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“The Life to Come”: Desire as Subversion of Imperial Discourse in E.M. Foster’s Posthumous Fiction

Maisnam Arnapal
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Gargi College, Delhi University.

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Abstract:

“The Life to Come”, one of the posthumous homosexual fictions of E.M. Forster, throws new light on the author’s life and politics with regards to his sexuality vis-à-vis the imperialist discourse. Forster weaves a tragic narrative of imperialism with homosexual love as the central theme in the title story from - *The Life to Come and Other Short Stories* - published in 1972, two years after his death. It is an interracial same-sex love story about the downfall of the native lives and culture, marked by a tragic ending with murder. Interestingly, the story employs a radical critical intervention through non-normative sexuality and desire as a new aesthetic order. In other words, the questions around race and imperialism within the imperialist discourse can be re-looked through the lens of love – ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ (from the Oscar Wilde trials).

Keywords: E.M. Forster, posthumous fiction, imperialism, homophobia, desire.

The homosexual writings of E.M. Forster (1879-1970), published posthumously, serve as priceless treasure in the world of literary studies vis-à-vis sexuality and desire. It must be noted that Forster was one of the closeted homosexual British authors of the twentieth century. His works on same-sex love and desire were circulated within a small circuit of friends, only to be published after his death in 1970. *Maurice* (1971), for instance, a well-known novel on male homosexual lovers from different class background, partly set in the intellectual world of Cambridge, was written around 1913-14. It was also adapted into a movie in the year 1987. Unlike *Maurice*, which has a happy ending with the two male lovers, Maurice and Alec, united in Greenwood by transgressing the class barrier; “The Life to Come”, from the anthology *The Life to Come and Other Short Stories* (1972), is an interracial love story between a white man, Pinmay and the African chief, Vithobai, marked by a tragic ending of their death. The story is critical for its aesthetic re-organization that places homosexual desire as the focal point to examine the imperialist discourse around race and religion. A crucial question here is - Can narratives on non-normative sexuality/desire reveal new ways of looking at the existing discourses, particularly that of imperialism and Christianity?

Before one delves into the critical study of this tragic tale, it is of crucial importance to recall the socio-political milieu in which Forster and the contemporary homosexual authors were writing. The infamous moral trials and imprisonment of his predecessor Oscar Wilde in 1895 and similar such other policing and censorship had a gloomy impact on the writers dealing with the themes of sexuality and desire. Particularly when it comes to the question of homosexuality, which was still a crime only to be decriminalized by England in 1965, E.M. Forster was an unfortunate one. Unfortunate because he always lived the life of a closeted homosexual man (he was out to a few friends), which could be a purely personal choice; but more unfortunate are his closeted homosexual writings only to be published and read after his death. In his letter to Siegfried Sassoon dated 1 August 1923, Forster wrote: “I shall never write another novel after it [*A Passage to India*] – my patience with ordinary people has given out. But I shall go on writing. I don’t feel any decline in my “powers” (qtd. in Stallybrass XIV). Even if the Wolfenden report of 1957 recommended that homosexuality should be decriminalized and subsequently it did in 1965 Forster was deeply pessimistic about publishing his works on same-sex love. In the ‘Terminal Note’ to *Maurice* which he added in 1960, he writes: “Unless the Wolfenden Report becomes law, it will probably have to remain in manuscript. If it ended unhappily, with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact, all would be well, for *there is no pornography or seduction of minor*” (emphasis added, 220). The constraints of law and morality during the time created a world of fear and pessimism; however, in the creative-imaginative world of Forster same-sex love is celebrated, and in love he saw the ray of hope. If in *Maurice*, Greenwood idyll is where Maurice and Alec defy the given societal norms and class hierarchy at the end; the murder and suicide as a tragic ending in “The Life to Come” also reveals ‘death’ as the only leveller, which provides them a ‘Greenwood’. In the essay, “The Tame in Pursuit of the Savage”, Levine argues that

[t]he appearance of the posthumous fiction does not [...] radically change our understanding. The complete Forster is still an acerbic and tolerant humanist, a sceptic with a mystical strain, a traditional writer whose forms look back to the nineteenth century rather than a formal innovator like Woolf or Joyce. But some changes in our appraisal are also warranted. Forster is more of an outsider than we had realized (87).

