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CANONIZING QUEER IN FICTION: THE PLACE OF ALAN HOLLINGHURST IN THE BRITISH NOVEL*

Gökçen EZBER**

Abstract

The present study aims at contextualizing the British novelist Alan Hollinghurst's fiction in the modern British Novel dealing with themes of homosexuality. The study will focus on the novels of E.M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood and Ronald Firbank and relate them to the novels of Alan Hollinghurst. Such a comparison will shed light on the evolution of themes of homosexuality and the depiction of queer characters in the British novel. Different from his predecessors, Hollinghurst focuses on homosexuality not only as a concealed or revealed identity, but as a textual phenomenon. Thus, Hollinghurst offers a wider fictional realm for the understanding of homosexual selfhood and identity. It could be argued that Hollinghurst's fiction builds up a 'queer' canon in British fiction that deals with the homosexual experience not as a reason for alienation, but as a lens which opens up to a wider human experience and identity.

Keywords: *Alan Hollinghurst, Modern British Novel, Queer Theory, Gender.*

KURMACADA KUIR'İN KANONLAŞMASI: ALAN HOLLINGHURST'ÜN İNGİLİZ ROMANINDAKİ YERİ

Özet

Aşağıda sunulan makale, İngiliz romancı Alan Hollinghurst'ün kurmacasını, eşcinsellik temalarını irdeleyen modern İngiliz romanında bir bağlama oturtmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, E.M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood ve Ronald Firbank'ın romanlarını inceleyerek, Alan Hollinghurst'ün romanlarında işlenen temalarla bağlar kuracaktır. Bu karşılaştırma, İngiliz romanında eşcinselliğin ve kuir karakterlerin betimlenme biçimindeki evrimi açığa çıkaracaktır. Kendisinden önceki yazarlardan farklı olarak, Hollinghurst eşcinselliğe sadece gizlenmesi ya da açıklanması beklenen bir kimlik olarak değil, metinsel bir olgu olarak bakmaktadır. Hollinghurst, eşcinsel kimliği ve karakteri anlamada daha geniş bir çerçeve çizmektedir. Hollinghurst'ün kurmacasının, İngiliz romanında, eşcinsel karakteri bir dışlanmışlık nedeni olarak değil, daha geniş bir insanlık deneyimi ve kimliği olarak gören bir 'kuir' kanon oluşturduğu söylenebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Alan Hollinghurst, Modern İngiliz Romanı, Kuir Kuram, Toplumsal Cinsiyet.*

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** PhD, İSTANBUL.

e-posta:gokcenezber@gmail.com (orcid.org/0000-0002-7765-0752)

1. The British Novel and Queer Issues

The fate of queer characters in the British novel was traditionally a grim one. They were mostly depicted as failed individuals in society. The queer characters in British fiction were always somehow flawed and destined to end up in misery. Consummation of love between two men or women was almost unthinkable. The way the modern British novel dealt with queer characters was surely affected by the mores of society and ethics and even the sciences at the time. As the mores of society changed, the way novelists depict queer characters has also been aligned with the contemporary ways of seeing queer individuals. Alan Hollinghurst (b.1954) stands out among other contemporary 'gay'¹ novelists with his elegant prose style and focus on moral ambiguities. In his novels, he depicts sexual acts in a very frank manner, but his novels also expose the homosexual man's alienation in society and the different ways he reacts to this multi-dimensional alienation, which is sometimes even self-inflicted.

As a contemporary British novelist, Alan Hollinghurst extends the narrative tradition of Christopher Isherwood and Edmund White and he is regarded as the most important British gay novelist after E.M. Forster. In the works of Isherwood, White and Hollinghurst, a character's homosexuality is simply a given. Hollinghurst's novels do not contain any idealization or melodramatizing of homosexual characters. What readers are offered is the emotional complexities of these gay characters in their ordinary everyday lives. Perhaps more important than that, Hollinghurst's characters stand out with their great potential for self-delusion. This self-delusion of Hollinghurst's characters reflects the homosexual man's problematic relation with society. The alienation of the homosexual man in society rests upon an inherent paradox. While it is true that it is the hetero-normative society which ostracizes the homosexual man as an 'other', as supported by the opponents of queer theory, the homosexual man also builds up defenses himself to shy away from society due to his own feelings of inadequacy and other kinds of psychological problems. Alan Hollinghurst's novels very successfully depict the alienating forces and mechanisms of society, but they shed light on the psychological dynamics and forces on a personal level as well. Many Hollinghurst characters fail in being part of the society they live in and in finding themselves a home, not only because the society casts them away, but also because they cannot bring themselves to an integration as such.

Before focusing on Alan Hollinghurst's characteristics as a novelist, we should try to understand where he stands in the British gay novel tradition. This section will give a brief overview of the important novelists who have paved the way for the novels of Alan Hollinghurst.

