



E.M. FORSTER'S WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD AS "A HUMANIST'S PICTURE OF EDWARDIAN ENGLAND" TRANSCENDING CONVENTIONAL NOTIONS OF GOOD AND EVIL

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Abstract

*This paper aims at picturizing E.M. Forster as one of the major English literary figures whose literary contributions **Where Angels Fear to Tread** and **A Passage to India** received acclaim and recognition as contributions of high distinction, thereby making him secure an assured place among established writers. No doubt, Forster is a novelist with a philosophical mind and he is not only a doctrinaire thinker but also a thoughtful writer, whose very first novel **Where Angels Fear to Tread** proved itself to be 'modern' in all respects, using situations commonly associated with the domestic comedy following events in the traditional order of cause and effect, as a humanist's picture of Edwardian England transcending conventional notions of good and evil.*

Keywords: Recognition, Literary, Distinction, Traditional, Conventional, Comedy, Thinker, Modern.

Edward Morgan Forster undoubtedly one of the major English Literary figures of today, won fame and name as a novelist when he was in his twenties. Born in London in 1879, he produced his first novel, **Where Angles Fear to Tread** (1905), at the age of twenty six and by the time he became thirty-one, he had publication of four novels to his credit, which were all hailed as contributions of high distinction. And when **A Passage to India**, his most notable work, appeared in 1924, winning him unstinted praise, he was only forty-five. It was a story of amazingly quick rise to fame. It is said that Forster started with his novels and stories and almost suddenly, after having secured an assured place among established writers, turned to essays, biography and reviewing. Two authors considerably influenced Forster: Meredith as a spiritual power and Jane Austen whose novels showed him the possibilities of domestic comedy.

In E.M. Forster, we have a novelist with a philosophical mind. Not what one calls a doctrinaire thinker but a thoughtful writer. Though his early novels have been described as Edwardian, technically, his very first novel **Where Angels Fear to Tread** (1905), proved to be 'modern' in all aspects, using situations commonly associated with the domestic comedy and even follows even in the traditional order of cause and effect, but significant changes in the outlook of its chief characters are effected by what E.M.Forster termed, symbolic moments and what James Joyce introduced as the 'epiphany'. **The Longest Journey** (1907) is his autobiographical piece in which Forster is concerned with what puzzled him often, namely the relationship with his mother whom he has idolised. **A Room with a View** (1908) is Forster's earliest attempt at novel writing though it is third in the order of publication. The debt Forster owed to Jane Austen is clearly seen in this particular novel. The point of deviation from Jane Austen is in the attitude of society towards the lovers, and the lover's attitude towards society's norms. Music forms an important technical device in the narrative organization of Forster's ambitious novel **Howard End** (1910). A particular movement in the piece visualized by Helen Schlegel, one of the characters as the appearance of the goblins, is used as the rhythm of the narrative. The intrusion of the working class people, among the upper middle class men and women, is equated with it.



Throughout the novel, the house 'Howards End' dominates and different attitudes to this and other houses form another **leit motif**. Christopher Gillie points out,

"It is this kind of interest in narrative organization which in one aspect of his work, shows Forster to be among the innovators of English fiction, as opposed to the conservative who relied on the familiar formal constituents - story and plot" (Gillie 72).

He published **A Passage to India** in 1924, which is Forster's most modern novel and on its strength alone Forster's reputation as a leading novelist of the twentieth century could stand. Maturity marks this novel in all its respects. When the novel is spoken of as art, the focus of attention falls on what Marx Schorer called its "achieved content". The most important aspect that gives meaning to it is the one that deals with the people who live through its pages. In his book, **Reading the Novel** Roger B. Henkle writes, "The novel as an artistic expression appears to have as its objective, the deeper, richer knowledge of human life" (P 86). At an interview for

The Paris Review, Wilfred Stone quotes:

"In no book have I got down more than the people I like, the person whom I think I am and the people who irritate me" (P 123)

Thus, Forster's characters are drawn from his own experience of people and it would not be far fetched to say that his inspiration to write came from his interest in people. As John Batchelor puts it, "Shaw's plays reflect the irrelevance and inefficacy of male force and as a corollary, in many of his plays, power is vested in the female" (P 24). Forster, like D.H. Lawrence, has created women who guide the destinies of men. In the words of Evelyne Hanquart, "... The matriarchal figure rules the world inhabited by his (E.M.Forster's) heroes" (P 59). The reason, according to Glen Cavaliero, lies in Forster's special gift as a writer, "who makes a myth out of his own life by weaving its various strands into a new pattern. He points out:

"His childhood and boyhood were dominated by women - his mother his grandmother, her three daughters, his great aunt and her vinegary niece, Henrietta Saynot; in addition, there were his father's sister, Laura Forster and his mother's friend Maimie Aylward, with her two sisters it adds up to an alarming number": (P 2).

