The Taint of Effeminacy: Questioning Normative Masculinity in E.M. Forster's "The Other Boat" and Youssef Idris' "Leader of Men"

Caroline Anne Peri
Dickinson College

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The Taint of Effeminacy:

Questioning Normative Masculinity in E.M. Forster's "The Other Boat" and Youssef Idris' "Leader of Men"

By
Caroline Peri

Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements for the Department of English

Dr. K. Wendy Moffat, Supervisor
Dr. Paul Gleed, Reader
Dr. Carol Ann Johnston, Reader
Dr. Robert Winston, Reader

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I dedicate this thesis to all citizens – both at home and across the globe – who encounter the pressure to perform a normative gender identity and resist it in favor of creating a queerer world.
“...homoerotic writing after 1885 constantly defines itself against the predominate assumption that to be a man-loving man necessarily meant that one was weakened, morally and physically, by the taint of effeminacy.”

- Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885*
Table of Contents

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1
2. "The Other Boat" .................................................................................................. 10
3. "Leader of Men" .................................................................................................. 28
4. Conclusions .......................................................................................................... 43
5. Works Cited ......................................................................................................... 48
6. Works Consulted ................................................................................................... 51
Introduction – A Soldier and a Sultan

When I stepped off of the plane at Cairo International Airport in Egypt during January of my junior year, my light brown hair barely covered the tops of my soon-to-be-sunburned ears. The length of my locks set me apart, not only from the other women in my program but particularly from the Egyptian women that I met and observed each day, most of whom had thick dark hair that extended halfway down their backs. This difference caused a great bit of confusion during my four month stay in the country. My colloquial Arabic professor, a woman in her mid-thirties who always wore her own hair in a long braid to her waist, asked me on the first day of class if I had been in an accident and informed me that she had never met a woman who had such short hair. Several of the male students at the language center where I tutored commented on my hair length as well, and one man even told me that I had a pretty face but that he could never marry a woman with no hair to stroke and caress. The most unsettling moment came when I made my first trip to the local salon to have my hair trimmed, only to be turned away and told that there was no way that anyone there could take any more hair off of a woman’s head. Never before this trip had anyone questioned my femininity in such a way. My experience in Cairo left me curious about the construction of cultural normativity, and heightened my awareness of the need to perform specific gender roles.

Still, it is a far leap from feeling uncomfortable while travelling abroad as a straight American woman in the twenty-first century to spending a semester analyzing literature that features male homosexuality in colonial England and postcolonial Egypt. However, the same questions lie at the heart of each process: What marks certain behaviors, actions, and appearances as female or male? Do these gender standards change depending on time and geographic place? And finally, what happens when one’s own identity does not correspond to the
prescribed gender roles in a particular situation? These inquiries into normative identity, which initially surfaced when I was a student in Cairo, are the same ones that E.M. Forster and Youssef1 Idris take up in the short stories that I analyze in this paper.

When I first read the translation of Idris’ story “Leader of Men,” I immediately noticed similarities to a story I was already familiar with, E.M. Forster’s “The Other Boat.” Surprisingly, the two texts are structurally quite alike despite the fact that they were written thirty years and over two thousand miles apart. These connections allow for remarkable moments of comparison. Both narratives continually reference, reinforce, and subvert culturally defined stereotypes and assumptions about masculine identity. Each story centers on the development of an authoritative protagonist who is questioning his sexuality later in life. The object of each protagonist’s desire is another male who is in some way set in binary opposition to the main character. Additionally, both texts devote a significant portion of their relatively short length to the role of the maternal figure and her relation to society. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, both protagonists are in positions of power at the outset of the story – Lionel March is a member of the military, and Sultan is the leader of his village – that are in time jeopardized by their sexual orientations and performances of masculinity.

By picking figures of primary agency – the soldier and the sultan – the writers are negotiating with their own cultures. As Edward Said notes in the introduction to his seminal book *Orientalism*, “texts have to be read as texts that were produced and live on in the historical realm in all sorts of what I have called worldly ways” (xxix). Said’s statement interweaves literary output with the cultural moment of production during which the text in question was produced. Thus, the struggles of the stories’ protagonists to reconcile their positions of power

1 There are several accepted English transliterations of the author’s Arabic name. I’ve chosen to use “Youssef” since this is the spelling given by Saad Elkhadem, the English translator of “Leader of Men.” However, alternate spellings will be used in the context of quotes as they appear in the respective individual works.
with nonstandard gender performances can be read as reflections of the peculiar restrictions of each author’s society. Throughout “The Other Boat” and “Leader of Men,” Forster and Idris confront the normative societies of their respective eras and question the ability of the male-loving male to retain his agency and authority. Ultimately, the pairing of these two inverted parallel texts reveals the fallacy of permanent gender roles and constructs a pathway to understanding a queerer definition of identity.

In order to examine the different ways in which Forster and Idris address standards of masculinity and male-male desire in their respective short stories, we must establish a theoretical framework for the inquiry. What I am querying here is the difference between how colonial and postcolonial authors treat deviant sexualities and identities and how the texts in question construct character and voice. The two stories are interesting to place in dialogue with one another because they each represent a text written under the influence of a cultural moment on either side of the colonial divide. Whereas Forster’s story is in many ways a reaction to British imperial culture, Idris’ story is grounded in postcolonial Egyptian society. The latter story, while not necessarily an example of the subaltern “writing back,” is rather a continuation and reiteration of how authors construct texts in response to the dominant cultural ethos and use literary methods to challenge cultural assumptions. To inquire into this connection adequately, I feel that postcolonial theories and queer theories are important to consider as they work in tandem with each other, though both need explanation and qualification before proceeding further with their applications.

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2 The idea of the subaltern “writing back” here must be credited to postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, whose work I address in the following section. My understanding of how these two texts work together is influenced by an understanding of her theories, though as noted I espouse a slightly different articulation of the connection between them.
Many postcolonial theorists focus on the construction of identity and the process of "othering" and portray the colonial process as exploitive and harmful to the colonized culture. Though the power differential between the colonizer and the colonized is certainly a part of my literary analysis and provides contextual background for the literary works, I focus not on assessing the effects of colonialism on society but rather determining how the authors from both colonial and postcolonial viewpoints address a particular issue. Thus, what matters here is not the fact that the imperial project took place but the assumption I hold to be true that the project itself left its mark on attitudes towards sexual practices and identities that can be traced through the cultural production of each era. To this end, I agree with theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who writes in his essay "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" that:

to pose the colonial question is to realize that the problematic representation of cultural and racial difference cannot simply be read off from the signs and designs of social authority that are produced in the analyses of class and gender differentiation....the point of intervention should shift from the identification of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.

(71)

Bhabha points out that often the analysis of postcolonial cultures can reinforce stereotypes and promote essentialist readings by reproducing the colonized through the eyes of the colonizer, and cautions readers and scholars that it is difficult to extricate the representations of "othered" subjects from the discourses that create them. His words are important because he raises the
critical question of subaltern voice and reminds us of the uncertainty and instability that are inherent to readings of postcolonial identity.

Gayatri Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in which she counters the presupposed ability of the colonized to "write back" against the dominant colonial narrative, echoes Bhabha's sentiments. Spivak believes that due to the complex discourses of colonialism and power it is impossible to define a voice for the colonized "subaltern" that is free from stereotype or essentialism: "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (287). The "history" and voice are absent and inaccessible because of the structures of representation, promoted by the colonizers, which surround the formation of subaltern identity. In other words, the "colonial production" that Spivak refers to is part of an irremovable frame through which we as readers view the subaltern subject – a frame that obscures the subject and prevents any accurate conceptualization of identity. Though Spivak's essay mainly concerns the agency of subaltern women, I believe we can apply her theory to homosexual men in colonized lands, as well – and to the voice of Idris as postcolonial author – since they also represent figures that have been marginalized by powerful colonial forces.

However, her words have not gone unchallenged, and for this reason we must interpret her theories with some degree of hesitant caution. More recent postcolonial theorists have argued that Spivak's assertions prevent the important work that can be done with postcolonial texts like Idris' "Leader of Men." For example, Ania Loomba asserts in her book Colonialism/Postcolonialism that "[Spivak's] insistence on subaltern 'silence' is problematic if adopted as the definitive statement about colonial relations….too inflexible a theory of subaltern silence, even if offered in a cautionary spirit, can be detrimental to research on colonial cultures by closing off options even before they have been explored" (235). The "options" that have not
yet been explored are the nexus of my literary exploration. I agree with Loomba’s call for flexibility, and thus use Spivak’s theory more as a guiding reminder to not fall into essentialist traps than a steadfast rule for reading the texts. In fact, the subject of this inquiry – the interesting and intersecting ways that the two authors deal with the problem of enforced masculinity in different cultural contexts – focuses directly on the influence of those moments of “colonial production” (Spivak 287). Rather than immediately making the assumption that these moments deny the subaltern a voice, I would like to find out what sort(s) of voice(s) and representation(s) can and do emerge under such an influence.