“The Life to Come”, written in 1922 is a story based on homosexual love between a Christian missionary, Paul Pinmay and an African village chieftain Vithobai, later baptized as Barnabus. The story begins with a passionate lovemaking scene between the two men:

Love had been born somewhere in the forest, of what quality only the future could decide. Trivial or immortal, it had been born to two human bodies as a midnight cry. Impossible to tell whence the cry had come, so dark was the forest. Or into what worlds it would echo, so vast was the forest. Love had been born for good or evil, for

a long life or a short (65).

The introduction to the story itself shows the mighty yet uncertain fate of interracial same-sex love. It is against the backdrop of this intersection of race and sexuality, that Forster's critique of imperialism and homophobia finds a new aesthetic and politics. The language of love (or lust) becomes one with the language of God: "I wish to hear more about this God whose name is Love"... "Come to Christ!" he had cried, and Vithobai had said, "Is that your name?" (67).

Against the backdrop of this intense homosexual eroticism is portrayed a critique of colonization, which is informed by the discourse of patriarchy and homophobia. The story raises two broad questions with regards to institutionalized homophobia in Christianity and the collusion between Christianity and imperialism. According to John Ryan, the intention of the author is "to create a magical intervention into history. Inserting a metaphorical screwdriver into the heteronormative hard wiring of historical discourse [...] Forster hoped to create a space for the other, the omitted voices that are not part of dominant narratives [...]" (214). In "The Life to Come", Forster is representing the voices of the 'silenced' and the 'repressed' by writing the story of homosexual love between the colonizer and the colonized. The 'silences' refer to the silencing of homosexual love and of homosexual voices in historical discourse. He provides an alternative historical space in the dominant heteronormative discourse in general and also in the particular contexts of imperialism. Needless to say, his life-long struggle with his sexuality under the bourgeois regime and the ontology of a homosexual colonial give him the edge of representing multiple and differing voices. He represents the 'ahistorical' and his writings exhibit "moments of freedom from history" (Ryan 216). This is not to imply that Forster's voice is more authentic than other historical narratives. But his voice speaks volumes and these are the voices, which should not be undervalued.

As mentioned above, "The Life to Come" gives us an interesting account on the tension between religion (Christianity) and homosexual love. Paul Pinmay, an archetypal colonial missionary, is always in a self-denial mode of his sexuality till his death. Blinded by both religion and imperialism, he abandons his love-interest and lives a heterosexual married life complicit in the whole process of the systematic destruction of the indigenous culture. His sexual attraction towards the native chief Vithobai - "the wildest, strongest, most stubborn of all the chiefs" finally culminates into an actual sexual encounter till he succeeds in converting the latter into Christianity (66). Here, Forster subverts the mainstream narrative around sexuality and resolves the tension between faith and homosexuality through love. The Bible speaks the language of love and Vithobai falls for Pinmay, who embodies both Christ and Love to him: "And Vithobai had lain in it gladly - too gladly and too long - and had extinguished the lamp. And God alone saw them after that" (68).

