

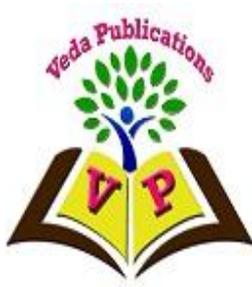
“TWO MEN CAN DEFY THE WORLD” - DEFIANCE OF HETERONORMATIVITY IN E. M. FORSTER'S *MAURICE*

Agnibha Banerjee

(M.A., Second Year, Calcutta University.)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ioell.61.132>

ABSTRACT



E. M Forster's *Maurice* achieves a bold defiance of heteronormativity at a time when homosexuality was a crime, the exploration of which forms the principal purpose of this paper. An attempt has been made to define 'heteronormativity' and expose the means by which it exerts itself - its calculated reinforcement of rigid binary categorisation, amalgamation of 'sex', 'gender' and 'sexuality', and collaboration with the contemporary political hegemony. A socio-economic and psychological study of the principal characters is then undertaken to portray how each, through varied means and in varying degrees, transgresses and subverts the normative. Special emphasis is placed on Clive's defection to the lure of heteronormativity, with its promise of the perpetuation of lineage by progeny, and this is connected to the dilapidation of British aristocracy in the early twentieth century. An analysis of the dialectics of a 'Platonic' abstraction of same sex desire and its erotic celebration is then endeavoured by a comparative study of Maurice's relationship with the Cambridge educated Clive on the one hand and the gamekeeper Alec on the other. This exploration unearths the internalisation of homophobia by the homosexual as a defence mechanism against apprehended discovery and prosecution. The paper concludes with an assessment of Forster's ultimate renunciation of heteronormativity through the transcendence of hegemonic heterosexism. This is accomplished by the creation of an undefined space beyond language and representation for the gay lovers, outside the watchdog scrutiny of both the coercive power structure and the reader.

Keywords: *Desire, Hegemony, Heteronormativity, Homophobia, Language.*



E. M. Forster's *Maurice* is a novel without antecedents in its bold repudiation of heteronormativity at a time when homosexuality was a crime in England under the 'Criminal Law Amendment Act' (1885) which decreed:

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour (Mead and Bodkin, *Criminal Law Amendment Act*, 15 - 16)

The socio-political atmosphere was further charged against homosexuality in light of the much publicised Oscar Wilde trials (1895) which marked the climactic culmination of Victorian bigotry and homophobia. Consequently, *Maurice*, though conceived between 1913-1914 (and dedicated 'to a happier year'), remained unpublished until the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, appearing only after Forster's death in 1970, poignantly in line with his own declaration that the gay love story could not be published "until my death and England's" as the heteronormative Edwardian England he knew had "always been disinclined to accept human nature." (*Maurice*, 188)

Coined in 1991 by Michael Warner in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, the term 'heteronormativity' refers to pervasive and invisible norms of heterosexuality (sexual desire exclusively for the opposite sex) embedded as a normative principle in social institutions and theory; those who fall outside this standard are devalued, discriminated against and often subject to legal coercion. The indoctrination into heteronormativity commences from childhood with the socialisation processes imposed, directly and indirectly, upon the child by social institutions - especially the family, the education system and religion, through a complex system of rewards and reprimands. These means of induction into the normative are explored by Forster from the very first chapter of *Maurice* where the bewildered school boy is explained "the mystery of sex" (*Maurice*, 8) by his

teacher Mr Ducie in terms which when put to scrutiny expose the calculated reinforcement of gender binaries ('male' and 'female'), amalgamation of 'sex', 'gender' and 'sexuality', and the contrived association of the heteronormative with the sanctions of religion and morality:

He spoke of male and female, created by God in the beginning in order that the earth might be peopled...To love a noble woman, to protect and serve her - this, he told the little boy, was the crown of life...It all hangs together with God in his heaven - All's right with the world. Male and female! Ah wonderful! (*Maurice*, 9 - 10)

