

ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL BY E.M. FORSTER: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The present paper is a critical appraisal of E.M. Forster's famous work on Aspects of Novel. This paper is a sort of critical report in which an attempt has been made so as to understand the critical canon and methodology of analyzing a novel; hence it can be considered as a treatise to facilitate the approach of the reader. It also offers some useful insights and suggestions so that a novelist can acquire excellence in the art of fictional writings. During the analytical study of this work, it is discerned that Forster has dismissed the hackneyed and typical method of examining novel as a historical development rather he focuses his attention on the general pattern and universal tone which should be taken into account while dealing with a fictional writings. This paper is divided into several parts. The first part of the paper forms the introduction while in succeeding parts different components of novel are discussed in which Forster puts forth certain guidelines to study novel and also suggests skills of novel writing to the new generation of novelists. Since this work is a compilation of Clark Lectures delivered in Trinity College of Cambridge University, it is but oblivious from the very beginning that the critical treatise is in conversational mode and even more lucid and easy to be comprehended. Keeping in view the conversational mode of expression and analysis of the book, the research mythology adopted is based on primary source of material and the book is the sole source on which an analysis has been imposed.

Keywords: Story, People (Character), Plot, Fantasy and Prophecy and Pattern and Rhythm.

E. M. Forster is one of the most well reputed British novelists and essayists in twentieth century. He wrote a range of critical works and many of his ideas and critical tenets about fiction, art and literature are found in his essays, reviews and broadcasts which were compiled in two volumes entitled *Abniger Harvest* and *Two Cheers for Democracy*. According to Forster, novel as compared to poetry and drama and other literary genres, is rather more shapeless and it would not be wrong to say that of all literary genres, it is less bound to rules and set patterns which are obvious in other literary forms. However, the novel has its own specific characteristic in the sense that the novelist is endowed with greater freedom and scope to speak much more through his characters. He portrays his characters in such a way that deals with external as well as internal aspects of their life, meaning thereby, that he is advantaged to draw a picture of the external side of his character while at the same time he can probe deep into his mind too. In addition to this, a variety of techniques lie at the disposal of the novelist who can pick up and choose and in turn can combine one and several to create a work for the recreational purpose. Similarly, the scope of subject matter is also very vast for his exploration; hence he paints a realistic picture of the age and thus giving information about the life and the manners of the time unobtrusively.

Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* is the most celebrated and subtle effort in the sphere of literary criticism and the study of the novel. This book, a brilliant and scholastic treatise on narratology, is a critical analysis of the novel and its various aspects. The content of this very book was, in fact, the publication of a series of Clark lectures delivered by E.M. Forster at Trinity college of Cambridge University in England. In this book, his ideas about art and novel are nicely expressed in the lecture form and also has a conversational intonation embedded in its style. Forster writes in the Acknowledgement to the book:

These are some lectures (the Clark Lectures) which were delivered under the auspices of Trinity College, Cambridge, in the spring of 1927. They were informal, indeed talkative in their tone, and it seemed safer when presenting them in book form not to mitigate the talk, in case nothing should be left at all[S]ince the novel is itself often colloquial it may possibly withhold some of its secrets from the graver and grander streams of criticism, and may reveal them to backwaters and shallows. (*Aspects of the Novel*)

As already mentioned, *the Aspect of Novel* is great work on narratology, Forster opines that when manner and matter are properly combined in a work, it carries the efficacy of giving pleasure and aesthetic delight to the reader stirring his imagination by instigating him to contemplate and then appreciate that very work. In this work too, by illustrating various examples of classic works, Forster tries to discuss various aspects of novel which collectively makes novel a specific work of its own type. He suggests seven aspects of novel which the reader or critic should bear in mind while reading a novel. These are (1) The Story (2) People (Characters), (3) The Plot (4) Fantasy (4) Prophecy (5) Pattern and finally (6) Rhythm. This is also to be taken into account that Forster does not simply enlist these technical components of novel rather, in this context of narratology, he also tries to explore the emotional and spiritual aspects of novel embedded in these parts and that his main thrust is on the creative tension between form / freedom and passion / structure.

