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The Clash of Ethno-Cultural Views in E. M. Forster's Three Novels

Yıldıray Çevik

Istanbul Arel University, Faculty of Science and Letters

Abstract

The Edwardian period was one of rapid change; yet the basic structure of society remained unchanged. Class distinctions, social conventions and cultural values based on ethnicities/localities were rigid and remained so until the First World War. Accordingly, all through his fiction one feels Forster's underlying preoccupation with bourgeois values juxtaposed with local cultural aspects. In one of his essays, Forster asserts that personal relationships provide the only firm reality in the world of violence and cruelty. In a civilization which advocates causes and abstractions Forster declares that the personal is the most significant element. He believes that through the relationships with others we achieve insight and wisdom. Considering his views on the variety of values, this study aims at examining the theme of "the clash of values" based on ethnicities in personal relationships in the three of his novels Where Angels Fear to Tread, The Longest Journey and Howards End because these novels are the manifestations of a world view which is mainly based on the belief in the necessity of tolerance to various values in such a divided world, and the importance of personal relationships to overcome all kinds of drawbacks of communication.

Key words: culture, Sawston, bourgeoisie, affection, muddle, clash

1. Introduction

The influence of Cambridge as well as his personal temperament led Forster to emphasize personal relationships in his works. When Forster graduated from Cambridge, he travelled extensively in Europe. The practice of completing one's education abroad, previously restricted to the wealthy aristocracy, now included the members of the middle class, many of whom carried their conventional English standards to the places they went and remained uninfluenced by the spirit of the countries they visited. In this way, Forster's novels expose the vulgarity, sterility and limitations of such people.

A close study of Forster's fiction will reveal him to be a writer responding to the spirit of the place. His first two visits in Europe, first Germany then Italy and Greece provided him much inspiration and material for his early writings. His travels project his wish to explore and reflect views in his fiction as deeply and comprehensively as his experience permits. At the same time they express his search as a man and artist for some way of harmonizing the values of public and private life.

For Forster culture itself is valuable; but, it should not come between a man and the realities of life, and it should not be used to cut a figure in society. His education at Cambridge and later his affiliation with the members of Bloomsbury provided him with the necessary basis for cultural background. He sympathizes with those who are involved in life itself rather than with those who watch life pass by and regard themselves as being superior because of their intellectual activities. Forster's England is chiefly that of the upper-middle classes and the intelligentsia of the Universities and London. The voice of the bourgeoisie is self-complacent, unimaginative respectability, and the snobbery of culture.

2. Review and Analysis of the Novels

2.1 *Where Angels Fear to Tread*

Philip Herriton, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) is a young man endowed with the spiritual qualities of intellect, sensitivity, great capacity for friendship and nobility of self-sacrifice. He has beaten down within himself the Philistine upbringing of Sawston as a result of his spiritual education in Italy. Italy, for him, is the school as well as the playground of the world. When he went to Italy for the first time, "he is absorbed into one aesthetic whole of olive trees, blue sky, frescoes, country inns, peasants, mosaics, statues, beggars" (Forster, 1959, p. 61). All his desire is to remodel Sawston; yet, after his return it comes to nothing, and he is left only with a keen sense of beauty. As time goes on he is resigned to life as it is in Sawston; yet, as a defense mechanism against the vulgarity and hypocrisy of his class, he develops his sense of humor. He thinks, "If he could not reform the world, he could at all events laugh at it, thus attaining at least an intellectual superiority" (Forster, 1959, p. 62). So Philip laughs at people and has a condescending attitude t them. His knowledge makes him aloof rather than understanding and sympathetic. Philip's culture has not humanized him since he cannot connect prose and poetry: "A little disenchanted, a little tired, but aesthetically intact, he resumed his placid life" (Forster, 1959, p. 64).

Forster drew an ironical character in the person of Philip. When Philip goes to Italy the second time, he does not have a high ideal such as educating his mind. This time he goes there to stop Lilia's marriage to an Italian. When he discovers that Lilia's Italian fiancé is a dentist's son his shock is very heavy:

> Philip gave a cry of personal disgust and pain. He shuddered all over, and edged away from his companion. A dentist! A dentist at Monteriano! A dentist in fairyland! False teeth and laughing gas and the tilting chair at a place which knew the Etruscan League, and the Pax Romana, and Alaric himself, and the Countess Matilda, and the middle Ages, all fighting and holiness, and the Renaissance, all fighting and beauty! He thought of Lilia no longer. He was anxious for himself: he feared that Romance might die (Forster, 1959, p. 25).