Levine is of the view that the posthumous homosexual fiction of Forster is marked by an

impulse of “the tame in pursuit of the savage, oscillating within a field of attraction and repulsion” (72). The repugnant strangeness of the savage (Vithobai) develops a connection with the tame, civilized man (Pinmay). She also argues that this should not be seen as merely ‘sexual and comradely’ but in political terms as well because the power of the civilized man “rests on institutionalized force” whereas “the sexual potency of the savage arises out of his being a ‘natural’ man in the Rousseauian sense” (72). If the tension between faith and sexuality is resolved through love, the collusion between Christianity and imperialism destroys the same love. It is here that Forster’s mastery is visible when he places Christianity, imperialism and homosexual love together that enable us to see the homophobia and racism legitimized by religious and imperialist discourses. What Levine mentioned above, the political connection between the tame and the savage, the institutionalized power between the two men annihilate the love between them, not to mention the downfall of the indigenous lives. While Pinmay is hailed as a hero by his fellow Europeans for his successful conversion of the chief, he is overwhelmed with guilt and remorse:

He was no longer an open-hearted Christian Knight but a hypocrite whom a false step would destroy...he saw that he had gained an ascendancy over the chief which it was politic to develop. Barnabus respected him, and would not willingly do harm – had even an affection for him, loathsome as the idea might seem (71).

For Pinmay, Christianity only serves the purpose of proselytization and the expansion of the colonial power. Gradually, the culture of the natives deteriorated and overpowered by the colonizers. The forests all encroached upon by the outsiders. The downfall of the local culture coincides with the increasing distance between Pinmay and Barnabas. Forster describes it as “the dark erotic perversion that the chief mistook it for Christianity...” (76). When Barnabas is suffering from tuberculosis and nearing his last days, Pinmay, who is confused and heartless, offers a simplistic diatribe about repentance: “Come to Christ...but not in the way that you suppose. The time has come for me to explain. You and I once sinned together, yes, you and your missionary whom you so reverence. You and I must now repent together, yes, such is God’s law” (79).

When the dying Barnabas, dressed in minimal clothes, is lying on the floor of the hut according to the local custom, Pinmay shows his utter lack of respect and humanity. This last scene in the story is filled with pathos where the height of imperialist inhumanity is portrayed by Forster. Whereas, the plight of Barnabas multiplies because of being the colonized, the racial other, and also being in love with a man (a sin he has committed according to Pinmay). The chief replies to Paul Pinmay: “I repent. I do not repent...I forgive, I do not forgive, both are the same. I am good. I am evil. I am pure I am foul. I am this or that. I am Barnabas, I am Vithobai. What difference does it make now?” (79). These poignant lines by the chief epitomize Forster’s passionate humanistic appeal, the anger and frustration expressed towards discrimination of

sexual and racial minorities in the name of religion. In other words, the author humanizes the polemic against institutionalized racism and homophobia. Vithobai shouted, “[...] the life to come...Life, life, eternal life. Wait for me in it” and stabs Pinmay. The death scene is described thus:

He dragged himself up, he looked over the parapet. Below him were a horse and cart, beyond the valley he had once ruled, the site of the hut, the ruins of his old stockade, the schools, the hospital, the cemetery, the stacks of timber, the polluted stream, all that he had been used to regard as signs of his disgrace. But they signified nothing this morning; they were flying like mist, and beneath them, solid and eternal, stretched the kingdom of the death. He rejoiced as in boyhood, he was expected there now. Mounting on the corpse he climbed higher, raised his arms over his head, sunlit, naked, victorious, leaving all disease and humiliation behind him, and he swooped like a falcon from the parapet in pursuit of the terrified shade” (81-2).

According to Levine, “this romantically triumphant ending- in which Vithobai reviews and erases the symbol of his role as supplicant, reattains his former self, and enters the realm of the dead as king – moves beyond personal vengeance” and “into a vision of redemption through action” (85). The subversion of imperial discourse happens at multiple levels in the story. And all forms of subversion are sparked off by desire - an unnamed desire - right from its sexual union in the beginning till lovers’ union-in-death at the end.