Let us discuss various aspects of novel and try to understand the contribution of E. M. Forster to literary theory and criticism as regards novel. According to Forster, the cardinal and the most essential aspect of the novel is “its story telling aspect” (*Aspects of the Novel* 28). In the chapter entitled “the Story,” Forster says that “the basis of a novel is a story, and a story is a narrative of events arranged in time-sequence. (A story, by the way, is not the same as a plot. It may form the basis of one, but the plot is an organism of a higher type” (*Aspects of the Novel* 32). The story is definitely a backbone of the novel and in order to make it effective, the events should be narrated in time sequence. The story should be able to arouse the curiosity of the reader whetting his keenness to know what may happen next. To be lucid and logical, the novelist must incorporate two aspects of life, that is, the life in time as well as life of values. Forster states that the story should appeal more to the ear than to the eye; hence it can be better appreciated if it is read aloud. This is because “the story” is “the repository of a voice. It is the aspect of the novelist’s work which asks to be read out loud, which appeals not to the eye, like most prose, but to the ear; having indeed this much in common oratory” (39). He again reiterates the same point: “The story, besides saying one thing after another, adds something because of its connection with a voice” (39). However, this should not be mistaken that the reader comes in close proximity with the personality of the novelist, rather he can comprehend his point of view, and that this is done only through his comments on life or the character and the plot.

The next fundamental and significant aspect of a novel is character or people as he remarks at the very outset of chapter titled ‘People: “Having discussed the story – that simple and fundamental aspect of the novel – we can turn to a more interesting topic: the actors. We need not ask what happened next, but to whom did it happen” (*Aspects of the Novel* 42). Why this aspect comes next in the succession to story is also given by Forster as he intimated in the previous chapter “Story” too and it is because “the novelist will be appealing to our intelligence and imagination, not merely to our curiosity. A new emphasis enters his voice: emphasis upon value” (42). Through his characters, a novelist gives vent to his voice and establishes his value system, though implicitly. To the question why Forster calls this aspect people rather than character has been answered by him judiciously: “Since the actors in a story are usually human, it seemed convenient to entitle this aspect people” (*Aspects of the Novel* 42). Definitely, characterisation displays a novelist’s craftsmanship and skill of writing more so because it enables him to lay emphasis on values. Moreover, there is unique intimacy between the character and its creator as the creator does psychological study of the character as well. The characters are taken from life but are given new personalities because a work of art is an imaginative reconstruction of life, so a novelist creates them by mingling facts and fiction in appropriate proportion.

According to Forster, there are five human activities which should be taken into account in order to understand the creation of people by a novelist. He writes: “The main facts in human life are five: birth, food, sleep, love and death” (45). Now the question arises as to how all these facts and activities pertaining to human life finds manifestation in a novel: “Does the novelist tend to reproduce them accurately or does he tend to exaggerate, minimize, ignore, and to exhibit his characters going through processes which are not the same through which you and I go, though they bear the same names?” (45). Forster deals with this question very efficiently by bringing forth the obvious distinction among them in real life and on the canvas of novel. In a novel birth, death, food, sleep should not be given that importance as they have in real life but love and other emotions occupy a prominent place in fictional piece of writing. In a novel, people are shown to be exceptionally sensitive to each other; however, such is not the case in real life. Apart from this, a novelist, since he is the creator of these people, he has complete hold over them and they interact and inter-depend according to the will of the novelist. Hence, the creation of characters is a difficult task. If the novelist gives them too much freedom, they will not fit into the pattern of his work. On the other hand, if he restricts them too much, they would be lifeless wooden puppets. In order to resolve this problematic situation, the novelist has to take recourse to two technical devices: first is the use of various types of characters and second is a careful handling of the point of view under consideration. Forster has classified his characters into two categories: (1) Flat Characters and (2) Round Characters. According to Forster, flat characters are also known as types, caricatures and humours, while round characters, often referred to as complex or multi-dimensional, are capable of change and development physically as well psychologically in the course of the novel. Forster’s novels being symbolical in nature abound in complex characters.