E.M. Forster (1879-1970) as a novelist holds a very significant position in the British gay novel tradition. His novels *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924) have established his fame. His novel *Maurice*, published posthumously in 1971 positioned E.M. Forster as a novelist who has dealt with homosexual themes indirectly in all his novels except for *Maurice*, where the main characters are openly homosexual. Forster's first novels and short stories reflected a society which was trying to free itself from the residues of Victorianism. Although Forster adopted certain themes (the importance of women in their own right, for example) from earlier novelists such as George Meredith, he broke with the elaborations and intricacies favored in the late 19th century and he wrote in a freer, more colloquial style. Starting with his first novels, he nurtured a strong strain of social comment and observed the middle classes very acutely. Forster has also developed a concern associated with his interest in Mediterranean 'paganism', that if men and women were to achieve a satisfactory life, they needed to keep contact with the earth and cultivate their imaginations.² This sentimentality could well be read as a reflection of his homosexual psyche in which the male and female elements are interconnected.

Forster's interest in the Mediterranean culture, his short sojourn in Alexandria is reflected in the character of Lord Nantwich in Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Lord Nantwich, like E.M. Forster, had lovers in Middle Eastern countries and is in need of his personal story to be written down by William Beckwith, the novel's main protagonist. E.M. Forster, when he was nearly forty, fell in love with an Egyptian tram conductor in Alexandria in

1 Alan Hollinghurst does not like to be defined as a 'gay' novelist; however, for purposes of clarifying his position among other novelists dealing with homosexual themes, this study takes the liberty of using the word 'gay' to define Hollinghurst's tradition of novel. Richard Canning, 'Conversations with Gay Novelists: Gay Fiction Speaks', Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 331-365.

2 "E.M. Forster", *Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2011, Web, 20 June 2011.

1919. Forster's homosexuality, both in reality and in fiction, manifests itself in an erotic preference for foreigners and for men of the lower social classes. This results in a romanticization of lower, working classes in his fiction, which is most clearly visible in his novel *Maurice*. Such a romanticization of lower classes results in Forster's harsh criticism of the effects of imperialism abroad. The homosexual desire's erasing social boundaries and its bringing down the class barriers led Forster to think that homosexuality could serve a positive social function by helping to bridge the barriers that separate the classes.³ The echoes of this Forsterian sentimentality could also be traced in Hollinghurst's novels. William Beckwith, in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and Nick Guest in *The Line of Beauty*, for example, desire black men and thus negate the social distinctions that rest upon race.

Forster was greatly influenced by the persecution of Oscar Wilde. This event has created in him an acute consciousness of gay oppression and fueled his anger at social and political injustices. Forster's sensitivity to the gay oppression in society is created his mildly sad literary style which came to be defined as the characteristic of the Forsterian voice. Although Forster did not deal with homosexuality openly in his fiction, except for *Maurice*, homoeroticism emerges as a significant element in all his novels.⁴ The implicit treatment of homosexuality in E.M. Forster's work makes his literary style interesting in the sense that it hides and reveals things at the same time.⁵

Forster's novel *Maurice*, the only one where he treats homosexuality openly, positions him in a very important place in the British gay male novel tradition. *Maurice* is actually similar to Hollinghurst's novels, because it largely deals with the inner feelings of individuals and how they attain self-awareness. This self-awareness is worked on in a strong relationship with society. *Maurice* reflects Carpenter's view of homosexuality.⁶ Carpenter argued that homosexuality and heterosexuality represented equal emotions and he considered neither to be more or less spiritual than the other. His contemporary Symonds held completely opposite views, implying the superiority of homosexuality to heterosexuality. Forster juxtaposes these two conceptions in *Maurice*. *Maurice* and Alec's relationship, which could only be sustained in the country, reflects Forster's way out for homosexuality. By pairing a middle class man and a worker, Forster comes to the rejection of society and social reform. This very much reflects Oscar Wilde and his arguments in *De Profundis*.

E.M. Forster's fiction is echoed in Hollinghurst's novels with characters trying to come to terms with their identity and acknowledging an inherent confrontation through their gradually attained self-awareness, the characters' seeking refuge in the country so as to survive. Hollinghurst's novels could be read as a somehow negative reply to Forster's wish that there will be better days for homosexuals⁷.

A visit Forster paid to the sixty-year-old Edward Carpenter in 1913 triggered in him the wish to write about homosexuality directly⁸. Carpenter himself as a homosexual man shared a simple life with a young working-class man. In Carpenter's well-known essay 'The Intermediate Sex', we have a description of the male homosexual

3 Forster's way of thinking is very clearly reflected in his novel *Maurice*. This belief derives from the Whitmanesque ideal of comradeship as expressed in the early English gay liberation movement and in writings by 'Uranian' leaders as Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds.

4 In *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) the character of Philip Herriton is a painfully self-conscious and sexually oppressed aesthete; *The Longest Journey* (1907) depicts Rickie Elliot whose weak passion for his wife Agnes is aroused by his unconscious desire for a soldier. A homosexual consciousness is more subtly present in *Howard's End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924), where the emotional center of each work resides in a same-sex (though non-sexual) relationship, that of Margaret and Helen Schlegel and Fielding and Aziz. Although the plot of *A Room with a View* (1908) makes it Forster's fullest celebration of homosexual love, the novel is actually the product of the author's self-conscious attempt to discover a homosexual literary tradition; and it is suffused with homoeroticism and with the ideology of the late nineteenth century homosexual emancipation movement.

5 This is exactly the subject of Nick Guest's theses in Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty*.

6 Edward Carpenter in his *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) and other works pursued the claim that the increasing incidence of 'Uranism' (homosexuality) was anticipating a new era of sexual freedom for all.