In this inquiry, the problems of postcolonial voice and agency are also enmeshed with queer theories and questions of sexual desire and identity. At the heart of this coming-together of the postcolonial and the queer is the question of power. Theorist Michel Foucault addresses the relationship between power and sexuality in his text *The History of Sexuality*:

> In actual fact, manifold sexualities...all form the correlate of exact procedures of power....[We are not] dealing with paradoxical forms of pleasure that turn back on power and invest it in the form of a ‘pleasure to be endured.’ The implantation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct. (690)

Foucault deftly explains that the “procedures of power” leads to “manifold sexualities” – that is to say, as systems exert their power on society, different discourses of sexuality emerge in response. The social forces bring into being the thing – sex – that they work to control. A repressive society does not mute the “peripheral sexualities” but instead allows the different
conceptualizations of what one considers pleasurable to “branch out,” “multiply,” and “penetrate modes of conduct.” Thus, if we assume Foucault’s theory to be true, Lionel’s and Sultan’s sexual identities become problematic only as when their respective societies deem them problematic. The opportunity for analysis lies in how the two authors work with the “procedures of power” present in their respective times and places.

When questioning the figurations of sexuality in literature, however, it is important to bear in mind that like postcolonial subaltern agency, identity is never static. In fact, as Donald Hall points out, “queer theories...work to challenge and undercut any attempt to render ‘identity’ singular, fixed, or normal” (15). In this way, queer theories question the assumption of (sexual) identity as an unwavering, essential element and allow for multiple identities, or multiple manifestations of identity, to exist concurrently or in succession for a single individual. Hall’s ideas are reiterated – and further specified – in Jeffery Weeks’ introduction to Guy Hocquengham’s Homosexual Desire. Weeks, speaking on “homosexual” identity, writes:

There is no subdivision of desire into homosexuality and heterosexuality. Properly speaking, desire is no more homosexual than heterosexual....Just like heterosexual desire, homosexual desire is an arbitrarily frozen frame in an unbroken and polyvocal flux. ...[but] homosexuality expresses something – some aspect of desire – which appears nowhere else, and that something is not merely the accomplishment of the sexual act with a person of the same sex (“Introduction” 692-3)

Here, Weeks is pointing out that “homosexuality” is not a catch-all label but rather an expression of one form of sexual desire. Homosexuality, therefore, can coexist for an individual along with

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3 I will delve deeper into the question of the specific cultural and historical influences on the protagonists’ sexual identities later on in this paper during my respective discussion of each story.
other types of sexual desire, and it does not mark a person's identity so much as it expresses a particular state at a particular “arbitrarily frozen” time. This perception of homosexuality is crucial to an understanding of how “The Other Boat” and “Leader of Men” portray male-male desire. The characterization, actions, and plotlines do not create fixed identities for the protagonists-as-homosexuals, but rather serve as illustrations for the path each protagonist takes towards the fulfillment of a particular desire for another man and the ways in which each protagonist (en)counters the pressures of normative masculinity.

Before beginning to analyze the textual content of “The Other Boat” and “Leader of Men,” let us first look quickly at the titles of the two stories. This inquiry is important because both stories are titled in such a way that they can be closely read and analyzed in the context of colonialism and sexuality. Clearly, Forster and Idris selected their titles for particular reasons, and thus a closer look at the multiple readings of each can help the reader to understand both how and why the author might have undertaken such a queer project. The ambiguity present in the titles' meanings opens up the pathway for reading the two texts themselves as reactions to and subversions of the culture of enforced masculinity.

Forster's story, “The Other Boat,” was actually an offshoot of a larger literary project. Forster originally began writing the story of Lionel and Cocoanut as children around 1915, intending it to be the first chapter of a new novel. He published this first chapter under the title “Entrance to an Unwritten Novel” in 1948, and when he was met with limited feedback, decided to abandon the project altogether. However, as Forster biographer Sunil K. Sarker points out, in 1957 “he came upon the manuscript and thought of writing a short story on the material of that

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4 I use the word “queer” here in reference to Donald Hall’s definition in his book Queer Theories of what it means to “queer” something, which is “putting pressure on simplistic notions of identity and...disturbing the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity, sexual identity in particular” (14).
first chapter" (107). To give "a new direction to the material," Forster queried "what would have happened if the Anglo boy, Lionel, and the half-caste boy, Coco, would have been sexually attracted to each other, when grown up?" (107). The answer to this question became the plot of the short story at hand. In order to continue the story of the two boys, then, Forster had to create a parallel situation for them as adults, and so he placed them on a second boat many years later – hence, the title "The Other Boat."

I am not entirely convinced, however, that this is chronological reading (literally, the second of two boats) is the only way that one can interpret the title. The word "other" is particularly interesting in the context of both postcolonial studies and queer theory. Viewed under a postcolonial lens, the title can be understood as a marker of an "othered" space – the boat adrift somewhere in the Red Sea – that serves as a site for a mixed-race relationship between the Englishman and the Indian. Similarly, the "other boat" can stand as a signifier of a space for the practice of alternative sexualities as well, since the homosexual activity that drives the motivation of the plot takes place below the decks of the very ship referenced in the title. In any event, the title of this story makes it clear that two aspects of this short story are of utmost importance: the location in which it takes place as marked by the word "boat," and the fact that in some way, the location and action deviate noticeably from normative standards. In this way, the title forces the reader to consider what is being "othered" and what the boat in question is "othered" against, which points to the ways in which Forster was writing in dialogue with the accepted beliefs of his time.

Youssef Idris' title "Leader of Men" has similar ambiguity, but the multiplicity of meaning here arise not from the varying definition of words but from their translation and subsequent connotation. Originally, Idris had titled the story "al-Kumun" which means
"latency." As Saad Elkhadem, the translator of the story, tells us, Idris "was persuaded by Salah Muntassir, the magazine's editor, to give his story a new title" because this word "could also be read as 'al-Kammun' which means the decidedly less relevant 'cumin' since, in Arabic, both words have the same spelling" (13). To avoid such confusion, Idris chose the new Arabic title for the story, "Abu al-Rijal." Literally translated into English, this phrase means "The Father of Men" and according to Joseph Massad, a scholar of Arab literature and culture, it can also mean "The Manliest of Men" (271). The word "abu" in such a construction can also mean "ruler" or "leader," which allows for at least four potential readings of the same title. Elkhadem chose to use the latter meaning in his English translation of the story. As rationale for the choice, he states that "because the story deals with the latent homosexuality of a strong and virile man who has an exaggerated sense of masculine pride, the title must be understood as an ironic comment on the tragic dilemma of the protagonist" (Elkhadem 13). Indeed, the title can be read ironically, but only if one believes that Sultan's character loses his power at the end of the novel and that the feminization of his character is an inherently negative change. I believe, though, that the title can also be read with much more optimism, marking Sultan's character as a progressive model citizen for modern Arab men wishing to act upon their own sexual desires, however atypical those desires might be. As with "The Other Boat," the ambiguity of the title "Leader of Men" allows us to begin questioning the text itself and prompts a reevaluation of how the author constructs his protagonist's identity as a reaction to Egyptian cultural norms and standards.

"The Other Boat" – No Queer Colonizers?

E.M. Forster was born in 1879 in the Marylebone district of London, England. His father, an architect, died one year later which left Forster and his mother alone. In 1883 the two moved to Rooksnest, a country home in Hertfordshire, where they remained for the better part of
the next decade. Forster began attending preparatory school in 1890, and though he disliked much about private school society, he developed his love for the classics while he was there. He went on to enroll at King's College, Cambridge where he spent four years studying the classics and meeting other intellectuals – both his contemporaries and his mentors. Throughout the course of his life, Forster travelled extensively and lived at various times in Italy, Austria, Germany, India, and Egypt. Nevertheless, he spent the majority of his life in England where he was a part of the Bloomsbury Group, a noted group of writers, artists, and thinkers who were at the forefront of intellectual and creative activity during the early twentieth century. The general public knew him as a humanist figure who advocated for liberal consciousness and he wrote political and social commentary in addition to his fictional works. His writing often focused on class differences and attitudes towards gender and normative social roles. In addition to authoring these texts, Forster held several positions, including a teacher and tutor, a private secretary to the Maharajah, and a broadcaster on BBC Radio. Though Forster is remembered as a homosexual man, and had several sexual and emotional relationships with other men, he rarely spoke about his sexuality before the end of his life and only wrote publicly about the subject in his later years. Forster passed away in England on June 7, 1970 following a series of strokes (Beauman n.p.).

Forster's England was a country of imperial expansion abroad and social restriction at home. In 1885 the British government passed the Labouchere Amendment, the eleventh clause of the Criminal Law Amendment act that put a complete ban on acts of 'gross indecency' and effectively made all male homosexual contact illegal in the country. Ten years later, when Forster was 16, Oscar Wilde was tried and sentenced to prison under this law, and numerous other men fled the country for fear of similar persecution. Following Wilde's conviction,
"effeminacy became the main stigma attached to male homosexuality in the eyes of English
society" and for many literary men of the next generation in the early 1900s, such as Forster,
"the slur against effeminate masculinity was taken seriously, often with damaging consequences"
(Bristow 2, 11). This prejudice was only compounded by England’s political dominance over
the colonized nations, which was upheld in large part by military force. Masculinity, in this case,
became tied to nationalism and patriotic service. As Bristow notes, "countless examples could
be rallied to show how the specific ideal of the Englishman was being pressed into the service of
empire: a man who was dutiful, self-sacrificing, and willing to go to the ends of the earth in a
spirit of patriotic zeal. He was...physically and morally robust" (9). The need for hyper-
masculine Englishmen left little room in society for anyone who did not fit such a role. This
atmosphere of intolerance created a hostile climate towards men who desired other men and men
who behaved effeminately that persisted for the remainder of Forster’s career. Though the
Wolfenden Report, which promoted a more tolerant legislature, was released in 1957 – the same
year that Forster finished “The Other Boat” – it would be another ten years before the Sexual
Offences Act was passed to partly decriminalize male homosexuality (1).

