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The Criminal Blindness of Society: A Study of E.M Forster's Maurice

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Abstract: E.M Forster's fiction is significant because of his ability to express some of the major dilemma of the twentieth century, in spite of their multiplicity and complexity, in the order of art. Forster's novel *Maurice* (1971) touches the sensitivity of modern society to relations and questions of deep human relationships. The present paper explores in detail the emergence of the inner life of Maurice in the face of a hostile society.

Index Terms – Inner life, homosexuality, taboo, quest, identity, meaningful relationship, psychological tensions, light and dark, creation.

E.M Forster is a liberal writer whose works continually deal with the ideal of a cosmopolitan tolerant culture which would encourage the free and fullest growth of the individual. His portrayal of human relationships in the social, economic and political aspects was all the time concerned with the ways and means by which human beings can break down the fetters of narrow-minded conventions, destructive and inhibiting human freedom. Forster's fiction is significant because of his ability to express some of the major dilemmas of the twentieth century, in spite of their multiplicity and complexity, the order of art.

Forster's *Maurice* (1971) touches the sensitivity of modern society to relations and questions of deep human relationships. In his earlier novels, Forster had dealt with the earth-connected, passionate life in its conflict with middle class society. In *Maurice*, Forster traces, in more detail than ever before, the emergence of the inner life in the face of a hostile society. This novel deals with a homosexuals' coming of self-understanding in conflict with a hostile society. Maurice's struggle is the conflict between the inner life – the force which would have a person live his life according to the truth of his own emotions and the outside forces which seek to define and direct the life of the individual. In *Howard's End* (1910) Forster had tried to reconcile the outer life of the middle class, which is changing the world, with the cherished life of personal relations. The attempt proved to be a failure. In *Maurice*, Forster turn to a total rejection of the middle-class values by having a character make the connection Henry Wilcox could not. When Maurice connects he finds that in order to live according to his new vision he must live outside society altogether. Having rejected all of the values of his class, Maurice finally relinquishes class itself. This outcome is similar to that of *The Longest Journey* (1907) except that Stephen Wonham does not have to reject the middle class to go and live in a rural retreat; he had always existed on the periphery. The middle-class world is reduced at the end of *The Longest Journey* to the image of a train passing through the countryside. The novel then ends with Stephen and his child ready to spend the night in the field. The inspiration to write *Maurice* came in September 1913 when Forster went on a visit to Edward Carpenter, a friend, whom Forster considered to be the prophet of the simple life and high-minded homosexuality. Forster has described the incident that led to the writing of the novel in the "Terminal Note" to the novel. (p.235). Carpenter's friend, George Merrill, touched Forster on the backside and the sensation travelled straight through the small of his back into his ideas. The experience was as much psychological as physical. Forster's own inclination towards homosexuality added to it and on the instant an entire novel shaped itself in his mind which was to deal with homosexuality.

Prior to this incident, Forster had been writing short stories on the homosexual theme. But being dissatisfied with them as a craftsman he destroyed many of them. His diary for 8th April 1922 reads "have this moment burnt my indecent writings or as many as the fire will take. Not a moral repentance, but the belief that clogged me artistically. They were written not to express myself but to excite myself, and when first – 15 years back? - I began them, I had a feeling that I was doing something positively dangerous to my career as a novelist. I am not ashamed of them... It is just that they were a wrong channel for my pen." (p.14). Only three months later he recorded in a letter to Florence Barjer the completion of "A Short Story (*The Life to Come*) which is...violent and wholly unpublishable, and I do not yet know whether it is good. I may show it to Goldie, but there is more sensuality in my composition than in his, and it might distress him." (p.14). Here the reference is to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, the man above all others whose esteemed Forster treasured. In 1913, Dickinson's "disgust" at a "Ravelaisian" story of Forster's had shaken him so severely as to retard work on *Maurice*. Dickinson, however, approved of *Maurice*. But after that Forster took greater care not to expose himself again to disapproval, from Dickinson or anyone else. It is not a moral repentance but a craftsman's dissatisfaction which led him to destroy some of his stories. His prudence and fear of disapproval prevented him from publishing his stories and *Maurice*. So both *Maurice* and the short stories were published posthumously in 1971 and 1972 respectively.

