The Search for Sexual Identity in E. M. Forster’s

*Maurice*

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ABSTRACT

E.M.Forster’s novel *Maurice* can be labelled as a homosexual Bildungsroman in which the character Maurice Hall discovers his sexual identity at Cambridge University, where he realizes that he has natural attraction to men. In the novel, Maurice gradually discovers his homosexuality and the novel deciphers the stages by which he obtains his identity. In the first stage, he enjoys an emotional relationship with undergraduate Clive Durham, who later chooses heterosexuality and marries. In the second stage, Maurice consults his family doctor and a hypnotist to get rid of unhappiness, but both remain inconclusive. He then visits Clive at the country estate and falls in love with Alec Scudder, Clive’s gamekeeper. In the third and last level, Maurice realizes the social consequences of his homosexuality and abandons his business as a stockbroker. Nevertheless, he radically accepts his sexual love for Alec and rises against the social values of the middle class.

**Keywords**  
Identity, homosexuality, heterosexuality, morality, performative
1. Introduction

Since the 19th century the colonial expansion of the British Empire had made England rise to the economic peak. But meanwhile it had brought about cultural anxiety. According to the middle class values, both male homosexuality and asceticism of the time are inconsistent with Victorian emphasis on gentleman’s masculine image. In 1895 Oscar Wilde was brought to trial, which not only brought the term “homosexual” into the public view, but also rose homophobia. Faced with such great social pressure, many writers chose to hide their homosexual identity. As Joshua G. Adair states, “In late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century England, one simply could not allow homosexuals to hold steady in their convictions or to freely pursue their desires, even in the realm of fiction. Practicing homosexuals understood that their actions must always be closeted, whatever the cost” (Adair, 2010: 53). E.M. Forster was no exception. Only a few friends knew his true sexual orientation. But considering his own reputation, Forster insisted on publishing his novel Maurice, which dealt with the theme of homosexuality, after his death. According to Maisnam Arnapal:

One of the possible reasons why Maurice was never published during Forster’s lifetime was the fear created by the infamous trials of Oscar Wilde, 1895. Linder in his account on the Wilde trials argues that the trials have completely changed public attitude towards homosexuality which was increasingly being seen as a threat to the society and construed effeminacy as a signal of homosexuality. (Arnapal, 2015: 59)

In Maurice, Forster depicts a homosexual’s physical and mental suffering in the process of identification. Published in 1971 after Forster’s death, the novel is a “homosexual Bildungsroman that tells the story of stockbroker Maurice Hall’s fraught personal journey to self-acceptance and fulfilment in love” (Bush, 2013: 1). In the novel, Maurice, the protagonist, gradually awakes to his homosexuality and the novel renders the stages through which he acquires his identity. Forster describes three stages of Maurice’s development in the novel. Firstly, he recognizes his own homosexual gender identity. Secondly, Maurice knows that passions are essential to achieve the ideal of love. Finally, Maurice breaks through the class barriers, sets foot on the way against moral hypocrisy of the middle class and Western
culture built on the basis of heterosexuality, and finally lives in the seclusion of the greenwood with Alec. Through Maurice, Forster manifests that the true homosexual love can be beautiful, which does not lead to degeneration but conversely brings nobility to people. This paper focuses on the stages in which Maurice develops and finds his sexual identity.

2. Maurice’s Discovery of His Homosexuality

Identity: A reader, argues that;

identities are constituted through the reiterative power of discourse to produce that which it also names and regulates; that identities are constituted in and through “difference and that, as a result, they are inherently “dislocated” (that is, dependent upon an “outside” that both denies them and provides the conditions of their possibility); and that “subjects” are “interpellated” by or “sutured” to the subject positions made available in discourse through the operation of the unconscious (du Gay, Evans and Redman, 2004: 2).

In Forster’s novel, Maurice’s awakening is against the discourse in which subjects are interpellated by power and ideological apparatuses. At the beginning of the novel, we see Maurice as a young son of a widowed woman who expects her son to step into his father's footsteps after his education. It has never occurred to his mother that her son might have other ambitions for himself. Maurice has not considered other ambitions as well. He is focused on his future because it seems logical for him to take his father's place. Maurice is bothered, however, by the subject of sex. According to Paul Gilebart Barbera, “when reading chapter one of the first part, it is inevitable to notice something that will leave a deep mark on Maurice’s character, that is to say, he lives –and in fact he has always lived– in a closed men’s world which obstructs and even prevents a fluid contact with the other world, women’s one” (Barbera, 1994: 39). The book opens with Maurice discussing with the dean Mr. Ducie, who explains Maurice the knowledge and basics of sexuality:

“Then, very simply and kindly, he approached the mystery of sex. He spoke of male and female, created by God in the beginning in order that the earth might be
people, and of the period when the male and female receive their powers. “You are just becoming a man now, Maurice; that is why I am telling you about this” (Forster, 1971: 13).

