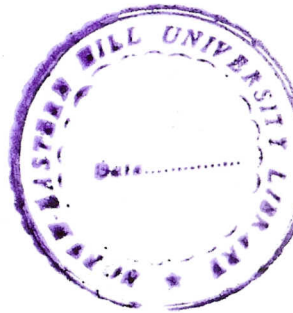


E. M. FORSTER AND THE CRITICAL TRADITION



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Submitted In fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG : INDIA

MAY 2003



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ABSTRACT – presented at the Pre-submission Seminar on 16.04.2003.

My dissertation is an attempt to place E.M.Forster, the novelist-Critic, in the greater tradition of Modern Literary Criticism. Forster has been much acclaimed as a great novelist and *A Passage to India* (1924) was a sensational success. There have been innumerable studies on his various novels and short stories, and much has been talked about his special brand of liberal humanism reflected through these works. As a novelist Forster probed different aspects of the human condition in order to make sense of life which appeared to be a mystery and a muddle to him. His fictional imagination feverishly traced the complex web of human relationship in its various forms, in search of sustainable meaning. Forster's central problem remains man's unceasing quest for happiness and wholeness. In his novels Forster tried to experiment with humanistic ideals and with the possibilities of aesthetic wholes. But this artistic and fictional exercise was far too remote from the world of actualities which he discovered around him, and after being put to severe test in the novels, this exhilarating artistic vision of an integrated world full of integrated individuals could not be made to "connect" with the tragic realities of the modern world. The humanist's ideals of tolerance, friendship, liberalism and love were all put to the acid test in the half dozen novels he wrote. Thus Forster, the novelist, found himself always at the centre of a conflict, a conflict between what he experimented with in his novels and what was experienced actually, between an artistic, liberal-humanist view of life and a painfully realistic, tragic experience of life. Though Forster found a slight possibility of an ordered life only in art, he could not possibly cloister himself complacently in that 'ivory tower'. After his "shy, crablike" survey of the modern scene, after presiding over the gigantic failure of the human spirit and human relationship in *A Passage to India*, Forster sort of "dried up" as a novelist and turned to criticism. His criticism, in a persuasive form of plain talk – clear, simply phrased and colloquial, is also a powerful sequel to this central quest. But critics by and large have significantly ignored this phase of his literary career. Here one is struck by the fact that right from one of his undergraduate essays in 1899 on Henry Fielding to his Post-war

broadcasts as a cultural commentator on the modern condition Forster evinces a strong critical acumen. If his novels betrayed the symptoms of his liberal-humanist inclination, his criticism, which was written later, was a purposive endeavour to make that inclination effectively prevail in a world which refused to wake from its dogmatic slumber. Without professing any absolutist theory, without formulating any philosophical positions, Forster, the critic, tried to “connect”, slowly and steadily, art with life. This project within its obvious limitations and usual constraints tries to trace the development of Forster’s critical position through the many articles and reviews written by him. The six main chapters of this work deal with different aspects of E.M.Forster’s life and works leading to his final emergence as a literary critic with great relevance in the modern world.

The first chapter studies the various influences on Forster which directly or indirectly contributed to his intellectual evolution. These include people, places, travels, incidents, institutions, associations and groups which influenced Forster right from infancy to maturity, and greatness. His family dominated by some powerful women influenced him greatly. Special mention can be made of Marianne Thornton, his great aunt whose biography by Forster tellingly reveals his attitude to problems and issues of life in general. Significant among the other influences are Italy, Egypt, his Cambridge companion, Meredith, his special friend, Syed Ross Masood, and most significantly India, Forster’s metaphor for the mystery and complexity of life.

The second chapter is a resume of his world view as a man of letters in the midst of the world. This touches upon his astonishingly refreshing views of politics, society, religion which have contributed to forming his ideological positions. The foremost among them is that of Forster as an Optimist in Life. He was a compulsive optimist, an ardent lover of freedom. He firmly believed that people are “radically good” and they ceaselessly wish to get into touch with one another. In this seemingly idyllic mood Forster tries to come to terms with the grueling contradiction which public life presented during his time, life dominated by violence and growing isolation and marginalization of the individual. Added to this is his faith in and love of nature. He believed that one “can write down ‘man’ with the help of images from nature” and thus make him more pleasing and

appealing. Also refreshing is his 'Neo-Platonic-Coleredigean idealism' which is the central axis of his social criticism as against the Aristotelian-Benthamite-materialistic-utilitarian axis which was the order of the day. His benevolent, playfully tolerant, agnostic humanism in religion, which seems to have been poised against dogmatic Christianity, provides an imaginative insight into the working of his mind as a critic. His strong preference for 'aristocracy-in-democracy' in Politics further accentuates his liberalist predilection.

