

Homosexuality As Depicted In E. M. Forster's *Maurice*

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Abstract:

This paper studies E. M. Forster's closeted novel *Maurice*, and how it reflects the societal outlook towards homosexuality during the early nineteenth century. The novel aptly brings about the prevalent heteronormative norm that was obstinate during the time. Internalisation of homophobia and criminalisation of homosexuality led to marginalisation of the homosexual population. Furthermore, it was believed that homosexuality led to perdition and hence it was condemned. Societal and religious pressure, along with other factors, forced homosexuals to suppress their sexuality – either consciously or subconsciously. Forster, a homosexual himself, explores the ordeals and tribulations faced by homosexuals through two relationships in the novel.

Keywords: *Forster, homosexuality, morality, gay literature, sexual identity*

E. M. Forster's ground-breaking novel, *Maurice*, offers an important exploration and reflection on the subject of homosexuality. The novel explores society's resolute outlook on marriage, love, and homosexuality. *Maurice* also traces the angst, remorse, and frustration felt by homosexuals in the early twentieth century on account of being persecuted and marginalised by mainstream society.

Maurice was written in 1913 and 1914 but remained closeted till 1971. Forster kept this book and his homosexuality a secret fearing the repercussions it would cause him and his writing career. As mentioned in his Terminal Note, the book was inspired by Edward Carpenter – a poet, philosopher, anthologist and an early homosexual activist. Carpenter was a homosexual who lived with his partner. Dedicating the book to a *Happier Year*, he crafts an impeccable story that represents a marginalised population, during a particularly difficult period.

This essay will argue that Forster's representation of homosexual themes provides a significant insight into the anxieties and experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, it will also focus on society's attitude and approach towards homosexuality during this period.

Maurice highlights the difficulties that the protagonist, Maurice Hall faces to recognise and accept his homosexual identities. Two relationships are focussed on – that of Maurice-Clive and Maurice-Alec. According to Robert K. Martin, these two distinct relationships, “one that is identified with Cambridge and Clive, and one that is identified with Alec and open air,” demonstrate the process of Maurice’s understanding of his sexual orientation (qtd. in Bukowski 18). Through Maurice’s affair with Clive Durham, Forster brings about the emotional upheavals that both of them have to endure before, during, and after their discreet relationship. This part of the novel also concentrates on Maurice’s denial before his realisation of his homosexuality. After meeting one another in college, Maurice and Clive instantly start liking each other and develop a strong friendship. They spend time with one another, walk arm in arm, stroke each other’s hair – and subtlety of their affection enlivens them both. This is the first time Maurice has let himself close to another boy, and his “heart had lit never to be quenched again” (Forster 40). They start getting more intimate, and one day after class Clive professes his feelings for Maurice. Appalled and horrified, Maurice explains to Clive that this is not how an Englishman should feel. He adds that it is the “worst crime in the calendar” and tells him to never utter it again (Forster 59). Maurice’s behaviour wounds Clive deeply and he refuses to keep the same intimacy with Maurice. The slight regret Maurice had initially felt becomes agonising as the days go by. Maurice can no longer lie to himself and finally he acknowledges his homosexuality and comes out of the closet.

He would not deceive himself so much. He would not – and this was the test – pretend to care about women when the only sex that attracted him was his own. He loved men and always had loved them. He longed to embrace them and mingle his being with theirs. Now that the man who returned his love had been lost, he admitted this. (Forster 62)

This was the turning point in Maurice’s life – the acceptance of his sexual orientation, the acceptance of his true self. He had firmly decided that he would love men and embrace his homosexuality instead of denying it. Maurice’s realisation of always having loved men brings to light the internalisation of homophobia and the repressive behaviour that stems from it. The early twentieth century condemned homosexuality, labelling it as a disease and a crime (McCallum and Tuhkanen 241-324). The convicts were imprisoned and subjected to public embarrassment, and on account of this many men (and women) hid their sexuality. Forster, therefore, created a realistic character – one who went through great internal ordeals and defied societal expectations to come to terms with his homosexuality.

Society’s deeply ingrained religious convictions led people to victimise homosexuality and homosexuals. These views prompted people to denounce and homosexuality, particularly before the mid-twentieth century. Clive’s firmly ingrained Christianity made him think of the subsequent possibility of his soul being damned in the afterlife on account of his sexuality. Due to Clive’s apprehension of perdition, Maurice and he keep their relationship unconsummated. However, after two years, Clive writes a letter to Maurice that states Clive has become “normal” and asserts that he now likes women (Forster 116). When he meets Maurice, he keeps repeating it to Maurice, “I have become normal – like other men” (Forster 126). Forster keeps reiterating the word *normal*, indicating that only heterosexuality was considered natural in the early twentieth century England. Homosexuality was looked down upon and was considered bizarre and unorthodox – aptly reflected in the novel. Although he states that he has become heterosexual, Clive cannot hide

his homosexual desires. While Clive is married to a girl, he tells Maurice that he thinks about him very often and loves him as much as he used to. He proceeds to kiss Maurice's hand, after which guilt overwhelms him. This clearly indicates that Clive lives in self-denial and has forcefully repressed his homosexuality. Another reason for Clive to renounce homosexuality could be in order to uphold "his upper-class position by maintaining a heteronormative public identity" (Bukowski 26). Men, especially from the upper-classes, were expected to marry and fulfil the need for an heir. This forced many homosexual men in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries to suppress their homosexual desires and adopt a heteronormative attitude.