This instils in the queer child the overwhelming urge to conform, to 'belong', which he begins to regard as absolutely necessary to avoid ostracism and persecution - "It would be jolly certainly to be married and be at one with society and the law" (*Maurice*, 141). His failure to do so causes in him self lacerating guilt and acute self admonishment - "He had suffered and explored himself, he knew he was abnormal." (*Maurice*, 141). This in turn relentlessly drives him to find a cure (homosexuality was considered a pathological condition in Edwardian medical science and hence capable of remedy) - "He could undergo any course of treatment on the chance of being cured." (*Maurice*, 135). Ultimately, the normative order asserts its dominance either through the incarceration of gay characters, or, as a casual glance at the 'queer canon' would reveal, through death, an apparently inevitable fate presented in, among others, Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*:

For us, death is stronger than life, it pulls like a wind through the dark, all our cries burlesqued in joyless laughter; and with the garbage of loneliness stuffed down us until our guts burst bleeding green, we go screaming round the world, dying in our rented rooms, nightmare hotels. (*Other Voices, Other Rooms*, 113)

The principal queer characters of the novel - Maurice, Clive and Alec - are set against such a pattern of heteronormativity which each, through varied means and in varying degrees, transgresses, subverts and defies.



At the centre, four - square and square - jawed, stands Maurice; in him, Forster wrote:

I tried to create a character who was completely unlike myself or what I supposed myself to be: someone handsome, healthy, bodily attractive, mentally torpid, not a businessman and rather a snob. Into this mixture I dropped an ingredient that puzzles him, wakes him up, torments him and finally saves him. (*Maurice*, 'Terminal Note', 221)

Coming from the comfortable middle class suburbs south of London, "a land of facilities where nothing had to be striven for." (*Maurice*, 11) instructed "never to do anything you should be ashamed to have your mother see you do." (*Maurice*, 7), and be "the copy of his father" (*Maurice*, 7), Maurice seems too submerged in heteronormativity to ever dare its defiance. Lurking beneath his surface conformity, however, is his intense yearning for "a friend...to make any sacrifices for, and count the world nothing." (*Maurice*, 16). This 'friend' arrives, or seems to arrive, in the person of Clive Durham, an atheist, a Hellenist, and a member of the landed but not moneyed gentry, who at first glance appears to be a rebel figure. As they begin to fall in love during their almost idyllic Cambridge years, Clive, with his perceptive intellect and vast knowledge of Greek mythology (which provides him models for identification), shakes Maurice out of his confused faith in Christianity (which condemns same - sex love as sin) - "his dislike of Christianity grew and became profound...he thought his faith was a pawn well lost for it...exposed his heart" (*Maurice*, 41) - effectively eradicating from the mindscape of the hitherto complacent Christian the stifling grasp of one of the most powerful enforcers of heteronormativity - religion.

Further, it is Clive's unabashedly direct articulation of his feelings, "I love you", and Maurice's "horrified, scandalised", instinctive (a result of his internalisation of homophobia as a consequence of his upbringing in an orthodox society), "Oh, rot! You're an Englishman, I'm another. Don't talk nonsense...it's the only subject absolutely beyond the limit...it's the worst crime in the calendar." (*Maurice*, 48) that allows him to achieve epiphanic self - realisation and break down another

psychological barrier imposed by heteronormativity, self - denial:

It was all so plain now. He had lied...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 admitted this. (*Maurice*, 51)

Thus empowered, Maurice begins with Clive a love affair that on the surface seems to jar threateningly against contemporary mores.

This defiance of heteronormativity however is, as David Leavitt points out in his introduction to the penguin edition of *Maurice*, "illusory...a sham operating not from outside the hegemonic order but from within that space which the normative allows" for a brief, often playful deviation. It occupies the conventionally hallowed space of Platonic homosocial friendship that poses no real threat to the primacy of heterosexuality. Clive, for all his lip - service to rebellion is too deeply rooted in civilization to ever venture an escape. Recognising in him "the impulse that destroyed the city in the plain." (*Maurice*, 59), he is nonetheless determined to play safe by "cultivating it in such ways as will not vex God and man." (*Maurice*, 59). His love affair with Maurice is also marked by similar double standards; his fear of social backlash eclipses his affection for his lover whom he convinces to remain within the circumference of society:

They could take their place in society...they proceeded outwardly like other men. Society received them, as she receives thousands like them. Behind society slumbered the law. (*Maurice*, 85)

