

**Innocence to Awareness: Emotional Queer Journey in Maurice and Cobalt Blue**

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**Abstract:**

The present article explores the theme of queer innocence and self-discovery in E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (1971) and Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* (2013/2022). Both *Maurice* and *Ashwin* are subjected to a plethora of negative emotions resulting from their sexuality prior to accepting themselves. As per the study, their troubled self-perception is highly reminiscent of Vivienne Cass's view of homosexual identity formation, as well as Silvan Tomkins's theory of emotion. The research provides valuable insight into the state of homosexual identity in the UK and India, as well as the nuances of interpersonal relationships. Although *Maurice* reflects the perception of homosexuality in Edwardian England, where it was barely tolerated, *Cobalt Blue* outlines the specifics of Indian relationships with regard to gender and sexual orientation. Notably, the adaptation of Kundalkar's novel significantly alters the conclusion as compared to the book, thus, changing the perception of the author's position on the issue. The analysis of both literary works uncovered the so-called 'growing sideways' theme, which revolves around non-traditional relationships and their impact on the characters' self-perception. Overall, the article highlights the role of the queer experience in literature as a means of emotional expression and an element of protest.

**Keywords:** Queer identity, emotional affect, identity formation, literary adaptation

**Introduction**

The emotional journey from innocence to awareness is not an easy path for the protagonist of any queer literature work since they should experience the painful process of accepting their sexuality and, as a consequence, reject the society that refuses to accept them. E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (1913-14; 1971) and Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* (2013; 2022),

published in different centuries and countries, demonstrate how the main characters fight against their nature or, eventually, accept it. The novel *Maurice* was written in the early 20th century and was published long after the author's death in 1971. It tells the story of Maurice Hall, who falls in love with a man and tries to find a way to be with him despite everything that society and medical science can muster against same-sex relationships. At the same time, Kundalkar's novel describes the relationships between two siblings and an enigmatic paying guest in 90s India.

In *Cobalt Blue*, Kiran Keshavamurthy sees "the sensuous longing of youth, and the disillusionment of disappointed love" (Keshavamurthy 2022). It is worth noting that both books show the development of the protagonist's queer identity, but the path of acceptance is thorny and full of shame, fear, and disappointment. This paper is going to illustrate how the authors use elements of identity and affect theories to demonstrate the inner turmoil connected with early 20th and 21st-century societal norms. The chosen novel's context and analysis will display the ways how the authors address this theme similarly and differently using various theories.

### **Review of Literature**

Existing literature on queer identity formation provides well-established frameworks for understanding the emotional complexities of the coming-out process. Vivienne Cass's model of homosexual identity formation delineates six stages—identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis—each characterized by distinct emotional experiences (Cass 221). According to Campbell, the model is one of the fundamental theories of gay and lesbian identity development, with identity acquisition occurring through a developmental process as the individual interacts with their environment (Campbell 82).

Silvan Tomkins's affect theory provides complementary vocabulary for analyzing the innate emotions that dominate each stage, including shame, humiliation, terror, rage, and disgust (Tomkins 133). Tomkins considers shame to be one of the basic human affects, along with surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, disgust, contempt, and interest (Tomkins 144). He argues that shame operates only after interest, enjoyment, or excitement has been activated—shame is provoked when a subject has become interested in someone or something but the interest is not returned or confirmed (Tomkins 152). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick later drew on Tomkins's work, arguing that queerness "might usefully be thought of as referring in the first place to this group or an overlapping group of infants and children, those whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame" (Sedgwick 61).

Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of "growing sideways" offers a crucial framework for understanding queer childhood and development as "a mode of irregular growth involving odd lingerings, wayward paths, and fertile delays" that defies linear trajectories toward heterosexual maturity (Stockton 3). Stockton examines "children's strangeness, even

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some children's subliminal 'gayness'" and contends that "children's queerness is rendered and explored best in fictional forms" (Stockton 5).

Forster scholarship has extensively examined *Maurice* as a pioneering gay novel that explores "the slowness of the English character" and the emotional repression characteristic of Edwardian society (Forster xii). Quentin Bailey argues that "the official organs of epistemic control (the state, the school, and the church) came increasingly to use a rhetoric of racial superiority to justify their position and try to control—through the development of a consensual view of history—divisive elements at home and abroad" (Bailey 45). Critics have noted how *Maurice*'s journey involves moving from self-disgust to acceptance through his relationship with Alec Scudder. Franco Moretti provides a model of societal normality that speaks to both Bailey's "period of anxiety" and Sedgwick's "chronic, now endemic crisis" (Moretti 78).

