CHAPTER - II

E.M. FORSTER ON THE ART OF FICTION

... and I wish that it was not so, that it could be
different - melody, or perception of the truth,
not this low stacist form

Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must
cling to.
Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out.

- E.M. FORSTER

In the spring of 1926 E.M. Forster received an invitation
from Trinity college, Cambridge to give the annual Clark
Lectures. He was to speak on 'Some period or periods of
English literature not earlier than Chaucer. It is inter­
esting to learn that Forster found some gaps in his reading.
He had not read much about the eighteenth century. In a
letter to Virginia Woolf on 17 May 1926, he surprised her by
requesting to help him update his knowledge about the
eighteenth century novels. The lectures that he delivered
between January and March 1927 were published in the form of
a book entitled Aspects of The Novel. The book was published
the same year, by the time Forster's novels, except Maurice
had been published. It is natural to regard the book as a comment on his own novels, a theoretical retrospect of his fictional practice. A novelist's views on the aspects of the novel help to place his own work in a better perspective.

Assuming that an artist's theory must inevitably have some unfailing correlation with his practice and even a bias for it justifying the ways of his art, the advantage that he has of the evidence of experience must not be underestimated, the advantage of viewing the art from inside rather than outside.

Every artist has certain assumptions and views about the nature and practice of his art. He tries to give his intuitions about the life around him a form. Virginia Woolf expresses her criticism of the art of the novelists like Galsworthy, H.G. Wells and Bennett. Their novels lack what she calls 'reality' she calls them materialists and contrasts them with novelists like James Joyce whose concern is with the spirit, reality and truth. H.G. Wells disagrees with Henry James on his views about the form of the novel. Wells believes in subordinating his art to life. Henry James' theory of art is criticized by H.G. Wells for the "denial of sweet complexity of life." E.M. Forster also shares H.G. Wells' preference for life's richness and complexity and
rejection of the rigid pattern that novelists try to impose on their works.

Consideration of the novel as an art form is relatively new in English criticism. Thomas Hardy's reaction to J.W. Beach's book on him is quite revealing. In Hardy's view, prose has no technique, it just comes along of itself. E.M. Forster is one of the few novelists who have tried to write about the art of novel writing. Walter Besant in the 1880's started the discussion about the novel as an art form, and it was continued by Henry James, Percy Lubbock, Edwin Muir and E.M. Forster. E.M. Forster's views on the art of novel are found not only in *Aspects of the Novel*, but they are also expressed in his essays: "Anonymity", "The Raison d'Etre of Criticisms in the Arts", "Arts for Art's sake" and "English prose between 1918 and 1939".

*Aspects of the Novel* represents Forster's fictional theories and his views on the art of other novelist. It begins with Forster's views on "The story" and ends with "pattern and rhythm". Forster tries to show the difference between the story and the plot of a novel. For many novelists there was hardly any difference between the two forms. The Russian formalists, according to Rene Wellek
and Austin Farrn distinguish fable or "story," from 'Sujet' which may be understood as 'narrative structure'. It must be said to the credit of Forster that a lot of confusion regarding the story and the plot was cleared by him. Story is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence (AN, p.35) whereas in the plot of a novel the stress is on "causality". According to Miriam Allott few novelists have managed to be as helpful on this subject as Forster. Forster distinguishes the plot from the story thus:

A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen did', is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot.

Though story is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels (AN, p.35). Time is an essential component of a story because its movement has temporal significance. No novelist, according to Forster, can ignore time. All novelists are bound alike by their allegiance to time. Forster draws a distinction between 'life by the clock' and 'life by values'. I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it is his illustration of this difference. It is an allegiance from which there is no escape because if the novel is to be intelligible,
the novelist must cling "however lightly", to 'the interminable tape-worm' of chronometrical time. In order to face the problem of handling time in their fiction, various novelists try various methods. Emily Bronte in Wuthering Heights hides her clock, Sterne in Tristram Shandy turns it upside down. Time by Values is more important than the time by the clock because the intensely experienced moments are packed into it. When the novelist writes about the intense moment or what Forster calls the 'eternal moment', the characters undergo a memorable experience which leaves a lasting impact on them. In Forster's own novels the eternal moments or 'life by values' play a significant part. In every novel and most of the stories the characters experience 'life by value' very intensely. Gino in the embrace of Caroline in Where Angels Fear to Tread Mr. Lucas' experience in the hollow of the tree in "Road from Colonus" are early attempts by the author when 'life by value' transcends 'life by time', they extend the boundaries of emotional experience.

