witness box and is convinced of Aziz's innocence. Before the trial even begins, Adela tells Ronny that it should be called off, that she has made a mistake, that in her trauma she had allowed her experience to be appropriated by the Anglo-Indian community (Walls 56). But Ronny is too invested in the Anglo-Indian myth of interracial rape; he convinces Adela to take the stand and gives her a platform for her retraction. Elizabeth MacLeod Walls explains that when McBryde assumes rather than persuades, his authoritative rhetoric overlooks Adela's humanity; in the trial scene, Forster illuminates “the dehumanizing effect of imperial systems and the extent to which women and other underlings of empire are viewed as little more than buttresses to the colonial paradigm of virtues” (Walls 56). By speaking her own experience, Adela undermines those imperial systems.

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The chapter following the trial opens with “Miss Quested had renounced her own people,” but really the opposite is true; the British leave her to fight through a riot on her own and close their doors to her (Forster 257). It is in this moment of intense vulnerability that Fielding takes Adela in, a woman whom he doesn’t particularly like. The reader can see his relationship with Aziz cracking the second Fielding pulls Adela into his carriage and Aziz says “Cyril, Cyril, don’t leave me” in a shattered voice (Forster 258). From this moment on, the two men have a split opinion of Adela; Fielding, after several intimate conversations with the young woman, befriends her, while Aziz continues to hold a grudge for the person who, as Hamidullah puts it, dragged his name through the dirt, damaged his health, ruined his prospects before she suddenly changed her mind on the stand (Forster 270). As the two men continue to argue over the terms necessary for Aziz to forgive Adela, the fissures in their relationship grow deeper. Aziz’s “foul” attacks on Adela’s personal beauty—he says he is disgraced “to be mentioned in connection with such a hag”—are distasteful to Fielding, making the Englishman feel “a barrier between himself and Aziz” every time the subject arose (Forster 268). These disagreements are made even worse by Fielding’s distaste for the now deceased Mrs. Moore:

“Miss Quested, you won’t treat her generously; while over Mrs. Moore there is this elaborate chivalry. Miss Quested anyhow behaved decently this morning, whereas the old lady never did anything for you at all and it’s pure conjecture that she would have come forward in your favor, it only rests on servant’s gossip.” (Forster 282)

The confrontation over the women reaches its climax when Aziz hears a rumor that Fielding slept with Adela, a rumor that the Indian cannot shake once he hears it: “He had

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no objection on moral grounds to his friends amusing themselves...But he resented him making up to this particular woman, whom he still regarded as his enemy” (Forster 302).

However, the women seem to be only fronts for the actual cause of Aziz’s mistrust:

Aziz’s rising Indian nationalism.

### **Temple: A Meditation on Friendship and Indian Nationalism**

Two years separate the Temple from the Marabar Caves, during which time Fielding and Adela have left Chandrapore, and Aziz has moved to Mau in order to pursue the life of a poet. One of the book’s main theses is that there is no “real India,” but rather millions of individuals with specific experiences. This multiplicity of experiences is represented in the opening of the third part of the book, which takes place during the festival celebrating the birth of Krishna in Mau. The two parts of the novel, as well as the names “Mosque” and “Temple,” develop a dichotomy between Muslim and Hindu, Aziz and Godbole. This separation, which eventually would lead to the split between India and Pakistan, was a huge part of the nationalist politics between Forster’s two visits to India. However, this assumed duality is not part of Aziz’s final concept of Indian nationalism. Aziz adopts Gandhi’s pluralism after moving to Mau, which is predominantly Hindu, where “the cleavage was between Brahman and non-Brahman; Moslems and English were quite out of the running, and sometimes not mentioned for days” (Forster 327). Here, Aziz adopts a more generous view of the Hindu at the expense of the British: he equates genuine hatred for the British, including Fielding, with becoming “Indian at last” (Forster 329).

Just as Aziz’s nationalism includes Hindus, Aziz has also found a place in his nationalism for Indian women. After moving to Mau, all of his poems focus on Oriental

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womanhood: “‘the purdah must go,’ was their burden, ‘otherwise we shall never be free. And he declared (fantastically) that India would not have been conquered if women as well as men had fought at Plassy” (Forster 329). Aziz also comes to admire the British ability to maintain friendships between men and women, something he feels cannot be achieved in India. Aziz discovers such intimacy when he looks through his old friend’s letters:

It was all “Stella and Ralph,” even “Cyril” and “Ronny”—all so friendly and sensible, and written in a spirit he could not command. He envied the easy intercourse that is only possible in a nation whose women are free. These five people were making up their little difficulties, and closing their broken ranks against the alien. (Forster 346)

To Aziz, the inclusion of “free” women into society not only strengthens interpersonal bonds, it also allows a group to “close ranks,” protecting themselves from the other. This incredible shift in Aziz’s perception—though slightly tempered by his assertion that he would still prevent foreigners from seeing Indian women—shows that he is beginning to identify with those who share his race as much if not more than those who share his gender. That is to say, his national resolve comes from his identification with a subjugated population—Indians—rather than a ruling population—males. When Aziz sees Fielding again, he says that his “heart is for [his] own people henceforward” (Forster 339).

In the light of his new nationalist identity, Aziz calls his rejection of Fielding “the end of a foolish experiment” (Forster 328). Due to a miscommunication in what little correspondence they had before Aziz stopped reading Fielding’s letters, he believes that his friend has married Adela. In actuality, Fielding has married Stella Moore, Mrs.

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Moore's daughter. Though Aziz's hostility is initially based on a misunderstanding, he continues to be cruel to Fielding, his wife, and her brother Ralph Moore, with whom he is traveling. As with the trial, Adela was a stand-in for something much larger—the Empire itself. By marrying a British woman, even Mrs. Moore's daughter, Aziz assumes that Fielding has allied himself with the imperial oppressors. Fielding too acknowledges that “he had thrown his lot in with Anglo-India by marrying a countrywoman... Would he to-day (sic) defy all his own people for the sake of a stray Indian? Aziz was a memento... yet they must invariably part” (Forster 358). What little connection is reestablished during the ceremony is condemned with the two men's final ride through the forest:

“India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one... Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty-five hundred years we shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then”—he rode against him furiously—“and then,” he concluded, half kissing him, “you and I shall be friends.” (Forster 361-362)

Aziz's insistence that interracial friendships are not possible so long as India is under British control gives the final answer to the question posed at the beginning of the book. It is only after India's inevitable emancipation that Aziz believes that he and Fielding can reestablish their friendship. However, after the reader watches their friendship crumble because of one woman—a mere stand in for the oppressing empire—the idea that such a friendship could overcome the weight of empire itself seems implausibly optimistic.