7 E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice* is dedicated to 'a happier year'. However, in his epilogue to the novel, Forster draws a rather bleak picture to define the position of homosexuality in the English society in 1960: 'Note in conclusion on a word hitherto unmentioned. Since *Maurice* was written there has been a change in the public attitude here: the change from ignorance and terror to familiarity and contempt. It is not the change towards which Edward Carpenter had worked. . . . And I . . . less optimistic, had supposed that knowledge would bring understanding. We had not realized that what the public really loathes in homosexuality is not the thing itself but having to think about it. If it could be slipped into our midst unnoticed, legalized overnight by a decree in small print, there would be few protests. Unfortunately it can only be legalized by Parliament, and Members of Parliament are obliged to think or to appear to think. Consequently the Wolfenden recommendations will be indefinitely rejected, police prosecutions will continue, and Clive on the bench will continue to sentence Alec in the dock. *Maurice* may get off.' E.M. Forster, *Maurice*, Penguin Classics, London, 2000, 224.

8 Scott-Kilvert, Ian, Ed., 'E.M. Forster' in *British Writers*, Volume VI, New York: Simon Schuster, MacMillan, 1983, p. 407.

that fits Forster: the homosexual man, for Carpenter, 'tends to be of a gentle, emotional disposition' and he is 'generally' intuitive and instinctive in [his] perceptions, with more or less of artistic feeling.⁹ The heterosexual framework of Forster's novels actually reflect this feminine temperament in an indirect way. The sisterly tenderness of Helen and Margaret in *Howards End*, for example, reflect a kind of love relationship in their unity against maleness. Going beyond the immediate context of the novel, readers can sense an elaboration on 'eternal differences'.¹⁰ Margaret's words in *Howards End* reflect the tension in E.M. Forster himself:

"It's only that people are far more different than is pretended. All over the world men and women are worrying because they cannot develop as they are supposed to develop. Here and there they have the matter out, and it comforts them."¹¹

It could be argued that through his novel *Maurice*, E.M. Forster had his 'matter out' by dealing with homosexuality directly. Forster, through Maurice, finds an opportunity to portray the plight of the homosexual in an unsympathetic and uncompromising world. His main protagonist Maurice's loneliness and his search for the friend of his boyhood dream is the main focus of the novel. Themes of search for a friend and companion in life, developing relationships with lower class men and leaving one's home all emerge in Alan Hollinghurst's novels as well. Maurice's journey in the novel is a journey of self-realization which is very similar to the experiences of William Beckwith in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and Nick Guest in *The Line of Beauty*.

Another significant novelist who is echoed in Hollinghurst's novels is Ronald Firbank (1876-1926). Firbank was an idiosyncratic figure. He was an aesthete and he wrote short, satirical and almost plotless novels with eccentric characters. Firbank as an English novelist was greatly influenced by the literature of the 1809s. He is defined as a peculiarly fantastic writer with a 'perverse' and idiosyncratic humor. He has developed a peculiar style as well, which depends on the shape and cadence of the sentence and an eccentric use of vocabulary. Writers like Evelyn Waugh and Ivy Compton-Burnett were influenced by Firbank.

Hollinghurst's novels also bear the stamp of Firbank's authentic style and aesthetics. It could be argued that Firbank enacts his homosexuality as a high vocation and very much like Oscar Wilde, he nurtures an exacting devotion to art. Firbank's novels represent homosexual desire with a revolutionary consciousness of the aesthetic element in the novel form. *Vainglory* (1915) depicts characters including a male composer and his male lover; *The Princess Zoubaroff* (1920) is a play about the founding of a lesbian convent, *The Flower Beneath The Foot* (1923), which is read by William Beckwith in Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*, deals with lesbian longings and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926) depicts a bisexual hero who dies during a nude chase after his favorite choirboy, which is very much reminiscent of Edward Manners in *The Folding Star*.

Ronald Firbank stands out in his generation of writers with his original and peculiar style. He excels the indirect and elliptical style which paves the way for an independent homosexual voice in fiction that precedes many other authors. Although Firbank was not deemed as a serious and eminent writer¹², many critics have acknowledged his literary style to be diligently constructed so as to serve for his literary ambitions in his novels. Such positive criticism of Firbank relates him to previous canonical writers like Laurence Sterne and William Congreve. Edward Martin Potoker, for example, refers to some structural similarities between Firbank's novels and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*:

9 Carpenter, Edward, *The Intermediate Sex*, The Echo Library, New York, 2007, p. 15.

10 E.M. Forster, *Howards End*, Everyman's Library, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, London, 1991, p. 353.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 353.

12 Ralph C. Boettcher in his entry for Ronald Firbank in *British Writers* refers to a number of critics who defined Firbank as a trivial novelist: "The distinguished critics Mark Longaker and Edwin C. Bolles in *Contemporary English Literature* (1953) dismiss the novels of Ronald Firbank as "trivial impertinences" (p. 342). And Cyril Connolly, in his essay "The Novel-Addict's Cup-board," in *The Condemned Playground* (1946) writes that "it is quite useless to write about Firbank— nobody who doesn't like him is going to like him, and he can be extremely aggravating and silly— but," he immediately adds, "he was a true innovator, and his air of ephemerality is treacherous in the extreme." This assessment follows Connolly's judgment of "the poetry of Horace and Tibullus, the plays of Congreve, the paintings of Watteau and Degas, the music of Mozart, and the prose of Flaubert"—and the fiction of Firbank—as attempting "to portray the beauty of the moment, the gaiety and sadness, the fugitive mistress of hedonism." Further, he catalogs Ernest Hemingway, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as "among the Firbank derivatives" (p. 115)." George Stade, Ed., 'Ronald Firbank', in *British Writers*, Supplement II, New York: Simon and Schuster MacMillan, 1992, p.480.