The third chapter is on Forster's views on Art, his Aesthetics. Besides trying to ascribe some sort of a theory of art to Forster, this chapter examines the evolution of Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy from Plato to the modern times. Forster's ambivalent relationship to major schools of aesthetics, especially the Romantic aesthetics and Psych-analytic aesthetics, is discussed in passing with a view to trace the formative influence behind his critical formulations. The chapter tries to emphasize the role of a single expression of Forster's: "Not looking at art leads to one goal only. Looking at it leads to so many", and proceeds to accentuate his eclectic attitude which greatly influenced his views on art. Forster's views on art are also influenced by the principles of music. His passionate desire to connect prose with passion, life with poetry, lands him in a state of 'diagonal syndrome' – a tendency to discover implicit connection between things. So as a critic he looks for diagonals everywhere and celebrates whenever he finds one. Art, according to him, should discover for us the hidden connection that exists between things and thus should create a general harmonious situation of geniality and goodness. Love should eventually flourish in such art-begotten situation. Coming of love into prominence naturally leads to gentleness and delicacy as against boorish one-sidedness. It leaves the door open to various opportunities. Forster praises the C minor key of Beethoven which in fact effects a strong diagonal between music and non musical things and thus typifies the works of Beethoven. This key which sounds like the weak squeaking of a fidgety rat seems to be the most favourite key of Forster. His criticism seems to be characteristically formulated in this musical key. Forster believes in standing a bit aside while looking at arts so that from this diagonal position he can have a better and more complete view of things. And having had a more complete view than the straight-seeing publicans, he can

playfully use the C Minor key to talk about it instead of the boisterous jargons of the garrulous theorists. Diagonal in position, and C minor in execution, Forster's aesthetic formulations advance the role of love in the realm of art.

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The next chapter on Forster's literary criticism is the central argument of this thesis. 'A Plea for Imagination' – and a strong one too, is how his criticism can be described. All through his reviews, articles, essays, broadcasts, lectures one just cannot ignore the jubilant employment of and spontaneous celebration of creative imagination while discussing different authors and their books. Forster is in no doubt that "imagination is our only guide into the world created by words." Forster gives the impression of an ancient mariner, a compulsive story-teller who tells the story of books and their authors with such spontaneous flair and delicacy. "I am a Jane Austenite", "Works of Thomas Hardy is my home" – are some samples of his critical statements. Forster's criticism is not dogmatic or doctrinaire. It has no theory, nor manifestos. It just re-tells the story of literature in the Forsterian fashion. Resembling as it does what Modern Theory describes as Narratives, Forster's criticism takes us nearer to the condition under which a literary work of art is produced. In theory's parlance, it brings out the 'literariness' of a work. It also, and most characteristically, brings us closer to the works and the authors emotionally. It reveals what can be roughly called the poetry discovered in the works of literature and tries to connect poetry with life, passion with prose. Forster, like John Keats before him, always valued the holiness of heart's affection and the truth of imagination and considered them as of prime importance while judging a book or a literary author. Imagination and affection take his criticism right into the midst of human concerns and worldly matters, and Forster, the literary critic very readily engages with these issues. Hence his literary criticism is a mixture of many issues, not merely literary, and thus resembles what Modern Theory classifies as Cultural Studies. Forster's criticism can be termed as larger statements about human culture which are made rich with the colour of imagination and a rare sensitiveness which considers everything truly human as surely holy. All sorts of considerations, - national, geographic, political, personal and so on, - go into the formation of Forster's critical judgment of works and authors. There is no one central criterion for either admiring or running down a work. Forster admires or

pulls up authors and their works for a variety of reasons. This chapter deals in some bit of detail Forster's critical assessment of some biographers, historians, poets, dramatists, writers of diaries and memoirs. Eliot is admired for caring about the soul, Auden, because "he can command me to follow him", Cavafy and D'Annunzio, for the sense of contact with the land, William Barnes, for welcoming the entire human race and for the predominance of heart in his works, Lytton Strachey because in his biography of Queen Victoria he managed to get inside his subject, Wilfrid Blunt because he was "partly by achievement and wholly by temperament a poet", Edward Gibbon, because for him study and amusement were the same thing, and Shakespeare and Voltaire, because they are the two spokesmen for Europe at the last judgment. He runs down certain authors for equally interesting reasons: Sir Sydney Lee's biography of King Edward VII is criticized because "the book is dead", Marco Polo is rated down because its author could not differentiate between men and make them come alive, Rudyard Kipling is chastised for immature imagination, H.G.Wells, for his worship of science, and Tagore, for dabbling with superficialities which prevents the essential contact with the deeper zones of imagination. 'Poetic elements', 'inner life', 'passion', 'fire within', 'sense of humanity' – these are some of the loose criteria variously employed by Forster while he deals with literary works and their authors. One can generalize these into a broad category and roughly call it Imagination - the presence or absence of which characterizes a literary work of art. Forster also uses the principle of irony along with imagination in order to assess the relevance and value of a book and its author. His unique sense of irony is very effective and it helps him to achieve a well adjusted tolerance towards the incoherence and alienation which strongly characterize the modern situation.

