



**Censorship and Sexuality: The Curious Cases of *The Well of Loneliness*,
Orlando and *Nightwood***

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ABSTRACT:

The following paper attempts a comparative study of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* to argue that lesbian desire rather than being suppressed, got legitimised by the acts of censorship in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. While my primary focus is the obscenity trial of Hall's text, I shall also delve into the literary aesthetic of Woolf and Barnes' texts to understand the ways in Modernism relied on encoding and self-censorship to speak about sexuality and gender.

KEYWORDS: Radclyffe Hall, Virginia Woolf, Lesbian, Censorship, Modernism, Sexuality, Obscenity, Djuna Barnes

Introduction:

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault writes – “we must therefore abandon the hypothesis that modern industrial societies ushered in an age of increased sexual repression” (49). Exploring the relationship between Modernism and sexuality, he argues that the late nineteenth century witnessed a “visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities” (49). This seems obvious, given the proliferation of sexological discourses in late nineteenth century as evident from the works of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud. I argue that the homosexual subject was largely shaped by censorship and obscenity laws as part of the legal discourse within Modernism. As Jeffrey Weeks concludes – “in the furnace fanned by oppressive legal situation, a modern homosexual identity has been forged” (11). I shall focus on the British trial of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) as a significant rupture in the development of the Queer aesthetic in early twentieth literature, which in turn shaped the lesbian politics of the time. To understand the factors and strategies that lead its construction as a “lesbian Bible” (Saxey vi) it is important to also take note of the Modernist techniques of encoding and self-censorship employed by Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes in *Orlando* (1928) and *Nightwood* (1936) respectively. While it is difficult to do justice to all these novels within a single paper, I shall try to delineate the specificities and politics of authorship that governed the contemporary responses to these politically polarized texts.

Censorship as a History of Events:

Though it is difficult to categorically define ‘censorship’, I understand it in terms of actions taken by an agency, usually the state which tries to regulate the availability of products (particularly associated with art) that can influence the masses and disrupt the status quo. If censorship is to be seen in terms of a series of public events for the consumption of the state citizens, one cannot restrict its understanding to Modernism. The British state’s persecution of art can be traced back to the closing of theatres in 1642 followed by the enactment of State Licensing Act of 1737 that allowed the Lord Chamberlain’s office to regulate “the references to homosexuality, immoral women, sex, public officials and politics” particularly in the twentieth century (Sigel 64). Since censorship as a tool is used by the state to regulate speech and representation as well as their influence on the state subjects, it unabashedly goes by vague definitions of ‘morality’ and ‘obscenity’. The Obscene Publication Act 1857 introduced to check “European pornography”, “designated obscenity as an effect” rather than as a “cause or an inherent wrong” and did not take into account any “authorial intention” (Gilmore 606). Leigh Gilmore elaborates that “in *Regina v Hicklin*, obscenity was defined through a ‘test’ rather than as a quality in the material: ‘The test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall’” (606). Thus, the censor assumes a monolithic response to a text thereby infantilizing the spectators, (in this case young minds) who are constructed as what Shohini Ghosh (in a different context) would describe as “copycats and passive victims” (40).

As evident from the 1895 Oscar Wilde trials, such public events are essential “theatrical acts” where the censor and the censored engage in a pre-scripted spectacle instead of interpreting terms like obscenity and morality (Sigel 68). This is also evident in *The Well of Loneliness* trial where likes of Virginia Woolf, E M Forster and Vita Sackville-West were not allowed to testify since in the magistrate’s eyes they were artists and not “experts in obscenity” (Parkes 435). Hence the fate of the trial was predestined once the author’s earnestness in representing and defending sexual inversion was beyond doubt. As cited by Judge Biron, notes:

in the present case there was not one word that suggested that anyone with the horrible tendencies described was in the least degree blameworthy. All the characters were presented as attractive people and put forward with admiration. What was even more serious was that certain acts were described in the most alluring terms (Parkes 435).

It is important to note the conflation of obscenity with lesbian desire even though the novel does not use the word ‘lesbian’. In *Affective Communities*, Leela Gandhi notes that following Darwinism, “the colluding discourses of evolutionary anthropology and psychology hermetically sealed the frontiers of ‘civilized’ community...only admitting certain forms of human alliance” (36). Hall’s situation is complicated by the fact that she relies on sexological discourses to establish the “truth” about a form of sexuality that the state does not even recognize¹.