"One may have thought, when one first looked at his books in the twenties, that they were foamy improvisations which could be skimmed up in rapid reading. Yet when one tried to run through them, one found oneself pricked by something that queerly impressed; one was aware of artistic seriousness, even if one did not linger to find out what the writer was up to. When one returns to them today, one realizes that Ronald Firbank was one of the writers of his time who took most trouble over their work and who were most single-mindedly devoted to literature. The memoirs of him testify to this. His books are not foolish trifles, scribbled down to get through the boredoms of a languid and luxurious life. They are extremely intellectual, and composed with the closest attention: dense textures of indirection that always disguise the point. They have to be read with care, and they can be read again and again, because Firbank has loaded every rift with ore."¹³

The techniques Firbank has adopted from Sterne are employed as a queer attitude towards society in his work. The displacement of logical continuity of action through free association of ideas ruptures the linearity of the hetero-normative order. The free association of ideas that defines much of Firbank's work reflect the free-floating consciousness of the homosexual man that cannot be contained in a single framework. Alan Hollinghurst himself deems Firbank's literary style as a 'creative use of homosexuality' in fiction. Homosexuality in Firbank's novels, for Hollinghurst, could be read as a textual phenomenon. Firbank's work, in other words, integrates homosexual desire into a canonical literary and aesthetic tradition. The continuation of and fulfillment of this attempt could be traced in Hollinghurst's own work¹⁴.

The most prominent aspect of Firbank's style is his use of ellipsis which rules out chronology and continuity. In Firbank's work, narration and description are minimal and dialogue functions as a glue which builds the plot. The use of ellipsis and free association links Firbank to poets and authors like Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf¹⁵.

Writers like Ronald Firbank and E.M. Forster represent an era during which men of literature mostly kept their homosexuality in secret and dealt with this theme only indirectly in their works. But in the 1930s, starting with writers like Auden and Isherwood, the homosexual was no longer depicted on heroic terms, but as real people with their sexual desires and pleasures. Starting with the 1930s, writers no longer exalted or mystified homosexual desire, but subordinated it to more comprehensive political ideologies – socialism, communism, liberalism and fascism.

Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) is perhaps one of the most important predecessors of Alan Hollinghurst, because he created homosexual characters whose homosexuality is a simple given, an integral part of the wholeness or personality and an emblem of their common humanity. Isherwood's homosexuality had a major influence on his art. He developed an interest in certain psychological predicaments and his books include some recurring character types and themes like the Truly Weak Man, The Truly Strong Man and The Evil Mother and such obsessions as war, The Test, the struggle toward maturity and the search for a father. Some of these character types and themes occur in Alan Hollinghurst's novels as well.

A greater affinity in terms of character types and themes between Christopher Isherwood and Alan Hollinghurst could be found in Isherwood's later novels. Isherwood deals with more deeply and focus more on the plights of the homosexual man in a homophobic society. Isherwood's homosexual characters belonging to the works of his

13 E.M. Potoker, *Ronald Firbank*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 491.

14 Alan Hollinghurst has produced a number of critical works on Ronald Firbank. He has an MA Thesis and some shorter pieces focusing on Firbank:

- "Introduction to The Early Firbank", Ed., Steven Moore, London and New York, Quartet Books, 1991.

- "Introduction to Ronald Firbank", Three Novels, London, Penguin, 2000.

- Alan Hollinghurst, *The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the Novels of E.M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L.P. Hartley*, M. Litt., thesis, Magdalen College, 1979. (Unpublished. A copy of the manuscript can be consulted in the Bodleian Library.)

15 A characteristic device is his use of ellipses to create a conversational vacuum that the reader is invited to fill. In this snippet from *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, for example, a young man registers horror, dis-belief, and chagrin (let us say) on hearing that fleas have been found at the Ritz Hotel: " !? ...!!" (p. 509). In chapter 8 of the same novel, a third of the page is filled with rows of dots (compare the blank pages of *Tristram Shandy*) to disclose the awful interiority of Countess Yvorra's prayer. He frequently uses stichomythia. A unique motif is passages of fragments of overheard conversations - "confusion of voices" - to suggest the chatter in a crowded room.

later period are very similar to Hollinghurst's characters in that they nurture apparently incongruous needs to assert their individuality and to feel a sense of community. *The World in the Evening* (1954), for example, gives us a portrayal of such a character, Bob Woods, who rebels against the plights he is burdened with because of the homophobic society he lives in.

