CHAPTER - 1

Introduction

The present study is the result of my own reading of the novels of E.M. Forster over the years. Although there has been perceptively an unprecedented addition to the bulk of scholarly books on E.M. Forster at this fag-end of our century more particularly that of Lionel Trilling’s admirable contribution in the field of the criticism of the novels, yet there remains still an area which attracted me to study the novelist’s avowed commitment to the doctrine of liberalism which had tended towards humanism in his days at the various public schools and finally at Cambridge University where Forster received his education. In fact, Forster’s reputation as a novelist rests on the assumption that he is quite curiously relevant and contemporaneous with us. With his novels, the full tide of the liberal and humanist tradition is encountered. Educated at Tonbridge and Cambridge, Forster represents the qualities of intelligence, toleration of belief in individual freedom that had precedents in the nineteenth century with the prosperous middle class to which he belonged. He drew his inspiration, from traditional Classical Culture, English literature, history and the culture of modern Europe, regarding their influence as the best safeguard for liberalism.

Although a rationalist, Forster, like D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, was convinced that life was something more than merely mental. A love of the bright pagan life of the senses, of impulse and spontaneous emotions drew him to Greeks, but his fastidious intelligence and innate dualism forced...
him to distrust the imaginative vision of life even while he succumbed to its aspiration. He was far from accepting Lawrence's religion of the blood and would have shrunk from a conception of human personality that was based on repulsion and attraction, violence and primitive self assertion. He was convinced that the "wisdom of the heart" had been too little considered in the nineteenth century, with the result that insipid of material progress there had been a weakening of human sympathy and understanding. Englishmen were specially to blame in this, since their educational system neglected the emotions and by overvaluing restraint as a means of developing character they impaired sensitivity. Hence his attack on the Public Schools.

Forster, a liberal and a humanist, loved civilization, which he regarded the finest achievement of liberalism. But he perceived the peculiar dilemma confronting liberalism in the twentieth century. Liberalism was based on reason; it had rejected theology; its chief exponents were agnostic or vaguely patheist. Moreover, reason which had denied the force of imagination was itself in danger of being swept away by irrational impulses the mere presence of which indicated an unadmitted hunger of the human soul for deeper satisfactions than trade, commerce and a civilized social system could provide. Reason was obviously not enough, but the alternatives were alarming and uncontrollable. Forster's problem was how to reconcile civilized order with imaginative awareness and the world of feeling.

Order, culture, toleration, admirable as they were in themselves were so often balanced by hardness, complacency and insensitivity and by the absence of the vital principle that gave richness and joy to life. Those were
the pillars of society, respected guardians of civilization, often lacked heart and were devoid of tenderness. Down in the ripe human jungle among the swamps of passion both good and evil pulsated with stronger and more intense life than on the cleared cultivated uplands. According to Forster, who considered this problem in relation to England, the Englishman's weakness lay in his fear of emotion, in his "undeveloped heart", which prevented him from understanding the human predicament in the world about him. The problem of the confused complexity of human character and relationships is the chief theme of Forster's novels.

No modern writer has so scrupulously set down the dusty answer life reserves for those who seek for certainties and expect to find clear cut distinctions. His attitude to society provided the basis for the conflict embodied in his novels between the two ways of life—the way of the heart, which loves and understands but is often confused and misguided, and the official way that preserves order but stifles genuineness and sincerity under a pall of good form and convention. Human beings in Forster world tend to fall into two main groups, the "crustaceans" and the "vitalists". The former are the adherents of lifeless convention, hidebound conservatives whose responses, once conditioned in youth, are never modified by experience or understanding. They are the enemies of the idea, they destroy love because their hearts are undeveloped and they cause the delicate fibres of human relationships to wither. Such people make admirable officials because they are rather less than human. Opposed to them are "vitalists", who feel deeply and are not afraid of their feelings, who let the heart guide them in their relations with others, who take the broad view and refuse to
let respect for convention stifle their generous impulses. A peculiar inconclusiveness underlies much of Forster's philosophy and may have its origin in the liberal tradition to which he belongs. Although he champions the good life and delights in beauty, nature and the warm impulses of man, he has no message for the spirit. Like Virginia Woolf, and for similar reasons, he is aware of the confusion and mystery that lie at the heart of life and, like her, believes that it is beyond man's effort to understand. Belonging to a generation that denied the existence of absolute values, rejected the theological dogmas of the Middle Ages and was unable to anticipate a regenerated Christianity, Forster found there was nothing left but to contemplate that mystery and to hope that somehow "civilization" would gradually weaken it and cause it to disappear. To the end Forster remained a follower of intellectual laissez faire, putting his trust, but not too confidently, in that civilized solvent of hatred and prejudice—sweet reasonableness and toleration.

Forster was a liberal humanist who believed in civilization, culture and human potential of perpetual creativity toward achieving universal brotherhood based on love and purity of hearts. As such, perhaps, the emergence of a powerful middle class with its various public schools as training grounds for their children in average intelligence and average characters posed a serious threat to the growth of a healthy European culture encompassing the territories of race, creeds, nationalities and so on to strengthening the concept of a pervasive European culture. As such, it appears that Forster was experimenting with his novels and exposing the
tragic perils of his humanism and humaniterianism in a world where human relationships were constantly shifting. His novels endorse a caustic warning of the tragic human endeavour and fate to achieve the goal of brotherhood. I have taken help of all books on Foster freely and have tried to focus on the limits of his liberal persuits in his novels. Moreover, I have also contested some of the critics' opinions which do not convince us in the present study.