## Conclusion

Although the main question of E.M. Forster's novel is the possibility of friendship between a British man and an Indian man, this question is intensely influenced by the intervention of women and the existence of empire. In many ways, the Anglo-Indian women of Forster's novel become a stronger representation of empire than their husbands: they insist on segregation, and they demand their husbands ignore Indians in favor of spending time with them in the club. The two exceptions in the novel are Mrs. Moore, who is too old to feel the sexual anxiety of younger women, and Adela Quested, who embodies the curious spirit of an outsider in India. These two women shape the relationship between Aziz and Fielding; Mrs. Moore initiates it, Adela decidedly ends it. However, the women, Adela especially, are merely stand-ins for the greater injustice of the British Empire, an empire with which Fielding ultimately allies himself by marrying an English woman. After the suffering Aziz has suffered at the hands of the British, he simply cannot accept that they will stay, and India itself echoes his sentiments. For the novel's condemnation of friendship born in imperialism comes not from the doctor:

But the horses didn't want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "Not, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there."

(Forster 326)

While Aziz puts a moratorium on his friendship with Fielding for as long as the British are in India, the sky and the cosmos beyond doom it forever. According to Alison Sainsbury, "'not there,' referring to that which escapes history's imprint, both contradicts

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‘not yet’ and in the end overwhelms it,” since the two statements are given equal weight (Sainsbury 61). True friendship cannot be made or sustained within the power-structures of imperialism, no matter how accommodating the colonizer.

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## *Burmese Days*: The Burra Memsahib and the Inherent Corruption of Empire

In *Burmese Days*, Orwell paints a dark, skeptical portrait of Imperial Burma.

Whereas *A Passage to India* attempts to capture the Raj at its height, Orwell describes an empire in decay, featuring a main character that accepts the exploitative nature of empire but denies the idea that it's a civilizing mission. One of the hallmarks of this dark reality is the main character's interracial relationship with his Burmese mistress, Ma Hla May. This exploitative and shameful tryst is set up in direct contrast to the main character's courtship of an English woman—a relationship in which the main character, John Flory, attempts to emulate a specific sort of imperial masculinity to capture Elizabeth Lackersteen's school girl femininity. All of this takes place around the British club in Kyauktada, which is on the brink of accepting its first native member. Flory's Indian friend, Dr. Veraswami, is the natural choice, but Flory's inadequacy as a friend and as a man prevents him from nominating him. Unlike Forster's nuanced characters in *A Passage to India*, Orwell relies heavily on stereotypes to describe British and native alike. British women in particular get little sympathy in the novel, with Elizabeth's racist and conceited nature leading to her rejection of Flory, which, in turn, leads to Flory's grisly suicide. In *Burmese Days*, George Orwell both criticizes and endorses a certain Kipling-esque imperial masculinity, a masculinity that his main character John Flory fails to reach. Through Flory's relationship with Elizabeth, Dr. Veraswami, and his Burmese mistress Ma Hla May, Orwell exposes the inherent corruption of empire. In the end, it is not Flory's opposition to the racist civilizing idea behind empire, nor Veraswami's



dogged imperial support that leads to success in British Burma, but rather the ability to take advantage of a corrupt system.

### **Introduction: “A Hanging,” “Shooting an Elephant,” and Orwell’s Burma**

George Orwell, born Eric Arthur Blair in British Bengal in 1903, worked for the British Imperial Police in Burma from 1922 to 1927 as “part of an evil system, an oppressive and hypocritical racket” (King 79). Orwell’s personal politics on the matter of imperialism were firmly against the endeavor. However, his novels and essays from his time in Burma paint a more ambivalent picture. While his main European characters always state strong distaste for the imperial project, critics argue that Orwell’s peripheral Oriental characters seem to cling to stereotypes and caricature, if they are awarded any sort of differentiation at all. The treatment of Dr. Veraswami, “the scarcely plausible Indian admirer of the British,” emphasizes this point: his main role in the plot is to sing the praises of imperialism in a thick Indian accent as a counterpoint to Flory’s imperial skepticism (Melia 11). This ambivalence is also clear in Orwell’s essays from the period. “A Hanging,” more centered on its message against the death penalty than imperialism, and while “Shooting an Elephant” features an anti-imperial narrator, its main critique of imperialism seems to be of its futility rather than its moral implications.

George Orwell’s 1934 novel *Burmese Days* is only one of his three Burmese works. The first, an essay titled “A Hanging,” was first published in *Adelphi* in August of 1931 (“A Hanging” 48). The story centers on the hanging of a Hindu man in Burma, in which the narrator, using Orwell’s own voice, realizes the immorality of taking another human life through capital punishment: “When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in

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full tide” (“A Hanging” 45). The work, true to its name, walks through the steps of a hanging from retrieving the prisoner from his cell to his actual death. Unlike his later essay “Shooting an Elephant,” where the narrator is presented with a sea of Burmese egging him on, “A Hanging” gives the condemned differentiating features, most prominent of which is his religion:

And then, when the noose was fixed, the prisoner began crying out on his god. It was a high, reiterated cry of “Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!”, not urgent and fearful like a prayer or a cry for help, but steady, rhythmical, almost like the tolling of a bell. The dog answered the sound with a whine. The hangman, still standing on the gallows, produced a small cotton bag like a flour bag and drew it down over the prisoner’s face. But the sound, muffled by the cloth, still persisted, over and over again: “Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!” (“A Hanging” 46)

The moment when the prisoner cries to his god forces readers to recognize his humanity, as does the dog’s interest in the prisoner. It creates a stark contrast with the aftermath of the hanging, when imperial officers joke about another execution where they had to pull the condemned out by the legs. The essay ends on this note, contrasting the head jailer’s “extraordinarily funny” anecdote with the knowledge that a life had ended, that the body of a formerly “healthy, conscious man” lies on the ground one hundred yards away.

While “A Hanging” takes place in imperial Burma, some argue that its subject matter is not limited to the British imperial experiment. The main statement the essay makes is on the wrongfulness of capital punishment; the essay was written in England at a time when several new measures were being introduced to limit capital punishment (Melia 11). According to Paul Melia, one could change “the nationalities or races of any of the participants and the immorality of the execution would be unaffected” (Melia 11).