The need for community is an important issue in Isherwood's most important novel, *A Single Man* (1964). The novel's main character George is a late middle aged homosexual who grieves at the death of his lover of many years. Isherwood, through his homosexual character George, deals with issues like commitment and grief, alienation and isolation in a framework of homosexual sensibility. Isherwood as a novelist presaged and embraced the gay liberation movement. His novels focus on the need for solidarity among homosexuals and the recognition of homosexuals as an aggrieved minority. However, Isherwood's greatest achievement as a novelist, and in a way as one of the authors who paved the way for Alan Hollinghurst, is that he portrayed homosexual characters whose homosexuality is a single given, an essential part of their personality.

Homosexual novelists of the 1930s and 1940s also dealt with the hypocrisy of society in its relationship with homosexuals. Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) in his *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) deals with the fact that the heterosexual world simultaneously permits and condemns homosexuality. One of the novel's homosexual heroes, Sebastian Mardman is first idolized by the novelist and his narrator and then denounced and condemned for his homosexuality and aestheticism. The same pattern of society's consecutive and/or simultaneous glorification and condemnation of homosexuality is strongly echoed in Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), where Nick Guest, the main character of the novel is first welcomed by the Feddens family and then severely condemned and stigmatized because of his homosexuality.

Writers of the last quarter of the twentieth century largely dealt with two issues: first the resurgence of religious, moral, and political conservatism in England since 1979 and the social stigmatization of homosexuals with the society's discourse on the AIDS plague.

Thus, Alan Hollinghurst draws on retrospective mediations on English homosexual life's stories and pleasures in his novels. Hollinghurst's novels evoke the great variety of discourses and stories on homosexuality in the English tradition. It is through this dialogue between these earlier novelists that Alan Hollinghurst attempts at creating a literary canon for novels dealing with homosexuality. His emulation and reworking on these previous novel traditions and styles enable him to create a queer canon.

2.2. Alan Hollinghurst

Alan Hollinghurst as a British novelist is very often compared with eminent writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Austen and Henry James. In his novels, he deals with some perennial themes like love, death, age, mourning, manners and memory. What differs him from his predecessors and contemporaries is his queer perspective. His perspective could be defined as queer not only because his novels deal with homosexuality, but also because his works surprise, make fun of and perplex the normative order. Such 'queering' of the norms reveals the plight of the homosexual man in an unprecedented way. In Hollinghurst's novels, the homosexual man is related to the hetero-normative order in an ambivalent way. He is both accepted and cast out of society. Hollinghurst offers us a new literary framework in which the homosexual man finds himself a literary voice.

Alan Hollinghurst is praised for his elegant prose style, which is strengthened by his satiric impulse and lyrical gift. Hollinghurst uses his aesthetic sensibility to unveil sexuality 'as an essential thread running through everything ... in a person's life'¹⁶. Thus, sexuality emerges as one of the important triggering forces in a person's life that gives direction to the route the person takes in life. However, Hollinghurst's characters are not only operated by their sexuality, but by their personalities and characters as well. This differs Hollinghurst from his predecessors who have dealt with the homosexuality of their characters as the only defining trait they have. Hollinghurst's characters' sexuality is a given in his novels; in other words, Hollinghurst does not present his fictional characters in a moral dilemma about being a homosexual. What Hollinghurst mostly works on in his novels is the way his characters interact with society and how they position themselves against other groups of

¹⁶ Richard Canning, *Conversations with Gay Novelists: Gay Fiction Speaks*, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 332.

people. The issue of community, thus, emerges as a main topic in Hollinghurst's novels. It could be argued that, the predecessors of Alan Hollinghurst, novelists like Christopher Isherwood, E.M. Forster and Edmund White dealt with homosexual characters to show how they are alienated by the hetero-normative society. Writers like these tried to depict the impossibility of survival for homosexuals. Happiness could not be granted to these earlier homosexual characters, because that seemed theoretically impossible¹⁷. These characters did not even come out of their closets. On the other hand, Hollinghurst's characters are known as homosexuals by society. The main fictional concern is not their sexuality, but the deceptiveness of the modern acknowledgement of homosexuality in society. Although they seem to be living in a liberated environment, it is very difficult for Hollinghurst's characters to feel themselves at home wherever they might be. This ever-present sense of alienation haunts them at some important moment throughout the novels. The characters, along with readers, come to the understanding that it is not only the hetero-normative society that casts these men out, but these homosexual men themselves also cannot bring themselves to building close ties with the society. The inner conflicts they develop in their selves and the incongruities that haunt their identity formation will not allow them to live in compromise with the heterosexual order, even if they are allocated certain seemingly-liberated spaces in the margins of society.

The narrative techniques used by Alan Hollinghurst in his novel reflect the way he deals with the inner lives of his characters. *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) and *The Folding Star* (1993), his first two novels, are narrated in the first person, whereas *The Spell* (1998) and *The Line of Beauty* (2004) are narrated in the third person. Hollinghurst himself states that 'the book [*The Spell*] had to be inside the mind and preoccupations of its narrator'.¹⁸ Hollinghurst's choice for the first person narration enables him to reveal the feelings of his characters in minute detail. It is through this first person narrative that the readers can follow the characters' responses to people and events. Hollinghurst explains his choice in the following words:

'There are all sorts of reasons for writing in the first person, however. They're partly aesthetic; partly technical and partly something else; to do with the lack of moral heavy handedness that comes from writing in the first person, because everything is floating and unknown. Everything is responded very subjectively. There's an especially interesting engagement, I always think, between the reader and the narrator. It's like getting to know more in real life, forming a view, and changing your mind about him or her. It's interestingly unstable.'¹⁹