As is seen Philip's view of Italy is not based on reality; hence, it cannot survive the disillusionment of his visit to Montarioano. The sense of beauty, which he acquired in his first visit to Italy is in danger of failure. Feeling desolate he cannot realize "that human love and love of truth sometimes conquer where love of beauty fails" (Forster, 1959, p. 62). Not until Philip learns the value of human love is he transformed from a cold aesthete who looks at life like a spectator into a real human being who can feel its sadness and pain. Thus, he grows in humanity. Philip achieves somewhat self-awareness through the help of Caroline Abbot to whom he confesses:

> You would be surprised to know what my great events are. Going to the theatre yesterday, talking to you now – I don't suppose I shall ever meet anything greater. I seem fated to pass through the world without colliding with it or moving it – and I am sure I can't tell you whether the fate is good or evil. I don't die – I don't fall in love … quite right; life to me is just a spectacle" (Forster, 1959, p. 131).

This is what culture at its best did to Philip. Yet Gino's spontaneity and passion, Caroline's goodness and sensitivity help Philip to leave his cocoon of art and to get involved in life itself. His physical fight with Gino and later his admiration of Caroline holding Gino in her

arms to comfort him for his son's death, awaken in Philip the feelings which he has never capable of before:

> Philip looked away, as he sometimes looked away from the great pictures where visible forms suddenly became inadequate for the things they have shown to us. He was happy; he was assured that there was greatness in this world. There came to him an earnest desire to be good through the example of this good woman. He would try henceforward to be worthy of the things she had revealed. Quietly, without hysterical prayers or banging of drums, he underwent conversion. He was saved (Forster, 1959, p. 150).

It is true that Philip grasps the power of human love in Italy; his intellectual love of beauty and art is not lost but only mingled with the sadness of life and becomes more meaningful. At the end of the novel, Philip does not feel that he is privileged and superior because of his knowledge of arts; instead, he can sympathize with people, and feels more human; now, he is mature. When Caroline tells him that she is in love with Gino she expects him to laugh at her. Yet, Philip, who fancies he is in love with Caroline, has suffered and changed too much to do that, "he smiled bitterly at the thought of them together. Here was the cruel antique malice forth against Pasiphae. Centuries of aspiration and culture – and the world could not escape it" (Forster, 1959, p. 159).

Now Philip will go out into society with the vision of a thing of beauty in his mind, which will lighten his burdens. Thus the fair myth of Endymion dominates the ending of the novel. In spite of all the impact of Italy and Gino on Philip he keeps his place as a man of culture. Neither Philip nor Caroline reaches a complete fulfillment since they turn life into art before they can accept it. On the whole, the novel delineates the author's attempt to connect the ordered pursuit of culture and the disordered life of the emotions.

2.2 *The Longest Journey*

The Longest Journey (1907) begins in the cultural atmosphere of Cambridge. This is G. E. Moore's Cambridge, where philosophical discussions take place quite often in the rooms of the students. Stewart Ansell is the conveyor of Moore's ideas. Ansell has the power of apprehending whatever has value, and of recognizing whether what he finds valuable

corresponds to phenomenal reality. Therefore, he stands on firm ground. Rickie's reason is blurred through his valuing the wrong persons and the wrong incidents. He is inclined to get muddled and undesirable state of mind as expressed in Moore's *Principia Ethica*. Consequently, in the person of Ansell, art works as a redemptive power, but in Rickie's case, it serves as a dramatization of experience. Both scholars value knowledge; but Rickie is unable to connect his life of culture with his phenomenal life as does Ansell. Rickie writes stories of pure fantasy that have nothing to do with real life. On the other hand, Ansell is perceptive to the reality of life, that is, 'the spirit of life'; he says:

> If you ask me what the Spirit of Life is, to what it is attached, I can't tell you. I only tell you, watch for it. Myself, I've found it in books. Some people find it out of doors or in each other. Never mind. It's the same spirit, and I trust myself to know it anywhere and to use it rightly (Forster, 1960, p. 185).

He is in the reading room of the British Museum, where he looked up at the dome as the other men look at the sky. The relation of dome with sky and arc lamps with stars, and especially Orion, the constellation of November, assures one of the realities of his world. It also connects him with Stephen through the implied reference to Orion. Stephen in the novel embodies real life. Since Ansell is closely associated with real life culture works in his case. The passionateness of his intelligence gives him insight. He sees through Agnes and calls her a "Medusa" (Forster, 1960, p. 185). Culture, rather than being a veneer for social purposes or a misguiding force alienating him from life itself, helps him to ask the proper questions about the meaning of life; thus, it enhances the significance and the beauty of his intellectual world.