Such was the cultural backdrop against which Forster conceived and authored the short
story “The Other Boat” prior to the first publication in 1972. The story opens with a group of
children playing a game on the deck of a steamship traveling from India to England. The six
children debate whether or not they ought to invite the Indian boy, Cocoanut, to join their game,
which has decidedly military overtones – it is game that involves battling as soldiers and falling
down when struck by another player. Cocoanut joins in the play, but he engages the others in his
own game, which is a cryptic hunt for some unknown person or thing on the ship that he
expresses using only the single syllabic sound “m’m m’m m’m” (“Other” 166). After some
time, the children’s mother appears, becomes frustrated, and urges the children to end the game. She moves to take the children inside, but becomes trapped when one of the ship’s crew draws a white line around her in chalk. She takes her aggression out on Cocoanut, and the scene ends.

The second section of the book opens with a letter from Captain Lionel March to his mother. We learn that Lionel, who had been one of the children playing years ago on the deck of the ship, is now traveling on another ship from England to India. On the surface (quite literally above deck) he attempts to fit in with his high-class British shipmates, who spend their days of leisure socializing, playing cards, and sipping drinks. Because of a shortage of bunks on the ship, Lionel is sharing a room with Cocoanut, the Indian child from his youth. One night, Cocoanut makes a sexual advance towards Lionel, who is horrified and immediately attempts to have his room assignment switched. This is impossible to do, but he vows to spend as little time below decks as possible and finds solace in his British companions – a group known as the Big Eight. Nevertheless, he finds he cannot stop thinking about the moment he shared with Cocoanut. One night, he joins Cocoanut for a night of drinking and romance, and after they have sex, they lie in bed sharing the stories of their lives and catch up on what has happened between their childhood moments together and the present. They become close to each other, not only physically, but also emotionally, and Lionel realizes the seriousness of his feelings and their potential consequences.

The realization that the door has come unbolted and that he could have been caught performing illicit activities snaps Lionel from this moment of pleasure – a sign of his internalization of society’s pressures. He becomes distressed, blames Cocoanut for his anxiety, and ascends to the upper deck for a cigarette and a mind-clearing walk. Along the way, he observes the other passengers, who he holds up as paragons of model social behavior. In his
guilt, he remembers that he must uphold his family name, and also feels sympathy for his fiancée, Isabel, who he left back in Britain. In speaking to one of the other military men aboard the ship, he learns that Coconut had bribed his way onto the ship in the first place. Lionel returns to his cabin and finds Coconut lying in the top bunk, demanding a kiss. When Lionel refuses Coconut becomes violent and bites Lionel’s arm. The two launch into a physical battle that quickly turns sexual. While they are in the middle of this act, Lionel puts his hands around Coconut’s throat, strangling him until he suffocates and dies. Lionel closes Coconut’s lifeless eyes and gingerly strokes his skin before he runs up to the upper deck and commits suicide by throwing himself off the ship and into the ocean.

In this story, the mother figure stands as a symbol of the social and national pressures that Lionel encounters, and thus she serves to connect the protagonist’s struggle with normative masculinity to the cultural moment during which the story was written. Her continual presence as such a symbol indicates that Forster is using Lionel’s character to negotiate with his contemporary culture. In this way, the society in “The Other Boat” can be read as being a parallel to Forster’s own. The mother, Mrs. March, plays a particularly strong role in this narrative because Lionel’s father abandoned the family and no longer has any contact with the children. Thus, as critic Tamara Dorland observes, “Mrs. March must assume single-handedly the central position as parent and sign of the sociosymbolic community” and the “maternal image of Mrs. March hence becomes both sign of and impetus for suppression” (198, 197). In the absence of a male authority figure, she is the one who is responsible for embodying both national and social expectations and ensuring that her son Lionel lives up to the standards she represents.

As such an authority, Mrs. March is the one who imparts specifically British values – markers of national identity and pride – onto the story. One of these values is the restriction of
sexuality and freedom of sexual expression. As the British historian H.G. Cocks notes, during this era “the healthy and morally upright European body was to be differentiated from ‘lower races’ partly by its control of the excessive desires and passions held to be characteristic of other less developed racial groups” (883). Lionel recalls that his sexuality has never been discussed in the home, and that during childhood “his preceptors had condemned carnality or had dismissed it as a waste of time, and his mother had ignored its existence in him and all her children; being hers, they had to be pure” (“Other” 180). The word “pure” conjures up the connotations associated with the role of children during the Victorian era in England, who were expected to be chaste and innocent. Sexuality or “carnality” was not a proper subject for British citizens during this era to openly discuss or debate, and Lionel’s recollection of his mother’s attitudes towards sex reflects this restraint. The continual conflation of the maternal and the national is an indicator of the “mother’s presence as indirect arbiter of imperialist and British propriety” (Dorland 196). As a stand-in for the normalizing power of English national identity and the ever-watchful eye of the mother nation, it is only fitting that Mrs. March would pressure her son to uphold the values and standards that England itself espoused.

Mrs. March signifies not only standards of national identity, but standards of contemporary social hierarchy as well. Her character is first introduced as the “lady promenading with a gentleman” across the deck of the boat where the children are playing (“Other” 167). The use of formal markers of status like “lady” and “gentleman” here immediately aligns Mrs. March with the dominant society - a society that we already know to be judgmental and restrictive. The way she behaves when her children interact with the natives on their first voyage foreshadows the problems that Lionel and Cocoanut will face when they resume their relationship as adults. For example, when Mrs. March is questioned about her children spending time with Cocoanut on
the deck of the ship, she says “it doesn’t matter on a voyage home. I would never allow it going to India” (167). Her statement expresses that there is something about the relationship between the English boy and the Indian boy that must be regulated by an authority. It is all right for the two to interact on a voyage back to Britain because colonial dominance is not at stake and imperial control has already been established. On the way to India, though, she implies that British citizens must be conscious of their supposed superiority to the colonized beings and that segregation is the only solution. Thus, in her opinion – and as per cultural order – it would be inappropriate for the two boys to have such equalizing contact.

Unbeknownst to Mrs. March though, her son Lionel does spend time with the Indian boy years later. Even though she remains unaware of the sexual acts that he engages in with Cocoanut and cannot outwardly condemn their relationship, Lionel continually feels her oppressive presence. The narrator describes her at the end of the story as “another power, whom [Lionel] could not consider calmly: his mother, blind-eyed in the midst of the enormous web she had spun...she understood nothing and controlled everything...there was no parleying with her – she was a voice” (193). The “enormous web” is a reference to the large scope of society’s influence, which extends from Britain across the globe to reach the colonies. Mrs. March, who reigns from the center of this web, exerts complete influence over her son and like dominant society itself she is a force that he cannot fully comprehend nor transcend. He has internalized her standards and her judgment, which manifest themselves as the guilt and anxiety that he experiences about his relationship with Cocoanut. As Dorland suggests, this “voice of the abandoned mother, so important in the completed story, can also be heard as she attempts to keep such play within bounds of ‘what is customary’ and proper” (195). By upholding British social boundaries, she is the single strongest normalizing force for Lionel and constantly causes him to
doubt whether his actions are appropriate in the context of his culture and if they are worth the risk they present to his reputation. The great strength of her “voice” is an indication of the strength of society’s influence as it plays out in the story.

Forster attempts to challenge this influence by using Lionel, the figure of primary agency and the protagonist with whom the reader’s sympathy lies, to question the meaning of a culturally-defined masculinity. He portrays Lionel as both a "manly" man and a man who desires other men, thus pushing back against the cultural assumption that all homosexual men are effeminate and all masculine men are straight. Critic Jesse Matz describes this impetus by coining the term “amalgamated masculinity,” which he defines as Forster’s vision of a masculinity that allows for characteristics beyond the stereotypical ones embraced by the British Empire at the time he was writing his short stories (48). In this case, an “amalgamated masculinity” would be a masculinity open to men of all sexual orientations and behavioral types. Through Lionel’s characterization in the story, Forster queries whether it is possible to achieve this “amalgamated masculinity” or whether British society will prohibit such a breakdown of conventional ways of thinking.