Recent scholarship on *Cobalt Blue* has focused on the adaptation's shift from novelistic interiority to cinematic visual impressionism, with Manjari Johri observing that the film "diluted the ugliness and self-exploration of the novel" (Johri 84). The chromatic symbolism of cobalt blue has been analyzed as representing "the dialectic between intimacy, loss and estrangement that characterises the relationships" in the narrative (Johri 87). Kiran Keshavamurthy notes that both siblings "are ultimately driven by a productive lack that enables them to negotiate with their own solitude and refashion themselves" (Keshavamurthy 2022). However, comparative analysis of the emotional queer journey across these two texts remains underexplored.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To analyze the emotional trajectory from innocence to self-awareness in *Maurice* and *Cobalt Blue* through the lens of Cass's identity formation model and Tomkins's affect theory.
2. To evaluate the impact of different cultural and historical backgrounds on the emotional experience in both narratives.
3. To investigate how the novel-to-film adaptation of *Cobalt Blue* transforms the representation of queer inferiority and emotional experience.
4. To compare and contrast the universal and culturally specific aspects of queer feeling experienced by the protagonists of the books.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses a combination of theories including queer theory, the theory of formation of identity, and affect theory. Cass's six stages of homosexual identity formation serve as a framework for the analysis of the protagonists' journey through the stages towards embracing their identity (Cass 220). These stages are: identity confusion (the first awareness of homosexual thoughts, feelings of chaos), identity comparison (accepting the possibility of being gay, facing social isolation), identity tolerance (looking for others, combating social isolation, still feeling shame), identity acceptance (linking positive feelings with gay

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identity), identity pride (expressing pride, becoming out), and identity synthesis (integrating sexual identity with other areas of life) (Cass 224).

Tomkins's affect theory explains the mechanism by which shame, fear, rage, and disgust underlie the stages of identity formation (Tomkins 130). Tomkins writes: "The affect 'shame... and its sisters' is fundamental to understanding identity formation and its vicissitudes," and "disruption...in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication" (Tomkins 146). Shame is performative in that it enacts a set of bodily movements and acts on the surface of the body: the shamed person turns the body away, particularly the face, and attempts to avoid the gaze of the other (Tomkins 148).

Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of "growing sideways" allows to expand on the ways in which the development of the protagonists' queer identity does not follow an upward vertical path to gay or adult identity (Stockton 3). Growing sideways is "a mode of irregular growth involving odd lingerings, wayward paths, and fertile delays" (Stockton 4). This concept applies to the analysis of both Maurice and the siblings in Cobalt Blue who experience difficulties embracing the established norms and values.

Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation is used for the discussion of Cobalt Blue as an adaptation of the novel and an analysis of the changes which occurred in the transformation from book to movie. Hutcheon writes: "The very fact that adaptation is a relationship between an original and a derived work means that both the product and the process of adaptation exist within a context a time and a place, a society and a culture" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 16).

### **Methodology**

This study employs a comparative literary analysis methodology, examining both texts through close reading and theoretical application. The primary texts include Forster's Maurice and Kundalkar's Cobalt Blue in both its novelistic form (translated by Jerry Pinto) and cinematic form. Secondary sources include Cass's identity formation model, Tomkins's affect theory, Stockton's queer childhood theory, Sedgwick's work on shame and performativity, and Hutcheon's adaptation theory.

The analysis proceeds through thematic and structural comparison: examining each protagonist's emotional journey through the six stages of Cass's model; analyzing the role of cultural context in shaping emotional experience; and comparing how the two works represent queer interiority. For Cobalt Blue, the analysis also attends to the adaptation's transformation of emotional representation from interior monologue to visual impressionism, drawing on scholarly critiques of the film's aesthetic choices.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **The Emotional Architecture of Identity Formation**

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Both Maurice and Cobalt Blue plot their protagonist's journey through the emotional stages of Cass, although the exact manifestations differ due to the cultural context.

Maurice Hall's journey starts with the identity confusion stage characterized by "bewilderment" and the inability of the protagonist to name his desires (Forster 15). As a boy, Maurice is taught that "to love a noble woman, to protect and serve her—this, he told the little boy, was the crown of life" (Forster 4). According to the narration of Bailey, the educational system "was engaged in the production of a particular myth of Anglo-Saxon manhood as a strategy of imperial administration" (Bailey 47). Maurice's early education sought to erase the possibility of same-sex desire. Maurice responds to the advances of an older man with violence, knocking the man down (Forster 20).

