

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The true history of the human race," writes Forster, is the history of human affection. In comparison with it all other histories — including economic history — are false."¹ Being concerned with the study of history that deals with ^{the} human race in relation to human affection, Forster gives in his novels full weight to personal relationship which, he thinks, is his primary concern as a novelist. It is in this sphere that he considers the subtleties of moral life. Both in his novels and miscellaneous writings he gives evidence of his deep concern with the problem of personal relation. His method of dealing with social problems in the novels is naturally in tune with his conception of personal intercourse which is the basis of his new social order. An idealistic liberal who has trust neither in political action nor in political reformers, Forster is of opinion that man is innately good, and that he can express his true nature in a proper form of society. His irony, therefore, assails the agencies that ossify natural emotion, develop regimented outlook, and impede the life of spontaneity, passion and friendship. He also deplors the role of science which is repugnant to the emergence of an aesthetic order. Naturally, he is sorry that economic enterprises, which science has blessed, have made the

1. 'De Senectute', The London Magazine, IV, ii (November 1957) pp.15-18. Quoted by H.J.Oliver in The Art of E.M.Forster, p.9

modern philistines aesthetically sterile, imaginatively weak, and emotionally cold. He caricatures his conventional characters for their inability to 'connect'. His ideal characters, however, appear clear-sighted; they are endowed with all potentialities for personal intercourse.

An Edwardian in point of time and in spirit, Forster is one of the celebrated novelists of modern times whose reputation rests rather on a very slender output. Since the publication of A Passage to India in 1924, he gave nothing by way of fiction, though he had been writing on matters of vital importance to mankind all the while until his death. The close attention he has received from his countless readers and literary critics is obviously because of the meticulous sense of art he has brought to bear upon the form of the novel and the new dimensions he added to it.

Forster's ardent belief in an aesthetically refined life and in such^a social order, bereft of the impact of industrialisation and colonisation, is reinforced by his endorsement of some richer values essential for the emergence of a religious attitude to life. Persuaded to retreat to a safer ground like tolerant individualism owing to the explosion of the Victorian dream of benevolent social progress, Forster, while shunning any of the popular creeds of today, or any of the methods of the propagandists, lays emphasis on the holiness of heart's affections, in one's being true to oneself, and in the proportion of blood, brain and spirit which Meredith stressed.

Forster's social criticism serves as a contour line in the map of his fictional world because he does not intend his novels to be mere sociological blue-prints in spite of the accepted fact that his is a sophisticated middle-class world. The grafting of a new order in the conventional life, artistically interwoven, is, therefore, well matched with his irony that assails the bourgeois society. The ideal life, so pin-pointed in the earlier novels, eclipses the artificial life of the world of snobs, represented by Sawston, which, while being placed in contrast with the other, the novelist desires to view as a metamorphosis on the lines of his thesis. He cherishes ^{his} ideals of life that might have had relevance to the classical past of Greece, but do not perhaps harmonise with the complicated nature of social organizations in the modern world. Yet he is credited with the full import of his sincere moral intention and re-creation of real life — the life of aesthetic values.

Forster is now acknowledged to be one of those rare authors whose books are increasingly appreciated not merely for their interesting stories, rich domestic comedy, or wise sayings, or lofty ideas that bristle their pages, but for the revolutionary approach to life and the 'gentle humanist philosophy' with which he is generally credited. Although his novels could be read with irresistible inquisitiveness, as Trilling thinks, yet they may appear, in the opinion of George Sampson,

as the writings of the 'shy, unworldly quality'.¹ The diverging views of the critics, therefore, spring from their basic approach to Forster's works from different angles of vision : the fundamental point is whether Forster should be studied objectively, or the realism in his novels should be estimated from the subjective point of view alone. Naturally, therefore, literary criticism on Forster has never been uniform for obvious reasons. The critics generally miss the point that Forster's novels embody the criticism of Edwardian money values that flourished in a period which witnessed England changing from the leading industrial power in Europe into a leading financial power. Such a gradual change on ^{the} social plane appears subtly reflected in his stories and novels ; and each of them lays emphasis on the reversal of values with a view to suggesting its impact on the spiritual frame of human life.

