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E. M. Forster: Novels, Films and Representation of Homosexuality
A Reading of *A Passage to India*, *A Room with a View*, *Howards End* and *Maurice*

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of the representation of homosexuality in four novels of E.M.Forster and in their cinematic adaptations. Further this paper deals with the viewers' reception of the on screen representation of homosexuality and treatment of the same in private life. Then it tries to connect the theme with its present day treatment.

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Introduction

In this paper I shall not subscribe to the hierarchized binary of book/film adaptation. Ashis Nandy points out, in Bengali sometimes the word *boi* is used to mean both a film and a book. He writes, "Bengalis have never drawn a sharp line between cinema and literature. The term for a film in Bengali is *boi*, a book; a film is supposed to narrate a novel, a play, or *purana* faithfully. This has spawned, some ... believe, a cinematic language that is never entirely independent of literature". Therefore, this paper seeks to consider both book and film as forms of "text" as both of them are 'open signifiers' rather than 'closed signified' and each of them has its own 'discourse'. This subscribes to John Ellis' view that "adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original representation and repeating the production of the memory". There is no originality, only 'intertextuality from verbal to visual text.

Therefore, while dealing with the novels of E. M. Forster and their cinematic adaptations I am not going to bother about the fidelity of the film to the novel, rather my point of discussion would be the changing perspectives in treatment and representation of homosexuality both in the novel and the film.

Forster famously wrote in his essay "What I Believe" that "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." When Forster first published these comments, in 1938, they were controversial because they placed human relations over nationalism, friendship over patriotism. Since Forster's posthumous "outing" that he himself arranged before his death--these sentiments have come to signify in a different register. With our more complete knowledge of Forster's homosexual relationships and friendships, we now understand that "friend" here means both "buddy" and "lover," a usage found in writers from Plato to Walt Whitman. Forster here suggests that the homosexual is sometimes forced to choose between his "illegal" sexual relationships and the country that condemns them. For Forster, the homosexual is always an outlaw, often an outlaw in hiding, who exists in important ways on the margins of society. This notion of the homosexual is, we argue, pervasive in Forster's writing, not just the explicitly gay novel and stories.

Howards End

Homoerotic desire is replaced in the novel *Howards End* on the plane of marriage and heterosexual relations. While ostensibly focusing on marriage and social issues, the narrator nevertheless endows greater value on the relationship of the two Schlegel sisters and the friendship between Margaret and Mrs. Wilcox (clips:1,2 and 4) than to Margaret's marriage to Mr. Wilcox. Ruth comes to admire Margaret, for she shares her reverence of the house at Howards End, which is rich with personal history. In a surprising move, Ruth bequeaths Howards End to Margaret Schlegel instead of her own family members—who are irate. As Forster explores the grave repercussions of this unexpected move, he underscores the novel's central message: connecting with others. The news of Margaret's marriage arouses hostility and protest. Leonard represents the deterioration of the homoerotic ideal, and the novel is concerned with the barriers that prevent the Wilcox men from relating to Leonard. The character of Tibby Schlegel seems to be that of a closeted, effeminate young man, content in the shadow of his sisters. Although the novel does not encompass friendship between men, the narrative ends with the vision of friendship, projected into the future, between Helen's baby son and Tom, the farm boy (clip:3). The Treatment of these relationships in the cinematic adaptation is evident from the movie clips. Whereas Forster's belief in personal relationships is founded on *Bloomsbury* and the *Principia Ethica* (1903) of its Cambridge sage G. E. Moore, Forster's invocation of comradeship no doubt owes much to Edward Carpenter, a strong defender of homosexuality who was one of the first English disciples of Walt Whitman.

A Room with a View

A Room with a View contains references to Phaeton and Persephone and to Michelangelo. Men bathing together as a homoerotic motif derives from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass*. The most significant scene of men bathing in Forster is found in the chapter 12 of the novel. That the cinematic adaptation of the novel also contains scene of bathing and running naked through the woods is perceptible from the movie clips (clips:5,6). Several changes made in the early drafts of the novel brought about a text in which most of the more direct representations of homoerotic atmosphere are all but gone. The changes, however, did not touch such basically homosexual characters as Cecil Vyse "the ideal bachelor" of "the sort who can't know any one intimately" and the Reverend

Beebe. Not only that, while Lucy Honeychurch embodies Forster's internal strife, Mr. Emerson is created in the image of a man Forster admired, Edward Carpenter, a social pioneer who believed in equality for women and open expression of homosexual love. First through his published works, and later as a friend, Carpenter was to Forster a beacon of spiritual and sexual liberation who guided him towards a deeper understanding of himself. For Lucy, Mr. Emerson is the "kind old man who enabled her to see the lights dancing in the Arno", who encourages her to follow her heart's and her body's desire, explaining that "love is of the body, not the body, but of the body". This advice she must heed, as Forster makes sure, in breaking from the fettered world of Windy Corner and choosing truth over deceit.