In “The Other Boat” the narrative consistently figures Lionel in terms of the traditional masculine ideals of his time while his partner, Cocoanut, is by comparison effeminate and childish. This characterization is visible even in the first part of the story, when the characters are children. Lionel, who later becomes a decorated soldier, is immediately connected to the military, which situates him within a traditionally masculine social order. He “plays at soldiers” as a game, and dons a uniform of “some paper cocked hats and a sash” (“Other” 166). These clothing items foreshadow the uniform of masculine identity that he wears to cover up his desires
that emerge later on in the story. In this way, he can appear "normal" to the others and hide his sexual deviance from society.⁵

In adulthood, when Lionel becomes a "Nordic warrior" to Cocoanut's "subtle, supple boy," Forster describes him externally as the perfect picture of "what any rising young officer ought to be - clean-cut, athletic, good-looking" (174, 171). The "athleticism" that Lionel possesses and the "dash and decision" that he displays are all characteristics associated with a powerful, dominant male in accordance with the norms of British colonial society (171). The description of his external features - "thick fairish hair, blue eyes, glowing cheeks and strong white teeth...broad shoulders" employs manly adjectives expressing substance and vigor in contrast to demure and meek femininity (172). Additionally, Lionel's physical strength and capability match his particularly masculine appearance, which allows him on the surface to project a very normative sort of manliness. Forster indicates that though "his hands were clumsier than the rest of him" they "bespoke hard honest work, and the springy gleaming hairs on them suggested virility" (172). The words "virility," "springy," and "gleaming" have very positive and even sexualized connotations and suggest that he is as good with wielding tools and following commands as he would be in the bedroom. His military prowess in this way parallels the sexual dominance that society expects him to display. We as readers do not understand the complexity of this characterization until later in the story, however, when the narrator reveals that Lionel is breaking society's rules by desiring another man.

Furthermore, the diction of the scenes that depict interactions between Lionel and Cocoanut also express Lionel's masculinity through the dominance he exerts over his effeminate partner. In this way, though Forster may be challenging society's condemnation of

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⁵ I will address the particularly interesting but complex question of the soldier subject-position at length later on in this paper.
homosexuality he nevertheless still upholds the traditional sexual dynamics that afford the more masculine partner the position of power. The words the narrator uses to describe the sexual interactions between the two men are dynamic verbs that place Lionel as the agent who is doing the action. The narrator shows the reader that Lionel is first “teasing and bossing” Cocoanut, and later he is “stripping” him, which as the editor’s note reads, is Forster’s “substitution for topping” which indicates that Lionel is the active partner to Cocoanut’s submissive bottom (174, 193). These actions that give sexual agency to Lionel are Forster’s way of figuring him as the dominant, and therefore traditionally male, partner in the relationship. Also, Cocoanut calls Lionel by the pet name “Lion of the Night” during one of their first nights together (“Other” 173). The lion image suggests strength, supremacy, and potency, since lions are considered to be the biggest and mightiest of all of the jungle cats. The word “night” implies that this lion-like personality exists in an occluded world – the darkness of the inside of the boat, and of the hours after dark – where Lionel and Cocoanut are free to express their sexual desires away from society’s gaze. Lionel maintains his supremacy even in this concealed private space, which is yet another sign of how powerful the pressure to uphold the social hierarchy can be.

On the contrary, Cocoanut’s character is presented in the story as being very effeminate, which situates him on the other side of the gendered binary in this homosexual relationship. Early in the story, Lionel’s mother calls him “a silly idle useless unmanly little boy” (170). The string of negative adjectives attached to the word “unmanly” connotes a negativity that is associated from the start with feminine behaviors and expressions. He is similarly figured as womanly when we return to the story and the two men are adults. Forster writes that Cocoanut possesses a “sing-song voice” reminiscent of a woman’s, that he “giggles delightedly,” that he wears a “brightly colored scarf” like a woman, and that an “aromatic smell came off him, not at
all unpleasant” (173, 174). If we as readers were not familiar with the fact that the character was male, we would likely assume that Cocoanut was a female because these descriptors – vibrantly colored clothing and pleasantly sweet fragrances - are generally associated with femininity. The narrator also reminds the reader that Cocoanut is frequently emotional: Lionel becomes annoyed at him for “crying and not trying to stop” and “crying as if he had the right to cry” (191). Here, the repetition of the word “crying” reinforces the weakness of his actions, and the statement queries why a man is crying at all, insinuating that the action is outside of the realm of acceptable male behavior. Furthermore, just as Lionel’s position during sexual scenes shows his dominance, Cocoanut’s actions are written in a way that places him in the subordinate, or traditionally female, role in the relationship. In their bedroom, Lionel “put him where he had to be,” “manhandled him,” and “closed in on him” (173). By denying Cocoanut agency as an actor through language, Forster strips him of his manhood while further reinforcing Lionel’s own masculinity in contrast. The comparison also highlights Lionel’s nuanced position as a homosexual colonizer and brings the disparity between his performance of normative masculinity and his deviant sexual desires to the reader’s attention.

Another way that Forster attempts to portray an “amalgamated masculinity” through Lionel’s characterization is by making the protagonist both a soldier and a man-loving man. These two identities are seemingly at odds, but Forster holds them up against each other to query the possibility of coexistence. This positioning troubles the most normatively masculine position possible and, in a way, queers the very idea of the military as a social institution. Critic Joseph Boone, a scholar focused on modernist literature and sexuality, notes that in many colonial narratives
interior confrontations with one’s own alien otherness, the dark demon within, are projected outwards, first onto racially ‘foreign’ geographies...and second, onto the homosexual figures to whom these colonial landscapes give expression, figures who eventually become scapegoats sacrificed to the anxieties of masculinity and femininity that beset the sexual and textual quests of both protagonists. (Libidinal 30)

This statement, which asserts that the “interior confrontations” and the protagonist’s “alien otherness” are the source of conflict in the story, is exceedingly true for “The Other Boat.” Lionel’s “dark demon within” – obviously, his desire for Cocoanut, who here is Boone’s “scapegoat” because of his racial and sexual otherness - is revealed when he boards the second boat after becoming an adult, a move which disrupts his life of normalcy in England and leads to his affair with another man.

This “dark demon within” is immediately at odds with the established masculinity of Lionel’s “above decks” persona. When the story resumes at the beginning of the second voyage, the narrator reintroduces us to the protagonist as “Captain March” rather than “Lionel” as he had been known in the previous section, and refers to him frequently throughout the remainder of the story as “the British officer” (“Other” 171). The titles “Captain” and “officer” denote not only the fact that he is a part of the military system, but also that he holds a considerably high level of rank. Soldiers in colonial British society were considered to be examples of normative masculinity and male strength, as evidenced by Forster’s positive description of Lionel: “he was what any rising young officer ought to be – clean-cut, athletic, good-looking” (171). We know that the text is accepting such a normative understanding of the soldier figure because the narration continually associates Lionel’s character with authority and a high level of influence.
Literary critic June Levine supports this reading, stating “according to Forster, power resides in the world of the tame, ‘civilized’ man” (72). In this story the world of the “tame, civilized man” is the colonizer’s world, and the process of colonialism was inevitably secured, controlled, and maintained through the use of military force. The soldier, therefore, stands at the forefront of social and national power.

Lionel experiences the power vested in the soldier subject-position when Colonel Arbuthnot, his superior, tells him in reference to the fact that he is being forced to bunk with Cocoanut that “if the Company thinks it can treat a British officer like that it’s very much mistaken” (“Other” 194). Lionel is accorded two types of privilege as a result of his high rank, which the narrator tells us that he earned by being wounded in “one of those little desert wars,” an obvious reference to a prior mission of colonization (171). First, the Colonel automatically assumes that Lionel would not like to live with Cocoanut. Wrapped up in this assumption is the implicit understanding that Lionel is heterosexual, which the text later proves is not the case. Colonel Arbuthnot does not even consider the idea that Lionel might be homosexual and want to share a bedroom with another man, and thus Lionel’s nightly transgressions with Cocoanut are hidden in plain sight as a byproduct of reputation. Moreover, by making such a statement to Lionel, the Colonel is also reaffirming the racial superiority of members of the British army to their colonized counterparts. The narrative echoes this power dynamic when Lionel thinks to himself that as a matter of policy “British officers are never stabled with dagoes, never, it was too damn awkward for words” (174). The harshness of the curse word “damn” and the negative
ethnic slur “dagoes” are examples of usage of language and tone that only serve to reinforce the prescribed differences between soldier and subaltern.  

Forster troubles this position of masculine power, though, by exposing his protagonist’s “deviant” sexuality through interactions with a colonized “other.” This narrator reveals this disturbance of the military to the reader when, towards the middle of the story, Lionel and Cocoanout are discussing Lionel’s family background while they are lying in bed at night. Lionel tells Cocoanout about his father, “the Mater’s husband... [who] was in the Army too” and who “attained the rank of major” before “going native” and deserting Lionel’s family while stationed abroad (183). Upon hearing this, Cocoanout starts questioning Lionel about his situation with increasing intensity, and the narrator indicates that this caused tension in the conversation: “the half-caste smiled as the warrior floundered” (183). This statement inverts the power that the narrative has already established by putting the “half-caste” in a more comfortable position than the “warrior.” The tension and “floundering” on Lionel’s part comes from the fact that he realizes at this moment that he is breaking sexual and racial boundaries, and thus abusing his power, in the same way that his father had before him. Just as Lionel looses respect for his father’s position of authority, this scene forces the reader to question the assumption that being a soldier and being a homosexual are mutually exclusive characteristics. The conversation also exposes the fallibility of the military, which offers another reason why Cocoanout – whose country is oppressed by this very institution – might take pleasure in the unsettling discomfort.

