

E.M. Forster's Fictional Forte of Picturizing the Relationship between 'Reality' and 'Symbolic Vision' in his the Longest Journey: An Appraisal

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Abstract- This paper is an attempt to explore the fictional forte of E.M. Forster who has skillfully picturized the relationship between reality and symbolic vision in his *The Longest Journey* and show how he talks about the comradeship and truth which is the main vision focused in the novel. It neatly focuses on the conflict between men and women as well as truth and falsehood. Bringing back home, all the elements focused in this novel visualize the reality of characters.

Index terms- Comradeship, instinctual, response, degradation, prejudice, unrealistic, subverted, hypocrisy

INTRODUCTION

“Cambridge and Italy were the major liberating experiences in Forster's life and are clearly reflected in his writing” says Martial Rose (P 13). While in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* Forster has shown Italy as the land “in which repressions were defeated and the restricting conventions of English conduct forgotten”, *The Longest Journey* celebrates the glories of Cambridge; its intellectual companionship and relentless search for truth. As Italy condemned Sawston's feminine society in the earlier novel, Cambridge condemns Sawston's Public School in *The Longest Journey*. As a novel commemorating male comradeship and truth, its view of women in general is dark; but Forster with his celebrated double vision lets in exceptions and allows redeeming graces for his otherwise monstrous women. But this double vision, nor yet under the control of the artist, creates ambivalent characters whose twists and turns are difficult to grasp. There are also two points of view put forth earlier in the novel by two undergraduates, regarding women, and the plot of the novel supports both views: Rickie Elliot, in love with Agnes Pembroke writes to his friend Stewart Ansell, “The

eternal feminine leads us on” (LJ 97) to which partly out of jealousy and partly because he seen through the falsity of Agnes, Ansell replies, “the eternal feminine leads us a pretty dance” (LJ 97).

Though Rickie chooses to marry, it is the friendship of Ansell, Jackson and his half-brother Stephen which is shown to be worthwhile and preferable. Except the silts about whose domestic squabbles nothing is known, none of the married couple lives in harmony. Yet the novel ends on a note of domestic peace and hope of continuity. Cambridge, exclusively made, can admit women as serving maids to see to the needs and comforts of the residents. The entry of women like Agnes into this seat of intellectual honesty cannot but cause alarm. She may enter as the emissary of Nature and claim a weakling like Rickie but she brings with her a disaster which only few could foresee. It is to such people that the “eternal feminine” appears to be essentially selfish, false and cruel. In the words of Ansell,

“...man does not care a damn for Nature-or at least only a very little damn. He cares for a hundred things, besides, and the more civilized he is the more he will care for these other hundred things, and demand not only a wife and children but also friends and work and spiritual freedom” (LJ 96).

Rickie Elliot, orphaned at the age of twelve, has found in Agnes a mother surrogate. At the beginning of the novel, she is engaged to be married to Gerald Dawes an athletic young soldier who as a boy had often bullied Rickie. At a football match, he receives an injury and dies. While Agnes struggles to keep her sorrow in check, Rickie encourages her to honestly experience grief at the passing of the greater thing in her life. Agnes notices for the first time that Rickie

has depths that others fail to see. Agnes visits Rickie twice at Cambridge; once before her tragedy and another time two years after it. During the second visit they become engaged. Ansell opposes the match fiercely, and predicts “the most appalling catastrophe” (LJ 95). Agnes hence forward guides the destiny of Rickie. Once to his mother, Rickie had said, “I Shall be as wax in your hands Mamma” (LJ 37) and that is exactly what he becomes in the hands of Agnes and her brother Herbert Pembroke. Thus, from Cambridge independence Rickie moves to Sawston bondage.

Mr. Pembroke becomes Housemaster at Sawston Public School and needs a woman to keep house for him. Failing to find a wife for himself, he tells Agnes to get married to Rickie and invites them to come and live with him. A vacancy is created for Rickie so that he may be one of the faculties. Brother and sister make use of Rickie in their separate intrigues and Rickie loses worthy friends and is forced to compromise the values he had cherished at Cambridge. The break with his wife comes when he discovers her shameful connivance at the disinheritance of his half – brother Steph Wonham. During their first visit to Cadover after their engagement, Mrs. Failing, Rickie’s aunt out of a desire to hurt Rickie reveals to him the secret that her rustic protege, Stephen Wonham is Rickie’s half – brother. Though initially suffering a severe shock Rickie – wishes to acknowledge and accept Stephen as his brother, but motivated by selfishness, Agnes and aunt Emily prevent Rickie from telling Stephen who he is. Ansell who has given up his friend as irredeemable is induced to visit Sawston if only to read the posthumously published writings of Rickie’s uncle Mr. Failing, a socialist. Ansell uses the information imparted to him by Stephen to reclaim his friend from spiritual muddledom. Rickie suffers a second shock when Ansell in the presence of all the boys informs him that Stephen is his mother’s son, not his father’s as Rickie had formerly assumed. Rickie recovers and longs to redress the wrong inflicted on Stephen by Agnes.

