

The Prose Style of E. M. Forster — An Attempt

Dr Gontumukkala Nirmala

*An Associate Professor in English, S. B. S. Y. M. Degree College, Kurnool,
Andhra Pradesh, India.*

Abstract

E.M. Forster is primarily known as a novelist, short story writer and a literary critic of a rare distinction. Though his contribution to English essay is substantial he has not received the critical due attention as an essayist. Unlike the other writers Forster began his literary carrier as a short story writer and a novelist and then turned to essay-writing. The aim of the paper is an attempt to analyse the prose style of E. M. Forster, in his two volumes of essays *Abinger Harvest* and *Two Cheers for Democracy*, which is characterised by its raciness, simplicity, directness and 'beautiful amusingness'. The style of a writer expresses the nature of his thoughts. Hence the popular view 'style is the man.' Bacon says that language is the instrument of thought. Any discussion of Forster as an essayist is incomplete without reference to his prose style.

Keywords

E M Forster's prose, racism, simple, direct and beautiful amusingness.

Introduction

The word essay has come from the French word 'assay' which means an attempt. Different critics have tried to define the word 'essay' but no single definition could be termed satisfactory. Dr. Johnson defined the word 'essay' as a loose sally of the mind, an irregular, indigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance. The word 'sally' refers to the aimless movements of the mind here and there within the limits of the subject matter and the mind does not search for the depth of the knowledge of the subject. Twentieth century is the most successful period for the development of 'essay'. G.K. Chesterton, E.V. Lucas A.G. Gardiner are some contemporaries of E.M. Forster.

The most unique thing about Forster's prose style is that it is racy. It may start with an event or an incident or an argument and is linked with various aspects of life. Throughout we find the language racy and interesting. The following may be taken as an example. In "What I Believe" he begins an argument by saying that he has to live in an Age of faith. Immediately he links it with items like personal relationships which he feels would bring about some order. Then he discusses the merits of democracy. Next, he dwells upon the role of Force. Later he turns to hero worship and then he expresses his belief in aristocracy.

*I believe aristocracy Not an aristocracy
Of power , based upon rank and influence but
an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and
the plucky. Its members are to be found in all
nations and
there is a secret understanding between them when
they meet.¹*

It is the raciness of Forster's language that makes his prose very interesting. Forster's prose is sometimes simple easy and realistic. Unlike the writers like Lytton Starchy, Forster's prose is easy, simple and direct. For example, his essay that appears in Abinger Harvest, are easy and are even in the reach of an ordinary reader. For example, his essay 'Happiness' is very simple and can be followed even by a layman. He says that Eve and Adam "have lived there as long as they can remember amongst the birds and flowers, they have ridden giraffes and turtles, and danced into shades and lights of the forest; they have played by the cataract at sunset."² These lines reveal to us the lightness of forester's prose style.

The predominant quality of the prose of Forster is its 'absolute fidelity to the truth of life' and its exposé of the most important events of the contemporary English society. The realism is not an attempt at a book keeping of existence but an artistic endeavour to transcend the actual. For example, his 'The Challenge of our Times' records the events of the contemporary times. It is here he brings about the evil effects of war and also of the collapsing of moral values in the contemporary society.

The old capitalist order based on free enterprise, which enabled a few to have good life at the expense of the many has completely collapsed in many countries today. The new order puts the people at the mercy of the officials, allows the state to interfere in the day-to-day life of the citizens and paves the way for totalitarianism. In the words of E.M. Forster,

*All that has changed in the present century. The dividends have shrunk to decent proportions and have in some cases disappeared. The poor have kicked. The backward races are kicking – and more power to their boots, which means that life has become less comfortable for the Victorian liberals.*³

Sometimes Forster resorts to deliberate irony and to a beautiful amusingness in his essays, 'Jew Consciousness' provides us a good example for this. After an extremely accusing amount of two preparatory schools where it was a disgrace to have respectively a sister and a mother, Forster suddenly pounces "Those preparatory schools prepared me for better than I realized, for having passed through two imbecile societies, a sister-conscious and a mother-conscious, I am now invited to enter a third. I am asked to consider whether the people I meet and talk about are or are not Jews, and to form no opinion on them until this fundamental point has been settled. What revolting tosh: Neither science nor religion nor common sense has one word to say in its favour"⁴ Here he comments ironically that science, religion, and common sense have kept themselves deliberately mum with regard to the persecution of the Jews.

Forster's prose is fraught with metaphor. In 'Ibsen the Romantic' he speaks about the influence of mountains upon Ibsen and Words Worth.

Words Worth fell into the residential fallacy, he continued

To look at his gods direct, and to pin with decreasing success

*His precepts to the flanks of Helvellyn.*⁵

One notices the metaphor of the mountain and its influence on Words Worth and Ibsen.

P.N. Furbank rightly says, "indeed this characteristic leads us to the heart of Forster's beliefs. He trusted metaphor to lead him where it would because he believed things contained the truth, albeit a truth probably every different from man's presuppositions."⁶

Sometimes Forster's prose is fraught with rich poetry. The essays that appear in "Two Cheers for democracy" are intensely poetic and do not lend themselves easily to the first reading. In his 'What I Believe' he says

*Tolerance, good temper, and sympathy.....they are what matter really and if the human race is not to collapse they must come to the front before long. But for the action is no stronger than a flower, battered beneath a military jack-boot. They want stiffening, even if the process coarsens them*⁷

Here the language is highly poetic because he gives us a graphic account of the destruction of the tenets of humanism in the age of violence. They are like flowers mercilessly spoiled by military boots.

Conclusion

To conclude we may say that the style of a man decides the nature of the man. Forster in his essays comes to us as good stylist. His prose is racy because he starts with an argument and links it with various aspects of life. His prose is simple, easy and direct. The predominant quality of his prose style is its fidelity 'to the truth of life' It aims at a beautiful amusingness not without truth. It is sometimes metaphorical and highly poetic. Thus, Forster's style is racy easy, eloquent, amusing, metaphorical and poetic.

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Dr Gontumukkala Nirmala is an Associate Professor in English.
S. B. S. Y. M. Degree College, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh, India.

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