By pointing out this disruption to the established cultural order, Forster is attempting to “subvert the prevailing ethos,” to borrow a phrase from Levine, an ethos which assumes that British soldiers are consistently paragons of masculinity (72). The text illustrates how a

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6 The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term “dagoe” as “a name originally given in the south-western section of the United States to a man of Spanish parentage; now extended to include Spaniards, Portuguese, and Italians in general, or as a disparaging term for any foreigner” (“dagoe”).
character can at once embody very masculine qualities – the rugged good looks, the strength, and the bravery – and at the same time enter into a relationship with another man, more specifically with a man of another race and a lower class. As critic Christopher Lane observes, throughout colonial history one can trace “lineages of sexuality...some of these lineages emerged at the frontiers of imperial defense, supporting national loyalty...others were intermediary, falling between the nation and the colony, with often considerable ambivalence toward each; numerous others surfaced disruptively and defiantly within the nation” (5). Lionel’s character is an example of the second lineage, the “intermediary.” The British male simultaneously retains an allegiance to his country but also feels a strong tie to the colonies and the opportunities that could be made possible there that were not viable in his home nation. What makes Lionel’s character so dynamic is the fact that he cannot seem to choose between conforming to the standards he’s expected to uphold and his “abnormal” sexual desires that cause him to want to reject the boundaries imposed upon him by the very same people who confer his power. He is thus left somewhere in the middle of a mixed identity, floating (quite literally) between Britain, the country that oppresses racial integration and male-male desire, and India, which some viewed an exotic site for erotic exploration.

However, Lionel cannot permanently remain in this liminal space and the “amalgamated masculinity” that the narrative has built up thus far must eventually undergo testing. In the remainder of the story, Forster develops Lionel’s character by weaving together his identity as a soldier and his identity as a queer male, allowing the two identities to coexist – and finally showing that they cannot always do so. His querying voice comes across most clearly when the various iterations of Lionel’s masculinity are at odds. For example, when Lionel enters the berth for the final time he addresses Cocoanut “in clipped officer-tones” (“Other” 195). Though
Lionel is talking to his lover in their private interior space he cannot rid himself of the need to assert dominant masculine power. The adjective “clipped,” in addition to being a marker of upper class speech patterns, suggests shortness and a lack of emotion in his voice. His tone is a departure from the way that Lionel has addressed Cocoanut previously when they are alone together in their quarters. Before this moment, he had demonstrated fondness and endearment towards the other man by initiating affectionate physical activity, offering to make the two of them drinks, and wanting to “make a night” of their time together (178). The fact that the normative masculine aspect of his personality now silences his desire reflects Lionel’s growing inability to embody both soldier and lover.

Lionel’s identity as a soldier and the qualities attached to this identity stay with him even in death, for Forster writes that after he jumped off the ship “it was soon all over the boat that a British officer had committed suicide” (196). The text remembers him not as a sexual deviant but as a proud “British officer,” which is testimony to the fact that, in terms of permanent identity, only the normative masculine aspects of Lionel’s personality remained. As Christopher Lane points out, relationships in Forster’s texts such as the one between Lionel and Cocoanut often “shatter national allegory by introducing inassimilable elements of homosexual desire” (2). This is not true in “The Other Boat” because the national allegory stays intact and no one is any wiser to his situation. In this case, the illusion of military strength is upheld because the social subject-position of the soldier stereotype conceals any multiplicity in the personalities and private lives of actual soldiers. This is an example of an “ignorance effect” in action, and by identifying it thusly Forster is able to implicitly undermine the authority of the colonial general public. Such a critique of society is not without foundation. As critic Wendy Moffat suggests, Forster had personal experience with the power of “ignorance effects” during his own stint with
the Red Cross during World War I. As Moffat writes, “aboard ship, among strangers, [he] mulled over the transformative power of an ill-fitting khaki suit” and he also “traded on male privilege and his status as a British officer to wander with impunity. No one need know the inside of his heart” (124, 137). In this way Forster’s biography itself demonstrates the real, if hidden, “amalgamated masculinity” that he later attempted to portray using Lionel’s character.

Though the majority of “The Other Boat” places Lionel’s queerness and his normative manliness in contention with one another, the resolution of the story indicates how Forster was ultimately unable to maintain this amalgamation. By the end of “The Other Boat,” the reader learns that it is impossible for Lionel to continue his relationship, sexual or otherwise, with Cocoanunt. Overwhelmed by social pressure and maternal guilt, Lionel leaves his berth and ventures alone to the upper deck. Here he seems to be swayed by his British contemporaries to abandon Cocoanunt and rejoin the group of expatriates for their bridge games and drinking evenings. This contemplation shows that he may have reached the decision to suppress his sexual desires in favor of social norms. However, Lionel momentarily expresses an inner conflict that leads him back to the bedchamber, where Cocoanunt is waiting in his top berth. When the two men begin to make love, Lionel enacts “the sweet act of vengeance…for both of them…as ecstasy hardened into agony his hands twisted the throat” (“Other”196). Interestingly, Forster writes “the” rather than “his” when referring to Cocoanunt’s throat, which suggests that at this point in the story Lionel has dehumanized his partner and abandoned entirely the passion that he once had.

Still, the presence of the word “both” in the description of the action implies that when Lionel strangles Cocoanunt, he is thinking with their partnership in mind and has not entirely lost his feelings for his partner. Instead, the emptiness that Lionel feels – “no sadness, no remorse” –
when he kills Cocoanut is a product of the fact that he has abandoned all hope for realizing sexual autonomy in colonial society (196). Facing this bleak prospect, Lionel “burst out of the stupid cabin onto the deck, and naked and with the seeds of love on him he dived into the sea” (196). As Levine suggests, his motivations are clear, and when he finally commits suicide “it is not because he is disgusted with what has happened between Cocoa and himself but because ‘if he forfeited his caste’s companionship he would become nobody and nothing’” (86). Lionel cannot have both his relationship with Cocoanut (or any other male) and his acceptance by society, as evidenced by the words “nobody” and “nothing.” Here, the influence of society wins out over freedom of sexual express, and thus the text upholds the idea of a single normative masculinity with little room for deviation.

Lionel’s death, while perhaps unexpected, nevertheless leaves the reader with a sense of hopelessness about the practical ability to achieve any kind of “amalgamated masculinity.” Forster writes that Lionel’s emotions right before he jumped off the ship were “part of a curve that had long been declining, and had nothing to do with death” (“Other” 196). The “curve” is a symbol of his mental state throughout the story, which had devolved from comfort and authority into madness and paranoia as he tried to balance his masculinity with his homosexual desires. Lionel chooses to cease to exist rather than to continue this battle any longer and in doing so he disappears from society. We’ve established earlier that Lionel was not remembered for his sexuality but for his military identity, effectively erasing the duality of his personality from existence and writing out the possibility of different forms of masculinity. The narrator indicates that “his body was never recovered” and that his own mother “never mentioned his name again” (196, 197). The repetition of the word “never” echoes the permanence of these consequences.

Ultimately, Lionel knows what Elaine Showalter posits in her book Sexual Anarchy: that “it is
self-destructive to violate the sexual codes of one’s society” (113). He opts for a murder-suicide, preferring death for both himself and his partner to the prospect of returning to a society that would not permit him to be with his male lover and where he would have to perform a masculinity that did not allow for his sexual desires. The death of both men is the definitive negative answer to Forster’s attempts to defy contemporary stereotypes and establish an “amalgamated masculinity” through this text.

“Leader of Men” – Passive yet Powerful?

The author of the postcolonial text, Youssef Idris, was born in the rural Nile Delta region of northern Egypt in 1927. As a young adult, Idris studied medicine and worked a surgeon before publishing his first work of short fiction. His country considered him an outcast for his leftist views, and in 1954 he was arrested and held for over a year with thirteen other writers under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. He did not resume political writing until President Hosni Mubarak came to power in 1981 and though he felt that he had more freedom at this point, he continued to criticize the government. Over the course of his lifetime, Idris wrote nine plays and eleven novels in addition to his many short stories. He was also a contributor to Al Ahram, Egypt’s most prestigious newspaper, as a political and social columnist. His work tended to portray the daily life of the lower classes and often offered critiques of contemporary society. Though contemporary critics consider him to be a major figure in the nahda, or Arab intellectual renaissance of the early twentieth century, he did not enjoy as much fame and monetary success as other Arab writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, possibly due to his more controversial viewpoints and his consistent desire to break traditional barriers. Idris passed away in 1991 in London following failed treatment for a brain hemorrhage. To date, there exists very little
writing on his sexual orientation, though he was married to a woman and had three children with her ("Yusuf").

Idris produced his texts in an entirely separate cultural moment than Forster, as he was both temporally and geographically distanced from the colonial author. Due to this distance, the social pressures were markedly different—though anxieties of normative masculinity were as present in Egypt in the late twentieth century as they were in England half a century prior, they took a different form. Islam, the majority religion of the country, played a large role in the public attitude towards homosexuality. As contemporary Middle Eastern scholar Khalid Duran points out, "the primary source of Islam—its revealed scripture, Al-Qur'an—"is very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, leaving scarcely any loophole for a theological accommodation of homosexuals" (181). According to Islamic scholars, this condemnation applied not only to sexual acts but to behavioral practices, such as cross-dressing, camp mannerisms, and the male use of feminine adornments such as necklaces and earrings as well (Whitaker 166). However, though these religious strictures certainly had an influence on society's perceptions of sexual expression, there was a marked absence of formal legislature against homosexuality in Egypt throughout the twentieth century. As Frederic Lagrange observes in his survey of modern Arab literature, "it should be noted that pre-modern and colonial Egypt had no law against homosexuality, in spite of the insistence of the British that there should be one" (172). The colonized nation rejected the Western impetus to so strictly define the population and formally criminalize deviant behavior.

