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Homosexuality in Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the homosexuality represented in Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty*. Published in the year 2004, the novel won Man Booker Prize for its rich texture, emotional appeal, and charming comic way of delineating events. The novel unfolds the life of a twenty years old protagonist Nick Guest, who is living in an attic room in the house of a famous political man Gerald Fedden. Nick comes across various problems while establishing his sexual relations with different gay men. The homosexual desires and the constant moral pressure of being a part of the straight society is coupled with the politics during the government of Thatcher.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the theoretical conceptions of homosexuality; the second section analyses the novel from the perspective of homosexuality; and the third section concludes the paper with concluding remarks.

Keywords: Homosexuality, gay, sex, *The Line of Beauty*, erotic pleasures, etc.

Section I

Coined in the 19th century by a German psychologist Karoly Maria Benkert, the term homosexuality focuses on the same sex attractions. Homosexuality is an old term, the roots of which can be found in ancient Greece. However, the ways of representing homosexuality were diverse at that time. The concept of homosexuality, in real terms, was redefined in the 20th century as the premarital sexual relations and sexual identities have become more important in the period. Homosexuality becomes the way of examining the association among power distribution and identification; and at the same time, tries to understand the diverse facades of repression and privilege. It goes beyond merely sexual identification of the genders and provides an applicable framework to investigate various issues in relations to a social hegemony and marginalized self-resulted out of social practices and identity.

Since the emergence, many writers have tried to define homosexuality in different ways. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines homosexuality as the "sexual attraction or the tendency to direct sexual desire toward another of the same sex," which shows only sexual lust towards other men (www.merriam-webster.com). French philosopher Michel Foucault's ideas about homosexuality are quite revealing as he connects homosexuality with the society. He writes that "homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it

was transposed from the practice of sodomy into a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). Thus, homosexuality has emerged as a dominant concept in the critical discussions that focuses not only the sexual desires, but it focuses on identity constructions and the important shifts in power control. It is not possible to thoroughly discuss homosexuality in this research paper as it will widen the scope and divert the aim of analysing novel. In the following section, Allan Hollinghurst's novel, *The Line of Beauty* is analysed in order to point out homosexual desires and the various problems in consuming homoerotic love.

Section II

Allan Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* unfolds three different years in the life of Nicholas Guest, the protagonist of the novel. Set in the suburb areas of Britain, it covers incidents in the life of a young gay Nick, his middle-class background and his graduation from the college in Oxford. The first section of the novel is entitled as *The Love-Chord* which opens in the year of 1983 with Nick who is living in the attic room in the Fedden's house at Notting Hill.

In the emerging years of his life, Nick finds tribulations in living a successful life in the money minded political world and searches another way in the form of Fedden family to deal with the difficulties of his life. Toby, one of the members of Fedden family, is the best university friend of Nick. He takes this opportunity to enter in the Fedden house at the West London. Toby's father Gerald is a Member of Parliament in the government of Thatcher. Nick is instantly fascinated with the glamorous world of romance, money and power when he moves to the house.

Toby's parents give the responsibility of their daughter Catherine to Nick while they were going out as they are hesitant to leave her alone because she injures herself. During the period, Nick assists Catherine to come out from her crisis. When she tried to harm herself, Nick controls the circumstance and helps her to overcome her cutlery drawer. He politely holds her hand until she comes out from her trauma. The incident leads her to be emotionally attached with Nick; hence, her parents suggest him to stay with her. However, he is engaged homosexually with two men, which has become dangerous for his relationships. The projection of this scene (Catherine as a responsibility of Nick) in the novel, allows the writer to differ this novel from his other works as almost all novels of Hollinghurst project erotic pleasures and especially homosexuality without women's interference. But in this novel, Catherine becomes an obstacle in Nick's relationships with the other men. It can be witnessed in the beginning of the novel, where he has a blind date at the eight o'clock in the evening, but he cannot go as he has to take care of Catherine. He just wonders about his date as "the hot August day was a shimmer of nerves, with little busy interludes of lustful dreaming" (4).