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Although Orwell is careful to describe the differences between the white narrator, the Dravidian jailer, and the Eurasian boy, none of these labels has a particularly large impact on the plot. Melia argues that the attitudes of the Dravidian and the Eurasian not only “conform to a comical ingratiating stereotype, but also demonstrate...an unquestioning acceptance by the indigenous population of their foreign lords” (Melia 11). However, this statement ignores the Hindu prisoner himself, whose cry for a god unfamiliar to the narrator simultaneously sparks empathy and makes him aware of the condemned’s otherness. The cries of “Ram!” emphasize the prisoner’s humanity despite his dark skin. Despite the later revelation that the condemned soiled himself when his appeal was dismissed, which does play into imperial stereotypes, the prisoner is not robbed of the humanity he gained during his execution. If anything, this reinforces the inhumanity of the imperial agents who laughed at this information. In “A Hanging,” Orwell gives a concise condemnation of capital punishment and shows the levels of cruelty and pettiness to which imperial officers stoop.

“Shooting an Elephant,” Orwell’s last statement on Burma, takes a much more pointed stance on the British presence in Asia. First published in *New Writing* in autumn 1936, the essay takes place during Orwell’s time as an Imperial police officer in Burma when he had to track down and subsequently shoot a loose elephant. The most notable aspect about the work is its ambivalence towards the Burmese; while Orwell sees the “British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny,” he also admits that “the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts” (“Shooting an Elephant” 236). This ambivalence is most apparent in Orwell’s depiction of the Burmese, who are almost exclusively described as a “sea of yellow faces,” part of a bloodthirsty crowd and not as

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individuals (“Shooting an Elephant” 236). The one exception is the man whom the elephant trampled, whose main characteristic is his excruciating death:

He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast’s foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. (“Shooting an Elephant” 238)

Not only does this depiction lack the acknowledgment of an external life for the deceased, but it also describes him as “devilish,” a label which Orwell assigns to the dead here, but which the reader might extend to all of Burmese as they follow him in droves to watch the narrator track down and eventually kill the elephant. The hordes of Burmans described in “Shooting An Elephant” are similar to those who make up the rebellion in *Burmese Days*, who are at once harmless and devilish.

While Orwell does little to differentiate the Burmese in “Shooting an Elephant,” the elephant itself is given the utmost care and consideration. Unlike the Burmese man it trampled, the elephant is given an extended, tragic death in Orwell’s story, one that suggests the elephant has a life and intelligence that the dead man simply did not have:

At last, after what seemed like a long time—it might have been five seconds, I dare say—he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again at the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did it for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and

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knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upwards like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay. (“Shooting an Elephant” 241)

In the end, it is the elephant Orwell mourns, the elephant that represents the true nature of the British presence in Burma. Because, as Orwell tells it, it was his fear of being seen as a fool by the Burmese—over whom he supposedly has power—that made him kill the elephant. Orwell had a long relationship with beasts—both keeping them and killing them (Drabble 40). “Beastly” was Orwell’s first recorded word, and a blurring of the line between beast and man is prominent in several of his works, including his later novels *Animal Farm* and *1984* (Drabble 39). In “Shooting an Elephant,” the elephant’s long and drawn out death is set up in direct contrast to the hoard of Burmese who swarm over it for the animal’s meat. In Orwell’s retelling, the Burmese are more beastly than the rampaging animal itself.

Orwell’s ambivalence towards the Burmese in “Shooting an Elephant” leads readers to question just how devoted he is to his stated anti-imperial ideologies: Melia argues that “at most, the story is a half-hearted attack on the imperial project” (Melia 11). Indeed the essay ends with a debate about whether Orwell should have shot the elephant or not: the older men support Orwell’s decision, while the younger men lament that “an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie” (“Shooting an Elephant” 242). While Orwell is obviously asking his readers to critique this statement, it also reminds them of the troubling representations of race throughout the essay, including the

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fact that the narrator at one time valued the elephant's life over that of the man it killed.

This ambivalence toward the imperial project also plagues *Burmese Days*, which, despite its stated anti-imperial stance, is often interpreted as employing stereotypes in its description of John Flory's friend Dr. Veraswami and the villain U Po Kyin. The strongest statement in "Shooting an Elephant" is not about imperialism, but about the expectations of the white ruling masculinity needed to enforce the imperial project on a hostile populace. Orwell's essay examines the social consequences of the idea that "a sahib has got to act like a sahib;" as in *Burmese Days*, "Shooting an Elephant" implies that even the staunchest anti-imperialist will falter if his power is at stake ("Shooting an Elephant" 239).

### **Masculinity and the Empire**

Orwell both defies and endorses a specific kind of masculinity in *Burmese Days*—that of the British imperial officer. One of the main ways in which this is enacted is through the racially exclusive culture of the British club in Kyauktada. The club's resistance to a mandate to accept native members serves as Orwell's main vehicle for examining the racial rhetoric of empire. In addition to the racial politics of such a decision, letting a native into the club would be an encroachment on the one uniquely European space in Burma, since "in any town in India the European Club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain" (*Burmese Days* 17). Leonard Woolf, one of Orwell's contemporaries, said that the club was "the centre and symbol of British imperialism...with its cult of exclusiveness, superiority and isolation" (qtd. in Sinha 490). However, the exclusivity of the club was not initially to emphasize racial, but rather class

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and gender differences. Gentlemen's clubs in England "became a passport into the culture of the ruling elites in Britain," traditionally masculine spaces that, while they began extending membership to wives in the early 1800s, relegated them to their own section called the "Hen House" (Sinha 494-5). It was only once the club got transferred to British colonies that racial exclusion became part of the club's make up. Orwell creates a particularly dark club habitat, perhaps because the Government of India Act that created a dual government in India did not apply to Burma, provoking resentment in the Burmese (Crane 23). It is in this tense climate that the club becomes a cultural island to which the English cling, a cultural island that cannot tolerate incursion by someone like Dr. Veraswami (Crane 24).

Although Orwell's characterization mainly engenders antagonism towards white members of the club, especially the explosively racist Ellis, he also stumbles in his depictions of Burmans and Indians in *Burmese Days*. Veraswami, the native for whom the readers are supposed to have the most sympathy, stridently believes in British imperialism, a belief "which a thousand snubs from Englishmen had not shaken" (*Burmese Days* 40). When Flory attempts to disparage the British role in Burma, Veraswami shakes him off with arguments of social uplift, practically citing Kipling's "white man's burden" when he says "consider Burma in the days of Thibaw, with dirt and torture and ignorance, and then look around you...Look at the whole uprush of modern progress!" (*Burmese Days* 41). Even Veraswami's more logical arguments about technological and economic progress are filled with justifications for European paternalism:

"You say you are here to trade? Of course you are. Could the Burmese trade for themselves? Can they make machinery, ships, railways, and roads? They are

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helpless without you. What would happen to the Burmese forests if the English were not here? They would be sold immediately to the Japanese, who would gut them and ruin them. Instead of which, in your hands, actually they are improved. And while your businessmen develop the resources of our country, your officials are civilizing us, elevating us to their level from pure public spirit. It is a magnificent record of self-sacrifice.” (*Burmese Days* 40)

Whether Veraswami is meant to be a comical contrast to Flory’s stance against moralistic imperialism or he is simply a racist stereotype in Orwell’s supposedly anti-imperial tragedy, the self-loathing inherent in these arguments is exceptional. Orwell’s troubling treatment of race by the imperial officers and the native subjects alike shows just how far the imperial “idea” can be stretched to justify an utterly corrupt society.