While narrating the story the novelist must have a certain point of view which, however, depends upon the relation the novelist chooses to have between the narrator and the story. The narrator can be either an impartial onlooker or he may describe the minds of the characters, thus becoming one of them, or he may combine both the methods. Forster suggests that for him “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” (*Aspects of the Novel* 70). Forster exemplifies the point of view through Dickens’ novel *Bleak House*:

Look how Dickens bounces us in *Bleak House*. Chapter I of *Bleak House* is omniscient. Dickens takes us into the Court of Chancery and rapidly explains all the people there. In Chapter 2 he is partially omniscient. We still use his eyes, but for some unexplained reason they began to grow weak: he can explain Sir Leicester Dedlock to us, part of Lady Dedlock but not all, and nothing of Mr Tulkinghorn. In Chapter 3 he is even more reprehensible: he goes straight across into the dramatic method and inhabits a young lady. . . . Logically, *Bleak House* is all to pieces, but Dickens bounces us, so that we do not mind the shifting of the viewpoint. (*Aspects of the Novel* 70)

Forster refers to this as ‘the shifting of the view point’ and this is the attribute that ascribes him to be a successful novelist in English literature.

In the next Chapter entitled “Plot,” Forster turns to another significant component of novel. He begins by making a distinction between plot and story. He suggests that though the story is an integral part of the novel but plot is even more important in its own turn. He says that plot is different from story which is “a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence,” but the reader follows the narrative with curiosity. He says that plot, like story, is a narrative of events but the emphasis is laid on cause and effect. To quote him, “A plot is a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a story. ‘The king died and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot” (*Aspects of the Novel* 75). Hence, the plot ought to be compact with no loose ends because the aim of the novelist is to make the readers feel aesthetically satisfied with the plot structure. He puts certain guidelines before the novelist so that he may achieve the desired target:

The plot-maker expects us to remember, we expect him to leave no loose ends. Every action or word in the plot ought to count; it ought to be economical and spare; even when complicated it should be organic and free from dead matter. It may be difficult or easy, it may and should contain mysteries, but it ought not mislead. And over it, as it unfolds, will hover the memory of the reader (that dull glow of the mind of which intelligence is the bright advancing edge) and will constantly rearrange and reconsider, seeing new clues, new chains of cause and effect, and the final sense (if the plot has been a fine one) will not be of clues or chains, but of something aesthetically compact . . . (*Aspects of the Novel* 76-77)

In drama the plot is unfolded mainly through action while in a novel the means of expression and exposition are different and that the reader should have intelligence to enjoy a good plot. Mystery is essential to plot and it cannot be comprehended without intelligence.

Another two aspects of novel enumerated by Forster are ‘Fantasy’ and ‘Prophecy.’ If the character and the plot of the novel are to be placed against the backdrop, but how he portrays reality embedded in his vision can be executed by these two elements of novel. The novelist can make use of either reality or myth. As regards ‘Fantasy,’ it involves the use of mythological gods, or slips of memory, or puns and verbal coincidences. According to Forster, prophecy has a mythology which suggests unity: a mingling of the physical reality with some universal elements. The prophetic aspect of the novel demands two things from the reader ‘humility’ and ‘suppression’ of the sense of humour. If the reader does not have humility, he will be unable to hear the voice of his prophet. At the same time, the reader has to suppress the humour to be able to hear the voice of the prophet.

After giving an insight into ‘Fantasy’ and ‘Prophecy,’ E.M. Forster comes to ‘Pattern’ and ‘Rhythm.’ In the opinion of E.M. Forster ‘Pattern’ and ‘Rhythm’ formulate the aesthetic aspect of the novel as a whole. ‘Pattern’ is inseparable from ‘the plot’ and depends upon it. As long as it is visible, say, in the form or unity of the novel, it is ‘pattern’ but when it is not so, we may call it ‘rhythm’. According to Forster, ‘rhythm’ is of two kinds: ‘easy and difficult.’ In easy rhythm, a novelist takes up a phrase or an image and repeats it with slight variation throughout the novel. The repetition gets the effect of an echo, a memory. Difficult rhythm occurs due to perfect fusion of the various parts of the work giving ‘a larger existence like a complete musical symphony.

The Aspects of the Novel is best known critical document on novel. Its peculiar quality is that it is an engaging conversational style and while studying it we do not get bored with it. The book is really a great book for the student of literature (English literature) because it contains almost all the points which a student or scholar of English literature must be well acquainted with. If a scholar reads a novel while keeping in his mind the views given in the book, his approach to study novel will be up to the mark and the analysis done and prospect approached will be of greater significance. To conclude it can be said that this book anticipates 'Aspects of Narratology' in its consideration of 'point of view,' but it sharply distinguished from later Narratology, as well as from the more earnest and perspective approach of Henry James' 'Prefaces,' by Forster's jaunty scepticism about any pretension to abstract rigour.

Work Cited

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