Literary criticism on Forster by now is surprisingly substantial in volume in spite of his evidently meagre fictional output. Recent criticism on Forster has, however, been concerned primarily with the spiritual and, partly, the metaphysical aspects. It has laid great stress on the mystical aspect of Forster's art. James McConkey's book is an attempt towards an interpretation of Forster in the light of the principles of fictional art expounded by the novelist himself in Aspects of the Novel. J.B.Beer considers him as a romantic writer, laying stress on the fact that Forster's "sense of reality is always vigilant,

1. George Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, Cambridge University Press, 1949, p.969

curbing his inward vision."¹ K.W.Gransden views him as a writer who has pushed back "the frontiers of darkness along those sectors where the English spirit has since the nineteenth century been specially bogged down and benighted."²

There are critics, on the other hand, who consider Forster in relation to his position in the liberal tradition of which he was perhaps the last survivor in English literature. Ifor Evans regards him as "the supreme example of the very aristocracy of liberal intellectualism."³ Trilling, too, has made a noteworthy study of Forster from the same point of view. These critics have studied Forster's works in the light of his liberal values and ideas expounded in his miscellaneous writings. F.C. Crews makes a noteworthy estimate of Forster's novels in relation to their philosophical implications. Wilfred Stone's approach to the study of the background of Forster's ideas and of various influences on his mind, throws a new light on the art of the novelist. G.H.Thompson's approach to Forster is not far removed from that of Beer. He thinks that Forster's novels are romances rather than novels and the principal source of his symbolism is ecstatic experience.

There is, however, a completely different trend also to be found in Forster criticism. D.S.Savage ^{brings} ~~brings~~ a new approach to bear upon Forster's art as a novelist. He considers Forster's achievement from the point of view of ^{as} social criticism embodied

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1. J.B.Beer, The Achievement of E.M.Forster, London, 1963, p.15
 2. K.W.Gransden, E.M.Forster, London, 1962, p.118
 3. B. Ifor Evans, English Literature Between the Wars, London, p.27

in his very novels. According to him, Forster's portrayal of the life of parasitical bourgeoisie is false, because it is based upon social falsehood. Obviously no stable system of moral symbolism, according to Savage, could have been erected upon such a foundation.¹ This type of criticism, however, did not develop considerably for obvious reasons. Forster is an artist; therefore, any doctrinaire criticism of this kind limits an honest appreciation of his art.

C.B.Cox's estimate of Forster's art in relation to liberal tradition or standpoint is intriguing. While throwing light on the limited nature of the scope of liberalism and that of a liberal writer, he, however, concludes that Forster's values thrive best only in a world of peace, security and opulence.²

Forster's idealistic approach to life has prompted most of the critics to consider him primarily from the aesthetic point of view. These critics have not unfortunately taken adequate note of the contemporaneous social scene which considerably shaped Forster's point of view as well as his fictional approach to it; nor have they considered him in the light of his being influenced by Meredith in whose shadows he walks greatly. Forster is, as it were, Meredith's spiritual heir. Therefore, an estimate of his fictional position or standpoint in the light of Meredith's influence on him, is highly intriguing. Forster's values have a pagan character; they are matched against the realistic background of life. His realism,

1. D.S.Savage, 'E.M.Forster' in Writers of To-day, Ed., D.V.Baker, p.160

2. C.B.Cox, The Free Spirit, p. 79.

therefore, comprises both the real and the ideal in a harmonious combination. The aesthetic side of his art being only one side of the shield, the other is represented by ^{an adequate} examination of ^{the} socio-political conditions obtaining in his time.

Forster's treatment of the English social scene is, no doubt, realistic. His vision of a classless society emerging out of the connection between the upper middle-class and the lower one through marriage or sexual relationship is in tune with the popular demand for socialism as well as removal of class distinctions, as noticed in England during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

An extensive examination of Forster's position as a critic of the English society, is not unwarranted, since such critics as have considered him in this light have limited themselves to his attacks on the English middle-class conventions only. This invites an adequate assessment of Forster's art in the light of the formulation of his values and their artistic exposition in his novels; an examination of his innate understanding of the moral dilemmas of the upper middle-class life and his subtle portrayal of personal perplexities of sensitive men and women in Edwardian England is as interesting as the new aspects of life, offspring of his revolutionary outlook, which so creditably widened the dimensions of the fictional world. Any attempt to examine Forster's approach to social reality with a view to accounting for the chasm between the social milieu in his fiction and the values he endorses, should be well matched with showing

the limited nature of the fictional canvas of the earlier novels although the deficiency is fully compensated by laying stress on the evolution of the spirit as the ultimate goal. An estimate of the spiritual evolution in Forster's novels becomes the core of this dissertation.