

Original Article

Silenced Desires: Representations of Homosexuality in the Modern Novels of Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster

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Abstract - Modernism emerged as a significant artistic and intellectual movement in the early 1900s. It was shaped by notable changes in literary style, social awareness, and psychological studies. During this time, the modern novel became a key medium for examining marginalized identities, including homosexuality, which faced legal and cultural challenges in Britain. This paper looks at how homosexuality is represented in selected works by E. M. Forster (*Maurice*, *A Passage to India*, and *Howard's End*) and Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*, *Orlando*, and *To the Lighthouse*). It argues that both writers explore same-sex attraction through various methods, such as silence, displacement, symbolism, and unique narrative techniques. They draw from queer theory, modernist analysis, and historical context. Forster views silence as a moral failing, ultimately supporting homosexual love in *Maurice*. Meanwhile, Woolf uses silence to express fluid and often unclear desires. Together, their works show how modernist literature deals with themes of resistance and oppression, turning silence into a strong form of queer expression.

Keywords - Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, Homosexuality, Historical contexts.

1. Introduction

The modern novel marks a significant shift from the realism of the nineteenth century by moving away from straightforward narratives, all-knowing narration, and fixed identities, instead embracing fragmentation, introspection, and psychological complexity. One of the most crucial yet sensitive subjects explored by modernist writers is sexuality. In early 20th-century Britain, lesbian desire was largely absent from public discussion, while male homosexuality faced marginalization and intense societal disdain. Consequently, writers aiming to portray same-sex attraction had to employ indirect storytelling methods, embedding queer experiences within form, memory, metaphor, and silence. Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, noted for their stylistic advancements, are recognized as pivotal figures in British modernism due to their focus on themes of intimacy, repression, and emotional authenticity. Both were members of the Bloomsbury Group, which championed sexual and intellectual freedom and opposed the moral constraints of the Victorian era. Despite their shared background, there are distinct differences in tone, style, and ethical considerations in their depictions of homosexuality. This essay explores how Woolf and Forster represent same-sex attraction in their writings, highlighting silence as a social constraint and a creative tool within modernist thought. Through an analysis of Forster's works including *Maurice*, *A Passage to*



India, and Howards End, alongside Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Orlando*, and *To the Lighthouse*, the study illustrates how the modern novel serves as a platform for exploring queer desire amidst stigma and limitations.

When homosexuality cannot be openly expressed because of social construction, legal prohibition and cultural boundaries, it was not faded from literature instead it is encoded, displaced and mediated through indirect forms. Modern writer like Virginia Woolf and E.M.Foster this give rise to what we can called a poetics of "silenced desire"

2. The Cultural and Historical Context of Early 20th-Century British Homosexuality

Any discussion of homosexuality in modernist literature must consider its historical context. The Labouchere Amendment of 1885 effectively criminalized male homosexuality by outlawing "gross indecency" between men. The highly publicized trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde in 1895 heightened societal fears surrounding same-sex attraction and reinforced associations of homosexuality with shame, secrecy, and moral decline. Although lesbianism was not legally penalized, it was often regarded as either nonexistent or taboo, leading to its exclusion from public discourse. This social silence influenced literary creation, driving authors to develop coded representations. Philosopher Michel Foucault argued that silence is wielded as a mechanism of power rather than merely the absence of dialogue; thus, the very conditions under which homosexuality could be articulated were defined by its repression. Both Forster and Woolf were acutely aware of these constraints. Forster openly acknowledged that *Maurice* could not be published during his lifetime, while Woolf's essays and journals reveal her understanding of the dangers linked to explicit representations. Consequently, their works reflect both their personal experiences and a broader cultural struggle regarding the visibility of LGBTQ+ desire.