Nick intends to have homoerotic pleasures before Gerald and Rachel return from the France at the end of month. As his room is up in the roof, he thinks that he will take someone

to the house as if it were his own and show him everything there so that he can be very impressive. He has only company of Catherine in the house; therefore, he has lots of freedom to use the house. Sometimes, Toby comes back to the house who asks Nick about his sister. In fact, it was Toby, who has told Nick about the sickness of his sister when he was in the Oxford. He told him how “she used to . . . cut her arms, with a razor blade” (6). When Nick first visited the house, he observed that:

On one forearm there were neat parallel lines, a couple of inches long, and on the other a pattern of right-angled scars that you couldn't help trying to read as letters; it might have been an attempt at the word ELLF. But they were long healed over, evidence of something that would otherwise be forgotten; sometimes she traced them abstractedly with a finger. (6-7)

The mental illness of Catherine gives an opportunity to Nick to live there. In fact, though Catherine is the owner of the house, he is an in-charge of house, who has a lot of space to use it in the absence of Catherine's parents and brother. The class-conflict, which is another dominant theme in the novel, is also evidenced in the beginning of the novel as when Nick is attracted towards the luxuriousness of the house, Catherine points out his attachment towards the furniture and paintings as an instinct of the lower class people:

She was puzzled by his love of its pompous spaces, and mocked his knowledgeable attachment to the paintings and furniture. ‘You're such a snob,’ she said with a provoking laugh; coming from the family he was thought to be snobbish about, this was a bit of facer. (7)

Catherine's comments over the views of Nick reveal the difference between two classes viz. upper class and lower middle-class. Nick manages the situation and tells her that he attracts to every beautiful object.

Nick tells Catherine about his relationships with Leo Charles, twenty years old black boy from Willesden with whom he has homosexual relationships. However, he has been just waiting to consume his love relationships with Leo for a week. He cannot leave alone to Catherine because of her insanity and he feels her safety as his own responsibility. Yet, the thoughts of Leo are constantly in his mind. It is clearly evidenced when he goes downstairs to call the parents of Catherine and suddenly remembers about Leo: “as he left the room, he thought suddenly of Leo, and felt sure he was losing his only chance with him” (13). Realising that he is losing an opportunity to have sex, he calls Leo first and postpones his intention to call the parents of Catherine. When he calls Leo was having his dinner with his mother, therefore, their conversation becomes very formal and in the code language in which he tells Nick that he is going to Carnival and cannot meet tonight. Nick feels that he is losing Leo, who further tells him that he will meet next week. Though, Nick pretends that “all this was positive but feeling abruptly miserable and stiff in the face” (14). He knows that he is totally involved in Leo and his conversation can decide the future of his relationships.

Leo's promise of meeting next week seems to be a conspiracy to Nick; but he feels even it is beautiful. He feels sudden relief from his depression and begins to think about Leo, "how nice-looking he was, small but solid, clear-skinned and curly-headed. He could see Leo falling for him" (15). With these thoughts he goes to the communal garden with Catherine, where he can listen various voices including a man called Geoffrey who is making everyone laugh in the party nearby garden. There, once again, he is overpowered by the memories of Leo: "Nick yearned for Leo, away to the north, three miles up the long straight roads, but possibly anywhere" (19). His longingness leads him to imagine that someone is taking his photograph while having sex with Leo in the garden.

Nick usually tells Catherine his various romantic stories at Oxford which are merely imaginary tales as he had not consumed sex there even for once in his life. It is observed in the novel when Gerald asks Nick to have a dinner with them and he refuses as he has a date. He becomes reserved to open his heart to them and when Catherine tells about this he feels embarrassment. Catherine has a realisation about his less experience in having affairs:

Nick had never been on a date with a man before, and was much less experienced than Catherine imagined. In the course of their long conversations about men he had let one or two of his fantasies assume the status of fact, had lied a little, and had left some of Catherine's assumptions about him unchallenged. His confessed but entirely imaginary seductions took on – partly through the special effort required to invent them and repeat them consistently – the quality of real memories. (26)