This knowledge reveals Victorian people’s general attitudes towards sex and their recognition of heterosexual marriage mechanism. In a patriarchal society, the concept of male and female and heterosexual mechanism are integrative, behind which the prohibition of homosexuality was hidden in order that homosexual love became illegal and impossible to tell. The heterosexuals regularly resorted to social education about gender through a variety of methods, implementing the supervision of children’s sexual orientation from time to time during the process of their growth. In this sense, Mr. Ducie pressures Maurice to maintain heterenormativity. “The marks in the sand explaining heterosexual sex mean, in Mr Ducie’s view, that Maurice need never be puzzled or bothered” (Booth, 2007: 178-179).

However, Maurice does not understand this elementary sex education, because he does not feel the way the teacher assumes he should. But as he grows older, he begins to realize that his sexual identity is different from the other boys: “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” (Forster, 1971: 62). This homoerotic desire is attached to the theme of friendship and Forster elaborates the idea of a friend. According to Andi Saputro:

Due to the fact that homosexuals are usually not consciously aware of the same-sex feelings, they tend to rationalize what is happening with them, in term of their sexual feelings. This rationalization is one of the developmental tasks in pre-coming out process. Rationalization is a defence mechanism in pre-coming out process in which controversial behaviours or feelings are explained in a rational and logical method to evade the true explanation. The purpose is to make the controversial behaviours and feelings, in this case homosexual feelings, tolerable and acceptable by reasonable means. The rationalization also can be seen in Maurice’s personal experience, in two of his dreams when he is in the university.

He scarcely saw a face, scarcely heard a voice say, "That is your friend, " and then it was over, having filled him with beauty and taught him tenderness. He could die for such a friend, he would allow such a friend to die for him; they would make any sacrifice for each other, and count the world nothing, neither death nor distance nor crossness could part them, because "this is my friend. " Soon afterwards he was confirmed and tried to persuade himself that the friend must be Christ. But Christ has a mangy beard. Was he a Greek god, such as illustrates the classical dictionary? More probable, but most probably he was just a man. Maurice forbore to define his dream further. He had dragged it as far into life as it would come. He would never meet that man nor hear that voice again, yet they became more real than anything he knew (Forster, 1971: 15).

This dream implies a melancholia that includes a loss. In her article *Critically Queer*, Judith Butler defines the loss as “a sustaining of the lost object/Other as a psychic figure with the consequence of heightened identification with that Other” (Butler, 2004: 112). Jon Harned claims that this Other and lost figure is Maurice’s father and he is the reason why Maurice, who “is the victim of an absent father” (Harned, 1993: 51), becomes a homosexual. As the first step in the formation of subjectivity, this fantasy is homoerotic in that his passion and idealism are inspired by men, but it is not concrete. He tries to legitimize his desires by connecting them to Christ or a Greek god. Forster describes the dilemmas and conflict of an adolescent man with sensitivity as Maurice veers between lust and guilt. Maurice’s dreams and his physical and mental experiences in them reflect the confusion of the young British public school boy in his adolescence. Meanwhile it implies the contradiction between Maurice's pursuit of ideal love and his own passion satisfaction in the adulthood. Although Maurice is aware of his own homosexual orientation and desire for the love of the same sex,
he does not know what kind of love he needs, because neither he has the knowledge about
this, nor he does not have any example to follow. He always feels his own mediocrity and
cowards. The sense of self-disgust mixed with the indescribable inner homosexual desire
shows self-alienation and self-distortion caused by heterosexism and traditional gender
consciousness.