Homosexuality, though prevalent, was abhorred in western society because of moral views. It was considered to be an unclean and unhealthy practice and homosexuals were treated as outlaws. It was common belief in those times that a male who experiences love for his own sex must be despicable, degraded, depraved, vicious and incapable of human or generous sentiments. Homosexuality threatened the continuation of the family and the Western ideal of male as it became associated with moral corruption. It led to scandal and black mail. It was perceived as a threat to the state. In the nineteenth century Oscar Wilde's sufferings due to his deviant sexual views had created an atmosphere in which the issue needed to be reconsidered. George Woodcock in his essay "The Social Rebel" reveals the fact that homosexual practices, if not so openly recognized and tolerated as they are today, were very wide spread in London.

In *Maurice* Forster explores the crisis of identity that a young boy goes through adolescence and early youth. It is the story of a young boy in quest of a meaningful relationship with personal and social problems. The novel portrays deep psychological tensions presented by placing the individual within the family group, which has been continuously shaping the child's personality. Neuroanatomist Simone Levay believes that sexual orientation will eventually be explained biologically but he also note that the biological structure of the brain is influenced by inborn and environmental factors.

Maurice's household has strong feminine influences with his mother as its "presiding genius". (p.10). The young boy, Maurice, "was grateful to her for providing so much, and loved her". (p.10). Two incidents occur in Maurice's early adolescence which undermine his confidence in adult authority. The first incident occurs when Maurice's teacher Mr. Ducie explains to him "the mystery of sex" by drawing diagrams on the sand with his walking-stick. Mr. Ducie's very name implies doubleness or hypocrisy in the sense of "deuce"; it also seems to pun on "Do see!" – the imperative of the teacher laying down society's rules. The name also recalls Ducie street, where the Wilcoxes had one of these houses in *Howards End*. Mr. Deucie speaks about love, life and ideals of a man. After explaining to Maurice he stops and holds his cheek as though every tooth was aching. Then he turns and looks at the long expanse of sand behind saying slowly, "I never scratched out those infernal diagrams". (p.9). Suddenly he sees some people approaching the very spot where he had illustrated sex. He runs back sweating with fear to erase the diagrams. This incident fills Maurice with a profound mistrust for his teacher. "Liar", he thought, "Liar, coward, he's told me nothing". (p.9). Actually his teacher is incapable of imparting sex education. Laxmi Prakash says, "The sex- lecture given to Maurice by his teacher significantly hints at the pathos and futility of sex education during Forster's stay at the preparatory school Eastbourne". (1987,p.178). Forster's education left its mark on his vision of life by opening his eyes to the shallowness of schooling.

The second incident occurs a little later. Maurice's sense of betrayal is heightened when, upon going home, he finds that his one real friend, George, the garden boy, has suddenly left the family service. The unsatisfactory reply given by his mother for George's departure fills Maurice with a mistrust for his mother and begins his alienation from his mother. In this way he is betrayed by two adult authorities whom he revered, namely, his mother and teacher.

The emergence of Maurice's real self in the face of an antithetical society is carried out in the novel with a pattern of images of light and dark. In chapter 27, which is central to an understanding of this pattern, Maurice visits his dying grandfather, Mr. Grace, who has passed the time in his old age by creating a new religious view of the cosmos. "The chief point was that God lives inside the sun, whose bright envelope consists of the spirits of the blessed. Sunspots reveal God to men, so that when they occurred Mr. Grace spent hours at his telescope, noting the interior darkness. The incarnation was a sort of sunspot". (p.127). Maurice and Mr. Grace discuss the theory about a meteor swarm impinged on the rings of Saturn and chipped pieces off then that fell into the sun. Mr. Grace draws a "parallel between God, dark inside the glowing sun, and the soul, invisible inside the visible body. 'the power within- the soul: Let it out, but not yet, not till the evening.... The light within'. (p.129).