His imaginary tales have the quality of reality which confuses Catherine in her assumptions about him. Only in the last year at Oxford, he realised his interest in gay people and gay subjects. But as a novice, he fails to identify homosexual people as most of the time "he had used his new licence mainly to flirt with straight boys" (*ibid*). He is, in fact, attracted towards Toby during this period, but his efforts were useless as Toby is a straight man who believes in heterosexuality. His feelings are exposed as:

His heart was given to Toby, with whom flirting would have been inappropriate, almost sacrilegious. He wasn't quite ready to accept the fact that if he was going to have a lover it wouldn't be Toby, or any other drunk straight boy hoping the fence, it would be a gay lover – that compromised thing that he himself would then become. (*ibid*)

His initial attraction towards the heterosexual straight men shows his inability to judge and identify gay men. He is unable to establish sexual relations with the girls; hence he has created his own world of imaginary tales, "his inner theatre of sexual make-believe," where he often escapes and the stories that now he tells to Catherine (*ibid*). After a long time, he finds his first successful date in the form of Leo which is very much important for him: "So meeting with Leo, pursued through all the obstacles of the system which alone made it possible, was momentous for Nick" (*ibid*). He goes out with the thoughts that all that he is

doing is for the sake of pleasures. However, he intends to be loved rather than making love to someone else. It is evidenced when his feelings are expressed as: “Nick’s ambition was to be loved by a handsome black man in his late twenties with a racing bike and a job in local government. This was the one thing he wasn’t going to be able to admit to Leo himself” (27).

Nick goes to meet Leo at a bar called Chepstow Castle, which he has chosen purposefully for its shadowy semi-privacy, where he can give results to his plans of homosexuality. As he enters the bar, he spots Leo and approaches him. Leo finds the atmosphere of the bar bad and perhaps dangerous for them. Therefore, Nick takes Coke for both of them. He needs some courage, so he adds rum to his Coke. After all it is the time for him to bring his fantasy in reality:

His mind held the floating image of the man he had longed to meet, whom he had touched for a moment and left outside in all his disconcerting reality. He was too sexy; he was too much what he wanted, in his falling-down jeans and this tight blue shirt. Nick was worried by his obvious intention to seduce, or at least to show his capacity for seduction. (28)

There is no space to sit down in the bar, therefore, they prefer to stand up and lean against the window. Nick could not open his mind completely to Leo, so they begin to talk about each other. At first, Leo thinks that Nick is the one of the members of Fedden family, but soon Nick clarifies that though Fedden’s is not his family, but it is like a second family to him. Leo tells that he is just kidding to him and squeezes his shoulder that makes him to feel some current passing in his body: “He saw absurdly relieved. A charge passed into him through Leo’s figures, and he saw the two of them kissing passionately, in a rush of imagination that was as palpable as this awkward pavement rendezvous” (31). It is the first experience of gayness for Nick, therefore he is very nervous about his date. They spend half an hour in the bar; and now Nick feels a kind of excitement in the company of his new friend. He becomes more sure with the turning of street lamps from the pink to gold that “it was going to work out. He felt nervous, slightly breathless, but at the same time buoyant, as if a lonely responsibility had been taken off him” (32). Meanwhile a couple of benches becomes free, so they sit on one of them leaning towards each other as if they are playing a game. Nick begins to wonder what will be the perceptions of the heterosexual people, who are sitting around them, about their relationships. He also thinks that Leo may have his dates with other men in the gay pub and begins to regret for his selection of this place. In fact, he imagines some freedom where he can “stroke Leo’s cheek and kiss him, with a sigh of surrender” (*ibid*).