This difference in cultural context arises from the two very opposing attitudes towards homosexuality. Whereas for the modern British citizens homosexuality was a personality type, for the Egyptians there was a difference between the homosexual as a figure and sexual acts.
performed by two men. Duran points out that “in many Muslim societies, homosexuals are comparatively free to do what they like, provided they do not publicly assert their homosexuality” (183). Though young men before marriage and even older men in committed heterosexual relationships experiment sexually with other men, an Egyptian man’s “honor depends on his conduct as an adult” in the public sphere and “even frequent and recurrent homosexual behavior does not matter in Islamic societies as long as a man continues his family line and does not throw away property indulging his vices” (Murray 16, 21). What goes on behind closed doors matters less, it would seem, than what sort of personality a man outwardly projects.

Although Egyptian society was comparatively less strict about homosexuality than the English one, the same disdain for effeminacy in men still applied. The need to perform a certain sort of masculinity in public undoubtedly put Egyptian men during Idris’ time in a troubled position. Masculinity was connected in this culture to positions of power and control. As Lagrange notes, modern literature “is often an expression of self-doubt, sometimes self-hatred, and the Arab male’s certainty of being at the centre of the universe has vanished. Politically, economically and culturally challenged, his power, thus his virility, cannot be exerted as it was in the age of certainties. The view of homosexuality could not remain unaffected by this major shift” (174). In other words, after the “age of certainties,” Arab literature began to reflect the fact that men had to find new ways to assert their power according to socially recognized norms. As a result, male-male desire – seen as a sign of weakness and effeminacy – became a taboo subject and “while homosexual intercourse is referred to in modern literature, homosexual passion is almost totally absent” (Lagrange 173). With the absence of “passion” also comes the denouncement of certain behaviors, including the preference for sexual passivity: “men who seek
to get fucked are both less written about and seemingly less numerous than men who seek to fuck pretty boys” (Murray 41). This silencing of passive/effeminate male voices is exactly what Idris challenges in “Leader of Men” when he attempts to create a different sort of “amalgamated masculinity” – one where men can be feminized and passive sexually while also holding positions of power in their societies.

The short story “Leader of Men” was first published as “Abu al-Rijal” in the Egyptian magazine *October* in November of 1987. Saad Elkhadem translated the story into English one year later in 1988. As Ramzi Salti comments in one of the only scholarly articles yet written on the story, “when Yusuf Idris published his controversial story...it was immediately hailed by scholars as the first and only work in modern Arab literature to probe so deeply in the mind and soul of a latent homosexual” (247). Indeed, Idris’ work narrates the story of Sultan, the protagonist, who is in his early fifties. He is just beginning to confront the anxieties that have been tormenting him recently, and in doing so he comes to understand his sexual feelings for other men – what the translator terms his “latent homosexuality” (Elkhadem 1). The story that traces this process is divided into ten sections, or micro-chapters, within the larger narrative. In the first section, he begins to notice the changes that have taken place to his body in recent months. He becomes frustrated by these and angrily calls for one of his followers, Bull. This opening section introduces male-male desire to the text as a loss of masculinity and power. In the second section, the narrator gives the reader a description of Bull, who is the epitome of classical manliness – strong, youthful, vibrant and handsome, with all of the ruggedness that Sultan lacks.

After the detailed descriptions of the first two sections, the third section appears shrouded and metaphorical. It describes the encounter between the two men and tells of Sultan’s sexual
fantasies. Though the language is never explicit, it is impossible not to read this part of the story as erotically charged. In the fourth and fifth sections, Sultan begins to act introspectively, and he speculates on the origin of his homosexual desires. He discusses his experiences growing up in his village, the influence of society, and his role in the family as well as how his parents treated him while he was a child. We learn that when he was younger, he was involved in a situation where he refused to touch other children’s genitals during a self-exploratory game they had played. We also learn that his rise to power and prominence in the village did not come naturally. Instead, Sultan reflects that he was an “unknown lad” who became the “pride and joy” of a community (Idris 10). The sixth section continues with such introspection, but focuses more specifically on Sultan’s mother and her contributions to his life.

In the seventh section, Sultan has a flashback to an event that happened many years earlier but which can be read as a foreshadowing of the story being told now. He recounts a situation in which he was asked to come to the aid of one of his followers who was being beaten by a group of thugs. Rather than responding with violence, Sultan asked the crowd to defer the confrontation to another time. In remembering this, Sultan cannot help but view his actions as unmanly and weak. In section eight, however, Sultan teases the nephew of the village’s most effeminate man for being related to a homosexual. In retaliation, this boy pins him down with a knife to his throat and forces him to admit he is a woman, which he does in order not to be killed. The penultimate section is the shortest and includes Sultan’s departure from the village and ruminations on the cultural origins of homophobia and sexual shame. The story ends with a narration of the sexual encounter between Bull and Sultan, during which Sultan embraces his sexuality as more than sexual desire – as more of a personal identity. He chooses to be the passive partner in the climactic sexual act, which is omitted in the language of the text but
existent nonetheless in the preceding descriptions and in the white spaces of the final section. The story ends rather ambiguously, and though it is clear that Sultan’s identity can remain buried no longer, the reader is left unsure as to what actions he will take in the future in terms of expressing this aspect of his sexuality.

Just as the mother figure in “The Other Boat” stands for Britain’s normative national and social influences, the mother figure in “Leader of Men” reflects modern Egypt’s comparatively looser attitudes towards homosexuality and the masculine ideal. Whereas Mrs. March is the restrictive force that inhibits Lionel’s sexual exploration, here Sultan’s mother demonstrates the position of relative freedom under which he operates. Sultan recalls that his mother “was a proud and steadfast human being...her tenderness and steadfastness would blend with the roughness of the man to produce this unadulterated Egyptian temperament” (Idris 12). The mention of her “Egyptian temperament” marks her as a symbol of national identity much in the same way that Mrs. March stands in for England. And yet Egyptian mothers, as the narrator points out, do not exert such a direct influence over their children’s sexual behaviors. This difference in maternal voice is a byproduct of the difference between the two texts’ cultural contexts. The narrator explains that Sultan’s mother had never “impugned his masculinity, on the contrary, she was always proud of him” (12). The word “always” indicates that her pride in her son is unwavering no matter how he chooses to define and perform masculinity. She does not question his masculinity in part because she is decidedly open to a wide range of possible sexual expressions. For example, Sultan’s mother does not punish him for bestiality when he is caught with one of the family’s donkeys in the barn, and she chides him only for his poor choice of a partner when he is caught engaging in sexual acts with an older widowed woman: “her beating was not the beating of an angry person...she was almost proud of what she had seen...her
anger was caused only by the fact that he had chosen this old and ugly widow” (13). Sultan’s mother’s leniency reflects the Egyptian attitude that sexual experimentation – even the deviant variety – is acceptable as long as it takes place in private and does not appear visible the public sphere.

Despite the fact that the mother figure in “Leader of Men” does not enforce normative sexual behaviors and practices, Sultan seems convinced that she may have played a part in his homosexual identity, at least through his contact with her during his formative years. He experiences a moment of epiphany towards the middle of the story that helps to articulate the supposed connection. The phrase “the mother…” sits on a line by itself in the middle of the page, as if Sultan is lost in reverie and blocking out all other thoughts (11). The narrator then explains that “Sultan changed the hand on which he was leaning…it seemed to him that he had suddenly reached the point where he would find the beginning of the thread, the cause and the causer, his mother” (11). The “thread” that he refers to in this passage is the trajectory of his budding desire for Bull. As Salti points out, Idris – invoking Freud – “seems determined to dive into the question of whether a domineering mother can influence her son’s sexual orientation” (249). Though I do not agree that she is “domineering” based on the evidence given, I do think that it is clear that Sultan is actively attempting to find a link between his childhood and his current sexual preferences.

Salti offers two possible interpretations of this connection. At first, “the lack of pampering on the mother’s part may… be seen as a subversion of the mother-spoils-son, son-turns-to-sissy (gay) model” but “on the other hand, the fact that she is an intelligent woman who is far from submissive may be regarded as a reaffirmation of the stereotype of the domineering mother who impugns her son’s masculinity at an early age” (Salti 250). Neither of these
explanations is entirely correct. As we’ve already established, the narrator of the story directly states that Sultan’s mother never doubted the validity of his masculinity. Both of Salti’s explanations accord too much formative authority to the mother, who does not come across in the text as so influential in shaping Sultan’s adult personality. However, I do agree with Salti when he argues that “either way, the fact that the mother-son relationship is presented in such complexity makes it difficult to dismiss the story’s psychological dimension as insignificant” (250). Rather than reading the mother in a Freudian way as an influence on Sultan’s sexuality, her significance to the story comes instead from the way in which she functions as a symbol of Egyptian culture and social values.

