



E.M. FORSTER'S PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN CHARACTERS AS NOTHING BUT REFLECTION OF HIS FICTIONAL CAREER AND AGE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of women portrayed in E.M. Forster's fictional world concerning with the women and the position of women in families dominated by ideals. These ideals still prevailed during the childhood and youth of E.M. Forster and the female characters in her fictional world were studied from various angles and views of her relationship as wife, mother, daughter and bride. It beautifully picturizes the female world in where the female characters portrayed by E.M. Forster reflect the temper of the times in which he wrote his novels and embody the feminine virtues noted for the reflection of feminine roles and dominating power.

Key Words: *Matriarchy, Antagonist, Superiority, Stereotypes, Regimentation, Mediocre, Respectability, Displeased, Spiritual Muddle.*

E.M. Forster's women characters reflect the temper of the times in which he wrote his novels. The slow deterioration of the male heroic role gave prominence to women as achievers, manipulators, saviours and comforters. It is customary to regard women as the custodians of traditions. In the novels which appeared during the time when a powerful sense of transition was evident, the mother figure was seen as an upholder of customs that had lost their meaning for the new generation. Forster's first published novel **Where Angels Fear to Tread** makes diagnostic study of English society, in a period of phenomenal changes. In this regard, it is a typical Edwardian novel. Of the Edwardian Period, Frank Kermode writes:

“... there were signs of 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 Sawston novels **Where Angels Fear to Tread** (1905), **The Longest Journey** (1907) and **A Room with a View** (1908) are dialectically connected and form 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 that Rose Macaulay calls “the gorilla warfare that is perpetually waged between society and the individual” (Macaulay 18). In **Where Angels Fear to Tread**, Mrs.Herriton, the matriarch and her daughter and ally, Harriet are on the side of society, while Lillia 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 look 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 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. Carolina Abbott bewildered by a sudden realisation that this marriage just wouldn't do, returned to England in the company of Philip. Lilia'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. A chance meeting with Caroline during a railway journey revealed to Philip what he had so far never guessed: that Miss Abbott held views similar to his own, regarding the society to which they belonged. A picture postcard was sent by Gino revealed to Irma, the presence of her half brother and through her the rest of Sawston came to know of it. Caroline became interested because she felt it her moral duty to try and redeem the child since she had let the mother go to her ruin. Mrs. Herriton could not allow Caroline to take up the responsibility of anyone who could be considered her relative. Once more Philip was sent to Italy to get the baby from its father, whatever the cost. Caroline preceded him this time and Philip was annoyed. To make sure that Philip did not fail this time, the mother had sent Harriet her daughter along. Caroline met Gino and discovered the tremendous tie that bound the father to his son and decided that they ought not to meddle with it. Philip readily agreed but nevertheless went through a business meeting with Gino simply to meet his mother's demand at least a miserable half way. Displeased with Philip's want of determined effort, Harriet went to accomplish her mother's mission. She happened to find the baby unattended and kidnapped it. An accident killed the child, sent Harriet raving mad and broke Philip's arm.

Philip went to tell Gino of the death of his son and came very close to losing his life at the hands of the enraged father. Caroline arrived as the nick of the moment to save him and stayed on to comfort Gino. She saw to it that Gino came round to receive Philip once more as friend. A few days later the English left Italy for good. Harriet was on the road to recovery; Caroline and Philip for the last time in the novel exchanged their views. In this last conversation Philip came to tell Miss. Abbott that he loved her. But Caroline revealed her hopeless love for Gino and Philip had to simply swallow his intention of making her his wife. Philip told her of his decision to leave Sawston and Caroline however decided that she would return to Sawston and her old duties. The novels ends with the two young people comforting themselves in the prospect of their friends. Philip in effect had rejected Sawston once and for all by choosing to remove himself to London, whereas Caroline had chosen to remain in Sawston sustained by her faith in her friendship with Philip. The bond of friendship between them is created by a common awareness and a common acknowledgement, voiced earlier in the novel by Philip:

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

To this faith in themselves is added the strength that experience had given them and hence forward they need not be the puppets of the society. The conflict in the novel is interpreted by Wilfred Stone thus:

“Sawston against Italy is morality against sensuality, duty against joy, order against discorder and even in a comically diminished sense – the Apollonian against the Dinosian. 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).