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Narrative Silence and Queer Theory

This study draws significantly from queer theory, particularly the works of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick's concept of the "closet" highlights the knowledge structures that dictate what can be articulated and comprehended about homosexuality. In her book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, she argues that both revelation and silence play a role in shaping modern sexual identities. Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity further elucidates how Woolf and Forster challenge rigid sexual classifications. Butler posits that gender and sexuality emerge from repeated social actions rather than being inherent traits. Forster's critique of traditional masculinity and Woolf's evolving representations of identity align closely with this theoretical perspective. In this context, narrative silence serves as a deliberate modernist strategy, transcending mere suppression. Modernist authors hint at desires that cannot be fully articulated within existing linguistic and cultural frameworks through their silences.

2.2. Virginia Woolf: Queer Aesthetics, Silence, and Fluidity in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* presents one of the most intricate and moving representations of lesbian desire in modern literature. It offers a profound exploration of lesbian inclination within early twentieth-century fiction. The narrative revolves around Clarissa Dalloway's bond with Sally Seton, encompassing themes of memory, identity, and loss. Although their kiss is described as "the most exquisite moment of her whole life," it remains a memory rather than a current experience, overshadowed by societal accomplishments, marriage, and motherhood. This disconnects in time reflects the challenges of sustaining same-sex attraction in Clarissa's social setting. Despite her affection for Sally, her marriage to Richard Dalloway lacks the depth found in her connection with Sally. Woolf illustrates Clarissa's lesbian longing as psychologically authentic yet ethically constrained, rather than abnormal.

Woolf employs the stream-of-consciousness narrative style to express that which cannot be openly articulated. Desire emerges not through explicit statements but through fleeting thoughts, sensory experiences, and emotional echoes. In this way, silence becomes a means of recognizing the repression of the LGBT experience while preserving its essence. Clarissa's memories of Sally Seton are central to the emotional core of the novel. Their early intimacy at Bourton becomes a pivotal element of Clarissa's inner life. Their renowned kiss is depicted as an instance of

profound ecstasy rather than trivial exploration, yet this moment exists only in memory, emphasizing the spatial limitations of same-sex possibilities. While heterosexual marriage provides Clarissa with stability, it does not offer her the joy that her relationship with Sally did.

She shares a loving, friendly, and socially secure relationship with Richard Dalloway, but it lacks the vibrant immediacy of her bond with Sally. Woolf does not frame Clarissa's yearning as wrong or unhealthy; instead, it is portrayed as authentic, enlightening, and integral to her psychological makeup.

The real tragedy lies in the societal constraints that render this desire unsustainable, not in the desire itself. The stream-of-consciousness technique is vital to this depiction, allowing for the subtle expression of repressed feelings through internal monologue. Variations in tone, spontaneous memories, and sensory impressions all signify desire. Hidden thoughts articulate what society fails to voice, maintaining emotional truth while embracing ambiguity. Thus, silence functions both as a form of aesthetic limitation and suppression. Woolf recognizes the societal challenges facing queerness while validating its existence through memory and vision.

"She could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, but a woman..." *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

The above line shows the inner thought and free feelings of Clarissa towards another woman, where she acknowledges but cannot openly express. It shows an indirect discourse of Clarissa's intense bond with Sally Seton, which indicates Clarissa's recollection of her emotional and possibly same-sex attraction to women. This desirability is subtle and not explicitly acted upon and embedded in memory and reflection. The line expresses Clarissa's internal awareness of same-sex desire where Woolf uses a broader expression of stream of consciousness and psychological realism. The noun phrase "not a girl, but a woman" advocates a mature, conscious attraction and not merely admiration, but something deeper and more complex which shows suppressed lesbian attraction.