The story does not tell us much about the novel. He finds Scott's art of telling stories quite admirable. Scott is very clever in making 'one thing happen after another' (AN, p.45). According to Forster, Scott does not have any other skill which can explain his continuous fame. The
achievements of Richardson and Fielding. Richardson, according to Dr. Johnson, was like a man who knew how a watch is made and Fielding is compared to a man who 'could tell the hour by looking on the dial plate. The round characters are 'capable of surprising in a convincing way (AN, p.85) Forster's round characters pass this test. Aziz like a real man is unpredictable but the changes in his moods are convincing. Gino in Where Angels Fear to Tread is affectionate at the theatre and is cruel when he learns about the death of his son. Rickie in The Longest Journey breaks with Agnes in a quite convincing way. Sometimes the flat characters tend to assume rotundity. Miss Bartlett in A Room with a View surprises the readers by paving the way for the happy union of George and Lucy though throughout the novel she represents the forces of anti-life. There are not many flat characters in Forster according to Austin Warren who writes that:

Forster's books house few 'flat' characters, to be summarized in a gesture or a recurrent phrase, for as we are just about to catalogue them, they turn toward us another side, a side which surprises us but surprises us in a way which is compatible with the sides being the sides of the same person. 10

Delivering his Rede lecture on the novels of Virginia Woolf, Forster drew a difference between the characters who live only in the pages of a book and the characters who are remembered by the readers after they have read the book.
According to him except Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and a few others, the characters of Virginia Woolf do not lead "life eternal." Forster's characters like Aziz, Fielding, Margaret Schlegel are some of the characters that lead life eternal outside the books which contain them. The plot, according to Forster, makes demands on them for the triple process of complications, crisis and solution, though the characters wish to live their own lives, and they 'run away' or 'get out of hand'. Plot in a novel, which Forster visualizes as a sort of higher Government official (AN, p. 93), expects the characters to live the life dictated by it. Forster dislikes Hardy's novels because the characters have to contribute to the development of their plots by suspending their natures. In Hardy's novels, because the characters have to act within the framework of the novelist's moral vision, one feels that they are the puppets in the hands of fate. 'The fate above us, not the fate working through us – that is what is eminent and memorable in the Wessex novels.'12. Meredith is admired for his plots because the plots 'cause surprise' and there is a balanced relationship and interaction between the characters and the plots in Meredith. Mysteries are an organic part of a good plot. Forster's plots are also tightly constructed in the Italian novels and in Howards End but have loose ends in Maurice and The Longest Journey. The plots of the social comedies are constructed around Forster's
moral considerations and the characters are rewarded or punished according to the needs of the plot. Plots are the vehicles of Forster's moral philosophy. The recurrent and casual deaths are resorted to for the benefit of the plot. Gerald dies in The Longest Journey as he is required no more. Mrs Moore dies as her purpose is over in A Passage to India. Ruth Wilcox is killed so that Margaret may marry Henry to prove Forster's point that inner and outer life can and should co-exist.

At the same time Forster, who wants human beings to have their chance in the novels does not want the plot to dominate the book. "After all, why has a novel to be planned? Cannot it grow? Why need it close, as a play closes? Cannot it open out?"

Forster does not bother much about the question of point-of-view, which according to Percy Lubbock and other formalists is very crucial in fiction. He criticizes the novels of Henry James because the plots sacrifice human life for the success of his novels which are narrated from a fixed point of view. Like the omniscient narrator, Forster does not hold to any fixed point of view. We are told the stories in his novels, and about the characters from many and varying points of view. Forster sometimes identifies himself too closely with his characters like Philip Herriton or Rickie Elliot. The reader is not sure whether the views
expressed in the novel belong to the character or the author. According to Forster, "...the whole intricate question of method resolves itself not into formulae but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says - a power which Mr. Lubbock admits and admires, but locates at the edge of the problem instead of at the centre. I should put it plumb in the centre'.

Critics have challenged Forster's views on the method and wandered whether *The Ambassadors* and such novels are not great because of their fixed point of view.

Fantasy and prophecy are elements in a novel that may exist in their own way and yet they throw light on the characters and incidents. Some readers are thrilled to see the elements of Fantasy or prophecy in novels, while others dislike their introduction. "There is more in the novel" writes Forster, "than time or people or logic or any other derivatives". He calls that "something fantasy and prophecy. Both use mythologies, but their effects in the book are different. Elaborating on 'Fantasy' and 'Prophecy' he adds:

And by 'more' I do not mean something that excludes these aspects or something that includes them, embraces them. I mean something that cuts across them like a bar of light, that is intimately connected with them at one place and patiently illumines all their problems, and at another place shoots over or through them as if they did not exit."
Fantasy and prophecy make use of mythological characters but these are different for both. A writer of fantasy introduces 'beings' that inhabit the air, the shallow water, Fauns and Dryads, Pans and puns. Forster introduces Pan, Dryads, inhabitants of the forest into his stories and the novels as Norman Matson introduces a witch in Zuleika Dobson. Pan in his stories and novels represent an honest and natural acceptance of body and spirit. Phaeton and Persiphone are introduced in A Room with a View to suggest the human passion. The Pans in his short stories and, to some extent, in his novels have a further significance. They represent the link that Forster feels to exist between men and the countryside, the countryside which has been man's home for ages. Stephen in The Longest Journey is Pan's representative - a person at peace with Nature. The description of the rural landscapes in Howards End also have a vein of fantasy, Forster's feeling for nature is partly Wordsworthian and partly pagan. The experience of Lucas in the story 'The Road From Colonus' is also full of fantasy, because something supernatural is implied in the hollow of the tree. The marabar caves also have the element of fantasy.