In the case of Tanay, his identity confusion is expressed in his inability to articulate his desires for the paying guest. The second-person narrative technique used to tell the story of Tanay demonstrates the inner workings of the protagonist's mind. The color becomes a tool with which the protagonist names the unnameable desire for the paying guest. Maurice's meeting with Clive Durham triggers the identity comparison stage. When Clive Durham declares his love for Maurice, "Maurice was scandalized, horrified. He was shocked to the bottom of his suburban soul, and exclaimed, 'Oh, rot!' The words, the manner, were out of him before he could recall them. 'Durham, you're an Englishman. I'm another. Don't talk nonsense'" (Forster 58-59). According to Sedgwick, "the crisis of male sexual definition comprises an essential organizing component of modern identity" (Sedgwick 65). Maurice's discourse around sex and sexuality displays "the fundamental link between normative heterosexuality and English identity" (Bailey 50). The shame associated with the stage manifests in Maurice referring to himself as "an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort" (Forster 139).

Tanay's experience of the tolerance stage is characterized, according to Keshavamurthy, by "the disillusionment of disappointed love" (Keshavamurthy 2022). Tanay is forced to confront his desire while living within the confines of his traditional Maharashtrian Brahmin family. The paying guest's philosophy that "the true object of desire is the desire to keep desiring" (Kundalkar 89) both facilitates and complicates Tanay's quest for identity. As Johri notes, the siblings "do not conform to gender roles: Tanay is an unconventional man and poet who spends most of his time indoors and Anuja is a masculine woman who plays hockey" (Johri 86).

The acceptance stage is associated with a confrontation with terror. Maurice considers ending his life in despair, believing that "the heart of his agony would be loneliness" (Forster 200). But his terror of society's gaze prevents him from accepting himself as a queer man for a considerable amount of time. It is through his friendship with Alec Scudder that Maurice realizes his capacity for love and desire. As Forster notes in his "Terminal Note," Maurice's

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queerness ultimately saves him in that "the deviation of his desires from the 'straight line' initiates his breaking from the immobilizing dictates of English character" (Forster 252).

Tanay's terror of society's reaction to his desire is mediated through the sister Anuja's parallel life. Both characters are "ultimately driven by a productive lack that enables them to negotiate with their own solitude and refashion themselves" (Keshavamurthy 2022). Tanay's acceptance of himself and the rejection of his family is achieved through him departing to pursue an international writing program. Anuya's acceptance of her desire for sport is achieved through her finding a job as a hockey coach in Kohima.

Maurice achieves a sense of pride through his rejection of societal norms. His acceptance of his queerness is expressed in his refusal to live according to the rules of a "normal" life as chosen by Clive. As Clive says to Maurice, "Against my will I have become normal. I cannot help it" (Forster 104). Maurice's synthesis lies in his ability to integrate his understanding of queer desire with the rest of his being. As Stockton notes, Maurice's queerness prevents him from embracing the "straight line" that was expected of him in favor of a more "irregular growth."

The realization of a sense of self takes place through Tanay and Anuya's "growth sideways." As Stockton notes, this type of growth is manifested in "odd lingerings, wayward paths, and fertile delays" (Stockton 3). In the case of Maurice, his commitment to an "odd lingering" is manifested in the fact that he does not seek to embrace the life of married and child-bearing parents. He comes to a synthesis with his queer identity by rejecting his previous understanding of society. As Stockton notes, children's queerness is "rendered and explored best in fictional forms" (Stockton 5). Maurice's journey through the stages of queer development is reflected in his life choices. For example, his realization that "people turned out to be alive" (Forster 30) reflects Stockton's view that it is difficult for a child to accept the fact that people are not "flat pieces of cardboard stamped with a conventional design."

In the case of Tanay, his journey through the stages of queer development is encapsulated by the cobalt blue motif. As Keshavamurthy observes, the color is invested with "rich connotations" in the novel (Keshavamurthy 2022). The cobalt blue motif is a manifestation of the "dialectic between intimacy, loss and estrangement" (Keshavamurthy 2022). The paying guest dips his palm in the paint and impresses the mark on the wall; later, in one of Tanay's dreams, the paying guest smears the cobalt blue paint on Tanay's neck to make "Tanay embody the paying guest's absent presence" (Johri 88).

The figure of the paying guest himself is the embodiment of sideways growth. He is "anonymous and inscrutable till the very end" (Keshavamurthy 2022), reinforcing "his status as a projection of the siblings' fantasies of absolute identity and freedom from the ritual ties of kinship" (Keshavamurthy 2022). The paying guest himself states that he "loses interest

whenever he gets everything he wants" (Kundalkar 156). This statement reflects the reality that one's desire, when viewed through the lens of teleology, always reaches fulfillment in a point where the attainment of the self is undermined.