When Hollinghurst switches to the third person narration, it is so in order to unravel the underlying interrelations among his characters. *The Spell* (1998), for example, through its third person narration gives its reader the opportunity to see the relations between characters from each other's perspectives. *The Spell* is a novel in which characters seem to be dancing to a symphony of human relations. It is like a slow movement between the city and the country and between men of different characters. Hollinghurst states that he wanted *The Spell* to 'be a study of people and their relations to each other.'²⁰ Hollinghurst uses these narrative voices so as to come up with a detailed and deep excavation into the mind and feelings of the homosexual man. Unlike his predecessors, Hollinghurst does not only focus on what society does to the homosexual man, but on how the homosexual man reacts to society and tries to defend himself so as to survive.

Another significant characteristic of Alan Hollinghurst as a gay novelist is his concern with aesthetics and the formal laws guiding creativity. In all of his novels, his characters are very much concerned with the arts, whether it be literature, music, art and architecture. Hollinghurst's concern with aesthetics and creativity is the reflection of the attempt to construct an order on the part of his characters. The current of aesthetics and creativity represents the gap in Hollinghurst's characters which is opened by the hetero-normative society's disavowal of them. Hollinghurst's characters all suffer from a psychic gap which is there because of their being alienated by the hetero-normative society. Art and all kinds of aesthetic pursuits in Hollinghurst's novels might be read as the homosexual man's attempt to disguise this psychic gap both from himself and from others around

17 E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice* could be read as its author's struggle to resolve the paradoxical situation of the homosexual man in society.

18 Canning, Richard, Ed., *Conversations with Gay Novelists: Gay Fiction Speaks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 332.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 332.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 334.

him. Thus, Hollinghurst's concern with aesthetics and the formal laws guiding creativity emerges as a strong narrative current through which he portrays the subjectivity of his characters as gay men.²¹

This aesthetic concern of Alan Hollinghurst also differs him from other gay novelists, because the depiction of his homosexual characters' aesthetic pursuits act as insights into their subjectivity. It is through their relation with art and aesthetics that we learn more about their personalities and their feelings. In the works of Ronald Firbank, E.M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, for example, we do not have such in-depth analyses of homosexual characters. Their novels mainly deal with the homosexual person's interaction with society and they mostly depict almost stereotypical homosexual characters. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for example, William Beckwith's qualms about writing Lord Nantwich's diary, his chasing after beautiful black men portray a very strong character into whose mind we can so easily enter. *The Spell's* concern with architecture, strengthened by the fact that the main character of the novel, Robin, is an architect himself, does not only highlight the underlying search for a home, but also the homosexual man's inherent attempt to beautify his surroundings so as to disguise the psychic gap caused by his separation from and his rejection of his father. In *The Folding Star*, the side story which revolves around a mysterious Dutch painter functions as the reflection of Edward Manner's obsession with his young pupil and his beauty. The Dutch painter's obsessed love affair reflects how desire gives shape to people's fortunes in life. *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst's 2004 novel, is perhaps the most deeply concerned with art and aesthetics. Nick Guest, the novel's protagonist, is a young man perhaps too much disillusioned with what is beautiful and aesthetic. He is so overwhelmed with what is on the surface that he misses his true standing in life and falls prey to a 'narcissistic' self-deception. At the end of the novel, he is tragically cast out of what he previously deems as naturally his own. Through these characters, Alan Hollinghurst very effectively portrays the plight of the homosexual man in society who has to make a deliberate and conscious choice in accepting his essential 'otherness' in the hetero-normative society and living in deep awareness of forces against him or in living in a self-built narcissistic illusion that he is already part of a large community and other people around him are there to love him no matter what he is.

Talking about his novel *The Spell*, for example, Alan Hollinghurst himself makes it very clear that, beyond the depictions of the colorful lives these homosexual men lead, he wants to highlight a more obscure problem. The lives of homosexual men, very easily defined as 'colorful, enjoyable and 'gay'', disguise a darker dimension which is fed by a mostly unacknowledged sense of loneliness and being cast out:

'... with *The Spell*, I wanted to write more about pleasure. I know that the idea of pleasure itself has become a slightly charged thing – for instance, with the anti-gay movement and the perception that pleasure's the only thing certain gay people want to have. I hoped to take a fairly ironic position on pleasure; one that shows it's good to have fun, but that it isn't the only thing.'²²

The characteristics of a pleasurable and enjoyable life, which are generally attributed to homosexual individuals and their lives should be interpreted as an alibi of an underlying psychological cause and also as the society's forced way of perceiving the homosexual man. Alan Hollinghurst, by both acknowledging and problematizing this 'pleasure principle' in the homosexual man's life, presents some very realistic depictions of homosexual man and how they are positioned within society. In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for example, William Beckwith's colorful and social London life hides the inherent alienation of homosexual people by society. In his fast-paced and pleasure-oriented life, it is perhaps William Beckwith himself who keeps some dire facts out of his immediate perception. The turning-point of the novel emerges when William Beckwith comes to the understanding that in this pleasure-oriented life, he cannot have an autonomous and established personality. He has to shift the focus of his life from pleasure to ethics and make a choice between hiding his true self in transient pleasures and structuring a free and self-reliant individual. The novel ends with the main character's unresolved paradox.