Fantasy according to Frederick G. Crews is "symbolism that has seized control of reality". Fantasy's mythology, cautions John Colmer, should not be subjected to the standards of realism because the writer who introduces
fantasy expects the reader to suspend their disbelief. John Colmer adds, "The supernatural irrupts and shatters the surface of polite society, the infinite invades the finite world of picnics and civilized chatter". Fantasy and prophecy tax our sense of plausibility. Frederic C. Crews writes about fantasy that it,

Consists of violating the conventions of plausibility without wholly dismissing them, so that the reader must take up two problematical views of reality instead of a single unquestionable one.17

The element of fantasy, quite dominant in his stories and the early novels, tends to play a less significant role in Forster's later novels. Prophecy takes the reader into the noumenal world. The "voice" of the author plays an important role in prophetic novels. The theme is "universe or something universal" in such novels. The tone of the author's voice may imply "any of the faiths that have haunted humanity.... or the mere raising of human love and hatred to such a power that the normal receptacles no longer contain them. ...18. Forster refers to the experience of Mitya in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov as a prophetic one because the pity and love that he feels for the suffering poor is some that embraces the whole humanity. Forster writes about the experience of the characters like Mitya in Dostoevsky's novels.
Dostoevsky's characters ask us to share something deeper than physical - the sensation of sinking into a translucent globe and seeing our experience floating far above us on its surface, tiny, remote yet ours. We have given nothing up, but the sea is in the fish and the fish is in the sea. 19

James McConkey writing about the 'Prophecy' says: The prophet's voice, as Forster perceives it, implies an extension beyond the physical world to a point where barriers and differences are dissipated. 20

The experience of Philip Herriton when he goes by the carriage with Gino's child feeling as if he were travelling with the sorrow of the whole world, and watching Caroline rising above the mundane world of ordinary existence to have unlimited pity for all in Where Angels Fear To Tread and the feeling of alienation of the characters from the world and nature in A Passage to India, the merging of Godbole's love for the world's saviour, are examples of how Forster uses the prophetic element. But, like D.H. Lawrence, he is not a prophetic writer.

"Pattern" is the shape a plot takes. It may be like an "hourglass" shape of Anatole France's book Thais in which the two main characters. "Converge, cross and recede with mathematical precision (AN 158). Patterns, like plots, are sometimes beautiful, but the beauty is achieved at an
enormous cost. Forster criticizes Henry James because much of human life is sacrificed at the altar of pattern. Forster agrees with H.G. Wells that "immense richness of material which life provides" should be preferred to the rigidity of the pattern. Forster's concern for the human life prompts his criticism of Henry James. According to John Colmer, Forster'..... uses Henry James almost exclusively as an example of the sacrifice of 'life' to Art.'

Like 'prophecy', 'rhythm' underscores Forster's concern for the novels to transcend the demands of the plot. He cites the example of Proust's little phrase that crosses the book, not tied to the plot of the book and yet establishing a link between various incidents and states of characters' minds at different times. He writes about "rhythm" thus:

There are times when it means nothing and is forgotten, and this seems to me the function of rhythm in fiction, not to be there all the time like a pattern; but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope.22

In his view the novel can borrow something akin to rhythm from music. Music is heard even after it has been played and Forster wants fiction to have the same quality.
Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom. Cannot the novel be like that? 23

Was Forster speaking in his lecture with half an eye on his own work? In his novels, especially in The Longest Journey, Howards End and A Passage to India, Forster resorts to the use of rhythms in an exquisite manner. The Roman crossing in The Longest Journey, the references to the countryside, and the caves and the wasp in A Passage to India, the references to the primroses and darkness and light in Maurice are a few instances of rhythm in Forster's novels. They stitch the book from inside without caring for the rigid pattern born of the classical unities.

Aspects of the Novel throws as much light on Forster's novels as it does on the art of writing novels in general. Forster strikes a blow for the more personal, informal approach to criticism at a time when Cambridge was reverberating with extra-vagant claims of the systematic and scientific criticism.
REFERENCES


5. Ibid, P.47


13. ibid, P. 104
14. ibid, p.86
15. ibid, 112
19. ibid, P.136
22. E. M. Forster, O. cit. P.168
23. ibid, P.170