Ansell represents the way of the intellect. He is, in a way, a composite picture of Forster's Cambridge friends. Ansell's family background serves as a symbol for the wholeness of life that is achieved through frankness and love and the union of money and culture. The first important conflict between Rickie and Ansell appears when Agnes and her brother, Herbert, visit Rickie in his rooms at Cambridge. Ansell, for whom reality is mental, rudely ignores Agnes since for him she does not exist as a real person: the whole incident has ethical implications. As a philosopher, Ansell is aware that behind the values he holds there exists some unattainable ultimate meaning. Thus, he feels that the universe has no distinctive character after which we can model our lives; consequently, we must develop a private idea

of the good and stick to it at all costs. Ansell and what he stands for are proofs of the fact that G.E.Moore's principles influenced Forster.

Rickie in the first section of the novel gives himself to the detached life of the mind as symbolized in his friend Ansell. Cambridge does not stand for one philosophy or another, but for an attitude of inquiry, of open-mindedness and zeal for truth that is challenged by the outside world.

In the second section "Sawston", Forster attacks the system of education that produces the philistine in the English middle classes. This is the world of the Pembrokes. Herbert Pembroke, the house master of the Sawston School is a perfect philistine:

> Herbert was stupid. Not stupid in the ordinary sense- he had a business like brain, and acquired knowledge easily – but stupid in the important sense; his whole life was colored by a contempt of the intellect. That he had a tolerable intellect of his own was not to the point; It is what we value, not in what we have, that the test of us resides … (Forster, 1960, p. 169).

Rickie's demoralization becomes complete under the influence of Herbert and Agness, and his deterioration is set against a background of the second-hand values taught at Sawston. He cannot even write his short stories which deal with Greek gods and goddesses. He is mentally and spiritually mutilated.

The situation the Failings occupy in the world of culture is remarkable; Mrs. Failing is the false show. She is intellectual and bright and regards herself as a romantic heroine of the mind. Trilling describes her as having "withered into a kind of fancy-picture of an eighteenth-century wording, in the habit of taking life with a laugh" (Trilling, 1967, p. 135).

Mrs. Failing chills even the memory of her dead husband whose generosity was abundant. She mocks him while writing an introduction to his post-human essays. She is a bad person who uses her intellect to achieve power and superiority over people. On the other hand, Mr. Failing was a benevolent intellectual. In his essay, he preaches human love. He was capable of connecting his cultured life with reality; that is, the holiness of the heart's imagination.

Ansell's inquisitive mind is in search of a sufficient embodiment of values he is able to recognize; and while he is reading Tony Failing's essays in the garden of Rickie's house he is preoccupied with his thoughts. Ansell meets Stephen for the first time there and all at once

recognizes in him what he has been searching for. Previously he told a friend who had accused him of being too intellectual: "When the moment comes I shall hit out like any ploughboy. Don't believe those lies about intellectual people. They are only written to soothe the majority" (Forster, 1960, p. 184). Ansell has a close connection with reality whereas Rickie represents the failure of the aesthetic vision. He is like Philip Herriton, a spectator of life; so he is condemned to failure and death. On the other hand, the Pembrokes are "damned" because of their ignorance, limited view of the world and indifference to knowledge and art.

2.3 *Howards End*

Howards End (1910) is set in the Edwardian period and covers a number of years over which considerable social change took place. It was a time when the intellectual heritage of romanticism was passing through tension, when intellectuals were moving from liberalism to socialism, when G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was influential. In the novel there are three main milieu, the intellectual, urban milieu of the Schlegels, the country businessmen's world of the Wilcoxes and the suburbia of Leonard Bast.

Howards End evokes economic and intellectual life of the west. The characters are conscious of Europe and its intellectual, social and economic history. In their lives, ideas and culture play an important part. Cultivation and taste are part of their natural experience; the occasions at which characters interrelate with one another happen to be cultural occasions: for instance, the Schlegels meet the Wilcoxes looking for a Rhineland cathedral, and Leonard Bast at a concert in the Queen Hall. They are all concerned with art and ideas; but, to each person these have different degrees of relevance. To begin with, the father of the Schlegel sisters is originally a German idealist, who goes to England when he sees that "the clouds of materialism" are obstructing the spiritual and cultural life in Germany. He defines the weakness of Germany to his German nephew in the following manner:

> You see the intellect, but you no longer care about it. That I call stupidity. You only care about the things that you can use, and therefore arrange them in the following order: money, supremely useful; intellect, rather useful; imagination, of no use at all (Forster, 1941, p. 29).