Stephen, ten days after his abortive attempt to contact Rickie, comes to Sawston dead drunk. The brothers are reconciled. Stephen expresses a wish to take Rickie away with him and Rickie feeling that the call to liberty comes from his mother Agnes to go with him. Thus, Rickie is taken out of Sawston’s broad

highway to trace the unbeaten track to personal freedom and intellectual honesty. They go to the Ansell and Rickie takes up writing. His aunt sends for him and Rickie goes to Cadover. Stephen willfully joins him and in the train Rickie elicits from him a promise that while in Wiltshire he will become drunk. But being a law unto himself Stephen breaks the promise and breaks Rickie’s heart. At night after visiting his aunt Rickie goes in search of Stephen and finds him lying insensible across the railway track, in the path of a slowly moving goods train. Rickie manages to drag him to safety but himself gets run over by the train. He dies at Cadover. Stephen whom he names after their mother. Rickie’s stories get published. Agnes remarries and Cadover, after Aunt Emily’s death passes on to the silts, Rickies cousins. This last section of the novel in which people return to where they truly belong is called Wiltshire.

The three parts of the novel represent the three stages through which the career of the hero passes. They are named after places and represent certain attitudes to life and reality. Cambridge, the first part stands for congenial society and truth Sawston is a place benighted and it stands for falsehood and absence or imagination. Wiltshire the last part represents home. Its centre is Cadover, a piece of ancestral property. Here one brother lays down his life for the other so that he may live and continue his healthy yeoman line.

The conflict in the novel is between man and women as well as between truth and falsehood on the side of truth are young men from Cambridge and their associates, on the side of falsehood are women and Mr. Pembroke the Champion of the public school system. Agnes Pembroke is the antagonist whose potential for evil is first recognized by Ansell. Until his eyes are opened Rickie looks upon her with admiration. John Sayre Martin comments:

*“Overwhelmed by her manner and appearance
he had seen not simply a handsome girl
but a girl ‘like an empress’ an illusion
no doubt enhanced by the strain of ‘Das
Rheingold’, which one of the undergraduates
had been banging on the piano when she
came in” (P 29).*

Rickie clings to this exalted view throughout his courtship and for a time after his marriage. Professor Vasant A. Shahane considers it “a poetic and not a

rational view” (P 75). It is customary to represent the woman who marries the hero as an ideal of womanhood and attribute to her qualities of head and heart. That is exactly what Tilliard one of Rickie’s friends, does. He finds in her decent women who will keep Rickie up to the mark and stop him getting slack. But on the other hand, Ansell feels that once she gets him her work is over. He is cynical about their happiness continuing for long. Ansell even foresees Agnes leaving Rickie, in pursuit of a “jollier husband”. Ironically it is Rickie who bolts, while Agnes waits patiently for Rickie’s return. But Stephen gives her a terrible jolt as the poise of his shoulders suddenly brings to her mind Gerald whom she had really loved and lost. She hates Stephen all the more for it. Another intellectual besides Ansell sees through Agnes. It is Jackson, the rival of Herbert Pembroke at Sawston Public school. He refers to Agnes as “Meduse in Arcady” (LJ 201). In the matter of a day boy, Varden, Agnes sides with Herbert and persecutes him until the boy is broken in body, mind and spirit and finally has to leave. She passes on harmful bits of information against Stephen to Mrs. Failing until she decides to pack him off to the colonies.

Agnes is a dreaded enemy not only because she is selfish and unkind. She is, according to Prof. Shahane, “the principal instrument of convention and suppression of instinctual responses” (P 75). Marrying such a woman can only bring degradation to Rickie as he would be slowly subverted from what is good and true. John Colmer observes:

“Rickie’s marriage to the devious Agnes produces a fatal desertion from the high ideals of personal relations that he had experiences in Cambridge” (P 118)

Structurally this marriage, Colmer argues, is meant to contrast “the marriage of true minds” dreamed of in the Cambridge section of the novel. Rickie has an inkling of the danger when Agnes calls to him from Madingly dell. For the thrusts his fingers into his ears and resists the temptation to go to her. But he gives in Wilfred Stone comments:

