



TRANSFORMATION FROM SOCIAL UNITY TO A QUEST FOR THE SELF “Only Connect” In Forster’s Howards End And Smith’s On Beauty

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ABSTRACT

As the epitome of his humanistic view of life, E. M. Forster’s motto “only connect” is best represented by Howards End. Henry Wilcox’s and Margaret’s indifference and distanced approach to Leonard’s demand for employment because of his lower status, Helen’s failed efforts for the appreciation of the lower strata in the case of the Bast family and Leonard Bast’s acceptance of his inferiority to the Wilcoxes embody Forster’s anxieties regarding the “connection” among different social classes. However, contemporary man’s quest for a new self within the dynamism of the contemporary world despite the realisation of Forster’s emphasis on “connection” in the contemporary context is epitomised in Zadie Smith’s On Beauty. In the novel, Howard’s efforts for a new self by his affair with Victoria and his failure in returning to his family bonds indicate that Forster’s emphasis on “connection” among people turns into a quest for a new self in contemporary circumstances.

1. Introduction

Edward Morgan Forster is a humanistic author and he shows his sensitivity to humankind and the circumstances in individual, social, and cultural areas in his lifetime. His favour of human beings can be best summarised by his motto “only connect”. In his words in “The Challenge of Our Time”, “I have no mystic faith in the people. I have in the individual. He seems to me, a divine achievement and I mistrust any view which belittles him. If anyone calls you a wretched individual – and I’ve been called that – don’t you take it lying down. You are important because everyone else is an individual too – including the person who criticises you” (Forster, 1946: 69). Forster’s view of humankind as a divine achievement is a signification of his humanistic Weltanschauung. In relation to his sensitivity to the individual, Forster indicates that man is also a social being. For this reason, he puts emphasis on interpersonal relations. In focusing on the significance of interaction among the individuals with different identities, Forster’s following words in “I Speak for Myself” explain how an ideal interaction can be established between the people with distinctive views of life: “I cannot know what you are like – your upbringing and your mother tongue are probably different from my own, and your experience of life may well be deeper. [...]. We know we are individuals [...]. What matters is our common humanity – and I intend those words not in a vague sentimental way but as a truth which has to be utilised each time two human beings meet” (Forster, 1949: 310-311). People have different backgrounds and so they cannot have the same approach to life. At this point, it is possible to achieve a healthy communication among the people with different identities and views of life by respecting the individuals and their approaches, ideas, and views of life. Forster further elaborates on the way to achieve harmony among the people from different backgrounds in his following words in “Tolerance”: “If you don’t like people, put up with them as well as you can. Don’t try to love them: you can’t, you will only restrain yourself. But try to tolerate them. On the basis of that tolerance a civilised future may be

built” (Forster, 1941: 56-57). Forster’s value of humankind is based on the mutual respect of the individuals regarding their outlook on humanity and life, as well as the tolerance to people and ideas that do not comply with our opinions and views regarding the individual, social and global circumstances. These merits, which Forster also favours, represent his human-centered worldview.

While Forster reflects his sensitivity to humankind by means of his humanistic approach, he has also a realistic approach concerning the disharmonies and clashes among the individuals, societies, and countries with different lifestyles. His following words in “Modern Writing” indicate his realistic and critical view regarding humankind and the world: “In the first place, the world is unrestful. People are torn from their surroundings, their families, the places where they are being educated and sent away to fight, or into concentration camps. [...]. The result is a psychological reaction. The individual knows that he is not as important as he was under liberalism, he knows [...] that personal relations are not a good-spirited investment, because there is no reason to suppose that they will continue” (Forster, 1942: 122). Forster views the world as a place deprived of peace because of the problematic issues in the twentieth-century context and his following words in “Incidents of War” embody his anxieties as an explanation for his view of the world as an insecure place: “The earth is full of dead – their arms and legs stick out. When a mine is exploded they are so mixed that when the digging recommences one has often to cut through the corpses. They lie between the trenches after a charge and the smell of them is awful when there is a hot sun and a bit of wind” (Forster, 1915: 189). Forster relates the death of millions of people and even the insensitivity to their burial to the loss of respect to the individualities of the people around the world. The loss of tolerance to the individualities of the people somehow establishes the basis of discriminatory approaches and binary oppositions among people and societies with different approaches to life and humankind.