However, as he grows up, he struggles with his own identity and cannot make himself stop
wanting to be with other men. Since he first realized what his sexual identity truly was, he
realizes that he is not wrong to want love from another human being. Before reaching this
realization, however, he struggles with morality as he knows that morally his sexual thoughts
are wrong. The reason for this struggle is the belief he holds that homosexuality is a moral sin.
This is a performative that Judith Butler defines as “authoritative speech (...) in which power
acts as discourse” (Butler, 2004: 108). Through this performative, he is subjected to the
process of “pedagogization of sex” (Foucault, 2004: 104). Educational institutions and church
are the apparatuses and performative powers that take charge. From Althusserian perspective,
Maurice is hailed as a true Anglo-Saxon character who should be a brave and sympathetic
good citizen, a “quiet, honourable, prosperous” (Forster, 1971: 135) member of society. In his
essay *Homosexuality and the Church*, K. Boyd remarks that,

As Western Christianity developed, the sinfulness of homosexual acts was seen to
consist primarily in their intemperate and unnatural nature. On the one hand, a
deepening respect for rationality led to an abhorrence of irrational or intemperate
behaviour, of which unchecked lust was a type. On the other, a growing sense that
the orderliness of Creation could be understood, at least in part and imperfectly,
led to the opinion that unnatural behaviour was insulting or injurious to the
Creator. (Boyd, 1974: 171).

According to this view, the church teaches that a man is placed in this world to marry and
procreate. As an unnatural individual, a homosexual man cannot do this. The church also
teaches that it is immoral for a man to desire another man. Maurice is a subject who is
interpellated in “the Christian religious ideology” (Althusser, 2004: 34).
In the forthcoming parts of the novel, Maurice goes to Cambridge, where he finds an atmosphere that is very different from those of his other school experiences. It is a world that is more relaxed where men are allowed to be more like their true selves. Stuart Hall defines identification as “a process never completed – always in progress, (...) a process of articulation.” (Hall, 2004: 16-17). In the change and development of sexual identity of Maurice, Cambridge years are of great importance since the atmosphere of the environment gives Maurice a concrete step to progress his sexual orientation and understanding. Maurice enjoys this more relaxed atmosphere and falls in love with another student called Clive Durham. He finally realizes his homosexual tendency. In *The Cambridge Companion to E.M. Forster*, Howard J. Booth indicates that “identification is an unconscious process. It cannot necessarily be willed, and the child growing up homosexual may well, after refusing many possible sites of identification, find it difficult to suddenly start identifying when they discover someone to identify with” (Booth, 2007: 177-178). Maurice identifies himself with Clive, with whom he finds a new world of affection and kindness. Maurice feels as though he can be himself with Clive rather than hiding behind his public persona that he created in order to hide his odd thoughts. Clive seems receptive to Maurice, allowing Maurice to caress him during their many long conversations. The reader becomes convinced that Clive will be someone who can help Maurice accept himself when Clive announces his love for Maurice. However, Maurice surprises the reader when he reacts with scorn. Maurice's reaction is the product of many years of religious training. The setting of Cambridge adds to the moral consequences of Maurice's feelings, leaving him stuck in a difficult position that makes it nearly impossible for him to accept Clive's affections. However, Maurice decides that he can lie to the public world, but he no longer wants to lie to himself. Maurice goes to Clive and begs for forgiveness, receiving it only after Clive discovers he cannot hide his feelings any longer. This begins a relationship that will shape Maurice's character as the plot continues to develop.

For two years Maurice is content in his relationship with Clive. The two men fall into a routine that includes a budding relationship between their mothers. Everything seems perfect to Maurice, as though this relationship can continue for a lifetime. However, Clive is beginning to feel the pressure to marry. Clive becomes ill and during this illness finds himself drawn to the nurse hired to care for him. When Clive visits Maurice afterward, he has a
relapse. Clive has collapsed under the pressure to renounce his homosexual desire and to embrace the expectations of his mother and society. Clive decides he must end his relationship with Maurice because the society he lives “relies for the enforcement of obligatory heterosexuality” (Harned, 1993: 53). Clive runs off to Greece and attempts to end the relationship with a letter. “Clive’s ultimate rejection of his homosexuality indicates that fulfilling the public identity associated with the power and prestige of his aristocratic status is more important to him than expressing his sexuality” (Bukowski, 2008: 27). Maurice can see that Clive is buckling under society's expectation and wants to convince Clive that there is nothing unnatural about their relationship. However, Clive refuses to be persuaded. Clive’s refusal pushes Maurice into a chaotic situation. He considers suicide and goes through the stages of grief as he suffers in the aftermath of a three-year-long relationship. Maurice soon convinces himself that he will never find another man to love him, especially after his overtures to the young man are ignored. Maurice contents himself with a mundane life full of routine rather than a life of love with the only man who has ever showed him kindness. At the same time, Clive makes their breakup worse by getting engaged and not informing Maurice himself. Maurice is heartbroken not only because Clive is marrying a woman, but because Clive failed to tell Maurice about this engagement. Maurice's future seems bleak because of all these and the reader begins to wonder how Maurice will deal with the situation as he continues down the road of self-discovery.