Orlando (1928) represents Woolf's boldest challenge to conventional views on gender and sexuality. The protagonist's shift from male to female illustrates that gender is not fixed but rather a performance that can be adapted, which challenges the idea of biological determinism. The romantic relationships in the story reveal that attraction is not bound by biological sex, pushing beyond traditional gender boundaries. Written as a satirical biography, Orlando critiques the legislative and historical norms that shape identity. The book's playful tone contrasts with a serious critique of patriarchal authority and heteronormative standards. Woolf's belief in the fluidity of identity is evident in her refusal to confine Orlando within strict gender classifications. Although the fantasy style of the narrative appears more overt than in Woolf's other works, it serves as a protective barrier against social realism. Instead of a strategic liberation, queer desire is expressed symbolically, highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of modernist exploration. Woolf's exploration of gender identity reaches its peak in Orlando, where the protagonist's transformation from a male courtier to a female noblewoman challenges the notion that identity is inherently linked to nature. Gender is portrayed as a characteristic subject to narrative change rather than a fixed identity. Woolf illustrates those societal norms, rather than biological factors, dictate behaviour, hinting at later theories of gender performativity. When Orlando changes sex, the essentially beliefs about identity are questioned, as personality, memory, and desire remain intact. Social power is shaped more by clothing, legal status, and behaviour than by physical attributes. Through this lens, Woolf reveals gender as a role that is often donned and interpreted. The boundaries of identity are further challenged by Orlando's romantic connections. Attraction to Sasha occurs before the transformation, and desire continues without interruption, suggesting it exists independently of fixed gender. Subsequent relationships, such as with Shelmerdine, follow an androgynous logic rather than contradiction. The novel's focus on fluid perception is reinforced by Shelmerdine's own gender ambiguity. Physical bodies do not restrict the flow of desire. Framed as a parody biography, the story critiques the

authority of legal and historical narratives. Woolf mocks institutions that claim to define identities with certainty by mimicking archival documentation. The patriarchal enforcement of gender roles is illustrated through inheritance laws that strip Orlando of property upon her transition to womanhood. Beneath the light-hearted style, digressions, exaggerations, and time shifts lies a persistent critique of heteronormative dominance. However, this imaginative framework also provides a protective layer. By situating transformation within magical realism, Woolf avoids direct confrontation with contemporary censorship. Instead of seeking change through legal reforms, queer liberation is symbolically expressed in an artistic context. Thus, Orlando paradoxically highlights the constraints within which modernist experimentation operates while expanding the imaginative possibilities for gender.

“Different though the sexes are, they intermix... in every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place.” Orlando (1928).

Through this line Virginia Woolf challenges fixed gender identity where she supports queer and fluid understanding of desire. So, narrator is making a general philosophical claim that masculinity and femininity are not fixed or separate but its fluid, as every person contains elements of both male and female. So the human being identity is fluid shifting and unstable. It expressed Woolf’s idea that gender exists on a spectrum within every individual.

To the Lighthouse (1927) explores homosexuality through emotional intensity and the rejection of traditional gender roles rather than through explicit relationships. The narrative, which emphasizes internal consciousness, creates a complex web of emotional connections that resist easy classification. Lily Briscoe, in particular, challenges the idea that heterosexual marriage leads to fulfilment. Her dismissal of traditional femininity and commitment to her art suggests alternative forms of intimacy and self-discovery. Rather than overtly erotic, Lily’s relationships with women, including Mrs. Ramsay, are defined by emotional richness and identification. In *To the Lighthouse*, silence becomes an artistic ideal that allows for queer possibilities to exist without being explicitly named. Consequently, Woolf’s modernist approach creates a space where desire can be experienced rather than strictly defined. In this novel, queerness is less about explicit identity and more about a nuanced reconfiguration of emotions and relationships. Instead of presenting clear homosexual partnerships, the narrative conveys desire through internal thoughts, perceptions, and subtle gestures. Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness technique prioritizes the flow of thoughts over external actions, challenging conventional views of gender and sexuality. Characters share profound emotions that defy the norms of heterosexual courtship and marriage. Central to this emotional landscape is Lily Briscoe, who opposes the Victorian-Edwardian belief that links femininity to happiness through marriage and motherhood. Charles Tansley’s assertion that “women can’t paint, women can’t write” embodies the patriarchal narrative that he subtly challenges. Lily’s choice to remain unmarried is framed as a deliberate commitment to her artistic pursuits rather than a sign of loss. Her longing and attachment transform into artistic expression through her painting, which becomes a medium for sublimation. This emotional intensity is exemplified in her bond with Mrs. Ramsay, where feelings of dependence, connection, and admiration resemble romantic love yet remain unnamed. The absence of erotic elements does not diminish the depth of feeling; instead, it protects against simplistic categorization.