The novel’s villain U Po Kyin has a similar admiration for the British, not because of the “progress” they brought, but because of their power:

U Po Kyin’s earliest memory, back in the ‘eighties, was of standing, a naked pot-bellied child, watching the British troops marching victorious into Mandalay. He remembered the terror he had felt of those columns of great beef-fed men, red-faced and red-coated; and the long rifles over their shoulders, and the heavy rhythmic tramp of their boots...In his childish way, he had grasped that his own people were no match for this race of giants. To fight on the side of the British, to become a parasite upon them, had been his ruling ambition, even as a child.  
*(Burmese Days 5-6)*

Even Flory’s Burmese mistress Ma Hla May associates whiteness with power: “The whiteness of his skin had a fascination for her, because of its strangeness and the sense of power it gave her” (*Burmese Days* 54). This association between Britishness and power, spoken by the colonized themselves, undermines any attempt at creating diverse and



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complex native characters. Not only that, but the native complicity with the ruling power and the novel's plot itself ignores current events in Burma: "rather than deal with the actual problems of rising Burmese nationalism in the post-World War I period, Orwell focuses on this more limited drama, as U Po Kyin schemes to improve his standing by attacking and discrediting various other people" (Patai 23). Just as Orwell's plain and disillusioned descriptions of the British imperial officers raises questions about their competence in their imperial post, his treatment of his native characters seems to criticize them for everything from their accents to their socio-economic status, implicitly reinforcing racial stereotypes of the time.

The racial exclusion of the club is the one issue in which Flory, who is close friends with Veraswami, can claim true anti-imperial sentiment. Throughout the novel, Flory shows genuine interest in the Burmese culture, taking Elizabeth to a *pwe* dance and to visit several Burman acquaintances. Although Flory despises the rhetoric surrounding British control of Burma, when it comes to the exploitative nature of imperialism, Flory has fewer qualms since that exploitation is beneficial to him:

"I don't want the Burmans to drive us out of this country. God forbid! I'm here to make money like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man's burden humbug. The pukka sahib pose. It's so boring. Even those bloody fools at the Club might be better company if we weren't all of us living a lie the whole time."

"But, my dear friend, what lie are you living?"

"Why, of course, the lie that we're here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of rob them. I suppose it's a natural lie enough. But it corrupts us, it corrupts us in a way you can't imagine. There's an everlasting sense of being a

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sneak and a liar that torments us and drives us to justify ourselves night and day.”

(*Burmese Days* 39)

This is reflected in Flory’s profession. Unlike Orwell’s own post in the Imperial Police, Flory is a timber merchant, an occupation that relies exclusively on the exploitation of Burma’s natural resources. However, even Flory’s tepid anti-imperialism can be seen as fervent in contrast to the racist rhetoric of other members of the club. Ellis, a manager of another timber firm, has the strongest reaction to the proposition that the club accept a new native member:

“Good God, what are we supposed to be doing in this country? If we aren’t going to rule, why the devil don’t we clear out? Here we are, supposed to be governing a set of damn black swine who’ve been slaves since the beginning of history, and instead of ruling them in the only way they understand, we go and treat them as equals.” (*Burmese Days* 25)

Flory is bored by rants like this, but he rarely speaks out against them. Orwell uses the word “bored” and “boring” often when describing Flory, obscuring his supposedly anti-imperial perspectives with moral indifference. Flory’s boredom is often associated with white masculine imperial ideal—an ideal that he can never quite achieve—implying that his evasion is less about morality and more about self-vindication.

While there is no questioning that Flory despises the racism of his fellow club members, he admires the muscular, violent, and self-assured nature of their masculinity. Such masculinity began in the British public schools: “by the early twentieth century, through militaristic organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the Boys’ Brigades, the hegemonic ideal of manliness had spread to sections of the lower-middle and even working classes” (Gopinath 203). Daphne Patai says the “muscular Christianity” of the

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late 1800s defined itself in contrast to the “feminine” and “childish” Indians (Patai 24). The imperial subjects were assigned traditionally “feminine” characteristics; they were seen as emotional, undisciplined, and intuitive, revealing “the extent to which an androcentric view of the world, which places men...at the center of reality, can be adapted to imperial purposes” (Patai 25). One way that Orwell’s British characters display this masculinity is through their longing for the “action” of a rebellion. Westfield believes that only martial law in reaction to a rebellion could keep the British Empire from decaying, while Ellis openly endorses the actions of the Amritsar massacre, in which hundreds of Indians were killed and thousands more were injured: “Look at Amritsar. Look how they caved in after that. Dyer knew the stuff to give them” (*Burmese Days* 32). This suppressed violent masculinity comes to a head later in the novel when Ellis attacks a Burmese boy, which in turn incites a riot. Flory does not share this desire for war, but he is ashamed of this fact. He dodged the draft for the First World War “because the East had already corrupted him, and he did not want to exchange his whisky, his servants and his Burmese girls for the boredom of the parade ground and the strain of cruel marches” (*Burmese Days* 67). Once again, “boredom” becomes a diversionary euphemism, discrediting the masculine pursuits in which he cannot participate. Even the supposedly enlightened Flory defines the East as corrupting, providing him a “patriotic” excuse to dodge the draft, as the Burmese theorized that ““sticking by one’s job’...was the truest form of patriotism” (*Burmese Days* 67).

Flory’s obsession with manliness and his inability to live up to the virile ideals of Kipling and other imperialists leaves the reader of *Burmese Days* craving a change that is doomed from the beginning. Flory’s character is most notable for his ambivalent nature,

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represented by the “hideous birthmark stretching in a ragged crescent down his left cheek, from the eye to the corner of the mouth” (*Burmese Days* 17). David Waterman interprets this birthmark as a symbol of racial duality that “foregrounds the notion that a subject who does not ‘fit’ into his proper race/nationality becomes a freak” (Waterman 28). In this interpretation, Flory’s birthmark symbolizes a biracial nature like those of the Eurasians Mr. Francis and Mr. Samuel, one which makes him uniquely qualified to transcend racial boundaries, but which also marginalizes him so that he cannot fully participate in the privilege of his imperial status. Other interpretations of Flory’s birthmark make it into something more predatory, likening it to the mark of Cain and a phallic threat to Elizabeth Lackersteen (Lee 821-822). Either way, it marks Flory as an outsider whereas most of the other characters are mere caricatures within the imperial drama.