“...through Rickie shares Ansell’s misogyny, he is also fighting the other ghost, the fear of sexual inadequacy which Ansell knows nothing about. Half paralyzed by the very fear he is facing, Rickie can neither deny the women nor acknowledge her”

Ansell’s view of Agnes in highly prejudiced while Rickie’s in the beginning is unrealistic. It is Stephen who passes a balanced judgment on the woman. In his opinion, it was Rickie who gave her saints’ robes “whereas she was a woman of her own sort, who needed careful, watching” (LJ 296). Agnes attempts to prevent Rickie from acknowledging his brother is compared by professor Shahane to Mrs. Herriton’s attempts in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* to stifle the voice of truth of a real blood relationship. According to Prof. Shahane, “Agnes frustrates Rickie’s feeble desire to accept the challenge of the symbolic moment” (P 71) with Mrs. Herriton, Agnes shares another Sawston matriarchal trait, that of hypocrisy. Shelthorpe, the original home of the Pembrokes is desired as place where “neither the cry of money nor the cry for money shall ever be heard”. Against this attitude of discreet silence towards economic well-being Colmer pits Agne’s single minded legacy – hunting to “illustrate how hypocritical this late Victorian convention was” (P 70).

Agnes as malign matriarch is true to type. But Mrs. Failing is an amalgam of several Forsterian feminine types rolled into one. She is as rebel and a blue stocking, turned diabolic over the years. She hates smugness and would let in fresh air even if it would kill her. As rebel again, she stood by Mrs. Elliot and farmer Robert and welcomed them as pioneers. She declared them guiltless in the sight of god. As a blue stocking, Mrs. Failing had her select company of associated and frequented literary saloons as long as she could move around. Her response to nature is severely aesthetic. Forster writes:

“She applied the test of beauty to shadow and odour and sound; they never filled her with reverence or excitement, she never knew them as a resistless trinity that may intoxicate the worshipper with joy. If she liked a ploughed field, it was only a spot of colour – not as a hint of the endless strength of the earth” (LJ 120)

In the words of Glen Cavaliero, “this kind of aestheticism is shallow but Mrs. Failing’s intelligence so far as it goes always makes her worth listening to” (P 84). Cavaliero finds it impossible not to like this character. It is the hereditary streak of sadism in Mrs. Failing which renders her diabolic. She considered herself a dragon:

“I have been a dragon most of my life I think.

a dragon that wants nothing but a peaceful cave. Then, in comes the strong, wonderful, delightful being and gains a princess by piercing my hide”.

This self-portraiture is occasioned by her discussion on the traits of a hero. In her opinion, a hero's chief characteristics are, “infinite disregard for the feelings of others plus a general inability to understand them” (LJ 121). One may associate the first of these characteristic with Mrs. Failing herself. Yet this is the victim dragon's view. She hero perhaps is her husband whose idealism disturbed her peace. She is out to debunk heroism and distort truth. And evil as always recoils on itself. She becomes a malign matriarch. Bored by her isolation at Cadover Mrs. Failing had become sardonic. According to Forster, she dropped lies into life in the hope of making it sparkle and in the end, she could hardly distinguish truth from falsehood. She who once looked upon Rickie to go back to his unloving wife, telling him that conventions are majestic in their way. She sends ringing in his ears, that “we do not live for great passions or for great memories or for anything great” (LJ 304).

In the midst of these two women, the medusa and the dragon, appears Forster's pathetic mother – figure, Mrs. Elliot. As mother, Mrs. Elliot's portrayed is ambivalent. For, she too discourages emotional attachments. Evelyn Hanquart in her article contributed to Forster centenary volume argues that the tenderness she later on shows to Rickie is only transferred love, which was meant for Stephen from whom she was separated by circumstances. The critic Evelyn Hanquart blames Mrs. Elliot for the inner loneliness Rickie suffers:

“The distance she keeps between herself and Rickie's young passionate outburst of affection hurts his sensitivity to the quick and contribution to his inner loneliness” (Hanquart 62).

Nevertheless, Mrs. Elliot is the forerunner of Mrs. Wilcox in Howards End and Mrs. Moore in A Passage to India as his influence is felt even after her death. In Mrs. Elliot, the critic Evelyn Hanquart point out,

“love enters the depiction of the maternal figure in Forster's fictional world for the first time” and “the mother image becomes more and more positive throughout

the novels following The Longest Journey” (P 63)

Thus, it is to be concluded that The Longest Journey is his autobiographical piece in which Forster is concerned with what puzzled him often, namely the relationship between reality and the symbolic vision. Central to the story is the hero's relationship with his mother whom he has idolized.

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