Ultimately Lucy was more successful in fulfilling her desires than Forster ever was. As he composed the novel in 1907, Forster was still more than six years away from writing his great celebration of homosexual love, *Maurice*, and his first fully realized romance lay even further in the future. How did this repressed desire colour the development of the novel? The critical literature has shown great interest in the erotic undertones of the men's bath at Sacred Lake and possible veiled references to Mr. Beebe's homosexuality ("somewhat chilly in his attitude toward the other sex"). Some even believe that the entire work is a homosexual romance with Lucy as "a boy en travesti". In the end the object of desire is probably less important than the passionate sentiment. What is remarkable, as critic Claude Summers notes, is that Forster's wrestling with homosexual desire should give rise to one of the richest depictions of heterosexual love in the English language. Certainly *A Room with a View* can be appreciated from this perspective as a story of sexual awakening that provides insight into Forster's deeply felt struggle with his own sexuality.

A Passage to India

Whatever latent hint of homosexuality is there in the novel *A Passage to India*, it is drastically omitted in the film. Whitman's *Passage to India* is not explicitly homosexual in theme – it is instead a rapturous allegorical address to the voyaging soul – but in certain of its lines we get some sense of why the author of *Maurice* esteemed him so highly:

Reckoning ahead, O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd
 (The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,)
 Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
 As, fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
 The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.

(*Leaves of Grass* E-Text | Book XXVI: Passage to India | GradeSaver)

These lines anticipate obliquely the homoeroticism of Forster's novel. In Forster, punning between the two plosives /p/ and /b/ in the sentence "We will rob every man and rape every woman", in Christopher Craft's words, "becomes homoerotic because homophonic". Here "rape" and "rob" become tongue - twisters and threaten to mismatch verb with subject, rendering not only a woman robbed, but also, and far more problematically, a raped man. Not only that, but also Aziz's reciting of Ghalib's Urdu verse bearing the motif of "Friend who never comes" or his crying out "Fielding! Oh; I have so wanted you" or later "Cyril, Cyril, don't leave me" echo a kind of "queer" longing. The poem is of the Classic Muslim type that Aziz enjoys reciting; but there is a deeper significance. Rumi was a Sufi mystic poet, whose original inspiration to write was his sense of longing for a lost love. He had become obsessed with a wandering holy man with whom he lived in an almost homoerotic

intimacy, neglecting his family, who eventually may have had his beloved murdered. Rumi began to write poetry, and to accompany his verses he originated the famous whirling dance, a mystic striving for union, which was practiced by his followers among the dervishes. All of this lies behind Godbole's dance and Aziz's moment in the saddle with the "Caaba of Union."

According to Parminder Kaur Bakshi, in *A Passage to India* "ironically, while Forster endeavoured to use the racial and political prohibitions of the friendship of Fielding and Aziz to signify the wider oppression of homosexual love, the political issues of the time proved to be so powerful that they completely subsumed homoerotic desire in the text." (Chapter 8: Homosexuality and Orientalism: A Passage to India, *Distant Desire. Homoerotic Codes and the Subversion of the English Novel in E.M. Forster's Fiction*).

A Passage to India, chumming with the Indians is not merely socially queer, but must also be explainable by a queer predisposition. But this oblique representation of homosexuality is absent from Lean's adaptation leaving only a figment of it where Aziz sees Fielding bathing naked in his bathroom though from the other side of the glass as evident from the movie clip (clip:7).

Even in films made more than fifty years after the events they narrate, there is not any remarkable initiative to take a bold step to create an acceptable space for homosexuality on the silver screen.