Flory’s outsider status makes him the obvious catalyst for the change in the imperial club culture. His friendship with Veraswami gives him a personal interest in nominating the first native to the Kyauktada club—Flory claims he has never spoken honestly to anyone except the doctor in fifteen years. In addition to validating Veraswami’s high social standing and his infatuation with the British, the doctor’s election to the club would protect him from U Po Kyin’s libelous campaign, since after entry to a European club, “no calumny can touch him” (*Burmese Days* 47). Flory also has the potential to improve his relationship with women in this novel. By marrying an English girl and ending his toxic relationship with his Burmese mistress Ma Hla May, Flory would break free of Burma’s “corrupting” grip. Before he even meets Elizabeth,

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Flory begins to consider how companionship with a British woman would both improve his life in Burma and prompt him to leave it:

And it occurred to him—a thing he had actually forgotten in the stagnant air of Burma—that he was still young enough to begin over again. He would live a year in civilised society, he would find some girl who did not mind his birthmark—a civilised girl, not a pukka memsahib—and he would marry her and endure ten, fifteen, more years of Burma... They would be free for ever of the small of pukka sahibdom. He would forget Burma, the horrible country that had come near ruining his. (*Burmese Days* 70-71)

When Elizabeth Lackersteen comes to visit her aunt and uncle, Flory has his opportunity. Flory, the one dynamic character in the novel, is set up with circumstances to honor his friend, find a wife, and end his association with Ma Hla May. Flory has a chance to settle into a routine life that would make him more comfortable with his role in the imperial project. However, these chances for change are ultimately frustrated.

### **The Search for the Burra Memasahib**

Flory first and foremost sees Elizabeth as his salvation from his imperial post. They meet when he saves her from a buffalo, an act which he recognizes as minimal but which she sees as heroic. This initial misunderstanding leads to more egregious ones as the courtship goes on, such as Flory's impression that Elizabeth is artistic and cultured as a result of having lived in Paris—really, she hated her time there, and especially hated her mother's impoverished Bohemian leanings. Elizabeth is most attracted to Flory when he performs the traditional imperial masculinity and faces nature and its beasts. Their attraction seems to stem from Elizabeth's desperation and the scarcity of white women in Burma. Though Elizabeth did not come to Burma to find a husband, early in their first

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meeting, her aunt Mrs. Lackersteen implies that an English woman who leaves the colonies without a husband is a failure:

“Only a short time ago I remember a case—a girl came out and stayed a whole year with her brother, and she had offers from all kinds of men—policemen, forest officers, men in timber firms with *quite* good prospects. And she refused them all; she wanted to marry into the I.C.S., I heard. Well, what do you expect? Of course her brother couldn’t go on keeping her forever. And now I hear she’s at home, poor thing, working as a kind of lady help, practically a *servant*.”

(*Burmese Days* 99)

The implication is clear: unmarried women in the colonies are a burden, and one that can only be tolerated for so long. It is for this reason that Elizabeth attaches herself so quickly to Flory, despite the misgivings she has about his character—of which she has several.

The fundamental tension in Elizabeth and Flory’s relationship comes from Flory’s admiration for the Burmese culture and Elizabeth’s hatred for all things oriental. Orwell does not vary much in his depiction of Englishwomen in *Burmese Days*, drawing extensively from the memsahib stereotype. Mrs. Lackersteen, Elizabeth’s aunt, is domineering, lazy, and obsessed with social status (Patai 35). Elizabeth is cut from the same cloth, a fact that becomes Orwell’s final condemnation of the character. This final statement is no revelation to the readers; almost immediately they recognize what Flory cannot. This tension is first established when Flory takes Elizabeth to a *pwe*, a traditional Burmese dance. Flory sees history in the woman’s dancing:

“Every movement that girl makes has been studied and handed down through innumerable generations. Whenever you look closely at the art of these Eastern peoples you can see that—a civilization stretching back and back, practically the

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same, into times when we were dressed in woad. In some way that I can't define to you, the whole life and spirit of Burma is summed up in the way that girl twists her arms." (*Burmese Days* 105)

Elizabeth, uncomfortable with the graphic display, is more focused on the impropriety of the situation, worrying that "surely it was not right to be sitting among the black people like this, almost touching them, in the scent of their garlic and their sweat" (*Burmese Days* 105). This episode is echoed later in the novel when Flory takes Elizabeth to visit his friend Li Yeik. Despite Flory's attempts to convince the woman that the Chinese are "more civilised than we are," Elizabeth ends up storming out of the shop following a child's accident in the corner (*Burmese Days* 129, 132). Whereas Flory is excited by the prospect of interacting with the Burmese culture, to Elizabeth, anything approaching friendliness with the natives is improper. While it is clear to readers that their relationship is based on a fundamental difference in their perceptions of race and empire, as Flory follows her out of Li Yeik's dwelling "it was as though he had never truly loved her till this moment, when he walked behind her in disgrace, not even daring to show his disfigured face" (*Burmese Days* 133).

That said, it is not as if the pair have nothing in common. Elizabeth relishes Flory at his most masculine, when he is interacting with and conquering nature: "the most trivial scrap of information about shooting thrilled her. If only he would always talk about shooting, instead of about books and Art and that mucky poetry" (*Burmese Days* 161). Their courtship began after he saves her from a buffalo, and they are closest during their hunting trip together, after which Flory assumes that the two will marry. Elizabeth is anxious to hunt as soon as possible, and throughout the experience her excitement is closely associated with the death of animals. After Flory's first kill, she is simultaneously

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jealous of him and attracted to him. However, she has no interest in the Burmese myth that Flory shares about the little green bird, instead asking whether it is good to eat. This interest is only magnified when she holds her kill in her hands:

She could hardly give it up, the feel of it so ravished her. She could have kissed it, hugged it to her breast. All the men, Flory and Ko S'la and the beaters, smiled at one another to see her fondling the dead bird. Reluctantly, she gave it to Ko S'la to put in the bag. She was conscious of an extraordinary desire to fling her arms round Flory's neck and kiss him; and in some way it was the killing of the pigeon that made her feel this. (*Burmese Days* 167)

These feelings are only strengthened when the couple kills a leopard. Elizabeth's attraction is inextricably linked to predatory manliness, perhaps echoing the predatory nature of imperialism. It is only when Flory displays this particular brand of manliness that Elizabeth feels attracted to him, and when he falls in her estimation, she seeks a man who does even more to emulate imperial masculinity.