21 Alan Hollinghurst, in his interview with Richard Canning, explains his concern with aesthetics in following words: 'I'm not quite sure how I'd define it though. All my books have quite a lot about buildings. This happens to be a preoccupation of mine. I love inventing buildings and describing them. I'm interested in the atmosphere of buildings. People often wonder why the hell I have got an enormous description of building at a certain point, but I'm afraid they just have to put up with it.' *Ibid.*, p. 335.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 339.

Similarly, *The Line of Beauty* deals with the self-delusions of its main character, Nick Guest. Nick Guest is a young homosexual man who is very much concerned with beauty and aesthetics. He is almost obsessed with beauty and his fixation is to such an extent that he undervalues people around him and thinks that he can survive on his own. He cannot perceive the pretense of the Feddens family he is hosted by until the end of the novel. Nick's tragedy reveals itself not when he is looking for a community, but when he deliberately distances himself from others like him. Alan Hollinghurst presents Nick's coming to the awareness of the significance of community in his forceful exit out of the pretentious world of aestheticism.

Hollinghurst also differs from his predecessors in that he depicts his characters as very active figures in the heart of cities they inhabit. His characters present us a portrayal of a very clearly defined metropolitan gay culture. It is in this metropolitan gay culture that the characters' sexual pursuits and desires find themselves a scene. The city that engulfs the homosexual man to the degree of an involuntary invisibility seems to be simultaneously opening up underground spaces for him in which he can fall into the delusion that he is being himself by chasing beauty and momentary sexual gratification. Actually this self-deception is very much strengthened by society itself. The society prescribes its own image of a homosexual person onto homosexual people and they somehow feel compelled to act in certain ways.²³ This effect of society and the need to strip one's self²⁴ out of these social frameworks are given voice by some queer thinkers like Guy Hocquenghem. The pursuit of beauty and momentary sexual gratification constitute the main engines of plot in Hollinghurst's novel. However, Hollinghurst does not only utilize these as pieces of a grand narrative mechanism. Obsession with beauty and a focus on sexual gratification also reflect how the homosexual individual gives meaning to his identity as it is positioned in society. This relationship between the homosexual individual and society is mutual, in the sense that, it is the society itself which channels the homosexual man into a chase after beauty and sexual gratification. The homosexual individual, being psychologically prone to resolve the inner conflict in himself through art and perhaps camp elements, turns his chase after beauty and sex into a habitual way of living. This habituation is encouraged by society. Queer theory defines this as the 'performative' aspect of gender. The homosexual individual, in other words, most of the time learns to be a 'homosexual' by observing others like him in the 'metropolitan gay culture'. Hollinghurst is aware of how these inclinations in the homosexual individual are prone to be turned into habit: 'But I think desires, appetites and their innate tendency towards addiction, towards obsession, towards a need which becomes a habit, is what *The Spell* is about'.²⁵ *The Folding Star*, in a similar vein deals with a homosexual man who turns his desire for a young boy into a fixation and a kind of obsession. The libidinous dimension of the novel reveals the fragility of the homosexual individual in dealing with his quest for beauty and sexuality.

One important defining characteristic of Alan Hollinghurst as a gay novelist is that he foregrounds the often marginalized homosexual characters who are obsessed with beauty and art. The mainstream literature, even the gay novel itself, positions such 'wounded' and 'flawed' characters at the margins of books. Hollinghurst does not depict his characters as only clubbers and as effeminate aesthetes; the pursuit of art and beauty and the sublimation of sexual desire are used as narrative foci through which the characteristics and personality traits of Hollinghurst's characters are revealed and developed. Alan Hollinghurst explains why he foregrounds and explicates artistic pursuits and artistic sublimation in his characters:

'Bringing to the centre people who could acknowledge and fulfill themselves, however compromised or satirized it may be, was certainly part of my conscious intention in *The Swimming-Pool Library*. The idea was not to write about people in some way disadvantaged and sitting in the margins, but up there, in your face ... So one doesn't associate those characters with habits of mind and repressive social patterns one wants to discard. But I think I've always had characters who can't quite make it into this world of hedonistic fulfillment. Will's friend

²³ The French queer theorist Guy Hocquenghem, in his book *The Screwball Asses* pursues his claim that it is society itself simultaneously condemns and creates homosexuality, hence it is this socially prescribed version of homosexuality that many homosexuals live. Guy Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses*, Semiotext(e) intervention series N.3., Trans. Noura Medell, England, London, 2010.

²⁴ Guy Hocquenghem, in his book *The Gay Nation*, talks about how society gives shape to our desires: 'However, the desiring machines operate above as well as below the level of 'the human person', for it is society which at different points in historical development distributes desire in different ways through a process of coding, that is of signification which stabilises desire in patterns.' Guy Hocquenghem, *The Gay Nation*, Pluto Press, London, 1996, p. 27.

²⁵ Canning, Richard, Ed., *Conversations with Gay Novelists: Gay Fiction Speaks*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 343.

the doctor in *The Swimming-Pool Library* very much *sublimates his feelings into his work* [my italics]. Hugh in *The Spell* is similar.'

