

**E. M. FORSTER'S LIBERAL HUMANISM: AN OVERVIEW**

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**Abstract**

*In this article, an attempt has been made to analyse the 'liberal humanism' perceived by E. M. Forster who belonged to the fag end of Victorian liberalism. Forster who possessed an Arnoldian desire to see life and see it in full like many members of the Bloomsbury group with which he was associated to some extent. 'Humanism' to Forster meant getting connected to the spirit, holy and mind of the society, which, to Forster, existed only in developed hearts during his time. To Forster, the function and voice of any novelist or writer was to bridge two poles- two extreme ways of life- the developed and the undeveloped, the civilized and the uncivilized, the active and the passive and thus to see 'life' not as something belonging to an individual, but to a whole people of society. Forster's 'Humanism' is founded on his 'faith' in 'truth' the ultimate 'sign' of life. This article elaborates Forster's Liberal Humanism with special reference to his well-known work *Howards End*.*

**Keywords:** *Humanism, liberal humanism*

“I belong to the fag end of Victorian liberalism,” said Edward Morgan Forster, who was a member of that Intelligentsia, which included philanthropists, bishops, clergymen and members of Parliament.

Forster who possessed an Arnoldian desire to see life and see it whole, like many members of the Bloomsbury Group, with which he was half-associated, had been at Cambridge and came into the influence of the well-known philosopher, G. E. Moore. Forster too like G. E. Moore, emphasized aesthetic tastes and personal relations as the standards of life. He read and was shaped by the works of Samuel Butler and George Meredith and with them Forster also urged that the cause for comedy and the cause for truth are the same. Before coming under the influence of these people at Cambridge, Forster had his early studies in London.

Describing himself as a child of unbelief, Forster felt faith as a stiffening process, and a sort of mental search which ought to be applied sparingly in life. When one talks about Forster's perception of faith and belief, one has to note, that Forster, rejected Christianity, in as much as it prescribed a moral system instead of providing an integrated view of life. It insists, he believed, mainly on the spiritual aspect of life to the utter neglect of the body. Forster's such beliefs were the result of the liberal spirit of his age that weakened the dogmatic orthodoxy in religious thinking. Forster also believed that a return to faith would not solve the muddles of humanity. He was becoming conscious of the connection between religion and the rise of capitalism. Christianity, he further observed:

The influence Christianity retains in modern society is due to the money behind it, rather than to the spiritual appealing it has. It was a spiritual force once, but the indwelling spirit will have to be stated if it is to calm the waters again, and probably restated in a non-Christian form.

Even in his young days Forster attacked the evils of the slave trade because it stood for something which was unfavourable to the society. Taking a profession of intellectual life at an early age, and in a later age when intellectuals were not in good repute even with themselves he continued to be the unwearied of

his profession and justified writers. Forster took to writing when he was in his late twenties. Earlier he had his schooling in English Public School, and coming into the influence of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Forster later had to tell us that the public school was not infinite and eternal and something more compelling in life than team work and more vital than cricket. That firmness and self-complacency did not between them compose the whole honour of many schools at Tornbridge that made it miserable for Forster. But it gave his thought his great central theme, the theme of an undeveloped heart. Speaking of the public school system, Forster observes:

This system was the root of England's worst national faults and most grievous of all errors. To him the faults of England are the faults of middle classes that dominated the very core of the middle classes. The very core of the middle classes is the English Public School system which gave its young men a weight out of all proportions to their numbers and sends them into a world of whose richness and subtlety, they have no conception, a world into which they go with well-developed body, fairly developed minds, and undeveloped hearts.

If the Public School system presented him with his dominant theme, the theme of the undeveloped heart, his University taught him how to deal with it.

He defined the limits of his approach to his novels with great modesty and restraint. 'Only Connect', he said in his 'Howards End'. All that he was interested in was personal relations between and among human beings. Besides this, he was deeply concerned with the psychological atmosphere of the society in which he grew up and which also limited the scope of his inquiry. Thus he had very little to say, but he said it very well. Primarily he was an English novelist of the Edwardian and Georgian era, firmly rooted in the tradition of Jane Austen and George Meredith, and extended that tradition to take in something of the detachment of Flaubert.