Elizabeth rejects Flory for the first time after Mrs. Lackersteen reveals his past liaisons with Burmese women like Ma Hla May. In their first meeting, the two women are presented as two sides of the same coin, "the one faintly colored as an apple-blossom, the other dark and garish, with a gleam almost metallic on her cylinder of ebony hair" (*Burmese Days* 87). Elizabeth's presence makes Flory aware of Ma Hla May's undesirable qualities, including her "tiny, stiff body, straight as a soldier's" (*Burmese Days* 87). In an effort to hide Ma Hla May from Elizabeth, Flory threatens his mistress with a beating and lies to Elizabeth about her occupation, saying that she is a laundress. Inherent in Flory's interactions with the Burmese woman is shame and a sense of contagion, established by his insistence that he "had dirtied himself beyond redemption"



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through such liaisons (*Burmese Days* 196). In the imperial social structure, British men occupy the top and native women the bottom, with British women and native men residing someplace in the middle (Patai 34). Elizabeth's reaction of loathing to the news that Flory kept a Burmese mistress stems in part from the English woman's uncertain position in the social hierarchy. Orwell assigns to women an otherness that transcends race, culture, and class; Elizabeth hates her own status as a powerless woman, which she sees reflected back at her in the even more powerless and despised dark-skinned woman" (Patai 36). She hates Ma Hla May and other Burmese women more than the men, since she sees in them a sisterhood that British men and native men do not share: "all women are different from men, and in this 'difference from' there is also a 'sameness,' which Orwell calls a 'kinship'" (Patai 36). After the discovery that Flory has been connected to such a woman, Elizabeth throws her lot with "the Honourable" Verrall, the handsome new military officer whose imperial masculinity is untarnished. It is only after Verrall abandons her that Elizabeth will once again speak to Flory.

The narration surrounding Elizabeth's character emphasizes all that is negative about the woman and the imperial system she so admires—she is racist, she is bloodthirsty, and she hates art and all other forms of culture. When Elizabeth's past of poverty and harassment is mentioned, it is only in passing, and Orwell does not fully examine the significance of the woman's circumstances. Both her father and brother were drunkards and her fanciful mother took little care of her before she died a Bohemian. Given her upbringing, it is no surprise that Elizabeth preferred her time immersed in the wealth of boarding school. During her time in France, Elizabeth worked as a governess to the children of a banker, a man with a "fat, worn face and a bald, dark yellow crown

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resembling an ostrich's egg" (*Burmese Days* 91). It was in the banker's house that she first faced sexual harassment:

The second day after her arrival he came into the room where the children were at their lessons, sat down beside Elizabeth and immediately pinched her elbow.

The third day he pinched her on the calf, the fourth day behind the knee, the fifth day above the knee. Thereafter, every evening, it was a silent battle between the two of them, her hand under the table, struggling and struggling to keep that ferret-like hand away from her. (*Burmese Days* 91-92)

In Burma, Elizabeth must ward off similar approaches from her uncle, Mr. Lackersteen:

She had come out of her bath and was half-way through dressing for dinner when her uncle had suddenly appeared in her room—pretext, to hear some more about the day's shooting—and begun pinching her leg in a way that simply could not be misunderstood. Elizabeth was horrified. This was her first introduction to the fact that some men are capable of making love to their nieces. (*Burmese Days* 175)

Orwell's use of Elizabeth's harassment is in no way symbolic, the way the rape of women is often depicted in the imperial context, because there is no racial element to Elizabeth's violation. Instead "Orwell assigns rape to the private domain of the family, out of the reach of political or ethical censure, where it has remained until very recently" (Paxton 265). Because the harassment Elizabeth faces is private, she does not become a martyr—she suffers alone. In this moment of the novel, Elizabeth will do anything to free herself from her uncle's perversions. While after the hunt "it was understood that Flory would ask Elizabeth to marry him," it is only this threat of being left penniless eight

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thousand miles from home that convinces Elizabeth that she would say yes if asked  
(*Burmese Days* 174, 175).

Even before Verrall's abandonment, Flory's apparent triumph in quelling a Burmese rebellion makes him a viable suitor for Elizabeth once more. The rebellion is initiated by Ellis, who retaliates to Maxwell's murder by attacking a group of Burmese school children and blinds one of them (*Burmese Days* 238). Thousands of Burmans swarm on the club with sticks and swords in their hands, seeking to exact revenge on the attacker. Even in his depiction of rebellion, Orwell does not take the Burmese seriously, saying that "the Burmans seemed to have no plan beyond flinging stones, yelling and hammering at the walls, but the mere volume of noise was unnerving" (*Burmese Days* 248). Heartened by Elizabeth clinging to his arm, Flory has the idea to escape the fray and alert the police by swimming down the river. He successfully disperses the crowd by having the Imperial Police shoot over their heads, in direct opposition to Ellis' bloodthirsty suggestion that they shoot to kill. The action, however cowardly it actually was, causes Elizabeth to forgive Flory, and once Verrall leaves Kyauktada their relationship begins again:

She came willingly, even gladly—there in the clear daylight, merciless to his disfigured face. For a moment she had clung to him almost like a child. It was as though he had saved her or protected her from something. He raised her face to kiss her, and found with surprise that she was crying. There had been no time to talk then, not even to say, "Will you marry me?" No matter, after the service there would be time enough. (*Burmese Days* 270)

When he embraces Elizabeth, Flory regards her as his way to escape corrupt imperial Burma. What Flory does not realize is that such a union would benefit Elizabeth as well,

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helping her save face after Verrall's abandonment and delivering her from her lecherous uncle. After successfully quelling the rebellion, Flory has not only gained enough prestige to earn back Elizabeth's affections, but enough to secure Veraswami's place as the first native in the club. Flory's potential at the beginning of the novel has almost been fulfilled, but it will ultimately shatter with the shock of Ma Hla May's public confession.