In this context, silence operates as both a limitation and an artistic element, allowing queer undertones to remain suggestive instead of explicit. Woolf’s modernist approach shifts sexuality from being a plot element to a conscious experience. Desire is expressed through rhythm, imagery, and pauses rather than guilt.

The narrative weaves a web of intimate connections that challenge traditional distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual, as well as between male and female, by focusing on internal experiences. In *To the Lighthouse*, queerness is depicted as a dynamic and resistant form of engagement, where fulfilment is discovered through insight, creativity, and a shared sense of existence, rather than through legally sanctioned relationships.

“He wanted it said of him... that he was a failure.” *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

The line reflects a deep insecurity of Charles Tansley who need for a validation from other men which shows an emotional dependence that cannot be openly expressed.

The novel often carries male relationship which shows intense emotional charge but they are not articulated as desire. They remain repressed and socially suppressed and coded. The incapacity to express fondness, or vulnerability becomes a form of silence and desire.

E.M. Forster's *Maurice* is significant in both his literary works and the broader scope of English literature. Written between 1913 and 1914 but published posthumously in 1971, the novel candidly explores homosexual desire while critiquing the societal norms that suppress it. Forster's personal conflict between authenticity and societal expectations is mirrored in Maurice's journey toward self-acceptance. Unlike many earlier portrayals of homosexuality that ended in tragedy, Maurice and Alec find joy together, defying the notion that homosexual love deserves punishment or secrecy. Their happy ending is a bold ethical stand against societal bias and literary norms. Forster's choice to withhold publication highlights the power of silence as a form of constraint and protection. Maurice exemplifies the consequences of oppression and the necessity to envision queer possibilities. As one of the first English novels to focus openly on same-sex love, its delayed release reflects the cultural and legal limitations surrounding same-sex desire in early 20th-century Britain. The narrative follows Maurice Hall's gradual acceptance of his sexuality within a strictly heterosexual framework. Initially, he channels ambition into idealized, spiritually charged attachments during his time at Cambridge. The tension between physical desire and intellectual connection is illustrated through his relationship with Clive Durham. When Clive opts for societal respectability over their bond, Maurice grapples with the psychological weight of denial. The novel critiques institutional structures beyond personal experiences, identifying law, psychiatry, and educational institutions as enforcers of conformity. Forster examines how these systems utilize shame and silence to maintain control. The harshness of medicalized repression is underscored by Maurice's struggle with "conversion" therapy. However, the story does not conclude in despair or punishment; Alec Scudder's entry alters the course of events. Unlike Clive, Alec embraces emotional and physical reciprocity without hesitation. Their union disrupts the literary conventions that associate homosexual desire with death or isolation. Choosing to portray happiness is a conscious moral decision. Forster interprets a pastoral escape from society as a form of self-determined freedom rather than a loss. This affirmative ending acts as a significant challenge within the context of LGBT representation. Imagining joy during a time when homosexuality was criminalized was an act of defiance. Forster's choice to refrain from publishing demonstrates silence as both an obstacle and a limitation. *Maurice* remains a foundational work that underscores the importance of articulating and envisioning queer futures despite adverse circumstances.

“I love you... I have always loved you.” Maurice

The line indicates the internalized repression and fear of Clive Durham when he expresses his suppressed desire to Maurice Hall. When the novel is written, that period where same-sex love cannot be openly expressed and accepted by the society, this confession is exceptional. It highlights how people hide their emotional life and must be remain unspoken. The desire is not new but, it has been internally sustained and externally hidden, which is the result of silence desire. Later Clive express his renounces this love and conforms to heterosexual norms. This shows that even when homosexual desire is voiced, it is not socially sustainable, which fine difficulty of articulating it and the limits placed on that articulation by society.