### **Psychological aspects of Cobalt Blue:**

Cobalt Blue highlights the psychological burden. Tanay, his professor, and the paying guest are all connected to forms of secrecy created by a society that privileges heterosexual relationships. Because same-sex love is not easily accepted, Tanay is forced to hide an important part of himself. This secrecy contributes to his feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and emotional insecurity. His conversations with Pablo Neruda, his tortoise, become a symbolic space where he can express feelings that he cannot share openly with other people. The fact that the audience never actually sees the tortoise can also be interpreted symbolically, as though Pablo represents a private reflection of Tanay himself—a safe presence before whom he can express his fears, happiness, love, and grief without fear of judgment.

The film therefore presents sexuality and gender as deeply connected to questions of identity, freedom, and social expectations. All the major characters undergo some form of self-discovery. Tanay learns to acknowledge and express his sexuality, while Anuja learns to understand her desires and assert her independence. Even the paying guest, despite remaining mysterious, becomes an important catalyst in the personal journeys of both characters.

The film also invites the audience to participate in constructing its meaning. As Turner argues in *Film as Social Practice* (1999), the meaning of a film is not determined entirely by the film itself but is produced through the audience's interpretation. From this perspective, Cobalt Blue does not simply present a fixed message about sexuality; it encourages viewers to question their own assumptions about love, gender, sexuality, family, and social conformity. Chatterjee (2021) similarly observes that Indian cinema can both reproduce existing social structures and challenge them. Cobalt Blue performs both functions by representing the restrictive patriarchal family while simultaneously questioning the values that sustain it.

Queer cinema has provided LGBTQ+ communities with an important space to express experiences that have often been ignored, misunderstood, or stereotyped in mainstream culture. As Barbara Mennel explains in *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires, and Gay Cowboys* (2012), queer films often explore experiences such as sexual awakening, unrequited love, coming out, alienation, and the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities. By bringing these experiences to the screen, queer cinema allows audiences to engage with the emotional realities of people whose identities may differ from dominant social expectations.

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Representation can also have an important psychological impact. When LGBTQ+ viewers see characters who experience struggles similar to their own, they may feel less isolated and more understood. Such representations can create empathy, encourage self-acceptance, and challenge the stigma associated with non-normative identities. Craig et al. (2015), for example, found that positive media representations could contribute to resilience among LGBTQ+ youth. Their participants described media as helping them cope with discrimination, feel stronger, resist negative experiences, and develop a sense of community. This suggests that representation is not merely a matter of visibility; it can also become a source of emotional support and resilience.

The importance of realistic representation is also highlighted by Pooja and Rekha (2018), who argue that LGBTQ+ characters should not be reduced to stereotypes or used simply for comic relief in predominantly heterosexual narratives. Instead, queer characters need to be represented as complete human beings with emotional depth, relationships, desires, conflicts, and vulnerabilities. Such portrayals can help audiences understand homosexuality and other sexual identities as ordinary aspects of human experience rather than something strange or abnormal.

In this context, Cobalt Blue makes an important contribution to Indian queer cinema. The film does not portray its characters simply through their sexual identities. Instead, it focuses on their emotions, relationships, struggles, aspirations, and attempts to gain personal freedom. Tanay's journey from secrecy and emotional pain towards self-expression, and Anuja's movement from patriarchal control towards independence, demonstrate how individuals can challenge social expectations and reclaim agency over their lives.

Overall, Cobalt Blue presents queerness not as a problem that needs to be corrected but as one part of the complex spectrum of human identity and experience. By portraying love, sexuality, gender, family, betrayal, and self-discovery with emotional sensitivity, the film encourages viewers to question compulsory heterosexuality and rigid gender roles. Its emphasis on personal freedom and self-acceptance makes it particularly meaningful for LGBTQ+ audiences, while also encouraging wider society to develop greater empathy and understanding towards sexual minorities. In this sense, the film demonstrates how cinema can move beyond simply reflecting society and can actively participate in reshaping the way society understands sexuality, gender, and human relationships.