Nick realises that it is almost difficult to entertain Leo with his own affairs. Besides he is reserved man who has no experience of sex as he himself admits: “I’m the sort of guy who likes Pope more than Wordsworth’, ‘I’m crazy about sex but I haven’t had it yet’” (33). On the other hand, Leo is very frank in his approach who openly admits that he loves to have a sex: “‘I’m the sort of guy who needs a lot of sex’, he said, and, ‘I’m like that, I always say what I think’” (*ibid*). Leo’s statements about his acknowledgement of being gay leads to remember Foucault’s assertion in his *The History of Sexuality* (1996) that “I am homosexual”

(369). Nick's modesty and natural fastidiousness confines him to respond Leo in the same style. However, Leo's open mindedness adds more excitement and Nick begins to love the hard self-confidence of his date. With the third peg of rum, Nick's feelings are half-aroused and he looks "undisguisedly at Leo's lips and neck and imagined unbuttoning the shiny blue short-sleeved shirt that cut so tightly under his arm" (33-34). Leo does not want to go late to the home, hence, he asks Nick to go to his place where they can consume their love. But Nick was aware that he cannot take Leo to the Fedden's house, especially when Gerald and Rachel are present as it can spoil his relationships with them. His fear is expressed as:

Nick winced and waited – the truth was he didn't dare, he just couldn't do that to Rachel and Gerald, it was vulgar and unsafe, the consequences unspooled ahead of him, their happy routines of chortling agreement would wither for ever. (34-35)

Nick has promised to the Fedden that he will not establish homosexual relationships as it is vulgar and unsafe act which does not fit in the heterosexual social codes. Instead of going to the Fedden house, Nick wants to go to the house of Leo, who obviously turns down the proposal as his mother is very religious minded. It is for the first time Nick observes some kind embarrassment in Leo's face:

Nick saw that he was embarrassed. 'My old lady's at home.' This first hint of shyness and shame, and the irony that tried to cover it, cockneyfied and West Indian too, made Nick want to jump on him and kiss him. 'She is dead religious,' Leo said, with a short defeated chuckle.

'I know what you mean,' said Nick. So there they were, two men on a summer night, with nowhere to call their own. (35)

Nick and Leo both are aware that they cannot go either to the place of Nick or to the house of Leo. Their realisation leads them to decide that they will have the homoerotic pleasures at the garden behind Fedden's house. It is a private garden only giving access to the local residents. Luckily, Nick has the keys of the garden. As they entered the garden, Nick wants "to hold Leo and kiss him at once; but he wasn't quite certain. Bumshoving was unambiguous, and encouraging, but not romantic exactly . . ." near the darkness of shrubbery (36). Then they go inside the garden, where the composts are kept. With the hotness of the composts, they begin to feel warmth of each other. Suddenly Leo takes the hand of Nick and begins to slide it round his waist. He puts his arm round Nick's neck and pulls him close towards him:

. . . the unguessed softness of his lips touched his cheeks and neck, while Nick sighed violently and ran his hand up and down on Leo's back. He pushed his mouth towards Leo's, and they met, and hurried into a kiss. To Nick it felt simply like a helpless admission of need, and the shocking thing was the proof of Leo's need, in the force and thoroughness with which he worked on him. . . . He felt the coaxing caress of Leo's hand on the back of his head, roaming

through the curls there, and lifted his other hand to stroke Leo's head, so beautifully alien in its hard stubbly angles and the dry dense firmness of his hair. (38)

Finally Nick consumed his love relationships with Leo. After finishing the activity, all of a sudden Nick realises that it is very dangerous to have homosexual relations in the open places. He is disturbed "for a moment at the thought of himself out here in the dark with a stranger, the risk of it, silly little fool, anything could happen" (39). With these thoughts, Nick leaves the garden along with Leo.