In *A Passage to India*, while homosexuality is not explicitly addressed, critics have noted the profound intensity of male relationships, particularly between Aziz and Fielding. Their friendship is marked by intimacy and emotional openness that transcend conventional masculinity. The disintegration of their bond reflects a broader

critique of colonial power dynamics. Implicit sexual norms inhibit emotional expression, similar to how racial and cultural barriers obstruct genuine intimacy. In this light, homosexuality is reframed within homosocial contexts, laden with emotional significance yet remaining unacknowledged. Although the novel does not mention homosexuality directly, the dynamics of male intimacy are central to the narrative. The connection between Dr. Aziz and Cyril Fielding defies the expectations of conventional imperial masculinity. Their early interactions are characterized by warmth, spontaneity, and openness about feelings.

Fielding's rejection of racial hierarchies, combined with Aziz's enthusiastic hospitality, fosters a bond rooted in mutual understanding. This closeness disrupts the rigid norms of British colonial society, creating a relationship that appears almost utopian within a context fraught with suspicion and discrimination. Critics suggest that the emotional depth of their relationship rivals that of romantic narratives, with misunderstandings perceived as betrayals rather than mere disagreements. The pain of alienation indicates a deeper emotional investment beyond casual friendship. Forster channels what cannot be openly stated by redirecting desire into homosocial connections.

Silence functions as both a historical necessity and a narrative tool. The breakdown of the relationship reflects a broader issue related to colonial encounters. The tensions that exist within the power dynamics of imperialism are exacerbated by the Marabar incident. Political imbalances infiltrate personal feelings, eroding trust. Fielding's identity as an Englishman is inseparable from the colonial system. Aziz's public humiliation under colonial authority is closely tied to his sense of pride being wounded.

In the famous concluding scene, achieving reconciliation seems impossible, as nature itself appears to resist harmony. The phrase "Not yet" evolves into both an emotional and political statement. Unspoken norms restrict male compassion just as colonialism hinders intercultural unity. While there is a clear yet unacknowledged homosocial bond, it remains intense and ambiguous. Forster suggests through this dislocation that genuine connection be it emotional or political requires a freedom unattainable under colonial rule or traditional Edwardian masculinity.

In *Howards End* (1910), Forster explores various forms of intimacy and masculinity by critiquing rigid social structures. The ideals of the Schlegel siblings challenge conventional gender roles and highlight emotional sensitivity, even though the narrative does not explicitly depict homosexuality. Leonard Bast's vulnerability and the novel's focus on connection rather than dominance encourage queer interpretations of Forster's critique of traditional masculinity. The famous phrase "Only connect" reflects relationships that transcend heterosexual norms as both a moral and emotional imperative. Through a sustained critique of gender and class expectations, E. M. Forster questions Edwardian views of masculinity in *Howards End*. Although the novel does not explicitly address homosexuality, it contests the societal norms that dictate "appropriate" masculine behavior.

The Schlegel sisters, particularly Margaret and Helen, prioritize emotional honesty and intellectual openness. Their values emphasize conversation, artistic appreciation, and moral engagement over power or competition. In contrast, the Wilcox men embody a stoic self-reliance aligned with imperial capitalism. Rather than being seen as natural, this contrast portrays masculinity as historically constructed. Leonard Bast occupies a pivotal position within this framework. His aspirations for culture and refinement make him vulnerable under strict class divisions. His sensitivity, insecurity, and yearning for acceptance complicate the notion of strong, independent masculinity. Forster invites readers to empathize with this vulnerability rather than dismiss it, creating space for queer interpretations that focus on marginalized masculinities. Throughout the novel, connection is esteemed above ownership, illustrating that social rank and wealth are inadequate measures of value. Instead, mutual recognition, empathy, and intimacy emerge as ethical essentials. The moral theme encapsulated in "Only connect" calls for a synthesis of prose and passion, knowledge and emotion, as well as public duty and private feelings. This demand extends beyond heterosexual romantic relationships to encompass relational structures that defy patriarchal or

reproductive norms. Forster's emphasis on interpersonal connections and inner experiences challenges the rigid distinctions between masculinity and femininity. The novel contests the prevailing masculinity of its time by advocating for sensitivity and reciprocity, thus providing a subtle yet powerful critique of traditional gender and relational frameworks.