E.M. Forster has portrayed the matriarch/an unchanging champion of Sawston, on the side of morality, duty and order as understood and practiced by an insular society. The rebel younger generation has been influenced powerfully by Italy and only the matriarch’s ally, Harriet, remains untouched by Italy’s charm. The business of the author 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 giving the reader a complex picture of the intellectual and spiritual muddle characteristic of the society Mrs. Herriton represents. 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 in 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” (172), these are her faults: hypocrisy, selfishness, pride and repression of vigour. Her over-bearing personality makes Mrs. Herriton a greater danger to individual growth and liberty than any of her counterparts in the other two Sawston novels. Miss. Bartlett’s position as dependent relative and Agne’s intellectual inferiority make them less formidable. Mrs. Herriton with her gifts of diplomacy and flexibility represents society which even Philip and Caroline agree is invincible. If she loses in the end, she loses by the interplay of chance which for a moment fools everybody. But her antagonists win a quiet victory, deep down in their inner private selves, by boldly asserting their individuality and rejecting as invalid the claims of superiority that their society makes. They have unmasked its false face and will not be fooled by it anymore. Though no positive upheaval is in sight to overthrow society’s rule over the individual, yet privately, one by one, they can steal a march over it, those who could and would. The matriarch’s strong ally in this novel is her elderly daughter with whom she got on very well. Harriet is marked by her peevishness, her religious adherence and above all by her rigid stupidity. About her, Christopher Gillie writes:

“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 dogma, and she is an excellent caricature of English insularity at its crudest” (Gillie 104)

Her reaction to Italy is typical: “Foreigners area filthy nation” 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. Glen Cavaliero observes 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).

But this honesty seems to be her only saving grace. The same critic further comments:

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

He sees this rigidity as the result of her upbringing; the continued repression of vigour, imposed upon her by a proud mother who taught her to take pride in being a highly regimented person. John Colmer points out to what tragic end this regimentation can more. He says:

“Harriet’s melodramatic sense of familial duty is partly responsible for the death of Lilia’s and Gino’s baby” (P 117).



Writing about Harriets' gross act of kidnapping the baby, Forster comments:

"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)

Not only home but the decadent church too is seen here to have contributed to Harriet's delusion. Earlier, the author tells us that Philip entered Harriet's room looking her for and found her prayer book which lay open on the bed. The verse his eye caught was:

"Blessed be the Lord my God who teacheth?
My hands to war and my fingers to fight" (WAFT 136)

It is anybody's guess whether this verse added militancy to Harriet's determination to accomplish her mother's mission. The incident raises the issue of the failure of the church in the matter of detecting and eliminating any insidious infiltration of evil. A frequent criticism leveled against English religion of the day was that it failed to criticize the nation's activities abroad; that it deliberately shut its eyes to the exploitation and plunder – practiced against the colonies. It only fostered self-complacency. 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 deserved attention and sympathy'" (WAFT 62).

Lilia would probably have escaped her Italian misadventure and premature death had the Herritons shown the night kind of attention and sympathy where 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" (Beer 19).

Of all the characters in the novel, it is Lilia who satisfies this demand. In fact, Caroline Abbott recognises it when she says,

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

The reason is not far to seek: being an outsider, a girl from Yorkshire, she had escaped Sawton regimentation. She functions effectively as a foil to Harriet. Rose Macaulay calls Lilia and Gino, "two vulgar innocents" ... two gay children of nature" (P 38). As the victim of repressive social forces, Lilia's is the role of a tragic heroine. If in anyway, Lilia could be considered the architect of her fate, the fault should be placed on nothing but her foolishness, she failed to see that by marrying Gino, she would be only exchanging one groove for another and a worse groove at that. But the hasty decision to accept the first handsome person who would marry her might well be due to the lightness of the Herriton grip she had been straining against for over eight years. Colmer further comments:

"While in Jane Austen the wise forces of society protect the innocent from unwise marriages and bless their prudential unions, in Forster the conventional forces of society send out rescue parties to bring young lovers to their senses and to enforce false values. But they usually fail" (P 117).



It is a tragic fact that however false the values were, their failure did not make Lilia's escape any the happier. Inadvertently Lilia had fallen into another trap, a trap made grimmer by its strangeness, besides which Lilia's Sawston lot seemed by many degrees brighter and freer. The man acted upon by centuries of animosity strikes the final blow by his infidelity and Lilia crumbles. Forster writes:

“Lilia had achieved pathos despite herself, for there are some situations in which vulgarity counts no longer. Neither Cordellia nor Imogene more deserve our tears” (WAFT 54).

In these words, Forster introduces into fiction a new kind of tragic character whose, fall points an accusing finger at society's laws which instead of giving protection to the weak, only finish them off before their time. In the deaths of Lilia and her baby repressive society's religious and ethical codes stand condemned. In Caroline Abbott, the author has created yet another contrasting character. Contact with Italy awakens Caroline from her suburban torpor; and she becomes a rebel, an opponent of dull and mediocre society, criticizing its idleness, stupidity, respectability and petty unselfishness. In fact, the novel is a humanists picture of Edwardian England, rejecting pompous Victorian ways and reaching towards values which lie outside its narrow insular imagination. John Colmer observes:

“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 associated 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 as matriarch is the embodiment of “Society's notions of duty” and conventional notions of good and evil”. The novel unmasks these notions and shows them up as repressive and false. Lilia is a danger only to herself whereas Harriet is a danger to others. Thus, Forster's women characters reflect the temper of the times in which he wrote his novels.

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