Maurice decides he no longer wants to be a homosexual and tries ways to change, from going to a doctor to visiting a hypnotist. He is determined to change his sexual orientation via reparative therapies. According to Douglas C. Haldeman:

> reparative therapies or conversion programs, designed to change sexual orientation, are ineffective. Moreover, conversion therapies may cause 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, 2004: 43)

Observations of Haldeman can be affirmed in Maurice’s condition. Although Maurice attempts to reject the gay identity and find himself straight, he cannot make himself let go off
his homosexual desires. Instead, Maurice finds himself embraced by Alec Scudder, an employee of the Durham family. At first Maurice is happy, thrilled to have found a man willing to share everything with him, not just his friendship. However, as reality returns, Maurice becomes obsessed with the idea that he has trusted a man who only wants to hurt him. Maurice believes Scudder has come to him with the idea of revealing the truth of Maurice's character to ruin his reputation and to see him put in jail. Scudder sends Maurice letters begging to see him, but Maurice sees them as attempts at blackmail.

Maurice goes to Lasker Jones’s office to continue his treatments, but discovers that it impossible for him to submit to the hypnosis. Maurice is frightened, unsure what to do next. Lasker Jones suggests that Maurice go to a country where it is not illegal to be a homosexual. Maurice has finally come to a place in his search for his own identity where he is forced to either accept himself as he is or run away. At the same time, Maurice cannot make himself trust a man after Clive broke his heart. Maurice wants to trust Scudder, even asks Lasker Jones' opinion on Scudder's letters. However, Maurice still cannot make himself step out there onto the ledge and trust someone. As Özlem Görümlü discusses in her doctorate thesis,

Maurice feels that he will never be free of Clive until something greater intervened, and that something is physical homosexual love, not hypnotism and hypocritical heterosexuality. Going to the hypnotist is a regressive act in which Maurice tries to recapture the trance of childhood, when he was confused and bewildered; he is trying to escape self-knowledge (Görümlü, 2004: 95).

Maurice returns to his life, the boring job and the family he is not sure about, and realizes he has only two choices. Maurice can accept himself as who he is and go and live a happy life elsewhere. On the other hand, Maurice can remain where he is, taking care of a mother and sisters whom he no longer likes and work at a job he hates. Maurice receives a letter from Scudder that makes him realize he has allowed his own fears and biases see something in Scudder that is not there. Maurice has finally decided to trust his feelings and to trust Scudder. Maurice visits Scudder and they spend a night in bed. This is the first time Maurice had such a relationship and he finally realizes that what he had with Clive was nothing like what he can have with Scudder. “Maurice’s journey toward self-realization comes to an end when he falls
in love with Alec. (…) Although Clive is a transition for Maurice – from confused, amorphous asexuality to focused, physical homosexuality with Alec – Maurice never sees him in those terms, but always as a person” (Görümlü, 2004: 94-95). Maurice shares his happiness with Clive, but is not surprised when Clive disapproves. Maurice does not allow this to destroy his happiness, proving once and for all that he has outgrown his dependence on Clive and become his own man. “In his final confrontation with Clive before he leaves to spend the rest of his life with Alec, Maurice becomes the woodland magus who, in English myth, represents both priest and judge. He delivers a speech to Clive in defence of his sexuality” (Bush, 2013: 10).

3. Conclusion

In E.M. Forster’s novel Maurice, characters’ search for sexual identity results in alienation due to the conservative values of the society they live in. Maurice Hall, the principal character of the novel, finds his life's expectations shattered by the discovery of his homosexuality. Tormented by his shame and loneliness, Maurice struggles to discover a cure for his sexual affliction; however, in the end he accepts his identity with his physical relationship with Alec Scudder. From his university days at Cambridge until he leaves with Alec for the greenwoods of England, Maurice conducts a courageous rebellion against the moral norms of his day.

Although Forster does not create his works purposely under the main principles of queer theory, some characteristics of queer theory can be found in his character, Maurice. Maurice's sufferings in the process of construction of his homosexual identity and the hard journey of his inner growth are deeply rooted in sexism. Only through deconstruction of traditional notion of sex and gender can individuals live a free life as an individual. Maurice survives and frees himself, which presents the readers an idyllic vision of a homosexual who has battles for personal survival and finally achieves it. In the closing scene, Maurice retreats to the greenwood with his homosexual partner Alec. The ending seems to be happy but indicates homosexual love can't be accepted by the society. This also represents Forster's silent protest against social categorization of heterosexuality and homosexuality and hope for a more harmonious and free world.