### **The Fall of the Anti-Imperial Man**

Flory finally tumbles from grace through U Po Kyin's plotting, which destroys the timber merchant's respectability and opens a place for U Po Kyin to join the club instead of Veraswami. U Po Kyin hires Ma Hla May to deal the final blow to Flory's reputation. She appears in church, dirty and disheveled, screaming Flory's name so that there can be no mistaking who wronged her. Ma Hla May screams in Burmese:

“Look at me you white men, and you women, too, look at me! Look how he has ruined me! Look at these rags I am wearing! And he sitting there, the liar, the coward, pretending not to see me! He would let me starve at his gate like a pariah dog. Ah, but I will shame you! Turn round and look at me! Look at this body you have kissed a thousand times—look—look—”

She began actually to tear her clothes open—the last insult of a base-born Burmese woman. (*Burmese Days* 273)

It is significant that after all of the libelous campaigns U Po Kyin has run against Flory in the *Burmese Patriot*, it takes a Burmese woman to bring about his final fall. Ma Hla May is not only at the bottom of the imperial social order on the basis of her gender and race, she is also incredibly impoverished—Flory bought her from her parents for three hundred rupees. By Burmese common law, her open cohabitation with Flory would be considered de facto marriage—it is not merely self-delusion that causes Ma Hla May to believe that

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she was his wife before he threw her out (Patai 39). When one takes this into account, Ma Hla May becomes more than a pawn in U Po Kyin's plans to defame Flory and Dr. Veraswami; Ma Hla May is making legitimate claims to Flory's home and affection. The truth underlying her confession is what creates such revulsion among the British officers. Despite the hierarchy of race and gender that make up the imperial social structure, it is ultimately a Burmese woman who brings down a white man.

Ma Hla May reveals herself in front of the entire Christian community in Kyauktada, making such a scene that Elizabeth, who already knew of Flory's former affairs with Burmese women, cannot forgive him. Though none of her earlier acceptances or rejections were given verbally, except the time when they kissed, this final rejection is clear. At first she attempts to ignore him, as she had when she first learned about his Burmese mistresses, but Flory forces the point. After they leave the church, Elizabeth gives Flory her final, spoken, rejection of his marriage proposal: "Never, never! I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth. I'd as soon marry the—the sweeper!" (*Burmese Days* 277). However, while the scene at the church disgusted Elizabeth, there is another reason for her rejection:

When she thought of his face as it had looked in church, yellow and glistening with the hideous birthmark upon it, she could have wished him dead. It was not what he had done that horrified her. He might have committed a thousand abominations and she could have forgiven him. But not after that shameful, squalid scene, and the devilish ugliness of that disfigured face in that moment. It was, finally, the birthmark that had damned him. (*Burmese Days* 278)

Flory's birthmark, his symbol of shame, his symbolically biracial mark, is what sends Elizabeth away. So long as he cannot live up to idealized imperial masculinity, so long as

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he straddles the line between ashamed imperialist and timid anti-imperialist, so long as he remains fascinated by the Burmese culture he takes part in oppressing, she cannot marry him.

It is the rejection from the woman that he meant to be his savior that leads Flory to suicide. However, before killing himself, Flory kills his dog Flo. Flo is by Flory's side throughout the novel, to the point that she is practically an extension of Flory himself: "Flory becomes, through similarity in name and through adroit management of symbol by Orwell, closely linked to his dog, Flo" (Lee 862). She accompanies him when he first faces the buffalo and meets Elizabeth, she joins the couple on the hunting trip, and she even sits under the pew during the final damning church scene with Ma Hla May, getting up and greeting the familiar voice. Flo is similarly loyal just before her death, following Flory into the room despite her fear of her master. Flo's death is a test run for his own; he shoots her in the head. Flory's response is cold and vain: "Her shattered brain looked like red velvet. Was that what he would look like? The heart, then, not the head" (*Burmese Days* 281). Ironically, by shooting himself in the chest, Flory preserves the mark of his shameful, marginal nature even in death. With death, Flory's birthmark fades, but it is immortalized in the minds of the Anglo officials: "Flory? Oh yes, he was a dark chap, with a birthmark. He shot himself in Kyauktada in 1926. Over a girl, people said. Bloody fool" (*Burmese Days* 283).

However, Orwell's dark picture of imperialism does not end with Flory's death. Veraswami performs a final act of friendship in getting Flory's death certificate to read "accidental death" instead of "suicide," but without the friendship of a white man his reputation is buried by the libelous efforts of U Po Kyin. Flory's servants inherit a little

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money from their master, but end up in poverty. Ma Hla May joins a brothel, regretting that she did not save up the money she received from Flory. Meanwhile, the villain of the novel reaches all of his earthly goals. U Po Kyin, after the campaign he dedicated to discrediting Veraswami, is given a place in the Kyauktada club before being promoted throughout Burma. However, he fails to build the pagodas that he hoped would save his soul, dying of apoplexy “before so much as a brick of those atoning pagodas had been laid” (*Burmese Days* 286). The most damning conclusion falls to Elizabeth, who married Macgregor after Flory’s death. Though Orwell does little to make Elizabeth sympathetic throughout the novel, his ending undermines any fond feeling the reader might have toward her:

Elizabeth has grown mature surprisingly quickly, and a certain hardness of manner that always belonged to her has become accentuated. Her servants live in terror of her, though she speaks no Burmese. She has exhaustive knowledge of the Civil List, gives charming little dinner-parties and knows how to put the wives of subordinate officials in their places—in short, she fills with complete success the position for which Nature has designed her from the first, that of a burra memsahib. (*Burmese Days* 287)

Orwell’s condemnation of Elizabeth relies on two factors. The first is her persistent racism and snobbishness, something of which Orwell is rightfully critical. The second factor that Elizabeth works within the morally bankrupt imperial system to achieve what limited success she can. Orwell’s meaning is clear: it is those who work within the imperial system who succeed in it, and the imperial system is inherently corrupting. However, there is little satisfaction to that success. U Po Kyin’s corruption allows him to be admitted to the club, but his attempt at spiritual reconciliation is cut short, for which

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his soul will face the long-term consequences. Even Elizabeth, who is painted as a gleeful tyrant in this final description, has achieved only limited success in a place where all who surround her are miserable. In *Burmese Days* anyone who opposes the imperial project is doomed to fail, but Orwell's empire is so degraded and morally bankrupt that even success is viewed skeptically.