As the above quotation makes clear, many of Hollinghurst's characters do not really fit into the stereotypical image of a homosexual man. This enables his readers to see the homosexual man confronted with society. Since we do not see his characters in full compromise with the machinations of society, the rupture they live in reveals the traumatic encounter society. Lord Nantwich in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for example, is an elderly homosexual man who has simply failed himself into invisibility by not being able to construct himself an autonomous identity. The task of writing his diary, which symbolizes his 'word' in this life, his only and last chance to be someone, befalls on the shoulders of William Beckwith, who is himself not strong enough to tackle with this. *The Spell*, in a similar vein, in the person of Robin Woodfield, portrays us a homosexual man who consciously keeps himself out of the libidinous world of the gay metropolitan life. Robin is very successfully juxtaposed with his own son Danny, who seems to be enjoying himself in chasing and being chased in the sexual dance of the gay men in the kind of life his father had rejected. Nick Guest, in *The Line of Beauty*, is again somehow out of the homosexual milieu he would normally be accepted to inhabit. He does not know about the colorful gay social life and the dynamics of 'cruising'²⁶. It is only through his new lover he meets in London that he is initiated into the metropolitan gay world in London. Still, his fixation on beauty and his pretentious characters do not allow him to come together with ordinary gay men; he spends his time with high-ranking people in society. He distances himself from the social dimension of his gayness; he does not give much thought on the significance of the AIDS epidemic, for example. The AIDS issue, very much like the serious social aspect of his standing in life, is presented only very fleetingly.

The fact that the AIDS epidemic is treated in a seemingly shallow manner in Hollinghurst's novels hints at another novelistic and literary characteristic of Hollinghurst which differentiates himself from his peers. Unlike many other gay novelists, Hollinghurst's novels do not center around the theme of AIDS. Hollinghurst consciously 'evades' focusing on AIDS, because he thinks that it is rather cliché to construct characters dealing with AIDS in the gay novel. In other words, this strategic evasion on the part of Hollinghurst prevents his novels to be the voice of society that haunts homosexual individuals with the constructed AIDS narrative. Hollinghurst seems to be aware of the fact that if he had dealt with AIDS in the centre of his novels, they would only be accentuating the discourse of society itself. Gregory Woods, in his *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*, explains Hollinghurst's narrative strategy in the following words:

'The British novelist Alan Hollinghurst has adopted two different strategies of 'evasion'; or rather, to phrase it more positively, he has twice refused to submit to the considerable pressure, from gay readers and straight critics, on all gay male writers, to write about AIDS. His first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) is a lusty celebration of pre-AIDS freedoms, already a 'historical novel' at the time of its publication by virtue of being set in London in the 1970s, a decade so radically different from the 1980s in the common experience of urban gay men.'²⁷

The Swimming-Pool Library, for example, is a novel in the shadow of AIDS, but it is not acknowledged as a threat in an open manner. The main character William Beckwith leads a life which is very much ignorant of the impending epidemic. Still, he voices his sense that the summer in which the events of the novel unfold would be the last happy summer of his life. This sense of an ending of one sort or another is there, because we have the AIDS epidemic behind the curtain. *The Folding Star* is a novel is too much concerned with the psychology of its main character to deal with AIDS openly, but even there, the main character Edward Manners is given an ex-lover who has died of AIDS. In a way, the novel starts with the loneliness triggered by AIDS in Edward's life, but AIDS is not the main issue. This enables us to see more about the person influenced by AIDS. Any other narrative and stylistic strategy would only be strengthening the discourse wound up and let loose by society.

The way Hollinghurst deals with the AIDS question is perhaps the most revealing aspect of his authorship. Hollinghurst himself has dealt with this issue in his Master of Arts thesis which is titled as 'The Creative Uses of

26 'Cruising' is a word used to refer to the act of trying to pick up someone for anonymous gay male sex.

27 Gregory Woods. *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1998. pg. 368-369.

Homosexuality in the Novels of E.M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L.P. Hartley'. Hollinghurst in his thesis makes a differentiation between homosexuality as a 'content' and homosexuality as a 'lifestyle'. Richard Canning hints at a problematic of the British gay novel as put forward in Hollinghurst's thesis:

'... an unresolved question concerning the British gay literary canon; namely, what is the relationship between gayness as a matter of content and gayness such as it might be traced as literary lifestyle. In the thesis you argue for a clear division. For instance, you say Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* in 'not distinctively homosexual for it relies on a new moral climate free from discrimination against homosexuality'.²⁸

It could safely be surmised that Alan Hollinghurst's fiction is related to the tenets of queer theory that was developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Similar to queer theorists like Eve Sedgwick, Hollinghurst is interested in homosexuality not only as a concealed or revealed identity, but as a textual phenomenon. By working on the dynamics of the textual representation of homosexuality, Hollinghurst offers a wider fictional realm for the understanding of homosexual selfhood and identity. He achieves this through creating a distinctive homosexual style in fiction which reveals the homosexual man's positioning both from a psychological and social perspective. Another significance of Alan Hollinghurst is that he attempts at building a distinctive form for the homosexual experience. Hollinghurst's fiction could be read as a striving step for an autonomous 'queer' canon in which the plight of the homosexual man is linked to the perennial issues of humanity without being marginalized.

28 Canning, Richard (ed.), *Conversations with Gay Novelists: Gay Fiction Speaks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 350.

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