The hypocrisy inherent in Clive's surface defiance sets the stage for his defection to the lure of heteronormativity: his 'conversion' to heterosexuality - "Against my will, I have become normal, I cannot help it," (*Maurice*, 103). His marriage to the charming and refined Aristocrat Miss Anne Woods effectively terminates his play at rebelliousness, forthrightly initiating him into those very institutionalised norms against which he had once affected to rail. As Howard. J. Booth observes in his essay 'Maurice' printed in *The Cambridge*



Companion to E. M. Forster, "faced with the inescapable choice between who he really is and who society expects him to be, Clive takes the easy way out.", giving in to the security of conventions:

He rested his eyes on women...it pleased him to find that the women answered his eye with equal pleasure...How happy normal people made their lives!...He was one of them. (*Maurice*, 104)

The temptation of the safety net of conventions, especially marriage, is one that entices the characters in many queer narratives, such as, among others, Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*:

They talked of marriage, secure people whose lives followed a familiar pattern...None suspected that their collective wisdom was of no use to him, that the pattern of his life was different from theirs. This fact made him sad...He knew it was a dangerous thing to be an honest man; finally, he lacked the courage. (*The City and the Pillar*, 170)

Clive, like Bob in Vidal's novel, David in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Brick in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* chooses the "familiar pattern" over ostracism and isolation, with "all his grievances against society disappearing since his marriage." (*Maurice*, 150)

Intrinsically tied to Clive's 'reorientation' is also the "need of an heir for Penge. My mother calls it marriage, but that was all she was thinking of." (*Maurice*, 85), his rapidly dilapidating country estate emblematic of the steady degradation of the aristocracy, a class which "every year England grew less and less inclined to pay," (*Maurice*, 147) in twentieth century Britain, anticipating as it were the elegiac evocation of the irrecoverably lost past in Evelyn Waugh's homoerotic novel *Brideshead Revisited* - "The vision fades, the soul sickens, and the routine of survival starts again." (130). Though he had once argued against the normative emphasis on progeny - "Why children? Why always children? For love to end where it begins is far more beautiful." (*Maurice*, 83) - Clive, true to his hypocritical nature, ultimately succumbs to the socio - economic and political necessity for the continuation of lineage as well as to the psychological terror of death anxiety,

an apprehension all the more vexing in homosexuals stemming from their impossibility of using reproduction as a defence mechanism against death - "An immense sadness had risen up in his soul. He and the beloved would vanish utterly." (*Maurice*, 83)

Thus far, in the conflict between queerness and heteronormativity that the novel dramatises, the latter appropriates the former and all attempts at defiance are thwarted. This changes with the entry of the third combatant into the battlefield, Alec Scudder, the gamekeeper at Penge with whom Maurice, after Clive's marriage, enters into an affair that, as Christopher Lane in his essay 'Fosterian Sexuality' asserts, "celebrates the very carnality, the sensual, the physical that the Cambridge scholar, in slavish devotion to his mistaken notion of Platonism, rejects." The juxtaposition of Maurice's relationship with Clive on the one hand and Alec on the other reveals the dialectics of a Platonic abstraction of same sex desire and its erotic celebration, unearthing the internalisation of homophobia by the homosexual in order to escape from what he perceives to be the corrupting taint of consummation. Maurice's affair with Clive, even at its zenith, is marked by the absence of not only sex but also any gesture of physical intimacy:

It had been understood between them that their love, though including the body, should not gratify it, and the understanding had proceeded from Clive...he refused Maurice's kiss (*Maurice*, 132)

Yielding to arid, deadening intellectualism, Clive is thus unable to embrace a full continuum of sexual, emotional and intellectual intimacy modelled in ideal Hellenic relationships between men or to move beyond Platonism to a more inclusive epistemology of sexuality, denying, repressing or simply failing to recognise his homosexuality, opting instead for the compromised intimacy of his conventional heterosexual marriage with Anne where he "adopted secrecy without regret...the actual deed of sex seemed to him unimaginative and best veiled in night." (*Maurice*, 144) In stark contrast, Maurice's relationship with the gamekeeper begins on an explosively erotic note, with spontaneous sex preceding identification:



The head and shoulders of a man rose up...and someone he scarcely knew moved towards him and knelt beside him, and whispered, "Sir...I know...I know..." and touched him (Maurice, 170)

Through consummation, Maurice is finally able to overcome his internalised prejudices against gay sex, achieving what Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* would term the 'performance' of his homosexuality (instead of the heterosexuality that society demands from him, being a 'man'), defying and deconstructing the heteronormative fusion of 'gender', 'sex' and 'sexuality'.