### **Conclusion**

Orwell's novel *Burmese Days* relies on racial and sexual stereotypes, revealing Orwell's own biases when it comes to the imperial project. Most of Orwell's male British characters perform a certain type of masculinity, a masculinity which Flory can never quite imitate. It is the masculinity of conquerors and explorers, of war heroes and hunters, premised on the subjugation of the racialized and gendered other. It is an ideal that Flory ridicules and strives for—an ideal that he fails to achieve. This failure is symbolized by the massive birthmark on his cheek, which highlights his place as an outcast, while also implying an almost biracial nature in a system where those who not fit into the racial binary are considered outcasts. Orwell attributes to Flory's ultimate destruction to this mixing with the East—the catalyst for all of his subsequent failures. However, it is not the East that is corrupting, but the imperial structures that rule it. His ties to Veraswami create ridicule in the club, while his ties to the idea of imperial masculinity keep him from recommending his friend for the club for months. Flory's relationships with the Burmese people and culture disgust Elizabeth, whom Flory looks to as an escape from the corruption of imperialism. Finally, Flory's ties to Ma Hla May lead to his final downfall. At the beginning of the novel, Flory is brimming with human potential, but due to the corrupting influence of imperial society, that potential is ultimately frustrated.



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*Burmese Days* emphasizes the utter corruption of the imperial project. Only those who work within that corruption, like U Po Kyin and Elizabeth, can gain any sort of success.

## Conclusion

The justifications for empire have always been entangled with the conquerors' perceptions of the women and the imperial Other. These images, created and perpetuated by journalism, art, and literature, have had a profound effect on how Europeans and Americans viewed the world and its conquest. In the three late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century works I studied, the authors use race and gender to produce an anti-imperial message and discuss the limits of imperial ideas. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, and George Orwell's *Burmese Days* engage critically with race and gender as a means of qualifying and breaking down the imperial relationship. However, each had varying success dealing with the intersections of power, gender, and race, leading to vastly different characters and relationships within the works.

*Heart of Darkness* values the white male relationship over the relationships between the genders and races. Marlow's main goal throughout the novella is to reach Kurtz, mimicking the imperial male encounters found in travel writings like Henry Morton Stanley's *How I Found Livingstone* (Cole 254). Despite this, Marlow is heavily preoccupied with his perceived kinship with the "savage" Africans whom he sees on the banks of the river and who work as part of his crew. This recognition of kinship has contributed to the ongoing criticism surrounding whether Conrad's rhetoric of the Congo and the Congolese is racist. It is certainly a kinship that is never acted upon, except in death. Marlow makes a particularly strong claim to his friendship with the helmsman after he dies, given how he describes the man as foolish during his life. The helmsman was a casualty in Marlow's quest for a white male encounter in the African interior, a sacrifice that Marlow deeply regrets when he realizes the madness to which Kurtz has

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descended. Far from the eloquent speeches which fellow company men describe to Marlow, Kurtz is so corrupted and incapable of connection that Marlow can barely stand to be in the same cabin with him. Kurtz's final words—"the horror! The horror!"—reflect the corruption of the imperial endeavor and its effects on the white male relationship. However, it is a relationship that Marlow covets, lying to Kurtz's Intended about his final words in order to reaffirm an intimacy that hardly existed to begin with.

Unlike Conrad, whose discussion of the imperial relationship is limited to white men, Forster frames his entire novel around the question of whether an Indian man and a British man can be friends. In *A Passage to India*, Fielding and Aziz easily navigate the cultural gap that separates white women from Indian women and men. However, their relationship is established, damaged, and finally condemned based on the intervention of three white women: Mrs. Moore, Adela Quested, and Stella Moore. Mrs. Moore is the first to meet Aziz, and it is by her recommendation that Adela expresses an interest in meeting the Muslim doctor to Fielding. The two strengthen their friendship when Aziz shows Fielding a photo of his wife, imitating the intimacy of lifting the purdah. The relationship is damaged after Adela accuses Aziz of assaulting her, an accusation that plays into British anxieties about interracial rape. Initially, Fielding sides with Aziz, assured of his friend's innocence, but when the Anglo-Indian community abandons Adela following the trial, Fielding gives her a place to stay and they become friendly, an act which Aziz sees as a betrayal and which begins the destruction of their friendship. This destruction is finalized when Fielding marries a British woman—Stella Moore—which both he and Aziz recognize as Fielding "[throwing] in his lot with Anglo-India"—an

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action the newly nationalist Aziz cannot stand. Once again, it is the gendered and racialized social constructs of empire that condemns the imperial friendship.

Orwell's anti-imperial novel *Burmese Days* focuses on several different relationships within the imperial construct. However, in this dark portrait of empire, these relationships are often based on stereotypes, severely limiting Orwell's critique. These stereotypes are especially prevalent in Dr. Veraswami, Flory's Indian friend with whom he debates the merits of empire. The use of racial stereotypes diminishes Orwell's assertions that the two have a meaningful relationship, but certain moments of connection ring true, such as when Flory confesses Veraswami is the only person with whom he can be honest and when Veraswami takes care of Flory's body after death in an attempt to protect his friend from further defamation. However, while Flory does have a few touching moments with Veraswami, it is his relationships with Ma Hla May and Elizabeth Lackersteen that illuminate Orwell's pointed criticism of empire and its subjects. In his discussions with Veraswami, Flory condemns moralistic claims that the British are "civilizing" the Burmese, stating that it is trade alone that brought the British to Burma. Ma Hla May is a literal personification of this exploitative imperialism—Flory bought her from her parents at a young age and has treated her as little more than a sex worker since then. Elizabeth, on the other hand, clings to imperial notions of British femininity and expects Flory to emulate the masculine counterpart. Ma Hla May's spectacle at the church leads to Flory's downfall, but it is Elizabeth's final rejection that leads Flory to suicide. In Orwell's corrupt empire, the bonds of the imperial relationship are built on exploitation, and only those who embrace that corrupting imperial "idea" have a chance at any sort of success, and even that success is limited.

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Conrad, Forster, and Orwell use themes of race, gender, and the imperial relationship in order to explore greater ideas about the imperial projects. *Heart of Darkness* silences women and Africans in order to emphasize the relationships between white male colonizers. Throughout the novella, Marlow systematically silences African voices, diminishes African bodies, and discredits the voices of women. With the final lie, Marlow seals his identity as the only legitimate voice to share the imperial narrative. *A Passage to India* explores the male interracial friendship through the connections made by women. The female British characters serve as the instigators of Aziz and Fielding's interracial imperial friendship, as well as the cause for its dissolution. Even Aziz's strident nationalism that leads to his rejection of Fielding is foreshadowed by Aziz's embrace of Indian women. Finally, *Burmese Days* uses race and gender to explore how empire corrupts the imperial officer and all of those who surround him. Flory as a character is given every opportunity to change and achieve his ideal self, if not the masculine imperial ideal. However, he utterly fails, leading to his own demise and the destruction of all who were close to him. Elizabeth is the only one to succeed, but she only does it within the limited scope that empire offers her. All of these works, despite their flawed depictions of race and gender and their qualified anti-imperial stances, anticipate the collapse of the British empire to come.

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