¹ Adam Parkes notes that a “proposal to extend to women the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, which outlawed ‘acts of gross indecency’ between men, ran aground in the House of Commons in 1921 because, Samuel Hynes

Hall's Inversion Against Woolf's Androgyny:

In her biography written by her partner Lady Una Troubridge, Hall refers to *The Well of Loneliness* as a "book on sexual inversion, a novel that would be accessible to the general public who did not have access to technical treatises...to speak on behalf of a misunderstood and misjudged minority" (81). Written in the realist mode, the novel enacts the argument that the invert is one whose soul is caught in the wrong body (as articulated by the likes of Ellis and Kraft-Ebing). It begins with the marriage of Sir Philip and Lady Anna Gordon - an ideal heterosexual couple - the former, "tall" and "exceedingly well favoured" and the latter "the archetype of the very perfect woman" (5). When Anna conceives ten years after their marriage, Philip is convinced that it is a son and christens the unborn child after Saint Stephen². According to the sexologists, one is born an invert and despite Hall's assertion of the same³, Stephen's representation as a 'mannish lesbian' is more of a conditioning by her father resulting from his aforementioned desire to have a son⁴. Philip allows her daughter to learn horse-riding, fencing and finally encourages her to excel in education so that she may develop her mind just as she had built up her body- "I want you to be wise for your own sake...I want you to learn to make friends of your books; someday you may need them, because

speculates, 'men found it [lesbianism] too gross to deal with'" (434). Incidentally Section 377 of Indian Penal Code is also silent on lesbian love, thereby explaining the similar moral and political outrage over films like *Fire* and *Girlfriend*.

² Hall herself was addressed as 'John'.

³ The notion of congenital invert that can be traced back to Ulrichs, is essential to contest the popular assumption of homosexuality being a perversion and hence challenge its criminality.

⁴ There is an uncanny similarity between Stephen's upbringing and that of Tagore's Chitrangada which is a Modernist revision of the same character in Vysa's *Mahabharata*

–” (52). Being familiar with Karl Ulrichs’ writings, Philip is aware of his daughter’s nature but cannot answer her query when the teenager is confused after being repulsed by Martin Hallam’s love proposal- “Is there anything strange about me, Father that I should have felt as I did about Martin?” (95). The neighbours who, following her attachment to Martin had “ceased to resent her” (86), now “instinctively sensed an outlaw” (99). Since “the institution of family was in accordance with the law of God” (Weeks 18), Stephen’s rejection of marriage becomes a threat to the stability of the institution of family and by extension that of the nation-state built on the tenets on racial and cultural superiority.

Stephen’s construction as a New Woman is however not in sync with those of Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence’s characters but rather represents the ‘mannish lesbian’. Justifying the association between lesbianism and masculinity, Esther Newton writes: “for bourgeois women, there was no developed female sexual discourse; there were only male discourses – pornographic, literary, and medical – about female sexuality. To become avowedly sexual, the New Woman had to enter the male world, either as a heterosexual on male terms (a flapper) or as-or with-a lesbian in male body drag (a butch)” (573). Despite or perhaps because of her imposing physique, Stephen is shy and awkward at parties especially at any references to love or sex. The author concludes – “Perhaps it was the clothes, for she lost all conceit the moment she was dressed as Anna would have her” (Hall 69). Unlike Woolf’s Orlando who is gender-fluid and enjoys wearing feminine attire, Stephen prefers to cross-dress as a means to

access male privilege. As a child, she refuses to be bullied by Roger Antrim who “grew to hate Stephen as a kind of rival” (39). Later in adulthood, they end up competing for the same woman – Angela Crosby. While feminists have criticised the representation of the butch-femme binary as being the worst stereotype of lesbian love, the portrayal may have been essential to cater to the generic conventions of the male *bildungsroman* (Satpathy 111). I, however don’t agree with Satpathy’s argument that this lends credence to the lesbian body as authentic and find his assumption rather problematic.

In Hall, the usage of the word ‘queer’ is bereft of its political currency as witnessed in the movements of the 1990s. Fond of cross-dressing, Stephen is described as a “queer kid” who is engages in “play acting” (Hall 13). Not just, Stephen, Sir Philip is also referred as a “queer mixture” of “part sportsman” and “student” (19) while Angela Crosby is described as a “queer flower” (116). Stephen’s masculine performance is enhanced by her physical similarities with her father that strikes Anna as an outrage as if “she were a caricature of Sir Philip” (9). I argue that Stephen’s desire for martyrdom is also an extension of her father’s attempt to bear her daughter’s “burden” (77). By locating her sexual dissidence within the discourse of Christianity and using the biblical mark of Cain as a symbol of shame and exile, Hall ironically ends up legitimizing the suffering of the invert as a preordained state. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, sexual identity is developed from childhood experiences. Stephen’s initiation into lesbian subjectivity is caused by an innocuous everyday conversation with the housemaid, Collins – “She had always said: 'Good morning, Miss Stephen,' but on this occasion it sounded alluring--so alluring that Stephen wanted to touch her, and