His daughters are sensitive, intelligent, and have an inclination for art. They lead a life of culture. Their brother, Tibby, is a scholar for whom humanity is tiresome and crude. He lives, most of the time in Oxford, away from his humane and affectionate sisters. He is an ascetic and an aesthete, and the part he plays, in the novel, is minor. On the other hand, though both Margaret and Helen Schlegel value knowledge and art they consider personal relations more valuable than anything else in the world.

The different interpretations which Beethoven's Fifth Symphony elicits from various audiences are characteristic instances of the way art is used as a touchstone in the novel. When Margaret and Helen respond to the symphony differently, the dissimilarity of their characters becomes evident. Helen can see heroes and shipwrecks in the music flood, whereas Margaret can "only see the music": as for Tibby, he is "profoundly versed in counterpoint, and holds the full score open on his knee" (Forster, 1941, p. 34).

Helen is more emotional than Margaret and has a greater capacity to share the composer's passion. Margaret likes Beethoven's music too, but she uses her mind more than her heart in her judgments. Both Helen and Margaret are cultivated enough to experience the beauty of the symphony. When Beethoven's symphony is over, Helen walks away with a heart void of cultivated feelings. To Margaret Brahms sounds all "grumbling and grizzling" (Forster, 1941, p. 34). That the heroines are lost in the melodies of the symphony, rather than gazing at a beautiful painting in a museum, is evidence of Forster's treatment of music as a humanizing agency. The intellectualism of the Schlegel sisters does not alienate them from their fellow men. On the contrary, keeping pace with the socialistic trend of the time, they do not believe in class distinctions. On this point, Stone states, "What is important to see that culture is a condition of classlessness, a peculiar state of grace – the state that the Schlegels are presumed to possess from the start" (1966, p. 114).

In *Howards End,* the Schlegel sisters are advocates of spontaneity and candidness. They are not as childlike as the other spontaneous characters in Forster's earlier novels. Yet, they are as strong as champions of personal relations as the other spontaneous characters. Candidness and spontaneity are strong human characters where good human relations are established regardless of ethno cultural impressions. Yet these qualities are easily rejected by the bourgeoisie to which they belong. Both Gin and Stephen are of low class as Mr. Beebe calls them socialists. So, it is critical that the Schlegel sisters are not opposing the values of

another class, but those of the very class of which they are respectable members. Margaret does not have a childish look in her eyes and is well educated.

That Schlegel sisters held that reticent about money matters is absurd, and that life would be truer if each would state the exact size of the golden island upon which he stands. But Sawston, which symbolizes everything Forster rejects in his own class, regards such candid self-exposure as obscene. Sawston is vulgar, secretive, purse-proud, class-proud; Henry Wilcox was unable to reveal even to his future wife how much he was worth. Although the Schlegel sisters value art, knowledge, and nature they would rather be in contact with the real, candid man than the one playing his appropriate role to come up to their expectations. On the other hand, the Wilcoxes are afraid to be found out; they are comfortable and complacent when the veneer of social norms and societal values hide their true beings, which Helen Schlegel describes as having nothing but panic and emptiness.

3. Conclusion

Forster remained faithful to his humanistic philosophy throughout his career; but as a novelist, he became more aware of the negative aspects in human connections. A close reading of Forster's novels reveals that his artistic growth goes parallel to his increasing acceptance of the ironies and disappointments inherent in humanism. He bemoans the presence of evil forces in human nature and in society. Tolerance, good temper and sympathy are all valuable qualities; but Forster admits that they are not much influential in a world where racial and religious persecutions dominant, ignorance is prevalent and science has been deviated from altruistic purposes. Rickie in *The Longest Journey* embodies many humanistic values. Like all others, Rickie tries to find some middle way between the poles of permanence and change under the influence of the inherent culture. Rickie muses on the unbridgeable gulf between the values of Cambridge education and the pragmatism of Sawstonian society. Margaret in *Howards End* is an ardent advocate of Forster's emphasis on individuality, self-fulfillment, personal relationships, imaginative sensitivity, knowledge and vital culture. She accepts her husband Henry Wilcox for what he is as materialistic. Thus Forster through Margaret supports the civilized life of proportion. Forster's view of humanism makes it appeal to mankind in two ways and unite against Sawston – a society depersonalized by materialism, philistinism, and inconsiderate complacency caused by a confident sense of its security and power. The two ways are similar to each other in that they are both on the side of "life", that is, on the side of a more lucid, richer and deeper perception

of human personality and human relations that Sawston can understand. Forster explores the virtues and limitations of both ways and tries to hold them in balance, while discriminating between the two.

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