“The Machine Stops” (1909) is an embodiment of Forster’s anxieties regarding the loss of respect and tolerance to the individuality of the people. In the story, Vashti’s treatment and recovery from diseases by means of the Machine and the performance of education by means of machinery indicate Forster’s anxieties about the loss of communication among people and hence man’s alienation from his human identity. Most significantly, people’s dependence on the Machine for feeding, clothing, and communication as well as their depiction of the Machine as omnipotent can be considered as an epitome regarding Forster’s anxieties concerning the loss of human nature.

A Passage to India (1924) epitomises the inevitable disunities among the British and Indian characters despite the efforts of both parties for reconciliation and harmony in a multicultural context. In the work, during an expedition to Marabar Caves, Aziz’s accusation as a rapist upon Miss Adela Quested’s claims despite his efforts for giving the field-glasses back to her represents the inevitability of disunities among the people belonging to different cultures: “[H]e followed her into the cave and made insulting advances. She hit at him with her field-glasses; he pulled at them and the strap broke, and that is how she got away. When we searched him just now, they were in his pocket” (Forster, 1979: 160).

2. Emphasis on Social Unity: “Only Connect” In E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*

Forster indicates that clashes and disunities are not only observed in the international area but within the same society as well. At this point, Forster reflects his concerns regarding the disharmony among the people from different social strata in the early twentieth-century context in *Howards End* (1910). The novel focuses on the relations among three families, namely, the Wilcoxes, the Schlegels, and the Basts. Each of these families belongs to a specific social class and they view each other and base their relations and interactions on the ideals of their strata. In Melanie Williams’s words, *Howards End* “may be said to be ‘about’ the

philosophical and political differences between pragmatic, ‘positivist’ persons – the Wilcoxes and the more idealistic Schlegels” (Williams, 2006: 255).

Early in the novel, Forster elaborates on the relationship between the viewpoints of the Schlegel and Wilcox families. Helen, the younger of the Schlegel sisters, enjoys staying with the Wilcox family and as she stays longer with them, she turns out to alienate herself from the identity of Schlegels and base her own self on the ideals of the Wilcox family:

The truth was that she had fallen in love, not with an individual, but with a family. [...] The energy of the Wilcoxes had fascinated her, had created new images of beauty in her responsive mind. To be all day with them in the open air, to sleep at night under their roof, had seemed the supreme joy of life, and had led to that abandonment of personality that is a possible prelude to love. She had liked giving in to Mr. Wilcox, or Evie, or Charles; she had liked being told that her notions of life were sheltered [...]. One by one the Schlegel fetishes were overthrown, and though professing to defend them, she had rejoiced. (Forster, 2012: 22-23)

Helen’s basis of her view of life on the ideals of the Wilcox family establishes a “connection” between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. Despite Helen’s love for Paul, the rejection of the two families for the engagement between Paul and Helen arguably establish a union and harmony between the two families in terms of the similarity in their approach to life and people in general. Although they have a sense of belonging to different social strata, both the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes are aware of the significance of economic power in social life. Arguably considered as an embodiment of this awareness in socio-economic context, Margaret’s following words to her aunt, Mrs. Munt, explain the unity and harmony between the two families: “You and I and the Wilcoxes stand upon money as upon islands. It is so firm beneath our feet that we forget its very existence. [...] I began to think that the very soul of the world is economic, and that the lower abyss is not the absence of love, but the absence of coin” (Forster, 2012: 61-62). In Douglas H. Thomson’s words, “the opening letters result in Aunt Juley’s ill-fated mission to

Howards End. Margaret's written attempt to break off relations with the Wilcoxes leads instead towards a fateful deepening of her friendship with them" (Thomson, 1983: 122). Thus, in line with Thomson's arguments, it is not wrong to claim that the two families base their friendship not on humanistic ideals, but rather on materialist interests. So, whereas Paul and Helen's engagement represents a humane love, the termination of this relation by the two families signifies the extent to which socioeconomic status shapes the interpersonal relations.