The literary scene that prevailed during the time of Forster, was a period of public school life. Literary greats like Maugham, H. G. Wells and Bennet occupied the scene. It was a period when literature was influenced and sensitized by art. The writers of the period were bent on exposing the hollowness of the upper class. E. M. Forster was a product of the upper middle class, another continental traveler secure in his inherited wealth; and he was one whose education and personal sensitivity opened his eyes to the emptiness of the values of England's propertied rulers. Like Hardy, Wells and Maugham, he found no comfort in religion. Like Hardy, Maugham and Ford, he was a skeptic, suspicious of easy answers. He did have a programme of a kind: he was neither as pessimistic as Hardy nor as optimistic as Wells, but he did believe that the world would be a better place if it was emotionally honest, if it was more open and if it had 'heart'.

His classical studies, and his familiarity with Greece and Italy, made a humanist of him. His gentle upbringing at the hands of women, his private mode of life and intellectualism made him an individualist. He did not write naturalistic novels; he did not write sagas or works of an experimental kind; nor was he a story teller, like Maugham. When a novelist writes to champion liberal, civilized values, and attack undeveloped heart, his works are difficult to fit into any ready-made category. Thus it can be said that Forster was not obviously influenced by any of his predecessors. His very few novels, by contemporary standards, are distinctively his, like those of Meredith and Kipling, which were distinctively theirs. They are the works of a man with a certain private perception.

*Howards End* (1910) is an ambitious novel. Here the clash of values is clear and fundamental. The thinking, sensitive Schlegel sisters are opposed to, yet very much involved with, the worldly-wise Wilcoxes. The Schlegels meet and befriend a poor young man hungry for culture. The association forces them to reflect on their own wealth, and that of the businessmen Wilcoxes. Mrs. Wilcox is a sensitive soul to whom they feel drawn, but she is ill and dies. Her death is mysterious as her life. Leonard Bast, the Schlegels' poor young friend, loses his job. Helen Schlegel tries to enlist Mr. Wilcox's sympathy and help, but fails. Stung by his indifference, the romantic, idealistic Helen takes Leonard and his wife Acky to the

smart wedding of Evie Wilcox. In so doing she embarrasses all concerned (especially Mr. Wilcox, whose earlier affair with Jacky Bast is exposed), not least her sister Margaret, who forgives Wilcox his shady past and marries him. The Schlegel sisters become joint mistresses of the Wilcox house. *Howards End*, but not before Helen has had a child by Leonard, and not before Charles Wilcox, the eldest son, has killed Leonard in a fit of righteous anger and been committed to prison. *Howards End*, a title to which Forster attached the famous 'sub-title', 'Only connect ...' is about the failure of human relationships, about the failure to connect passion with reason, the heart and the head.

If Forster can be compared with any of his predecessors, it is with Meredith. Both men were poets, though Forster's real poetry is in his novels rather than in his poems. For Forster as for Meredith, the novel had to be more than a story: it had to be a search for understanding, for perception. Forster had one theme the theme of human relationships and when he had exhausted it on fiction he wrote no more novels.

But well after the Second World War Forster retained his symbolic significance as the embodiment of a special and valuable kind of English liberal imagination both pin points a historical moment and stands for something permanently valuable. For while he is the great sportsman for an idea of human behaviour and a concern with human relationships which were characteristic of certain circles at Cambridge in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he is also the inheritor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of high minded religion benevolence and he is a literary artist with a strong sense of aesthetic form.

His novels reflect these different aspects of his life and character. Pre-eminently a novelist of civilized personal relations, he had at the same time a radical dissatisfaction with the finest civilization of personal intercourse that he knew. Forster's childhood and much of his adult life was dominated by his mother and his aunts, and it is obvious that Forster's relationship with his own sexuality was deeply influenced by this. He lived in a familiar atmosphere inordinately dominated by the mother figure and this no doubt, had an irreversible influence on his attitudes and relationships as an adult. Although it is true that Forster did have several male relatives that he had contact with on a relatively frequent basis, none of them were close enough to have any influence and it was his female relatives that shaped his life. Indeed, it was the legacy of Marianne Thornton, which gave Forster the opportunity to travel and the freedom to write. They were his only social and emotional contact and his role models.