In the beginning of the novel Maurice Hall is about to graduate from grammar school. He is nearly fifteen years old, but he is "afraid of the dark". Mr. Deucie's hypocritical behaviour leads "The darkness rolled up again, the darkness that is primeval but not eternal, and yields to its painful dawn". (p.9). Darkness is a symbol of unawakened sexuality and sexual ignorance- a darkness into which Mr. Deucie throws no light but which can be overcome by "the light within". Maurice attends his father's public school, named ironically "Sunnington" where his darkness is prolonged; and when he arrives at Cambridge he stands "still in the darkness instead of groping about in it". (p.21). But in his second year there Maurice begins to move, meeting Risley- a Cambridge homosexual modelled on Lytton Strachey- who calls himself a "child of light". (p.25). Going one night to visit Risley, Maurice literally gropes through the darkness in the hall and enters the room to find Clive Durham, with whom he becomes infatuated; "...his heart had lit never to be quenched again, and one thing in him at last was real". (p.32). Maurice recognizes the homosexual nature of his attraction and he and Clive manage short of sexual intercourse to have "one long day in the light and the wind". But Clive, who has brought Maurice out of darkness, eventually plunges him back in, for Clive finds that he loves women. The truth finally gets through to Maurice and as Clive leaves at the end of Part Two, "he heard Maurice turn out the electric light and sit down with a thud." He is back in the darkness.

The end of the three-year platonic affair, which has been the sustaining force in his life, brings Maurice near suicide. It is at this point in the novel that he visits his grandfather, Mr. Grace. Maurice's momentary fear that his grandfather's silly theory about the sun might be true "started one of those arrangements that affect the whole character. It left him with the conviction that his grandfather was convinced. One more human being had come alive. He had accomplished an act of creation and as he did so Death turned her head away." (p.128).

This crucial realization of Maurice keeps him from suicide and preserves his life, which is later fulfilled. Here Forster seems to deal with an apparent problem in his life, a problem which is reflected in a common theme in the previous novels – the theme of heritage and inheritance. All of his first four novels deal to some extent with children and fertility, with the question of whether the life of passion and personal relations attained by the main characters will be passed on and sustained by later generations. Since he was almost obsessed with this idea of continuance in the earlier novels, Forster must have been perplexed and distressed by the necessary reproductive sterility of a homosexual relationship. Previously, the desirability of the inner life and the life of personal relations had been symbolically established in terms of their relations to the earth, to fertility and growth. The latent homosexuality of Rickie Elliot has often been noted. Perhaps *The Longest Journey* was an earlier, less optimistic attempt to deal with homosexuality. In that novel, the problem of continuance is dealt with by having Rickie's stories survive and flourish. How can Forster reconcile the homosexual relationship, which he obviously presents as good with its apparent contradiction of the symbology already established in the earlier novels?

Forster finds a solution by proposing a different kind of creation than procreation. Through a sort of emphatic act, a person can bring life to someone else. Forster's idea seems to resemble what D.H. Lawrence had in mind when he wrote in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, "and as his seed sprang in her, his soul sprang towards her tool, in the creative act that is far more than procreative." (1986, p.139). Maurice invests a new kind of life in his grandfather; and by this "act of creation" Maurice affirms life and decides not to kill himself. This conception has roots in Plato's *Symposium* and Forster may have assumed that his readers would be well aware of this ancient and traditional justification of homosexuality.

Maurice undergoes through stages of discovering the sexual desire within himself. Initially, he is smitten by direct physical desire. Maurice is shocked and repelled at first by the emergence of this aspect of his character. The young house guest, Dickie, who is the object of Maurice's desire lies "unashamed, embraced, and penetrated by the sun". (p.134). In desperation, thinking he might become like an old man who makes a homosexual advance on the train, Maurice seeks the help of a doctor. He is alarmed at himself and thinks of his preference as a "disease". Dr. Barry, the hypnotist, as an enforcer of society's repression tries to make the room dark and make Maurice see in the darkness the picture of a woman. In effect, the hypnotist is trying to replace with the dream of a woman the dream that Maurice have had several times since his childhood, the dream in which "he scarcely saw a face, scarcely heard a voice say, 'That is your friend'". (p.15). The question of which dream will be reinforced and become the reality of Maurice's life is decided when Maurice meets Alec Scudder, Clive's assistant gamekeeper.

