

E.M. Forster's use of Symbolism in his Novels

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E.M. Forster is a widely acclaimed writer of fiction. His novels were published during the Edwardian and Georgian periods of the present century. He published his novels before he could publish his short stories, some of which were written even before he began writing longer works of fiction. The first four of his novels were published before World War-I, while the fifth one appeared before World War II. The first four novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), *A Room with a View* (1908) and *Howards End* (1910), were published in quick succession, while *A Passage to India* (1924), appeared fourteen years later. His sixth novel, *Maurice*, was published posthumously in 1971, though it had been written much earlier.

Symbolism in Forster is a technique by which he discovers, objectified, explores, and evaluates his subject. It is a means of conveying his meanings which remain unexpressed in simple, obvious terms. He uses it as a sharper tool, which discovers more, produces works with the most satisfying content, works with maximum meaning and truth. In his novels, the technique of symbolism does not appear to be secondary thing or a technical affair but a deep and primary operations. It not only contains his intellectual and moral implications, his values and beliefs, but it also helps the writer to discover them.

We can pick out symbols in all the novels of Forster like raisins. They are used with great artistic effects. They help to organize and extend his material of the novels. It is these which pave the way for his reassessment as a major symbolist writer. In fact they provide a spine to the entire range of his fiction, and it is these which make his writings poetical and which give to his later work its peculiar distinction.

A Forsterian symbol is composed of a word, or a person, thing, place, happening anything which has a significance greater than, or different from, its literal, obvious

meaning and can, therefore, convey some truth the writer wants to express. And in writing his novel Forster tends to make the whole story and the portrayal of his characters serve this end.

Forster's symbolism is mixed, multifarious and transcendent, having variations and belonging to no particular branch of knowledge or special area permanently for its sustenance and sources, though it makes references to certain areas with a view to showing its variety and universality. It is natural, poetical, religious, mythical and transcendental in its mode of representation, revealing a larger meaning of the novels. A symbol in Forster is vital to the general conception of the novel and as such it determines the perspective of his work, the point of view to some extent.

Forster's symbolism has a universal air. The title of Forster's novels symbolically imply their universal application. The 'View' in *A Room with a View*, for instance, symbolizes man's visionary power to realise the inner life, and the value of love and passion and the life of the body. The 'room' represents the world. Thus the symbols in Forster move with an air of universality.

In Forster's fiction structural symbols also play a dominant role. They help to organise the material of a novel. In *A Passage to India*, the three parts of the novel, Mosque, Caves and Temple, can be regarded as structural symbols which bring about a grand unity of design 'Mosque' suggests an attempted union, Caves represent frustration and alienation; 'Temple' stands for love and harmony, realization and reconciliation.

Forster used this artistic technique of symbolism abundantly. His large and overflowing symbols gave a great distinction to his novels. At their best, his symbolic novels can be a rich source of his beliefs and values. In fact, it is the living symbols which display his particular genius as a careful symbolist. As a novelist, having his own originality and individuality, he conceives his own world of symbols after his wider range of experience, and therefore, a quality of freshness marks his symbolic art. And his fiction is not so elusive and complex as it is thought by certain critics. But in comparison with T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Conrad and D.H. Lawrence, Forster's symbols seem, in my view, to be drawn from sources which are more familiar and less diverse. These poets and novelists were rather prone to French symbolism, myth and religion. Their sources are so remote and complex that the simple reader is bewildered by them.

Forster man appear a little ambiguous or elusive to a new reader. But if he has the patience enough to go through his whole writing in fiction and criticism, including his autobiographical pieces, he will be amply rewarded with an illuminating insight into the meanings of his symbols as well as the process of transformation undergone by many of his key symbols, and layers of fresh meanings will start opening up. Frank Kermode's words about E.M. Forster as a symbolist are worth quoting here :

Like all art, he thinks, the novel must fuse differentiation into unity, in order to provide meaning we can experience art is the only orderly product that our muddling race has produced, the only unity and therefore the only meaning. This is symbolist.

In Barbara Hardy's study of the novel, the point has been further elaborated. Here she shows 'how what Frank Kermode calls the search for a significant order leads Forster into creating characters who represent, symbolically an aesthetic or ordering approach towards life, characters like Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Moore'.

Forster, the symbolist, has broken fresh grounds in language too. It is, in fact, his language which makes his symbols more effective and artistic. He considers that every word in the language has a potentiality for being used either in poetry or in prose. As a symbolist, he does not suggest any particular topic or diction, especially to be used in prose fiction. His language is easy and poetical. It is this quality of Forster's prose which gives him power to use a variety of symbols in his novels.

R.A. Brower dwells on the central design of Forster's novel which is 'composed of a group of symbolic metaphors'. In *A Passage to India* mosque is associated with arch, Caves with echo and Temple with sky. These symbols have a positive as well as negative meaning. The positive meaning of the mosque symbol consists in the possibilities of friendly relations between Aziz and Mrs. Moore; Aziz and Fielding. The Mosque episode brings people together.

In *Howards End* 'Houses' have a symbolic role in this novel in the same way as 'rooms' had in the last novel *A Room with a View*. *Howards End* reminds us of the house in Hertfordshire where Forster and his mother lived for ten years, but it is also like Windy

corner, a symbolic house, a house with a view. Houses are feminine symbols. For the symbolic significance Forster seems to be careful to emphasize the local particularity of the house. The name 'Howard' is that of the family who once lived at 'Rooksnest' and 'End' is a Hertfordshire suffix.

To conclude, the novels of E.M. Forster are replete with symbols. Symbolic structure is, indeed, the very strength of his novels. The main purpose of this is to bring out the profound symbolic meaning of his novels.

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