Nick becomes obsessive in having a sex with Leo and wanders to various places; however, he is also possessed by the visions in which he finds himself in the garden, where he is exposed while having a sex. His involvement and his vision clearly show his state of mind as:

Nick was more and more seriously absorbed, but then just before he came he had a brief vision of himself, as if the trees and bushes had rolled away and all the lights of London shone in him: little Nick Guest from Barwick, Don and Dot Guest's boy, fucking a stranger in a Notting Hill garden at night. Leo was right, it was so bad, and it was so much the best thing he'd ever done. (40)

His visions are, in fact, his attempts to escape into a private life from the public sphere. It is aptly revealed in one of his dreams where he finds two staircases separated by the wall in the country house. The public life of Nick is reflected in the form of service stairs which is narrow, "dangerously unrailed, under the bleak gleam of a skylight, each step worn down to a steep hollow, turned tightly in a deep grey shaft" (109). On the other hand the main staircase of the house is a way to the miracles of the life. He feels:

. . . the great main sweep, a miracle of cantilevers, dividing and joining again, was hung with the portraits of prince-bishops, and had ears of corn in its wrought-iron banisters that trembled to the tread. It was glory at last, an escalation of delight, from which small doors, flush with the panelling, moved by levers below the prince-bishops' high-heeled and rosetted shoes, gave access, at every turn, to the back stairs, and their treacherous gloom. How quickly, without noticing, one ran from one to the other, after the proud White Rabbit, a well-known Old Harrovian porn star with a sphincter that winked as bells rang, crowds murmured and pigeons flopped about the dormer window while Nick woke and turned in his own little room again, in the comfortable anticlimax of home. (110)

Thus, Nick finds a way to switch between two worlds of private and public life. His private world of homosexuality is, in a way, an escalation of delight that gives access to other various small doors.

The feeling of loneliness is also evident in the novel; but gay world provides an opportunity to escape from the alienation. It is observed in the novel when Nick listens to the voice of Geoffrey from the balcony “whose regular tireless laughter had heightened his loneliness” (42). The memories of being with Leo give him some kind of relief from this loneliness. However, he cannot think to live without Leo whose absence he feels every time. It can be seen in his thoughts:

It was his second night without Leo. He lay wide-eyed, dwelling on him in a state beyond mere thought, a kind of dazzled grief, in which everything they'd done together was vivid to him, and the strain of loss was as keen as the thrill of success. (44)

Nick feels more alienated as he finds himself confined to the household only and has not got any opportunity to move outside. To pass the time, he meets one of his friends from the Oxford called Wani Ouradi, a handsome young man and son of wealthy businessman. They begin to share the homosexual relations, but their relationships remain secret as Wani is engaged with a woman called Martine. Despite being involved in the doctoral study over Henry James, Nick spends most of the time with Wani – having drugs and sex. While writing his thesis, he sustains his interest in film adaptation. Once at the time of dinner a guest at dinner asks Nick the contribution of Henry James to the society. Nick answers him:

He'd have been very kind to us, he'd have said how wonderful and how beautiful we were, he'd have given us incredibly subtle things to say, and we wouldn't have realized until just before the end that he'd seen right through us (194).

His answer reveals the importance of literary world in the life of human beings. Wani also financially supports Nick in his studies and gives different expensive gifts. To hide their sexual relationships, Wani tells everyone that he has hired Nick on the editorial board of his magazine called Ogee in the post of consultant. The magazine's name is based on the Hogarth's line of beauty. This line of beauty is symbol for the double way of living life which allows the characters to switch between the heterosexual world and homosexual world. Nick expresses this double curve of his life as: “The double curve was Hogarth's ‘line of beauty’, the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two compulsions held in one unfolding movement” (200). Wani is also helping Nick to write a screenplay of *The Spoils of Poynton*. Their friendship leads Nick to consume cocaine, another angle to that line of beauty which was introduced by Wani. Thus, the novel reveals the homosexual desires of Nick and his relationships with the Fedden's family, which finally he leaves as he is accused of destroying it purposefully.

Section III

The novel reveals the attempts of having homoerotic pleasures of its protagonist Nick Guest who is trapped in critical events because of his emotional involvement in the family

affairs of Fedden's family. Nick is always in search of an opportunity to consume sex with Leo and Wani. It is interesting to note that instead of loving, he wishes to be loved by other men. However, his superior race gives him an authority to remain at the powerful position. It is also remarkable that he is constantly aware about his lower social status in the company of powerful and wealthy men of his class or race.

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