Laxmi Prakash says, "Scudder's salvatory role depends not simply upon his and Maurice's love for each but on what Scudder is and represents." (1987, p.180). Being a gamekeeper Scudder is "associated with the only vital features of Clive's estate, the plant and animal life." (p.180). The gun that Scudder carries while climbing up Maurice's bedroom window "symbolizes his potentially destructive vitality." (p.180). Another quality of Scudder is that "he is not a gentleman, a fact that, coupled with his supposed vitality, will enable Maurice to escape the restraints of his own class". (p.180). It is possible that Forster would have read Edward Carpenter's book *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) where he explained and defended homosexuality and emphasized "the importance of a bond which by the most passionate and lasting compulsion may draw members of the different classes together..." (p.128). At the rural retreat of Millthorpe Forster found Carpenter and George Merrill maintaining a garden and fowl, living a simple life. Carpenter, educated, poetic, a prolific writer, son of well-to-do parents lived at Millthorpe with George Merrill, who came from rustic origin, was bred in the slums, was affectionate, humorous, intuitive and was utterly untouched by the prevailing conventions and proprieties of the upper world. The relationship between Maurice and Scudder seems to be based on their real life relationship between Carpenter and Merrill.

Maurice must resign himself to his "perversion", which he has confirmed by "pleasuring the body". (p.199). The hypnotist cannot put him into a trance, cannot return him to darkness. Maurice's inner light is triumphing over the external darkness. At this point, a positive aspect of darkness, which had been implied already in Mr. Grace's strange cosmogony, begins to become clear. There is the inner darkness of sexual ignorance and the outer darkness of social understanding and oppression. But there is also the outer darkness which hides and protects, the darkness of anonymity and escape which allows those such as Maurice to live according to "the light within". Similarly, in the last part of the book light takes on a negative aspect in addition to its positive, standing also for vulnerability to society's strictures. The happy ending of the novel is achieved in an image which combines the light and dark into one – an image of twilight. Maurice finds Alec at the end lying asleep, "just visible in the last dying of the day". (p.225). Is this the evening referred to by Mr. Grace when he had said, "The power within -the soul : let it out, but not yet, not till the evening"? (p.129). In the end Maurice goes up from the boathouse to tell Clive that he loves his gamekeeper. Clive, who cannot see Maurice in the shadows "felt that his friend...was essential night". (p.227). Clive cannot understand or accept Maurice's love for Alec; it is something dark and obscure. In terms of the positive symbolism of darkness in the novel, however, this "essential night" is the darkness inside the sun, the darkness in which, according to Mr. Grace, God lives.

After the completion of the novel there was no question in Forster's mind of publishing it. Such a thing could not happen, he thought, "until my death and England's". England is unable to understand homosexuals like Maurice. This is aptly summarized by Lasker Jones, the Psychiatrist, in the novel when he answers Maurice's question, after betrayal by Clive. "Will England ever alter its laws concerning the prosecution of homosexuality?" He replies, "I doubt it. England has always been disinclined to accept human nature". (p.196). It is the "criminal blindness of Society" which nearly destroys "perverts" like Maurice and "he nearly slinks through his life furtive and afraid, and burdened with a sense of sin"(vii). Now the time had come for Forster to commit himself, in imagination if it could not be in life to the belief that homosexual love was natural and good. He needed to affirm, without possibility of retreat, that love of this kind could be an ennobling and not a degrading thing and that if there were any "perversion" in the matter it was the perversity of a society which insanely denied an essential part of the human inheritance. Since the novel was written there has been a change in the public attitude- a change from ignorance and terror to familiarity and contempt. By the 1960s, his mother and most of his near relations being dead and attitude towards sexual questions having changed so greatly, Forster could, if he wished, have published the novel. Friends actually suggested it, but he firmly refused. Apart from the apparent wish to avoid the publicity and scandal that would have resulted, Forster may have withheld the novel because it in fact did not represent his true feelings about the possibility of a happy homosexual relationship-or, for that matter, of any relationship. Forster understood that the real threat to the life of personal relations is posed by society whose values are inimical and which was eliminating the bond with the earth which symbolized the ideal life. In the *Terminal Note* Forster laments the loss of Greenwood. "Our greenwood ended catastrophically and inevitably. Two great wars demanded and bequeathed regimentation which the public services adopted and extended, science lent her aid, and the wildness of our island, never extensive was stamped upon and built over and patrolled in no time. There is no forest to escape to today, no cave to curl up, no deserted valley for those who wish neither to reform nor corrupt the society but to be left alone." (p.240).

Forster made careful preparations for posthumous publication, but his final comment (inscribed on the cover of the 1960 typescript) was "Publishable-but worth it?" Few readers of this masterly and touching novel will feel any doubt about the answer.

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