extending a rather uncertain hand she started to stroke her sleeve" (10). Here the touch and by association the hand act as tools of sexual titillation. In *Sexual Inversion*, Ellis writes –"The various phenomena of sadism, masochism, and fetishism which are liable to arise, spontaneously or by suggestion, in the relationships of normal lovers, as well as of male inverts, may also arise in the same way among inverted women, though, probably, not often in a very pronounced form" (187). While Ellis' statement may be contentious, I argue that Stephen's enactment of male chivalry in the form of martyrdom manifests a streak of masochism. After learning about Collins' suffering from "housemaid's knee", she prays: "I would like very much to be a Saviour to Collins—I love her, and I want to be hurt like You were; please, dear Lord Jesus, do let me.... I'm not a bit frightened!" (Hall 15). Like Edward Carpenter's desire to forge a "radical form of kinship" with the marginalised (Gandhi 34), Stephen's first love interest is a member of lower class. This may be read as a counter to the common practice of aristocratic men seducing maidservants as exemplified by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. A twenty-one-year-old Stephen finally finds sexual fulfilment in her brief affair with Angela⁵ but the latter too, like Collins succumbs to the attention of a male lover. While in Collins' case, a young Stephen had physically injured the love interest, Henry; she now ends up biting her tongue in a moment of hysterical laughter. These confrontations prepare Stephen for her final martyrdom as she pretends to be in

⁵ Since the sexologists categorized a 'true inversion' as being congenital, Angela's bisexuality is a result of her husband, Ralph's impotence because of which she takes refuge in the practice of *Cunnilingus* as articulated in Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

love with Valerie Seymour⁶ in order to distance her partner Mary Llewellyn⁷ and thrust the latter towards Martin – the very person who had once proposed to her. Stephen must make this sacrifice to fulfil the generic requirements of a tragedy and justify the title of the novel. As Valerie remarks – “Being what you are, I suppose you can't--you were made for a martyr!” (Hall 396). This is anticipated by Hall’s strategy to locate Stephen’s narrative within the metanarrative of Christianity. If the author expected “the whole world” to acknowledge the identity of people like her and “give us also the right to our existence” (399), taking recourse to Catholicism and medical discourse only facilitated the charges of obscenity and perhaps even blasphemy.

Unlike Hall’s novel, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* published in the same year escaped any form of state censorship or moral outrage by virtue of being frivolous and fantastic despite focusing on a similar theme. Woolf’s metafiction challenges the generic conventions of biography by liberating her protagonist from the limitations of time, space and gender. The name ‘Orlando’ immediately situates her novel within the “transvestite apparatus of Shakespeare’s comic plots” (Parkes 451) thereby preventing any attempt on the part of the reader to treat her character’s sexual transgressions with the seriousness that can be associated with Hall’s novel. Here Woolf uses what Lee Edelman would later coin as ‘homographesis’ - “a writing practice that resists the cultural insistence on making homosexual difference visible” (Choudhuri 147). It is a

⁶ It is through Valerie that Hall represents the lesbian sub-culture of Paris which is rejected by Stephen as being utopic.

⁷ Satpathy refers to the “Celtic lineage” of Stephen and Mary which is similar to that of Wilde (98), thereby problematizing her position in the British nation-state.

“discursive camouflage that resists identification and blurs the boundaries between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’” (147). While sexual freedom became the most contentious issue of Modernism, sexual categories themselves were in a state of flux and hence Woolf begins by stating- “He- for there could be no doubt of his sex” (Woolf 8). In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler questions - “is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender?” (xi). Woolf anticipates Butler’s question by constantly subverting bodily reality - “the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman” (Woolf 82). Sex change is depicted as a way of life so that Orlando “shows no sign of “discomposure” when he “looked himself up and down in a long looking glass” (83). Woolf’s reference to lesbianism is highly encoded though not evasive as she confirms that Orlando still harbours feelings for Sasha, the Russian princess - “though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man” (96). Unlike Hall, Woolf mocks the tradition of heterosexual romance by rejecting any essentialist identities and subjectivities. Though Orlando (in contrast to Stephen) conforms to the institution of marriage in the Victorian Age, the now female protagonist discovers that the sexual identity of her husband, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine is equally unstable:

“‘You’re a woman, Shel! she cried.

‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried.” (149)

Rather than being an affirmation of lesbian love, *Orlando* questions the relationship between genre and gender. Describing the novel as a “transgenre”, Pamela Caughie explains that “transsexual life writing, as other scholars have noted, disrupts conventions of narrative logic by defying pronominal stability, temporal continuity, and natural progression. It thereby demands a new genre, a transnarrative” (503). While Caughie traces the evolution and application of the modern transsexual identity, Woolf’s novel seems to resist any sexual categories so that it celebrates androgyny as the only reality. In *A Room of One’s Own*, she would later remark “one must turn back to Shakespeare, for Shakespeare was androgynous and so was Keats and Sterne and Cowper and Lamb and Coleridge” (103)⁸. Since the novel is dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, one can assume that it is West’s androgynous body that Woolf intends to represent. In a letter to West, she writes: “If I saw you would you kiss me? If I were in bed would you-” (Knopp 24). Whatever may be the nature of their relationship, the contemporary legal situation made Woolf take recourse to self-censorship to write what Nigel Nickelson (son of Harold Nicolson and West) calls “the longest and most charming love letter in literature” (24). In the novel, the best account of androgynous love is provided when Orlando misjudges his feelings for Archduchess Harriet Griselda

For Love, to which we may now return, has two faces; one white, the other black; two bodies; one smooth, the other hairy. It has two hands, two feet, two tails,

⁸ According to Ellis, “there cannot be the slightest doubt that intellectual and artistic abilities of the highest order have frequently been associated with a congenitally inverted sexual temperament” (50). Woolf is here careful to avoid referring to any sexologists thereby rejecting their essentialist ideas.

two, indeed, of every member and each one is the exact opposite of the other.

Yet, so strictly are they joined together that you cannot separate them (Woolf 71).

Orlando reveals a strong fetish for clothes⁹ so that during her first public appearance as a woman, she recognizes the sensuality of her body: “these skirts are plaguey things to have about one’s heels. Yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own skin (here she laid her hand on her knee) look to such advantage as now” (92). The text is ambivalent on whether “it is clothes that wear us and not we them”, concluding that it is “change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress” (111, 112). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that “if we shift the example from drag to transsexuality, then it is no longer possible to derive a judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body. That body may be preoperative, transitional, or postoperative” (xxii). Butler here questions the idea of cross-dressing as a masquerade and the instability of cultural perceptions that shape our gaze.

Though both Orlando and Stephen are engaged in the masculine task of writing and manifest Sapphist desires, unlike the former, Stephen is trapped not only in her gender but also in time and space by enacting the medical discourse on sexuality. This visibility coupled with the construction of the protagonist as a prototype of a ‘mannish lesbian’ made Woolf and Forster¹⁰ extremely reluctant to defend Hall’s freedom of

⁹ As cited by Gonzalez, fetish according to Freud is a “passive form of allowing oneself to be seen” (80)

¹⁰ Also note that both these members of the Bloomsbury Group were in the closet. Forster’s *Maurice* that explicitly focuses on homosexuality was not published in his lifetime.

speech particularly on the grounds of artistic merit. However as argued by West who had also chosen to testify for Hall, the question of literary excellence is irrelevant – “even if it had been a great book, a real masterpiece – the result would have been the same. And that is intolerable” (Knopp 28).

Nightwood and the Silencing of the Lesbian Identity:

Following World War I, homosexuality and especially the lesbian body became a “traitor to the nation through non-reproductivity” (Gilmore 61) since they did not conform to the nation’s need for procreation. In Hall, Stephen is shown to be incapable of forging a heterosexual alliance and by association unfit for motherhood. In contrast Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* published just eight years later, was not identified as a lesbian novel even though it depicted the lesbian sub-culture in Paris through its central characters Nora Flood and Robin Vote. The novel also plays around with contemporary notions of obscenity in the depiction of Mathew O’Conner, a transvestite gay doctor. In the chapter titled ‘Watchman, what of the night?’ Nora goes to the doctor’s house and discovers him “in a woman's flannel night gown” with “olden semi-circle of a wig” and “long pendent curls that touched his shoulders” (64). The association of night as a veil obstructing or encoding homoerotic desire is initiated in the chapter ‘Night Watch’ where Barnes describes Robin and Nora’s moments of togetherness – “sometimes, going about the house, in passing each other, they would fall into an agonized embrace, looking into each other's face, their two heads in their four hands, so strained together that the space that divided them seemed to be thrusting them apart” (49). In Hall’s

trial¹¹ a similar line from her book –“and that night they were not divided” (284)- that concludes a passionate confrontation between Mary and Stephen is cited by the attorney general as proof of sexual intercourse which in turn is labelled obscene (Gilmore 613). That this notion of obscenity is not applied to Barnes is not surprising since Robin’s body is constructed as the site of Modernist angst and human suffering so that her complete dehumanisation at the end of the novel becomes a fitting homophobic response to her deviant sexuality. A somnambulist, she seems incapable of sustaining any given role – be it that of wifehood (Felix’s), motherhood or a lover (Nora’s). Denied speech and dialogue for most part of the novel, her descent to bestiality confirms her rejection from the contemporary civilised nation-state¹²:

And down she went, until her head swung against his; on all fours now, dragging her knees.... Then she began to bark also, crawling after him – barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching (126, 127).