Maurice

Obviously, early twentieth century England was not a good time to be gay. The climate was so bad that Forster began writing a book with a homosexual hero in 1913 that was published posthumously. It finally saw the daylight in 1971, a year after he died at the age of 91. That book, of course, is *Maurice* and it ignited a firestorm against scholars who refused to acknowledge the author's sexual orientation. *Maurice* is a story of its times and is therefore as much concerned with class distinctions as it is with the era's hostile attitude towards homosexuality. *Maurice*, the film, is a marvellous adaptation of a classic novel and one of the best that modern cinema has given us. The film follows the book rather closely as perceptible from the movie clips (clips:8,9,10,11,13,14,15) often lifting large chunks of dialogue verbatim, but also adding a few distinct improvements. The character of Lord Risley was smaller in the novel and he was not arrested for buggery as he is in the film (clip:12). By showing his arrest and enforcing the harsh statement the film upholds the dangers of being a homosexual in Edwardian England. It also provides a clearer motivation for Clive's sudden rejection of Maurice. It is also worth noting that, as in the trials of Oscar Wilde before him, the judge makes it clear that, because Risley is "a man of breeding", his corruption of the lower classes is an equally abominable offence.

As noted earlier, notions of class differences are as important to an appreciation of *Maurice* as its exploration of repressed sexuality. In this vein Maurice's affair with the servant Scudder is a double crime against society.

The cast is superb and truly brings this tale to life. Though each of the three principals are straight, it is a credit to them that they embraced these roles with such gusto. On all levels *Maurice* is an exquisitely executed film. There is more than a half hour of deleted scenes including two major subplots, that were eliminated in order to keep the film from being three hours long. One entails Maurice's clumsy and futile attempts to seduce a young houseguest, and another the suicide of Lord Risley. In *Maurice*, right at the

beginning of the novel we learn that Maurice has lost his object of desire, the garden boy George. We begin with homoerotic desire already lying in the past. And the novel ends with Maurice slipping away into the darkness, "leaving no trace of his presence except a little pile of petals of the evening primrose, which mourned from the ground like expiring fire". The image of the mourning petals like expired fire and the darkness link Maurice's disappearance into the greenwood with death. Again, Forster tells us in the Afterword to the novel that he tried to represent Maurice and Scudder's idyllic life in the greenwood, but he found himself unable to do so. So, we never get to see Maurice recover George and his past in the life beyond death in the greenwood.

The tension in the text between a homoerotic desire which has already occurred but does not enter representation and the promise of a future realization of that desire which Forster cannot seem to represent, as well as the insistent association of homosexual desire with death are eminently logical given the developmental narrative which Forster is both employing and inverting. In the developmental marriage plot, homosexuality is a stage that must be eliminated in order to progress to adulthood. So, it is no wonder homosexuality should be associated with death, or merely seen as an immature stage that lies somewhere in the past prior to the language and culture employed by fully adult heterosexual subjects. Within the (il)logic of this narrative, then, it is impossible for homosexuality to enter full representation. No doubt, Forster inverts the terms of the narrative to celebrate youthfulness and to celebrate the life beyond the grave, but he is ultimately unable to displace that narrative's terms.

On Screen Homosexuality and Viewers' Reception

Now I am interested in to deal a little with the viewers' reception of the representation of homosexuality in the films. In this connection, Laura Mulvey's concept of heterosexual 'gaze' does not provide any solution. On the contrary, theory of 'fantasy' seems quite helpful here. Refuting what Laura Mulvey says in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Thomas Waugh describes a 'narrative' as a visual discourse in which the look of the subject is mediated by other looks or visual exchanges between the participants within the viewed scene of a narrative, generating a network of identification that is fluid rather than fixed. According to Elizabeth Cowie, engaging in fantasy is a potentially liberating act for the individual, who orchestrates 'scenes' of desire in which she or he may assume multiple roles and positions as subject and object. By demonstrating that the gendered or sexed subject is not confined to a single perspective or position in visual relations, fantasy theory opens up new possibilities in the realm of queer theory by further demonstrating the intimate connection between identification and desire, and by granting agency to the subject who imagines. Therefore, this theory points to notions of destabilized identification and desire and the ability of the subject to occupy and adapt to a variety of subject positions in the pursuit of pleasure.

Following this theory on screen representation of homosexual relationship between characters also liberates the viewers to come out of the societal closet of compulsory heterosexuality consolidated by patriarchal authority and to let their desires flow in whichever direction they want.