Forster was a writer of the Modernist period. The term 'Modernism' refers to a radical shift in aesthetic and cultural perceptions evident in the art and literature at the time. It embraced a wide range of artistic movements, such as Surrealism, Dada, Constructivism, Symbolism and Expressionism. It cannot be described as a movement in itself but rather as a term that represented a general trend in the arts, brought about by a 'creative renaissance' which included a variety of artistic fields. Modernists were very aware of studies in other fields, such as psychology and anthropology and frequently incorporated these ideas into their art. Sigmund Freud was one of the great Modernist icons and Forster and his friends were very aware of his ideas and theories.

Forster's distinctiveness as a writer has to do with the way in which his novels engage with the unforeseeable. This is what Elizabeth Bowen says about when she speaks of the blaze of unforeseen possibilities in Forster's writing and characterizes 'the magic' of his work as lying in 'the manner, the telling, the creation of a peculiar, electric climate in which anything might happen.

Most unforeseeable of all in Forster's work is the strange place placeless place, unforeseen, unseen, unseeable called death. *Howards End* presents us with what Garrett Stetwart has aptly described as the most dramatically elided death in Forster.

The novel has the motto 'Only Connect' Only Connect ... the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted and human love will be seen at its highest, Live in fragments no longer. Only connect and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that life is to either will die. This theme of the novel echoes and expatiates on, the motto of it. The theme underlines Forster's life long belief in the great importance of personal relationship, honesty and un-fragmented human being. A person *isho* is absolutely rational,

lacking in the other human quality of passion is a fragmentary as another who is just the opposite. To be a whole man, a complete man, one must hold a balance within himself between the two cardinal human properties rationality and passion.

The bi-variant man may thus become an integrated whole. These two antagonistic properties of man have given birth to two contrary cultures: the urban commercial culture dependent upon cool rationality in the misgivings for passion and passionate culture of the countryside that is funky about frigid rational. Although a rationalist, Forster, like 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 the Greeks, but his fastidious intelligence and innate dualism forced him to distrust the imaginative vision of life even while he succumbed to its inspiration. 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 in spite of material progress there had been a weakening of human sympathy and understanding. Englishmen were especially to blame in this, since their educational system neglected the emotions and by overvaluing restraint as a means of developing character they impaired sensitivity and hence his attack on the Public Schools.

Forster, a liberal and a humanist, loved civilization, which he regarded as liberalism's finest achievement. 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 pantheist. 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 un-admitted 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, was so often balanced by hardness, complacency and insensitivity and by the absence of the vital principle that gave richness and joy to life. Those who 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 pulsed 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 feat of emotion, in 'undeveloped heart,' which prevented him from understanding the human predicament in the world about him.

This 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 pal of good form and convention. Human beings tend to fall in Forster's world 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 and understanding. They are the enemies of the idea, they destroy love because 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 the '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.

Forster was torn between his awareness that by the twentieth-century it was the Sawston faction who had the effective power in society and the apprehension he shared with the nineteenth-century writers of the anti-human characteristics of this faction. It is the fear that Arnold had of the middle class as philistine, 'something particularly stiff-necked and perverse in its resistance to light and its children'. Besides, Forster oscillates between seeing the Sawston values as undermining the Cambridge values, and in seeing them as protecting those humane values from the encroachment of war or class violence. He has the feeling that if the active, instrumental world is now the real one, then personal, humane values will survive only by allying themselves to it.

The liberal humanism of Forster can be found in his classic *A Passage to India* where he makes the two parties meet through what he calls Bridge Parties which invariably failed to connect the British officials present in India with the natives. The failure is attributed to the lack of humane values that were required to understand the spirit called India.

It can be thus concluded by saying that Forster's liberal humanism is not founded on religious faith but on the principles of human relations which lie beyond theology or any religious philosophy.

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