

Portrayal of Women in E.M. Forster's Fiction : An Appraisal

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An Abstract

This paper is an attempt to present the female characters shaped by E. M. Forster in his novels. Analysing the female characters in the novel *Where the Angels Fear to Tread*, Forster brings out the difference in their minds on following the traditional norms and fight against it. Presenting the contrasting women characters, Forster presents who is the real thread to the society. Thus, Forster has made a detailed study of female mentality during his own period through his characters.

Key Words: Conventional morality, religious values, rebel, liberty, friendship, misery, foolishness, innocence, matriarchy.

The women characters created by E. M. Forster reflects the period in which he wrote his novels. The way in which he created his male characters gave prominence to his female characters as achievers, good manipulators, great saviours and all-time comforters. He projected them as the custodians of traditions. In all his novels, the chaos faced by people due to transition was evident, especially the mother character was considered as the carrier of traditions and that greatly eliminated their existence in new generation. *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the first novel by Forster, makes a diagnostic study of English society where the high phenomenal change was evidenced. In this aspect, this novel was considered as the typical Edwardian novel in the Edwardian society. Frank Kermode rightly says thus,

“... there were signs of a more critical attitude to the past, a developing habit of self-examination... accompanied as always by mixed reactions to all the new evidence of decadence or renovation according to how one interpreted such signs of relaxation as the criticism of capitalism, the question of conventional morality and the treatment in literature of previously forbidden subjects” (PP 33-34).

Forster's novels *Where Angels Fear to Tread*(1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907) and *A Room with a View* (1908) are connected dialectically and combines to form a unique comic sequence in English Fiction. This sequence reveals Forster's young mind and his eagerness to “Ring out the old and ring in the portray” which Rose Macaulay says as, “the Gorilla warfare that is perpetually waged between society and the individual” (Macaulay 18). *Where Angels Fear to Tread* presents Mrs. Herriton and her daughters on one side of the society and also presents a foolish rebel Lilia and an enlightened rebel Caroline on the other side who opposes Herriton's side and fights for individual liberty.

The novel begins with the Caroline and Lilia's departure to Italy. Lilia and Charles Herriton married ten years ago but Herriton died soon after the birth of their daughter Irma. Herriton's family had no good impressions on Lilia as she gifted a continuous embarrassment to the family so they were all happy for her leaving their home. Their happiness did not last longer as they heard the news about Lilia's remarriage with an Italian. Herriton sends Philip to rush and stop the marriage but he could not succeed in his attempt. She marries Gino but their marriage did not last longer. After giving birth to a boy, Lilia expires. Gino takes the responsibility of taking care of their son. Philip and Caroline again goes for bringing back the child to the Herritons but after witnessing the love between the son and father. Philip however in the mission of bring the child, meets with an accident and loses the child. Gino shows his wrath to both of them. But they explained the situation and managed to get back

home safe. Meanwhile, Philip proposes his love to Caroline but she tells him about her silent love towards Gino. Understanding her feelings, Philip did not force her and decides to leave Sawston, but, Caroline stays back in Sawston due to the respect she had on him. Philip in the course of the novel says about their bond thus:

“There is no power on earth that can prevent your criticizing and desiring into splendor nothing can stop you retreating into splendor and beauty-into the thoughts and beliefs that make the real life – the real you” (WAFT 69)

Though, they faced difficulties together, they never became the puppets in the society. the conflict in the novel is expressed through the words of Wifred Stone thus:

“Sawston against Italy is morality against sensuality, duty against joy, order against disorder and even in a comically diminished sense-The Apollonian against the Dionysian, it is a familiar duality. For the last century and a half, such northern Europeans as Goethe, Arnold, Butler, Lawrence and Mann have in their writings made Italy a powerful symbol for release from repression, for all the sensuous and passionate side of life that protestant restraints have made illicit”. (Stone 172)

This novel explores how the changing society in England is influenced by the Italian charm. Forster beautifully shown the character analysis of Herriton who stands as an embodiment of traditions and familial spirituality. Thus, this makes Herriton a thread to individual freedom as she proposes tradition and puts everyone into a shell. The religious adherence and the uncontrollable stupidity of Herriton was explained by Christopher Gillie, he says thus:

“Harriet does not bear the Sawston Stereotype 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 tongue, and she is an excellent caricature of English insularity at its crudest” (Gillie 104).