As a signification of the deepening friendship between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, Mrs. Wilcox gives permission to Margaret to possess Howards End before her death: "The enclosed – it was from his mother herself. She had written: 'To my husband: I should like Miss Schlegel (Margaret) to have Howards End'" (Forster, 2012: 100). Considering Howards End as the major symbol of the economic power of the Wilcoxes, it is not wrong to claim that possession of this house by Margaret signifies a transition in economic power. Contrarily, the narrator's following words embody not only the continuation of the Wilcoxes' wealth but also the extent to which Henry Wilcox views economic power much more important than his wife's death: "Since his wife's death he had almost doubled his income. He was an important figure, at last, a reassuring name on company prospectuses, and life had treated him very well. The world seemed in his grasp as he listened to the river Thames, which still flowed inland from the sea (Forster, 2012: 137). In line with Henry Wilcox's viewpoint following his wife's death, the economic power and interests establish the basis of the unity between the Schlegel and Wilcox families.

While the Wilcoxes and Schlegels are well-to-do families, the Bast family represents the lower-middle classes in the social area. Because of this difference in terms of the lifestyles of these families, the narrator's following statements in the description of Leonard Bast can be considered as an embodiment of the agreement of the Wilcox and Schlegel families in relation to their discriminatory outlook on the lower classes in the social context:

We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet. [...]. The boy, Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. [...]. He knew that he was poor, and would admit it; he would have died sooner than confess any inferiority to the rich. This may be splendid of him. But he was inferior to most rich people, there is not the least doubt of it. He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable. His mind and his body were underfed, because he was poor. (Forster, 2012: 46)

Despite Forster's sensitivity to humankind as a whole, the Wilcoxes' insensitive approach to Leonard Bast because he belonged to lower social class somehow reflects the inevitable failure in the establishment of a "connection" among the people in the social area. More importantly, instead of making efforts to get his social class treated respectfully, Leonard Bast takes his inferiority to the wealthy strata (the Wilcoxes and Schlegels) for granted. Hence, although "the cult of personal relations provides a means of connection" (Pinkerton, 1985, 236) in the social sphere, Bast's view of himself as less healthy, intelligent and polite than the well-to-do families in the novel is an embodiment of the impossibility of reconciliation in the social context.

Though aware of this impossibility, Leonard still aims to establish an interaction with the Wilcoxes for his employment. The Porphyryon Fire Insurance Company, where he works as a clerk, is on the verge of bankruptcy and he expresses his demand for employment in another company to Margaret. While this purpose of Leonard signifies his hope for "connection" with the people from wealthy strata, the following dialogue between Margaret and Henry Wilcox emphasises the failure in the understanding and appreciation between the people from different social classes:

'Do excuse me, but about the Porphyryon. I don't feel easy – might I just bother you, Henry?'

Her manner was so serious that he stopped, and asked her a little sharply what she wanted.

'You said on Chelsea Embankment, surely, that it was a bad concern, so we advised this clerk to clear out. He writes this morning that he has taken our advice, and now you say it's not a bad concern.'

'A clerk who clears out of any concern, good or bad, without securing a berth somewhere else first is a fool, and I've no pity for him.' (Forster, 2012: 196-197)

Forster's following arguments in "Tolerance" signifies his emphasis on the inevitability of disunities and clashes among the people with different lifestyles and identities despite his humanistic outlook on life and humankind as a whole: "Love is what is needed", we chant, and then sit back and the world goes on as before. The fact is we can only love what we know personally" (Forster, 1941: 56). At this point, as a reaction against the disunities and biases among the individuals with differing views of life, the differing views in the Schlegel family regarding the lower social strata represents Forster's motto "only connect", emphasizing the significance of unity and harmony among people from all walks of life.

The change in the viewpoint regarding the lower social classes is particularly observed in Margaret and Helen's approaches to the "other half" of the society. The following dialogue between the two sisters is arguably an embodiment of the difference in their approach to the lower classes in relation to Leonard's circumstances of life:

'They're starving!' she shouted. 'I found them starving!'