Further, Maurice's relationship with Alec, as David Medalie observes in his essay 'Bloomsbury and Other Values', "liberates him from the shackles of class which had hitherto conditioned and chained him." Where he was "too embedded in class" (Maurice, 202), complacent in his middle class security and assumed supremacy, believing "the poor...haven't our feelings, they don't suffer as we would in their place." (Maurice, 147), Maurice now realises that class, and by extension, the city and society, is a normative prison, and true freedom lies outside the illusory safety of its boundaries:

...the King and Queen were passing, he despised them...It was as if the barrier that kept him from his fellows had taken another aspect. But he was not afraid or ashamed anymore. After all, the forests and the night were on side, not theirs; they, not he, were inside a ringed fence. (Maurice, 190)

It is, in the end, "the forests", Greenwood or Sherwood, remote from strangulating heteronormative society and historically linked to rebellion where Robin Hood and his band of outlaws lived in a homosocial utopia, that Maurice and Alec choose over the city of London that delimits the very liberties they crave. This choice requires of them the sacrifice of all securities that society had cushioned them with in exchange for their conformity, or in other words, the demolition of the 'selves' that society has crafted for and encased them with: Maurice gives up his "job in the city...money, position and family." (Maurice, 206); Alec his immigration to and prospective career in Argentina - "He missed his boat...he sacrificed his career for my sake." (Maurice,

217), achieving the "happy ending" that Forster in his 'Terminal Note' to *Maurice* declared "imperative":

A happy ending was imperative...I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows, and in this sense, Maurice and Alec still roam the Greenwood. (Maurice, 'Terminal Note', 220)

Forster thus accomplishes his ultimate defiance of heteronormativity through the transcendence of stifling heterosexist discourses by the creation of an undefined space beyond language and representation outside the watchdog scrutiny of both the coercive power structure and the reader. To Clive's attempts at surveillance over the fugitive gay lovers - "You're going mad...May I ask whether you intend -" (Maurice, 217) - Maurice, "the other", assertively retaliates - "No, you may not ask...I'll tell you everything up to this moment - not a word beyond." (Maurice, 217), adroitly warding off the reader and his propensity towards imposing 'endings' coloured by his own prejudices. Forster hence ingeniously subverts a highly conventional genre, the Bildungsroman, weaving a plot which concludes not with the formulaic reintegration into society but with the decision to live outside it in a space beyond normative discourse. Discourse, as Michael Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, is a product of the contemporary heteronormative 'power - knowledge' structure and is essential for identity (that is, those identities which are in harmony with the structure) formation. Homosexuality in *Maurice* lies outside this discourse (and precedes the 'counter discourse' initiated by later queer writers like James Baldwin, Edmund White, Jeanette Winterson and others), only alluded to as "unmentionable" and "unspeakable" (Maurice, 37), absolutely beyond the scope of discussion evident from the exclamation of Maurice's surrogate father figure, Dr Barry - "We'll never mention it again. No - I'll not discuss. I'll not discuss." (Maurice, 138). This affords the rebel lovers the powerful freedom to chisel their own protean identities, independent of heteronormativity and to perform those identities outside the rigid borders of society, relying only on their companionship and determination to brave all obstacles:



You can do anything once you know what it is...I'll come with you. I don't care. I'll see anyone. Face anyone...it's a risk, but then, so is everything else, and we'll live only once.

(*Maurice*, 206)

Instigating his readers to break free of the routinised security of their existence and come out of the suffocating comfort of their closets, Forster dares them to “defy the world.” (*Maurice*, 119)

REFERENCES

- [1]. Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room*. Penguin Books, 2007
 - [2]. Bradshaw, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*. Cambridge University Press, 2007
 - [3]. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990
 - [4]. Capote, Truman. *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2004
 - [5]. Forster, E.M. *Maurice*. Penguin Books, 2005
 - [6]. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume I - The Will to Knowledge*, Trans. Robert Hurley, Vintage 1990
 - [7]. Vidal, Gore. *The City and the Pillar*. Vintage, 2003
 - [8]. Warner, Michael. *Fear of a Queer Planet : Queer Politics and Social Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
 - [9]. Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2000.
 - [10]. Williams, Tennessee. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Penguin Books, 2009.
-