This passage reminiscent of Bertha Mason’s representation in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and that of the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s essay ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, associates homosexuality with mental degeneration and hence prevents the novel from being an affirmation of female sexuality.

¹¹ I mean the trial of Hall’s book since the author herself was not the defendant in the case.

¹² Please refer to Leela Gandhi’s argument as cited earlier. However the association of homosexuality with animal imagery in later Queer literature becomes a form of empowerment as evident from the works of Vikram Seth and Suniti Namjoshi.

Barnes is no stranger to censorship. Parts of her first novel *Ryder* were censored in the United States so that she achieved a “small victory over the censor” when “she succeeded in compelling the publisher to print ellipses where parts of the text had been removed. In this way, the ellipses would serve as traces of censorship; they would indicate an absence in the text and the presence of a censoring hand” (Gilmore 614). This “censoring hand” in *Nightwood* is felt in T.S. Eliot’s introduction to the novel’s American edition that authenticated its literary merit. Eliot suggests that the work shall appeal to “readers of poetry” and urges the readers not to see it as a “psychopathic study” but a representation of “particular abnormalities of temperament” and universal “human misery and bondage” (4, 6). As one of the major poets and theorists during the age of Modernism, Eliot not only testified to the literary worth of the book but also censored it before publication. As Gilmore notes: “Eliot suggests cuts from a few words to a few pages. He cuts almost every word that denotes homosexuality” (620). While Barnes retains the term “invert”, she assents to most of his objections such as words like “faggot” and instances describing the doctor’s sexuality (620, 621). Although *The Well of Loneliness* was not declared obscene in the US court of law¹³ and allowed publication in 1929 (Taylor 251), Eliot could not risk a trial especially if he were to write an introduction to Barnes’ novel. By the same logic, Hall’s book is predestined to be tested for ‘obscenity’ by its reliance on Havelock Ellis’s Preface to the text. Though Ellis

¹³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at the American trial of the book and the legal systems in the two countries that influenced the respective decisions.

considered homosexuality as an inversion of the natural state – heterosexuality, his intensive account of its history and practices made the judge declare his *Sexual Inversion* to be obscene and pornographic in a late nineteenth century trial (Gilmore 608). Thus Ellis' Preface to Hall's novel brings it under the purview of the obscenity law even before its publication. In both cases, the authors have no control over the factors that ultimately decide the fate of their works. While "Barnes's 'deviance' was strictly a matter of literary style, Radclyffe Hall was perceived as both the lesbian in the text and the lesbian writing the text" (Gilmore 622).

Conclusion:

Foucault writes – "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). The obscenity trial of *The Well of Loneliness* gave the female invert visibility¹⁴ among the public that would ultimately lead to the construction of the lesbian identity. Lesbianism within the discourse of Modernism therefore becomes a product of these public trials that ostensibly claimed to protect British culture built through a process of exclusion and othering. It is irrelevant if *Orlando* and *Nightwood* are artistically better equipped to represent the homoerotic aesthetic of Modernist writing. That these texts have neither the political will nor the earnestness is sufficient enough to label Hall's book as the first successful (and

¹⁴ While the works of the sexologists and Wilde's trials had already made male homosexuality visible, the female counterpart was largely invisible due to the legal situation.

legitimate¹⁵) lesbian novel in British literature. Satpathy cites Hall's scathing comment against the closeted 'inverts' –

As for those who were ashamed to declare themselves lying low for the sake of a peaceful existence...they were traitors to themselves and their fellows....For sooner the world came to realise that finer brains very frequently went with inversion, the sooner it would have to withdraw its ban, and the sooner it would cease this persecution" (406).

Thus censorship in Britain while desperately trying to suppress homosexuality, ironically acted as a constructive force legitimizing what was then seen as an 'impossible desire'¹⁶, thereby facilitating the Queer Movement of the 1960s.

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¹⁵ Legitimized by its recognition as a threat to British heteronormativity.

¹⁶ I borrow the term from Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires* which mainly looks at lesbianism in India.

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