While various interpretations of the Bible talk about homosexuality as sin, the way Vithobai understands it is totally free of all such biases. He understands the language of love through the language of the Biblical God. For him, Christ, Pinmay and love are just one. The story between the white missionary and the baptized chief is subversive of the existing Biblical discourse on homosexuality. One of the root causes of homophobia is the myth of Sodom and Gomorrah found in Abrahamic religions. Not only is the author challenging the role of Christianity in the exploitation of the indigenous religion and culture, the institutionalized homophobia within Christianity is also questioned. Christianity as Vithobai and his people understand is the embodiment of love, the epitome of which is realized in the passionate love affair between the white man and the native chief or their death. It should also be noted that Forster is not attacking the institution of Christianity itself; rather, he is questioning the misuse of religion for political and economic exploration by the imperial powers. In fact, he sees a potential of love and its celebration within the religion. By virtue of its validation of same-sex love, “The Life to Come” can be considered a counter-Biblical as well as counter-imperialist narrative. Forster has humanized his narrative by portraying Christianity as a radical potential to celebrate the power of love. In his Personal Memorandum (1935), he writes: “I want to love a strong young man of the lower class and be loved by him and even hurt by him. That is my ticket, and then I have wanted to write respectable novels...” (qtd. in Stallybrass XIV). These lines echo the words spoken by Vithobai – ‘Wait for me in it’ in the story.

It can also be argued that Pinmay has succeeded in converting the entire village by sexually trapping Vithobai. The latter being the chief has immense power over his people, which help in the quick success of mass conversion. Even Vithobai did not give up his Christian faith before his death; he died being both Vithobai and Barnabus. In this sense, Christianity can be seen as an effective political tool used by the colonial power. The collusion between Christianity and imperialism has been a major theme of postcolonial writings. What Forster has done in the given story is not to deny the exploitation of the natives by this alliance; but, he also subverts the mainstream discourse on homosexuality vis-à-vis the Church. It had resulted in a powerful and poignant attack on imperialism and homophobia.

By his ‘magical intervention’ into the history of imperialism in Africa, Forster in “The Life to Come” provides a transhistorical discourse against the dominant heteronormative historical discourse that provides no room for the sexual minorities. A revisit of the history of imperialism through the story evokes new thoughts and new ideas that will ultimately initiate a dialogue between faith and homosexuality and bring the two closer. “The Life to Come” shows us that there was/is a possibility of reconciliation between Christianity and homosexuality and they are not polar opposites. Despite all the decision of not publishing his works and taking a backseat, Forster in 1922 while writing the story has already foreseen that the future is bright: “the life to come [...] Life, life, eternal life” (81). It is not surprising that posthumous homosexual fiction of E.M. Forster such as *Maurice* and other short stories published in the 1970s coincides with the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the subsequent gay liberation movement.

It should be noted that one of the biggest influences on Forster’s life and writings was Edward Carpenter. The latter’s ideas of ‘political homosexuality’ and ‘affective community’ found their resonances in the homosexual writings of Forster. Carpenter was a homosexual and he fought for the rights of the minorities- homosexuals, the peasants, the natives and so on. Forster, a liberal, was also involved in the fight for civil liberties and his concern for the society is much more than the evolution of homosexual relationship but along with concerns about race, religion and colonization. In the much-quoted ‘Terminal Note’ from *Maurice*, Forster writes:

It was the direct result of a visit to Edward Carpenter at Milthorpe. Carpenter has a prestige, which cannot be understood today. He was a rebel appropriate to his age...a socialist who ignored industrialism and a simpler-lifer...[H]e was a believer in the Love of Comrades, whom he sometimes called Uranians. It was this last aspect of him that attracted me in my loneliness...he and his comrade George Merrill combined to make a profound impression on me and to touch a creative spring (219).

The story is a prime example of a non-conventional critique of colonization with the help of a radical intervention called same-sex love. Following Leela Gandhi’s study of anti-colonial

sexual dissidence, by putting the sex back into homosexuality (contrary to Carpenters' eclipsing of sensuality), Forster "foregrounds the rights of sexuality as the originary postulate of a homosexual politics" (96). In this tragic tale, Forster has attempted an aesthetic reorganization by using same-sex love in his critique of imperialism and homophobia, thereby challenging the hierarchy of racial and sexual order.

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