'Who? Why have you come?'

'The Basts.'

'Oh, Helen!' moaned Margaret. 'What ever have you done now?' 'He has lost his place. He has been turned out of his bank. Yes, he is done for. We upper classes have ruined him, and I suppose you will tell me it is the battle of life. Starving. His wife is ill. Starving. She fainted in the train.'

'Helen, are you mad?'

Perhaps. Yes. If you like, I am mad. But I have brought them. I'll stand injustice no longer. I will show up the wretchedness that lies under this luxury, this talk of impersonal forces, this cant about God doing what we are too slack to do ourselves.' (Forster, 2012: 234)

Whereas Helen makes efforts to appreciate Leonard's lifestyle to which she is unfamiliar, her sister Margaret turns out to develop a more biased approach to the Basts. Her following words to Helen in her letter indicate the extent to which the ideals of the social classes shape the interpersonal relations in the social area: "The Basts are no good. Henry found the woman drunk on the lawn. I am having a room got ready for you here, and will you please come round at once on getting this? The Basts are not at all the type we should trouble about" (Forster, 2012: 252). Margaret has a more distanced view concerning the Bast family due to her marriage with Henry Wilcox. As a result of this marriage, Margaret's discourse "it certainly is a funny world, but so long as men like my husband and his sons govern it I think it will never be a bad one - never really bad" (Forster, 2012: 287) represents her sense of belonging to the ideals of the wealthy Wilcox family despite her distanced and critical approach to them in the early parts of the novel. Thus, Helen's decisiveness to go to Germany to start a new life, Henry's decision that "I leave Howards End to my wife [Margaret] absolutely" (Forster, 2012: 360) and Leonard's death by Charles Wilcox, Henry's son, embody the inevitable failure in the establishment of unity among the people with different lifestyles in the social context.

Hence, in *Howards End*, Forster elaborates on the significance of tolerance and understanding between different social strata although he realistically indicates its impossibility by means of the relations among the families in the novel. In Kim Shirkhani's words, in this work, "Forster is asking us not only to notice how money conditions one's inner life but also to contemplate the effects of calling attention to this fact" (Shirkhani, 2008: 195). As understood from the events and network of relations among the characters in *Howards End*, money does not only condition the individual's inner life but also their interactions with each

other in the social area. This situation explains the dependence of social relations among the individuals on the class to which they feel a sense of belonging. Thus, Forster's motto "only connect" reflects his humanistic Weltanschauung, while it also shows the basis of his concern for the dependence of human relations on materialist interests rather than the respect for the individualities of the people.

3. A Quest for the Self: Transformation of "Only Connect" in Zadie Smith's On Beauty

Though almost a century later, Zadie Smith has a humanistic outlook on life and humankind, similar to Forster. For Smith, since human beings are social, they somehow need to establish communication with each other: "Friendship means conversation, and it is vital to my life because it is hard for me to have thoughts or feelings independently. I need to talk things through. I rely on my friends" (Penguin Random House, 2017). Sharing ideas and emotions with another individual establishes the basis of healthy interaction. So, an appropriate means of communication in daily life contributes to the emergence of "connection" among people with different beliefs, lifestyles, and identities.

In fact, contemporary life in the twenty-first-century context is characterised by the term "globalisation". Simply defined as "the intensification of global interconnectedness" (McGrew, 1992: 63), the globalisation process somehow makes Forster's motto "only connect" an inevitable phenomenon in contemporary world circumstances. Thanks to globalisation, people from a wide variety of identities and views of life establish an interaction with each other. At this point, Zadie Smith's following words arguably embody her emphasis on the inevitability of "connection" among people with different identities and lifestyles: "I cannot think of community in the singular. Does not everyone exist in a Venn diagram of overlapping allegiances and interests?" (The Guardian, 2018). As understood from Smith's discourses, globalisation makes it necessary to establish a connection and network of relations among the

individuals, societies, and countries despite their distinctive identities and ways of life.