### **Adaptation and the Transformation of Queer Interiority**

The adaptation of Cobalt Blue from novel to film is an interesting exercise of medium specificity. As Hutcheon and O'Flynn note, it is "a process governed by medium specificity; that is, a process in which adaptation is dictated by the differences between the source and target mediums" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 16). The novel's structure of alternating between the first-person narration of Tanay and Anuja is changed in the film adaptation to pursue a "visual unification," privileging the gaze of Tanay (Johri 84). Johri observes that "we axe the

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multiple perspectives, giving us only the world that Tanay sees, imagines, and wetly dreams" (Johri 85). This change in the representation of queer interiority has profound implications. If the novel allows the reader to witness the "gradual psychological stratification of emotional rhythms," it is the "visual impressionism: a language of colour, gesture, and silence" in the film that is used "to externalize the psychological breakdown of Tanay in a sensory tableau" (Johri 87).

The change in representation has profound implications for the way the queer interiority is performed in the film as compared to the novel. As Johri writes, "the radical interiority of the novel, a queer voice that speaks to the domestic world, has been re-packaged into an aesthetic of melancholy and beauty that can be recognized by an international art-house audience" (Johri 89). The "festival aesthetics" of the film, "visually disarming, emotionally desensitising, and packaged to be consumed by cross-cultural audiences" has the effect of diluting the radical interiority of the novel's queer voice (Johri 90).

Critics have also noted that the film adaptation has some advantages over the novel in terms of the representation of queer interiority. As stated by the author, "the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2018 to decriminalise same-sex relationships had provided a new representational terrain" (Johri 82). However, "market and censorship pressures still determined how same-sex lives would be presented onscreen" (Johri 83).

### **Cultural Contexts and Emotional Experience**

The cultural contexts of Edwardian England and contemporary India inform the way the emotional experience of the protagonist is portrayed. Forster's England is a country characterized by "a period of anxiety, pessimism, and bipartisan agreement on imperial matters" (Bailey 45). The culture is also characterized by a view "of epistemic control (the state, the school, and the church) came increasingly to use a rhetoric of racial superiority to justify their position" (Bailey 45). Homosexuality is both stigmatized and criminalized. Maurice's emotional journey is one of coming to terms with the fact that his desires cannot fit into the mold of the "normal" as defined by society. Maurice refers to himself as "an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort," which underlines the impossibility of naming himself in the here and now (Forster 139).

As opposed to the cultural context that informs the writing of Forster, Kundalkar's India is a country in the process of transition. The film, "released on Netflix worldwide in 2022, came at a moment when the Indian streaming industry was experiencing a radical growth, characterised by the transnational distribution of local stories and a sensitive approach to queer content" (Johri 82). However, as Johri writes, "market and censorship pressures still determined how same-sex lives would be presented onscreen" (Johri 83).

One of the differences in the emotional experience of the protagonists is the fact that the cultural context dictates that their queerness is incompatible with their societies. Maurice

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escapes England to find love; Tanay and Anuya can find freedom in other parts of India (Tanay to pursue an international writing program while Anuya moves to Kohima). As Priyadharshan writes, "the queer subject is always on the move as she negotiates stigma and persecution" (Priyadharshan 12).

### **Conclusion**

The emotional queer journey from innocence to awareness in Maurice and Cobalt Blue reveals the similarities and differences between the experiences of queer identities across different cultures. Both stories depict protagonists who undergo the stages described by Cass, including confusion and shame about their desires, tolerance of their nature, acceptance, and synthesis, but the contexts in which this occurs are significantly different. Forster's novel is set in Edwardian England, where homosexuality was illegal and heavily stigmatized, and Maurice's path to self-acceptance ultimately leads him to exile. Kundalkar's story has its protagonists live in modern-day India, where the visibility of homosexuality is greater but comes with expectations for the couple to pursue a traditional relationship, so their journey sees the characters growing in other areas of their lives.

The comparison highlights the importance of the contribution of Stockton's "growing sideways" to the understanding of the growth of queer identities in literature, which is non-linear and does not necessarily follow a straight path towards a binary-end goal. Both Forster and Kundalkar write about people whose adulthood does not follow a similar pattern, and their protagonists embrace their nature in ways that involve loving others but also going through an evolution of their emotions. The adaptation also underscores the differences between the two mediums in its ability to depict the internal feelings and thoughts of the protagonists, as the film version of Cobalt Blue uses impressionist techniques to represent the characters' mental processes.

Both works of literature explore themes of emotional growth and the challenges of reconciling one's desires with societal expectations, but their approaches are different. The adaptation's use of imagery better represents the internal struggles of the protagonists, realistically depicting the non-linear, often circular, nature of healing and self-acceptance. This is the ultimate lesson about the emotional development of queer people in both works: it is not a straight or easy path, but one that involves many complications, disappointments, and confusing turns. As Keshavamurthy asserts, the stories "leave us with this existential given that individuals are as isolated as they are interrelated" (Keshavamurthy 2022).

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