In the novel, Forster alludes to the heteronormative stance that was prevalent in the early twentieth century. During Maurice's last day at school, one of his teachers decides to have a conversation with him. After having talked to him about the outside world that Maurice is stepping into, Mr Ducie very mildly approaches "the mystery of sex" (Maurice 13). Elucidating with diagrams drawn in the sand with his walking stick, he tells Maurice all about the male-female sex. Maurice, who watches all this dully yet attentively, is discomfited. He feels repulsed at the idea of sex. Mr Ducie goes on to tell Maurice that the "crown of life" is to love and marry a noble woman (Forster 14). However, Maurice finds himself despising his teacher's ideas and the thought of marriage. During the period, it was firmly believed that only "by conforming to heteronormative behaviours, a man can live a good life and be the 'ideal man'" (Bukowski 21). This rigid attitude intensified society's negative outlook towards homosexuality resulting in the lack of homonormative behaviour.

The relationship of Maurice and Alec Scudder is very different to that of Maurice and Clive. Alec Scudder works for the Durham household – the evident class distinction is the cause of this difference (Bukowski 20). Forster demonstrates the struggles that Maurice and Alec have to endure, not only because of the unacceptance of homosexuality by the society and religion, but also owing to the class barriers that separate them both. Maurice and Alec spend the night together in each other's arms at Durham's. Maurice has had a wonderful night, and he utters to his friend, "Alec, you're a dear fellow and we've been very happy" (Forster 197). But, as morning approaches, guilt and fear start consuming him. He is nervous about Alec revealing their secret; he thinks about the mutilation it will cause his reputation. When he discovers that Alec's father used to be a butcher, he feels angry and guilty. Maurice starts to believe that Alec's motive is to expose his deeds and humiliate him. After Maurice goes back home, Alec sends him a number of letters asking Maurice to meet him. However, Maurice construes Alec's messages as containing promise of blackmail and threat. Despite having had a homosexual relationship before, Maurice is afraid of being associated with Alec. The social class distinction is one reason, the other being exposed as a homosexual in a society that views it as both – a crime and a sin. Forster aptly airs the issues face by the gay community during the time. By demonstrating the emotional upheavals that the characters face before they unite, he succeeds in accurately representing the marginalised section of society.

Therapeutic quests were commonly made by homosexuals during the pre-war period. The ill-treatment of homosexuality and the prevalence of homophobia made it very difficult for them to accept their true identity. It was regarded as a disease. And this led them to resort to different means to change their sexuality. After his first romantic encounter with Alec and

the subsequent compunction he feels, Maurice decides he wants to be “cured” (Forster 159). Desperate to end his loneliness and depressive phase, which he believes is because of his sexual orientation, he visits Dr Barry. Dr Barry is stunned and appalled – he decides to never discuss this matter with Maurice again. He simply tells Maurice to never let that “evil hallucination” occur again (Forster 158). Mr. Lasker Jones, a hypnotist, proves to be Maurice’s next option. Although Maurice connected hypnotism with seances and blackmail, he decides to give it a try – such was his misery. Another doctor is consulted, who turns out to be evasive and does not care much; but this brings about a transformation. Maurice is not “afraid or ashamed any more” and is accepting of his homosexuality (Forster 214). He understands that homosexuality is ingrained in him and acknowledging it is his only way to happiness. Forster tried to bring to light the failings of these reparative therapies adopted by homosexuals during early twentieth century. Douglas C. Haldeman argues that:

reparative therapies or conversion programmes, designed to change sexual orientation, are ineffective. Moreover, conversion therapies may cause some psychological harm to participants, he argues. He maintains that therapists should help homosexuals learn to be comfortable with their sexuality, and society should deconstruct the myth that homosexuality is wrong. (qtd. in Ojeda 43)

Even though Douglas’ views are contemporary, Forster’s opinions about homosexuality were not different. Forster wanted the society to understand accept homosexuality and not consider it immoral.

Accepting and embracing homosexuality was quite a task during the time Forster wrote. Homosexuality was denounced and was also considered one of the worst crimes. However, Forster’s character, Maurice, embraces his sexuality after his appointment with the second doctor. He acknowledges that it is his only way to happiness. After Alec and Maurice spend another night together, they realise their love for each other. Alec gives up a job in Argentina to stay back with Maurice. Maurice has evolved “from varying degrees of sexual ‘normalcy’ to the gradual recognition of his own nature, to the final full-bodied commitment to Alec” (Bolling 160). By the end of the novel, Maurice has developed into someone who has embraced his true self from someone who did not want to allude to homosexuality in the beginning making him a realistic yet strong character.

Forster’s *Maurice* exemplifies the cruelties the gay community faced at the hands of society in the early twentieth century. The institutionalised and, in some cases, internalised homophobia made it challenging for homosexuals to accept their true identities. Many of them abandoned their sexuality because of societal norms and its predominant homonormative approach. Religion viewed them as sinners and many feared perdition. It was also a grave offence during the time and was punishable. Many homosexuals actively tried to alter their sexual orientation because homosexuality was deemed a disease. In *Maurice*, the characters endure great ordeals because of their sexuality. Clive denies his homosexuality, whereas in the end Maurice and Alec brave the distresses and defy society to unite. As Joshua G. Adair precisely observed:

the novel’s ending represents Forster’s wholesale rejection of English society’s refusal to acknowledge or accept the possibility of loving, long-term relationships between homosexual men (56).

Forster challenges the English society and rebels against the ideals that oppress the gay community. His defiance is resembled in the novel by that of Maurice's. Maurice resists the societal conventions and rises above them by embracing his homosexuality with maturity and fortitude.

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