On the other hand, the network of relations as a by-product of the globalisation process somehow causes transformations in the views of the individuals and societies to each other. Salman Rushdie's following words as the narrator in *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* (2015) are arguably an epitome of the extent to which this process of change is influential in the interpersonal and social relations in the contemporary global context:

In the world of literature there was a noticeable separation of the writers from their subjects. Scientists reported the separation of causes and effects. It became impossible to compile new editions of dictionaries on account of the separation of words and meanings. Economists noted the growing separation of the rich from the poor. The divorce courts experienced a sharp increase in business owing to a spate of marital separations. Old friendships came abruptly to an end. The separation plague spread rapidly across the world. (Rushdie, 2015: 161)

Within the complexity of the contemporary world where words change their meanings, it somehow becomes difficult to maintain the individual and social ideals. Thus, relations among friends, family members, and people from different social strata lose their significance. In Effraim Sicher and Linda Weinhouse's words, contemporary life is characterised by "a continual metamorphosis of postmodern identities" (Sicher and Weinhouse, 2012: 91). The continual process of change in individual identities somehow makes it hard to maintain the set of values on which people base their lives and their relations with each other. This difficulty leads to the temporariness of the bond among the people with different views of life.

The failure in the establishment of long-lasting friendships and relations can be explained with the term "consumerism". George S. Day and David A. Aaker describe the characteristics of this term as follows: "The most common understanding of consumerism is in reference to the widening range of activities of government, business and independent organisations that are designed to protect

individuals from practices [...] that infringe upon their rights as customers. This view of consumerism emphasises the direct relationship between the individual customer and the business firm" (Day and Aaker, 1970: 13). Direct access to firms and their products helps the individuals to buy and consume products in a short time. Similar to the products that are bought and consumed in accordance with financial power, relationships among people may somehow be exposed to a process of consumption. Consumerist approach to interpersonal relations inevitably leads to the termination of friendships, family bonds, interactions between husbands and wives. As a result of the temporariness of interactions among the people as a by-product of the continuous process of flux in the contemporary globalising world, it somehow becomes impossible to establish a steady view of life about human beings and societies. Thus, the people's quest for a new self despite the globalisation's dramatic contribution to the establishment of Forster's motto "only connect" among the individuals with their distinctive lifestyles embody the paradox of the contemporary world in itself. Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) best represents this paradox of the contemporary world in relation to contemporary man's ambivalence due to the failure in his efforts for exploring a new personal identity in his life.

In *On Beauty*, Howard Belsey is depicted as an academic whose rivalry to his colleague, Monty Kipps, continues throughout the novel. Although he is an academic, he does not have enough real-life experiences. In the narrator's words, "he could identify thirty different ideological trends in the social sciences but did not really know what a software engineer was" (Smith, 2005: 33). Howard's lack of "connection" with the real-life restricts the formation of his individuality. So, his efforts for the establishment of interaction with his wife, Kiki, signify his purpose to discover himself. In the narrator's words,

Howard pulled his wife toward him and put his nose in between her breasts. 'Can't we just have a party here? You and me and the girls?' he asked, tentatively squeezing the girls. Kiki

drew back from him. Although peace had broken out in the Belsey household, sex had not yet returned. In the past month Howard had stepped up his flirtatious campaign. Touching, holding and now squeezing. Howard seemed to think the next step inevitable, but Kiki had not yet decided whether tonight was to be the beginning of the rest of her marriage. (Smith, 2005: 103)

In *NW*, Zadie Smith as the narrator states that "a vaginal orgasm can be provoked [...] by simply moving the pelvis forward and backwards [...]. There seems to be a small piece of flesh [...] halfway up the wall of vaginal canal on the side nearest your belly button [...]. Whether this is what is meant by the phrase 'G-spot', and whether it is the cause of the almost unbearably pleasurable sensation, Keisha Blake could not verify one way or another" (Smith, 2013: 190). Keisha's attempts to discover her genitals and learn about the female orgasm and reproductive system are arguably an embodiment of her efforts for the discovery of her female self. Similar to Keisha, Howard aims to find out his personal identity by means of a sexual contact with his wife. However, Kiki's distanced approach to Howard makes it difficult for him to discover his individuality through his relationship with his wife. Apart from his wife's approach, his son Jerome's discourse "a family does not work anymore when everyone in it is more miserable than they would be if they were alone" (Smith, 2005: 60) reinforces this difficulty in Howard's efforts for the discovery of his self due to the lack of "connection" with his family members.