Evidence of the Egyptian cultural moment exists in the actual text of the second story, as well. In “Leader of Men,” Idris inverts Forster’s depiction of the relationship between the protagonist and his partner because the protagonist here, Sultan, is figured as feminine in many ways and seeks a more masculine partner. The main crisis throughout the narrative, and the way that Sultan acknowledges his growing feminization, is the recognition of the loss of his normatively masculine characteristics. One such characteristic is his hair. As Salti observes “the most obvious and visible of these [things that define Sultan as a manly man] is facial and body hair, for in Sultan’s society a moustache and a hairy chest determine a man’s virility and masculinity” (248). Sultan has always marked his self-worth by these signs, but throughout the plot Idris troubles the reliance on such a singular characteristic of manhood and in doing so subverts the rigid definition of masculinity.

The story opens with a reflection in which Sultan is looking back at his past life, and the narrator notes that when he was younger “it always made him glad whenever he looked closely at his skin and saw how the sprouting hair was becoming heavier, thicker, and darker, until it all
turned black" (Idris 3). Clearly, the abundance of body hair is associated with becoming a man and assuming the responsibilities that men hold as the dominant figures of contemporary Egyptian society, and Sultan took pride in these markers of masculinity. However, as Sultan ages he notices that "the hair was very sparse. As though he were fourteen again" (3). This observation ties together the recognition of homosexual desires with the process of puberty, in which the protagonist is stuck between childhood and adult manhood. Now, stripped of his hair and thus of his power, he faces a "frightening effeminate smoothness" – the author includes the word "effeminate" directly in the text in order to further reinforce the point about Sultan’s bodily changes being opposite of society’s standards for men (3). Additionally, the word "frightening" expresses the anxiety Sultan encounters as he becomes less of a man in society’s eyes. As Idris writes, "you sense that his masculinity and his personality are dissolving in front of you, and that he is turning into a rabbit pissing on himself" (3). Through this statement, Sultan is emasculated further, down to the level of a child or an incontinent animal – furthered still when he is depicted later on in the story as "nothing, nothing but a frightened mouse" (4). The narrator serves as the voice of society here, passing judgment on the newly effeminate Sultan and reducing him to "nothing, nothing." Without performing normative masculinity, it seems society would deny Sultan any agency as a man.

As the story progresses, though, Sultan embraces the process of emasculation and with this acceptance begins to acknowledge his burgeoning desire for another man. In one of the final sections of "Leader of Men" Sultan shaves off his mustache, taking the decision to lose this marker of normative masculinity into his own hands. The act is symbolic of his rejection of society’s values and his ability to define himself according to his own terms. As his attitude shifts, so too does the tone of the narrative voice. Instead of recalling society’s normative
pressures, the narrative voice now structures sympathy for Sultan’s character. The narrator states definitively that “a man’s worth is not dependent on how thick is mustache is, or how oppressive he may be; a man is a man when he is gallant, generous, courageous, unambiguous, and a savior to those in trouble” (11). Once again, the text questions singular definitions of masculine agency, this time through the association of masculinity with interior characteristics rather than exterior ones. By allowing Sultan to accept the more effeminate aspects of his personality while still encouraging the reader to sympathize with him, the story is working to create a sort of “amalgamated masculinity” for the protagonist’s character.

“Leader of Men” questions the viability of this “amalgamated masculinity” by juxtaposing Sultan’s feminization with his position of power. Like Forster, Idris in this way challenges normatively masculine subject-positions in his text. Just as Forster made Lionel a queer soldier to question military masculinity and attempted to reconcile these two diverse identities, Idris queries whether Sultan can sustain his political authority while also fulfilling his desire to be penetrated by other men.

The narrator establishes Sultan’s position of authority within his village at several points throughout the story. Naming is one of the most important ways through which the text constructs this power. The protagonist could have had any number of names, but instead Idris chose to call him Sultan, which in the Arab world can be a name as well as a title. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “sultan” as “the sovereign or chief ruler of a Muslim country” but also makes note that the etymology of the word derives from the Arabic word for “king, sovereign, power” (“sultan”). By capitalizing the title and choosing it as a name for his main character, Idris encourages his reader to understand that the protagonist enjoys relative authority over those around him. The nature of names gives the reader insight into Sultan’s
character, as well. Since a name is given at birth and not bestowed later in life, Idris is affirming that Sultan’s power is not fleeting and may in fact be a title that he can retain for his entire life. This aspect of Sultan’s name foreshadows the conflict at the end of the story when the text calls Sultan’s position of power into question.

Furthermore, the text illustrates Sultan’s power through the characteristics he possesses, which at the outset of the story are aligned with traditionally masculine values such as strength and valor. In fact, as Salti observes, “Sultan is initially depicted as an overly macho, dominating, tough individual who is respected and feared by almost everyone in his village” (248). The narrator informs the reader that these characteristics first surfaced when Sultan was young and “among his peers...he was always the leader of, and adviser to, a big gang of kids” (Idris 7). When the young Sultan entered school, he “was brilliantly intelligent...an outstanding pupil” (7). He emulated his father, “whom he regarded as the manliest of men,” and continued to build his reputation along the lines of normative masculinity and finally assumed a position as a “leader known for his judicious opinions and crafty decisions” whose “requests were sacred commands that could not be evaded or circumvented” (10, 14). The use of the word “sacred” here aligns Sultan with the immortal or the holy and places him at a level above the average citizens.

Through these descriptions of action and personality traits, the narrative convinces the reader that Sultan – with all his might, swagger, and virility – rightfully deserves the dominance he enjoys. At this point in the text, though, Sultan’s dominance remains implicitly tied to the performance of normative masculinity, but this will not always be the case.

Sultan recognizes that he holds such power, and the reader learns of his achievements not only from the narrator but also from Sultan himself. The voice that describes Sultan shifts speakers several times throughout the story and sometimes statements are even repeated through
several speakers in order to emphasize a particular point. For example, in the beginning of the
story Sultan validates his own manhood by speaking in the first person as if attempting to
convince himself that it is true: “I am fifty...I have children.” The narrator then confirms the
truth of this statement, reiterating in the third person that “he has children indeed. And a wife”
(3). The repetition of language describing families and spouses situates Sultan firmly within the
heterosexual, heteronormative world. The language that the narrator uses to describe Sultan
throughout the story also serves to emphasize his normative masculinity, as the it features several
synonyms for “male” including “most manly man,” “my boy,” “a man and a father,” and a “chap
unlike any other chap” (4). Not only does the repetition and reformulation here establish his
masculinity, the literary devices also add force to the already prominent idea that Sultan has
power over the other citizens. The narrator asserts that “not only is he a man, but he is also a
father of men...a leader. A leader of a gang; but it is a gang of rebellious insurgents, of
bloodthirsty murderers and habitual criminals” (3). The adjectives “rebellious,” “insurgents,”
“bloodthirsty” and “murderers” all have connotations of a power that is dangerous yet highly
authoritative and strong. Sultan is praised in this statement both as a self-made man who
overcame poverty and obscurity and as a ruthless and merciless leader. The duality expressed
here begins to point to the “amalgamated masculinity” that Idris develops throughout the rest of
the story.

Idris further confirms the possibility of an “amalgamated masculinity” by allowing Sultan
to reconcile his leadership position with his effeminate sexual desires. Despite building up the
protagonist as a powerful figure, the narrative temporarily calls into question Sultan’s power
when he begins to age and acknowledges his latent homosexuality. During the moments in the
story when Sultan appears meek or weak, the text revokes his authority. For example, when a
group of villagers mock and threaten him, “he was frightened and trembling inside …[and] at that time, he was not a sultan at all, but rather a sultan’s jester, or a sultan’s buffoon” (14). By invoking the titles of lower-ranking court members, such as a “jester,” Idris is able to temporarily demote Sultan from the sultanate when his behavior does not match up with the accepted masculine normative standards. However, Sultan nevertheless remains in the court at least in part and is never entirely removed from his position of influence. Moments such as this one, which occur several times throughout the middle sections of “Leader of Men,” are examples of points in the story where the authorial voice forces the reader to examine the politics of power relations in contemporary Egyptian society. Idris asks critical questions in the same way that Forster did nearly half a century before him, though they are updated here to reflect his own culture: Can a sultan remain a powerful authority figure when he enjoys being penetrated by other men and exhibits traits generally associated with a female in Arab society? Is power the exclusive right of heterosexual men? Is there only one form of masculinity, and is masculinity a necessary trait of a sultan?

Ultimately though, the text allows the protagonist of this story to act on his sexual desire for other men and retain his political authority. The very last line of the story includes the phrase “he is still the sultan” (19). The word “still” in the narrator’s statement acknowledges the fact that there was previously a threat to Sultan’s sultanate – in this case, his sexual encounter with Bull and his increasing feminization. It is clear though that for Idris, this threat is not enough to proverbially dethrone the man. By making this statement, Idris – like Forster – is queering the powerful subject position and challenging the assumptions commonly made about male leaders. Opposite of Forster, though, in this story the possibility of “amalgamated masculinity” is eventually realized. Whereas Lionel needed to maintain the traditional markers of masculinity –
his hair, his strength, his followers – in order to keep his status in the eyes of society, Sultan loses these markers over the course of the story. But normative masculinity is not the single determining factor in Idris’ conception of power relations. Sultan can in fact be “still the sultan” after being penetrated by another man and even after announcing to the village that he “is a woman” (17). Idris goes further than simply allowing alternate forms of masculinity to exist. He confirms the position of authority for even the most effeminate of men, opening up powerful positions in society to a wider spectrum of identities and expressing a more liberal interpretation of gender dynamics and sexual orientations.