In a comparative analysis of Forster and Woolf, both authors address homosexuality through silence, though their approaches diverge significantly.

Woolf integrates desire into form, memory, and metaphor, transforming silence into an aesthetic and psychological realm. Her modernist approach deconstructs fixed identities, leaving sexuality open and fluid. Conversely, Forster increasingly perceives silence as a moral shortcoming. While he previously relied on suggestion in his earlier works, *Maurice* represents a notable shift toward explicit acknowledgment. Forster seeks ethical integrity and social critique, while Woolf emphasizes introspection and diversity. Collectively, their works reflect the diverse strategies employed by modernist writers to confront resistance and repression, portraying silence as a nuanced form of expression shaped by historical constraints rather than mere absence.

E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf both explore the topic of homosexuality within societies marked by moral constraints and repression. However, their approaches to conveying this theme are quite different. Woolf perceives silence as a creative instrument woven into her narratives. In works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, desire is expressed through memory, metaphor, and free indirect discourse, rather than being presented as a definitive identity; queerness is depicted as emotional intensity.

Her modernist perspective blurs fixed identities, rendering sexuality ambiguous and fluid. This ambiguity serves as a critique of knowledge rather than a means of escape. Through imagery, rhythm, and internal thought, Woolf's characters experience longing in fragmented moments. Silence protects these experiences from being simplistically categorized, making meaning reliant on what remains unspoken. In Woolf's work, suppression is transformed into a source of innovative aesthetics. In contrast, Forster's narrative journey takes a different tone and ethical stance. In earlier pieces like *Howard's End* and *A Passage to India*, heterosexuality is replaced by strong homosocial relationships. Here, representation is governed by implications that reflect individual caution and legal dangers. However, *Maurice* marks a distinct shift. In this work, silence becomes a moral failing rather than a creative strategy, granting the main character both narrative fulfillment and clear self-recognition. This shift indicates a preference for moral validation over symbolic misrepresentation. Forster increasingly seeks social visibility, while Woolf emphasizes inner complexity. While Forster's later works aim for acceptance within identity categories, Woolf's narratives challenge those categories. Together, their writings reveal various modernist responses to oppression, suggesting that silence can serve as a historically conditioned means of articulating queer experiences rather than merely representing absence or concealment.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the contemporary works of Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster illustrate how homosexuality can be represented in a society intent on suppressing it. Both authors convey queer desire while challenging heteronormative frameworks through emotional depth, symbolic nuance, and narrative creativity. Their complementary responses to repression transform the modern novel into a space of critique, imagination, and possibility. Woolf's aesthetic sensitivity and Forster's ethical realism confront and reflect the silences of their time, paving the way for future developments in LGBT literature. Their works demonstrate how homosexuality can be articulated in a context of stigma and restriction. Both authors employed subtle yet impactful representational strategies while navigating societal taboos and legal prohibitions, turning silence into a mode of expression rather than succumbing to it. Their narrative experimentation became a way to convey ideas that could not be overtly stated. In Woolf's writings, desire is interwoven with thought, memory, and artistic expression, leading to a

rejection of simplistic classifications of sexuality in novels like *Orlando* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Fluid identities and temporal shifts challenge heteronormative assumptions. Rather than being overtly articulated, queer experiences emerge as emotional intensity, with Woolf's modernism transforming repression into a form of creative expression. Ambiguity becomes a deliberate epistemological stance. In contrast, Forster focuses increasingly on ethical clarity. Maurice champions homosexual love without the constraints of discipline, diverging from earlier works reliant on implication and homosocial subtext. This insistence on a positive resolution challenge traditional tragic literary convention. Forster positions queer fulfillment within a clearly defined social context, emphasizing the real effects of repression. Together, Woolf and Forster expand the formal and ethical dimensions of the modern novel, illustrating that heterosexuality is not an inherent trait but rather shaped by historical contexts. Their works serve simultaneously as creative reimaginings and critiques. Silence emerges as a complex rhetorical device rather than simply an absence or defeat, laying the groundwork for future queer literary styles by navigating the balance between innovation and constraint.

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