Herriton describes the citizens of Italy as “Foreigners are a filthy nation”, even her stay at Monteriano did not convince her and change her attitude towards Italy. Her narrow minded attitude and her inability to see goodness in anything shows her typical muddle-headed and half-baked religiosity. Glen Cavaliero writes thus:

“Harriet’s role is more complex than at first appears. She is the one who acts, however disastrously, and within the narrow limits of her imagination, she is strictly honest-always a virtue in Forster’s eyes” (P 68).

However, she was honest in her claims and this honesty is her only grace. Glen further claims thus:

“Her acrid indissoluble character is that of a killer” (P 69)

All her activities are due to her mother who brought up her teaching pride in their status and being highly regimented person. The tragic end of this regimentation was pointed out by John Colmer thus:

“It was clear that she had gone prepared for an interview with Gino, and finding him out, she yielded to a grotesque temptation. But how far this was the result of ill temper, to what extent, she had been fortified by her religion... these questions were never answered” (WAFT 144).

Herriet’s delusion did not end up with her home but to her contribution in the church. In the course of the story, when Philip goes to Herriet’s room in search of her, he finds her Bible kept open on the bed. The verse he encounters was,

“Blessed be the lord my God who teecheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight” (WAFT 136).

This shows that Harriet accomplished her mother’s lessons in her life. This incident actually shows the church’s failure in splitting away the evilness in people’s minds. This frequent criticisms by Forster shows the social inequalities prevailing in the society even after the colonization ends. The moralistic muddles in her life was spoken by the author even in his previous book thus:

“Mrs. Harriton had just asked her children whether they should go into mourning, for Lilia’s death; the author writes, Harriet though that they should. She had been detestable to Lilia while she lived, but she always felt that the deed deserved attention and sympathy” (WAFT 62)

Lilia enjoyed the adventure of Italian culture but unfortunately had a premature death. Only her death brought a sense of kindness and sympathy towards her by the Herritons. J.B. Beer argues on Forster’s standpoint thus:

“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” (Beer 19).

Analysing all the characters in the novel, it is Lilia who satisfies the demand of good Italian friendship. Caroline recognizes her for this by saying thus:

“Now Lilia... though there were things about her I didn’t like, had somehow kept the power of enjoying herself with sincerity” (WAFT 68)

However, it became a tragedy that Lilia is shown as if she had fallen in a trap by her own sense of strangeness. She is introduced as a foolish rebel but she managed to take strong

decisions to be with an Italian who in no way related to their culture. Her decision may be right or wrong but her has undergone a condition where she proved herself as a rebel fighting for freedom. Forster writes thus;

“Lilia had achieved pathos despite herself, for there are some situations in which vulgarity counts no longer, not Cordellia nor imogen more deserve our tears” (WAFT 54)

From her character, Forster shown different kind of a tragedy where this society by its laws, instead of protecting the weaker characters, it pushes them to end their lives. The death of Lilia and her innocent baby shows the deliberate cruelty of this society’s religious and ethical morals. Caroline was yet another contrasting character created by Forster. Caroline’s friendship with Gino teaches her to stand against this dull and idle society, its stupidity, respectability and unselfishness and become a rebel. Thus, this novel proves to be an Edwardian novel which eliminates the Victorian points in the society. John Colmer rightly says thus:

“*Where Angels Fear to Tread* gains much of its strength and delicacy from the ironic juxtaposition of the false values associated with conventional marriage and the true values association with personal relations seen in the tangled love and hatred between Philip and Gino, and most clearly exemplified in the discovery by Caroline and Philip of values that lie outside society’s notions of duty, that transcend conventional notions of good and evil” (117).

Mrs. Herriton is shown as an embodiment of “society’s notions of duty and conventional notions of good and evil”. However, this novel unmask this view and shows them false. Lilia, though she takes foolish decisions, she is a danger to only herself but people

like Herriet is a danger to others. Thus, Forster's women characters shows the mentality of women during his time.

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