Unlike the finality of “The Other Boat,” in which the text does not allow for the protagonist’s “amalgamated masculinity”, the resolution of “Leader of Men” points the reader towards the definite conclusion that it is possible for Sultan to be emasculated and still retain a position of power. Towards the end of the story, Sultan experiences the same sort of hesitation about his identity that plagued Lionel. His self-confidence quavers and he becomes more and more morose about how his society views him, and though “the sickle did not decapitate Sultan,” it did “sever his pride completely from his body; and he left the village and never returned” (18). The word “sever” is violent and coupled with the words “completely” and “never,” it suggests a certain finality and permanence to the isolation that Sultan imposes on himself. His departure from the village, where he held a position of power, also shows his acceptance of his sexual desires and effeminate identity, but the fact that he leaves the town at all demonstrates that he does not feel that his society accepts his own unique iteration of masculinity. Idris puts forth an important commentary about the Egyptian culture in the 1980s when he remarks through the voice of the narrator that “death would have been easier for those who, like him, capture power and leadership; when they have a choice between death and losing their honor, they have to
choose death, and nothing other than death should they choose” (18). Sultan, though, does not choose death, because “he had no need for pride or even dignity” and “his declaration...was made and done” (18). The reader thus learns that Sultan will be able to live – and to keep his powerful status despite performing a masculinity that is significantly different from the accepted norm.

Instead of death, the text concludes with Sultan embracing his desire for sexual passivity and entering into a physical relationship with Bull. He first queries himself why it is “wrong for a human being to be a Tahhan” in reference to the flamboyantly homosexual man whom the villagers regularly persecuted (18). He then admits that because of his deviant desires, there is a “Tahhan inside” of him, too (18). This self-inquisition shows a level of understanding about the cultural situation and Tahhan’s position relative to society that Sultan did not access prior to his own recognition and acceptance of his lust for another man. Sultan now knows that it is not the gay man’s identity that causes problems but rather the way that contemporary society receives and reacts to such an identity.

Following the path of Tahhan, who the text now holds up as an exemplar of self-conscious behavior, Sultan enters into the “darkness of night [which] conceals all secrets” and then finally emerges into the light, “not caring anymore about whatever they would say, or whatever they would hide, or suppress, or reveal, because...he himself removed the veil of shame” (19). The binary images of darkness and light in this statement suggest that what had previously been concealed (Sultan’s desire to be penetrated by a younger man) is now revealed and is finally something he can act on. Indeed, at the very end of the chapter Sultan initiates anal sex with Bull but contrary to popular practice he chooses to be the passive or receiving partner, the man who gets fucked. This display of submission stuns Bull because “he was asked to do the
opposite of what he had reconciled himself to accept” (19). Even though the act Sultan chooses to engage in is traditionally associated with emasculation and is “opposite” the expected role for a powerful man, he inverts these associations and finds a way to express himself and his sexual identity. Despite this deviant and otherwise feminizing act, the narrator concludes at the very end of the story that “he is still the sultan, he is still the lion” (19). These words are the last ones of the entire story, and the finality of the tone confirms that Sultan can and will remain the leader.

What, then, does this reconciliation of effeminate masculinity and social power suggest in terms of the possibility of an “amalgamated masculinity” for the homosexual male protagonist in the post-colonial world? Salti attempts to summarize the narrative in a way that denies any such chance, remarking that “each of the ten sections contained in the story may be thought of as a step toward self-acknowledgement and self-acceptance. On the other hand, each section may also be considered as a step toward Sultan’s demise” (248). The actions at the end of “Leader of Men” prove, however, that Sultan’s quest was one of “self-acknowledgement” and “self-acceptance” rather than any sort of “demise.” Though readers may not know exactly what Sultan will do in terms of his identity in the future, it is clear that for the moment Idris allows his protagonist to act on his homosexual desires despite contemporary social pressures. This subaltern counter-voice to the colonial text lays the foundation for the manifold meanings of masculinity that Forster attempted but failed to access three decades prior.

Conclusions – The Possibility of Amalgamated Masculinity

The pairing of these two stories reveals exciting intersections between a cultural moment of production and the expression of gender, sexual orientation, and power within a given literary text. Forster, writing under the watchful eye of colonial England, attempts to allow for an
“amalgamated masculinity” in Lionel’s character but is ultimately unsuccessful. As Levine suggests, Forster is “a literary rather than political figure, but surely he is attacking the values of the dominant culture” and

his story, if not from the position of a reformer with concrete proposals, is at least as a cautionary tale for all the world’s Lionels who participate in professional and social institutions without distance, without questions, without skepticism and whose self-knowledge, when it comes, collides against the closed doors of the established order. (80, 87)

Textual analysis of the protagonist’s characterization confirms Levine’s qualified assessment of Forster’s progressive message – though her sentiments are, in my opinion, too generous. While Forster, in questioning the institution of the military, does “attack the values of the dominant culture” he goes no further than to point out the problems that exist because he offers no possibility for a more positive outcome. Lionel kills himself and his lover rather than live under the oppressive imperialist regime that he is sure to return to at either end of the voyage. His homosexuality and his powerful position as a soldier are not sustainable in a singular identity, and even in death his queerness is silenced. Thus, there is no suggestion in “The Other Boat” that an “amalgamated masculinity” is possible. The story ends in normative society’s triumphant victory and the permanent, echoing end of one man’s struggle to express an identity not sanctioned by his cultural moment. Despite asking the men in positions of power to take notice of the fact that the gender norms of a certain period are only one way to frame identity, the colonial story still remains at its essence only a “cautionary tale.”

However, the postcolonial counter-voice of the Egyptian text offers a greater potential for the realization of such an “amalgamated masculinity.” Idris challenges the sanctions of
normative masculinity by allowing his protagonist to be feminized but also retain his position of power. Salti asks readers to decide whether Idris’ text is “attempting to dispel negative stereotypes of the homosexuals in Egyptian society” or if it is “reaffirming social views that aim at persecuting and expressing homosexuals” (247). Based on Sultan’s triumph at the end of the story, it is clear to me that Idris is approaching the problem differently than Forster did. Rather than “reaffirming” social views that aim to persecute homosexuals, Idris explores the opportunities that the comparatively less restrictive Egyptian attitudes towards deviant sexual behavior make feasible. He expresses reservations towards the authority of socially constructed identity but then moves beyond this accusatory message to illustrate the progressive potential of a more tolerant society. His protagonist recognizes the stereotypes of the homosexual man and appropriates them for his own self-exploration – Sultan allows himself to express a degree of effeminacy, and pushes the boundaries of accepted contact with other males. The positive ending undoubtedly indicates the possibility of a queerer masculinity, which makes Idris’ work not homophobic but rather “enabling to gay movements, however obscure, in the Arab world” (247). In “Leader of Men,” Idris offers a counterargument to Lagrange’s statement that “there is no happy homosexuality, or piquant anecdotes in modern literature” by allowing his feminized protagonist powerful agency in spite of his nonstandard masculinity (175). Through this text, Idris successfully demonstrates that the “taint of effeminacy,” rather than being an inherent value, is actually constructed by certain societies and that such a stigma does not necessarily carry weight across all cultures and times.

Due to this noteworthy deviation from the message that can be taken away from Forster’s earlier work in “The Other Boat”, the latter story can be read as a statement that Idris is making about the possibilities of an unexpected level of openness in contemporary Egyptian society.
Whereas colonial England made no room for an exploration of different masculinities, in post-colonial Egypt a queer man can perform an alternative sort of masculinity and still retain political power. Readers with an awareness of the social implications of writing ought to remember that Lionel’s death may not have been in vain if Sultan, and those characters like him, can create a queerer masculinity in the contemporary era regardless of where on the globe they may be situated. The progressive movement between “The Other Boat” and “Leader of Men” is not simply a byproduct of cultural chronology, though. Post-colonialism does not answer all the questions, nor can we let it stand in as the only solution for why the latter text’s inversion of the former merits consideration.

In the greater context of literary production, what Forster and Idris show by taking up the issue of “amalgamated masculinity” and challenging social normativity is that identity is constantly correlated to contemporary customs and attitudes. This issue is at the heart of the intersection between sexuality, gender performance, culture, time, and geographic place. Identity is connected to agency, and agency in turn is dictated by the possibilities for which society allows. If we move beyond a historical framing of the subject, it is evident that the negotiation of these parallel texts with their respective cultural moments of production demonstrates how codes of masculinity fluctuate throughout time. According to Donald Hall, “queer theories ask us to recognize and grapple with the implications of the multiplicity and variability of identities...and not only among but also within us all” (176). At the most basic level, these stories are fundamentally in dialogue with the personal lives of the authors who write them and the readers who read them. Through the narratives of the soldier and the sultan Forster and Idris are able to queer our understanding of identity. Taken in tandem, their inverted parallel
texts remind the reader that there is no permanence in gender standards but rather an eternal multitude of masculinities that change and evolve as time advances.
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