Treatment of Homosexuality in Private Life

But Forster was not bold enough in his life to declare his own so called "unintelligible" sexuality. Wendy Moffat's research shows that in his own life Forster was ambivalent about his sexuality. Though he clearly was homosexual, he was troubled by the realization that this trait cut him off from "mainstream" human relationships. In an age

when Edward Carpenter clearly declared himself to be a homosexual, Forster never dared to come out of the closet.

Even he did not dare to publish his explicitly homosexual novel *Maurice* in his lifetime. In *Maurice* he said that, by having a sexual relationship with Alec, Maurice “had confirmed his spirit in its perversion, and cut himself off from the congregation of normal man.” This might explain why, as he came to finish his long delayed *A Passage to India*, Forster burnt all his homosexual stories. He felt that keeping them around “clogged my career as a novelist”; they were “the wrong channel for my pen.” When he channelled his pen in the other direction, he wrote his best work. Forster’s works, as a whole, triumphantly vindicate T. S. Eliot’s dictum that the man who suffers and the mind that creates are two separate entities. After completing *A Passage to India* Forster ceased writing novels. He devoted the latter half of his long life to writing prolific journalistic essays and radio sketches on broadly liberal humanitarian themes, but not without some regret: “How fatuous! I see my middle age as clearly as middle age can be seen. Always working, never creating.” When Christopher Isherwood asked Forster to publish *Maurice*, Forster wrote that “If the pendulum keeps swinging in its present direction it might get published in time. But the more one meets decent & sensible people, of whom there are now a good few, the more does one forget the millions of beasts and idiots who still prowl in the darkness, ready to gibber and devour.”

Yet the fact that they were written about a novel that was "the direct result" of a visit to Edward Carpenter and George Merrill, a pioneering gay couple who defied Victorian mores to live openly together for more than thirty years—and recorded in a letter to Isherwood, who risked his reputation to write about homosexuality—makes it hard to ignore the element of simple, if understandable, cowardice in Forster's refusal.

James Ivory and Ismail Merchant lived together in the same apartment and house for forty years very publicly. Being from a generation which predated gay liberation they never declared their homosexuality. Nonetheless, it is quite odd that a forty-year partnership can be ignored by the media simply because it is not heterosexual. What the New York Times did was exactly right - it did not need to mention sexuality, but accepted the relationship exactly the same status as it would a heterosexual one of similar standing.

Conclusion

To conclude, Ivory’s films show fidelity to the novels, whereas Lean’s film is unfaithful. That homosexuality is still considered a taboo in patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist society, is clear from the discussion about representation of it in Forster’s novels and in their cinematic adaptations. Similarly, Jessica Ellen Cornish, better known by her stage name Jessie J, has ridiculed rumours that she is a lesbian. She was accused of being a lesbian who was forced to hide her sexuality and say she was bisexual. The unauthorised biography, written by Chloe Govan, says that Jessie was told by record bosses that she would be more appealing to fans if she said that she was bisexual. It adds that the pop star, who first realised she was 'gay' at the age of 17, eventually went along with the plan but was 'incensed' by the decision. In *Jessie J: Who's Laughing Now*, Govan writes that Jessie went along with the charade as she was scared of losing her deal with Universal. Govan said: 'Jessie might have been with boys in the past - but she is

homosexual. Jessie was openly lesbian and didn't hide it. 'She was advised not to come out. Certain people thought being bisexual would increase her allure. In March last year, Jessie revealed that she was openly bisexual and said: 'I've never denied it. ... Yes, I've dated girls and I've dated boys – get over it. 'If I meet someone and I like them, I don't care if they're a boy or a girl.'

A CNN Report claiming that "The famous pop-star Bruno Mars admits his homosexuality" caused the singer's name to trend on Twitter. Gossip Cop reports that Mars' representative denies any closet door has been opened. The singer's representative tells Gossip Cop the reports that Mars has come out of the closet are "completely fabricated" and "false".

But congratulations to Stephany Lee who won a place on the United State Olympic Women's Wrestling team in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and then promptly married her girlfriend, Brigg McDonald. As John Branch reports in *The New York Times*, the serendipity of the Olympic trials being held this year in Iowa, where same-sex marriage is legal, made it possible for Lee to combine her earning a place on the Olympic wrestling team with her wedding. Though she refused to be any kind of idol for other people, in a way she can be an inspiration for other people to come out of the closet in order to clearly declare their sexuality. And this paper of mine is a little endeavour in that direction.

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