Forster's special aesthetics of fiction is the subject of the next chapter. Fiction was closest to his heart and so his views on the art of fiction are of great critical value. Besides presenting an almost exhaustive study of his *Aspects of the Novel*, this chapter puts together Forster's views on the novel and the art of the novel which are aired through a number of articles and reviews. Search for consistency in his approach is always frustrating because his ever dynamic ebullience as a practising novelist-critic eludes facile generalization and easy labelling. But one can observe a very strong imaginative

sympathy running across Forster's criticism of fiction and fiction writers. Forster is absolutely relaxed and never self-conscious while he speaks about novels and their authors. He seems to be a glorious native swimming by his very native shores. Virginia Woolf speaks of the intimacy and lover's privileges which Mrs Brown, the lady in distress, namely, fiction, so graciously allows Forster. Forster does not claim to be a critic in the genuine, academic sense of the term. While he disclaims knowledge he is proud of the intimacy with fiction and the art of fiction. He seems to have assumed the role of a hired critic while delivering the Clark lectures which were later published as the celebrated *Aspects of the Novel*. But it turned out to be a refreshing, trend-setting document of the art of modern fiction. It in fact presents a 'fiction-in-fiction' presentation of the art of fiction, memorable in its unique style of ease and informality which are unheard of in usual critical documents. In spite of the visible inconsistency and the lack of any central critical principle in *Aspects* this study tries to trace Forster's vision for the modern novel from the seven aspects he discusses in the book. It is an eclectic vision of a rainbow and Forster, as this work argues, takes us towards a 'Rainbow aesthetics' of Fiction. It is descriptive rather than prescriptive, imaginative rather than doctrinaire, revolutionary rather than orthodox. Forster's central plea for Imagination becomes strongly pronounced in the evolution of his aesthetics of fiction.

The chapter that follows is a corollary of the previous one in which a cursory survey of novels and novelist discussed by Forster in his various writings are examined. Criticism, like literature, is a man to man affair in which it is the heart that should predominate. This is the central argument which Forster the critic seems to be making. Hence we arrive at a point where we can almost say that literary criticism, in the Forsterian style and with the Forsterian emphasis on human elements, becomes an expression of creative understanding and friendliness. It should promote the brotherhood of writers and thus contribute to international understanding. Critic becomes Friend. Looking at the trends the postmodern theories have taken recently regarding Cultural Studies Forster's vision of Literature and the Novel, - dynamic, eclectic and liberal, - is strongly relevant in the modern world. He is truly our contemporary in the modern world.

Forster's loosely modulated and casually pronounced critical formulations are basically characterized by his sincere search for the conditions of poetry in any literary or non-literary work. Though he was primarily a novelist, Forster had the temperament of a poet who hesitantly tried to legislate for the benefit of the general conscience of all humanity. His anguish and indignation about the forms of modern institutionalized life and its exasperating grossness and vulgarity slowly transformed him into a great champion of what can be called human values in life and art. His unique concern, as a critic, was to assert the essential poetry of life in a grossly materialistic and shamelessly commercialized modern world. Though a return of the nymphs to the modern world was made impossible by Science and technology, Forster, the Novelist-critic, pleaded for the conditions in which humanity could at least spasmodically rediscover and sometimes reassert its innate and native spirituality. Symbolic, semi-moral suggestiveness and semi-mystical possibilities of love and harmony in the private human sphere, which Forster, the novelist, points at in his novels, become, in his criticism, direct and passionate pleas for the role of imagination, understanding and tolerance in public life. Allusive postures of the novelist are transformed into the zealous and urgent postulations of the propagandist-critic. Forster kept aloof from the trends which were in vogue, and, disclaiming any affinity with the "given" and the popular, was "always a little on the outside." This gives him a unique position as critic though he is not counted among the great pioneers of modern theoretical criticism. Distancing himself from the fashionable, brick-laying, black-smithing, theory-forming, workshop sort of criticism of the contemporary critics and from their pontific pretensions, Forster, in a half-serious, half-comic tone, went on a merry-go-round traversing both the firmer grounds and "moister areas of literature" like a freelancer commenting gracefully and gratefully on what it pleased him to observe. This produced just that criticism, refreshing and original, because it springs straight from the heart of a sensitive artist engaged in the creative act, and is the result of his temperament in tension with the art he was struggling to create.

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