Thus, Howard's sexual intercourse with Victoria Kipps, the daughter of his academic rival Monty Kipps, can be considered as a signification of his efforts for the discovery of his personal identity:

Now she began to unbutton his shirt slowly, as if accompanying music were playing, and seemed disappointed not to find a pornographic rug of hair here. She rubbed it conceptually, as if the hair were indeed there, tugging at what little Howard possessed while – could it be? – purring. She pulled him on to the bed. Before he had a chance to consider

removing her shirt, she had already done the job for him.

[...].

'Put it in me,' she said.

OK, then. Howard took hold of his cock and began the breach. (Smith, 2005: 315-317)

Although the narrator views Howard's insertion of his penis to Victoria as a breach of loyalty to family, Howard has this intercourse with Victoria as an embodiment of his struggles for the exploration of his individuality due to his failure in establishing communication with his family members, i.e. Kiki and Jerome and thus inability to find his personal identity. However, Howard's consumerist approach to his relation to Victoria is indicated in his discourse to her "just forget about me, all of it. Please – do that" (Smith, 2005: 335). Hence, as a signification of the temporariness of this affair, Howard aims to turn back to his interaction with his family. Despite his purpose concerning his family, the following dialogue between Howard and Kiki represents the inevitability of transformation in people's outlook on life as well as their views regarding each other:

'I do not want to be without ... us. You are the person I – you are my life, Keeks. You have been and you will be and you are. I don't know how you want me to say it. You are for me – you are me. We have always known that – and there is no way out now anyway. I love you. You are for me,' repeated Howard.

[...].

Kiki looked up. 'Howard, I love you but I am just not interested in watching this second adolescence. I had my adolescence. I can't go through yours again.' (Smith, 2005: 398)

Contemporary lifestyle contributes to the appreciation of Forster's concern for "connection" among the people, societies, and countries with different identities. In Peter Beyer's words, "we [...] live in a globalising social reality, one in which previously effective barriers to communication no longer exists" (Beyer, 1994: 1). On the other hand, this effective network of "connection" between various views

of life somehow brings about a process of transformation in terms of the outlook on life and humankind. Nikos Papastergiadis's following claim embodies the inevitability of transformation in a contemporary context: "The world changes around us and we change with it" (Papastergiadis, 2000: 2). Hence, when Howard is in a quest for the discovery of his self by means of alienation from his family and having a sexual affair with Victoria, his wife cannot welcome his offer for strong "connection" and unification within the family because of the transformation she experiences during this time. Howard's experiences in the novel indicate the inevitability of change and thus the impossibility of the achievement in finding a stable personal identity in the contemporary context.

4. Conclusion

Consequently, as an embodiment of his humanistic motto "only connect", Forster puts emphasis on the significance of the appreciation of different social classes and his reaction against the failure in understanding people from the "other" half of the society with regard to the views of the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels about Leonard Bast's socio-economic circumstances in Howards End. Forster's emphasis on the significance of "connection" seems to be realised in the contemporary period thanks to the contribution of globalisation to the establishment of a "connection" among the people with different lifestyles, identities, and social classes. However, the "connection" in the contemporary world also leads to an inevitable process of transformation in the outlook on life and humankind in individual and social senses, causing a search for a new identity. With Howard's efforts for a new self by his affair with Victoria and his failure in returning to his family bonds due to the change in his wife's outlook on him, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* is a story that represents the inevitable inability to discover a new personal identity within the constant flux of the contemporary world. Thus, Forster's emphasis on "connection" as a means of harmony and unity among people seems to act as a cause of a quest for a new self within the dynamism of contemporary circumstances.

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