As such, women play a significant role in Forster's fiction as matriarchs, their allies and the rebels and apart from these characters there are such characters as blundering fools, fallen or victim women. According to the function, the matriarchs fulfill in these novels, they are recognized as malign or



benign matriarchs. The rebels are usually younger women who are enlightened and among them also, a difference is noticed between the vehement rebels who stand to lose and the balanced rebels who to some extent succeed one of the allies, in **Howards End** is old and she stands by a benign matriarch. Two other allies appearing in **Where Angels Fear to Tread** in **The Longest Journey** are younger and they stand by malign matriarchs upholding false values.

Forster's Sawston novels **Where Angels Fear to Tread** (1905), **The Longest Journey** (1907) and **A Room with A View** (1908) are dialectically connected, thereby forming a comic sequence unique in English fiction. They reveal Forster's eagerness as a young man to "ring out the old and ring in the new". Very much under the influence of Cambridge, its Apostles and their creed of humanism, the novels portray what Ruse Macanely calls "the gorilla warfare that is perpetually waged between society and the individual" (P 18). In **Where Angels Fear to Tread**, Mrs. Herriton, the matriarch and her daughter and ally, Harriet are on the side of society, while Lilia the foolish rebel, and Caroline the enlightened rebel oppose them in the name of individual liberty.

The novel begins with Lilia's departure to Italy in the company of Caroline Abbott. Ten years ago, Lilia had married Charles Herriton who had died soon after the birth of a daughter, Irma. The Herritons looked down upon Lilia on account of her lack of proper up-bringing. They were influential members of the society of Sawston, a typical English Suburb. To them, Lilia proved to be a constant source of embarrassment and therefore they were happy to see her go. Panic overtook their sense of relief when they happened to hear of Lilia's intention of marrying an Italian. Philip, the youngest of Mrs. Herriton's three children, was sent post haste to prevent the marriage, but Lilia outwitted them by marrying Gino Carella her lover, before Philip could reach Italy. Caroline Abbott bewildered by a sudden realization that this marriage just wouldn't do, returned to England in the company of Philip.

Lila's second marriage failed as Gino's racial memory prevented him from being Chivalrous to a northern woman. Gino broke Lilia, the happy-go-lucky widow of thirty three, step by step but sincerely without intending to do so. Lilia died giving birth to a son. The news reached the Herritons and Mrs. Herriton decided to publish the death of Lilia but keep the birth of the child a secret. Forster has portrayed the matriarch, on the side of morality, duty and order as understood and practised by and insular society. The rebel younger generation has been influenced powerfully by Italy's charm. The business of another is to prove Mrs. Herriton the matriarch wrong and those who oppose her right. In the manner of a clever sophist Forster keeps on alternating comments of admiration with comments of condemnation of giving the reader of complex picture of the intellectual and spiritual muddle characteristic of the society Mrs. Herriton presents. On the positive side of Mrs. Herriton's character are cited her tolerance and understanding of her children, her interest in the upbringing of her granddaughter, her tact, her skill of home management, her several other social graces and capabilities which had won for her the respect of her peers and subordinates. As the embodiment of a society, in the words of Wilfred Stone, "already touched with rigor mortis", (P 172), these are her faults: hypocrisy, selfishness, pride and repression of vigour. Mrs. Herriton with her gifts of diplomacy and flexibility represents society which even Philip and Caroline agree is invincible.

The matrarch's strong ally in this novel is her elderly daughter write whom, the author tells us, she got on very well. Harriet is marked by her peevishness, her religious adherence and above all by her rigid stupidity. Of her Christopher Gillie writes:



"Harriet does not bear the Sawston stereo-type plastically as her mother does, adapting it to her purposes and she is certainly not capable of detachment from it like her brother. For her, it is dogma, and she is an excellent caricature of English insularity at its crudest" (49).

Her reaction to Italy is typical

"Foreigners are a filthy nation" (P 68) in her opinion; and not a single word of admiration escapes her during her stay in Monteriano. This narrow-mindedness, this inability to see virtue or beauty in anything different from one's own is typical of muddle-headed, half-baked religiosity. The moral muddle in Harriet's life is brought out by the author earlier in the novel: Mrs. Herriton had just asked her children whether they should go into mourning for Lilia's death; the author writes, "Harriet thought that they should. She had been detestable to Lilia while she lived, but she always felt that the dead deserve (d) attention and sympathy" (WAFT 62). Lilia would probably have escaped her Italian misadventure and premature death had the Harritons shown the right kind of attention and sympathy while she lived. J.B. Beer points out what Forster's standpoint is. He argues: "His moral earnestness, duly taken over, rejects not only religious dogmas but specific moral codes. His chief moral demand is that men should be true to themselves"(P 19). Of all the characters in the novel, it is Lilia who satisfies this demand. She functions effectively as a foil to Harriet. To conclude, the novel is a humanists' picture of Edwardian England, rejecting pompous Victorian ways and reaching towards values which lie outside its narrow insular imagination.

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