Chapter IV

Homosexual History and Contemporary Gay Men’s Life

in the Novels of Alan Hollinghurst

This chapter focuses on how the novels of Hollinghurst bring to light a buried history of gay London from the Romans to the 1950’s, its writers and musicians, from Shakespeare to Pope, Wilde to James, Forster and Britten to Firbank focussing mainly on the lives of gay men before the gay liberation movement both in London and the colonies of Great Britain. The chapter also analyses contemporary gay life as represented in his novels, The Line of Beauty and The Swimming Pool Library. The issues about class, family, social politics and sexuality in the 80’s era London exploring related themes of hypocrisy, homosexuality, madness, wealth, drugs and the emerging AIDS crisis in novels like The Spell and The Folding Star which forms a central backdrop of modern gay culture.

4.1 History of London Gays: The Politics of Identity

The novels of Alan Hollinghurst have a kind of dark allure, elegance and erudition, passages of dream-like beauty along the lines of sexual explicitness in depicting gay men’s lives: past and present: art and sex as consuming passions in both the realms. His fiction casts a spell with its atmosphere of decadence bearing the influence of Wilde, Proust and Firbank. The novels have a common pursuit of the love object theme, offering orientation and insights into the contemporary gay world set against a wider backdrop of art in all its forms and obsession. The novels talk about the history of gays that has been evolving and defining new social movements in London since the 1950’s and the 1960’s. Hollinghurst talks about a vision of politics that asserts the interlocking of public and private spheres, the politics of identity that conceptualizes individual and collective identity not only as a basis for political
organisation but also as a site of political activism itself. His novels offer a pro-sex promotion of transgressive sexual practices to a foundational tenet of identity politics wherein the personal is political. With this link between the pro-sexuality movement and identity politics Hollinghurst examines the political and material effects to construct radical sexual politics through his characters and his novels. His characters are a constant reminder of the fact that transgressive sexual identities and practices offer a privileged position from which to construct a truly radical sexual politics. Focusing on the liberation of sexual diversity as an organising principle for political activism Hollinghurst in his novels aims at an ethics of sex positivity and sexual diversity that risks replacing social liberation with personal liberation.

Hollinghurst’s rich portrait of past homosexual history – from the romantic 1920s to the promiscuous 1970s – 80s can be seen in The Swimming Pool Library as Beckwith the main protagonist in the novel writes the biography of Charles Nantwich, a gay aristocrat in the early twenties. The materials in the diary serve to piece together the ‘crazed mosaic’ of a life before the gay liberation movement. The intertwining of Will’s London and Charles’s experience as a young boy in a public school, as a young man at the university, as a soldier abroad, and into middle age, works to showcase a world before and after the liberation in London and the colonies of Great Britain. At the same time, the novel raises many complex issues around class, sexuality and race over the decades and the treatment of sexual minority groups in England. Hollinghurst in the novel vividly illustrates themes central to the experience of being homosexual, privileged and British in the early life of Charles Nantwich.

I saw one pair of adolescent boys – very tall & elegant – sauntering along with their fingers intertwined, wearing scarves or red cotton tied round their upper arms. One old man, too, had a watch, & encouraged people to ask him the time, which had to be done in a very respectful manner. Then he would listen to its ticking and give a knowing and superior smile.
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It is this, which I hardly dare to call innocence, for fear it might not be, or that I do not understand, which has moved me particularly and has given me a sense of contentment, almost of elation, even when doing the repetitive chores of the D.C. The beauty of the men is so openly displayed that it seems a reproach to lust. I felt anger and something akin to people has, until so recently, been stolen into slavery or mutilated into eunuchry (Hollinghurst 1988: 125-126).

Nick Guest in The Line of Beauty is said to like Alexander Pope. Nick is attracted to physical beauty in art and in men. As Nick starts talking about his interest in Henry James, Joseph Conrad and George Meredith, the world of a past gay history is revealed to us at the backdrop of a modern gay culture. References to Shakespeare’s play Pericles and Oscar Wilde’s Lady Windermere’s Fan exquisitely portrays the past in the form of art and literature. The past continually intrudes into the twilight world. Hollinghurst evokes in The Folding Star, as Edward Manners, a disaffected Englishman in Belgium develops an idealised infatuation with his seventeen year old private pupil Luc. The novel prepares a past background by laying out a definitive catalogue of paintings by EdgartOrst, a Symbolist artist of the 1890s with a tortured love life, which Manners takes up in pursuit of his increasingly desperate feelings for Luc. ‘I was gripped by Orst’s obsession with his actress. I loved the superior way he had renounced everything in its favour, and made such a show of retreating from view into the snows of a dream’ (Hollinghurst 1994: 70). Through Manner’s urgent explorations of local gay bars, the bodies of casual lovers encountered there, revelations proceed apace about all the characters, their motives and their past lives.

When William Beckwith starts reading Charles Nantwich’s diaries in The Swimming Pool Library, he becomes aware of his privileges and security as a homosexual in the 80s era London compared to the life that Nantwich had to struggle as a gay in the early 1920s. The untold, yet immense contributions of Ronald Firbank a novelist who openly addressed issues
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of homosexuality in his works, is related through the diary of Nantwich. The epigraph of the novel is itself from one of his novels.

‘She reads at such a pace’, she complained, ‘and when I asked her where she had learnt to read so quickly, she replied ‘On the screens at Cinemas’.

- The Flower Beneath the Foot (cited in Hollinghurst 1988: v).

His other works as Valmouth, Caprice, Vainglory and Inclinations find mention through the diary of Nantwich. From the diaries, Will comes to know about his meeting with Ronald Firbank, who is an extraordinary portrait of effete, decrepitude, camp and alcoholic. The novel is pervaded with references to Ronald Firbank up until the very last page. Through Nantwich’s diary, the lives of gay men before the gay liberation movement are vividly portrayed before Beckwith. The house of Charles Nantwich is in itself a representation of a gay world in the past. The whole house is filled with memorabilia and books; as they walk up to the library, there are homo-erotic paintings as well as the portrait of a beautiful African boy.

There was one heavily creased photograph of an exquisitely soulful black youth, cropped at an angle, where presumably another figure in the picture had been scissored off. After the scene in Charles’s bedroom this gave me a mild unease, as if it might be a magical act of elimination (Hollinghurst 1988: 111).

After going around the house and the photographs of Charles, Will begins to get a glimpse of Charles’s past life.

It was really the present which reassured me. Charles’s life now was so incoherent, such a mixture of fatigue and obsessive, vehement energy, of knowing subtlety and juvenile broadness, of presence and absence, that he gave me the hope which the books withheld (Hollinghurst 1988: 112).
The novel elaborately projects the causal yet dangerous engagements of William Beckwith to address issues of resentment and homophobia that lies behind a thin façade of artifice meted out by the heterosexual society. As Will reads of Nanwich’s days at public school as a boy where he experiences sexuality by turns brutal and tender Will becomes aware of the fact that being queer in the 1920’s was a bold step. If it was ignored then, Will’s era would never be basking in the privileges that it was enjoying through their sacrifices and their channelled contributions to this cause.

Though it is usually accompanied by excitement, it is not in essence a sexual thing (that is Ross or Van Orde in Mob Lib, or ChanceyBrough out at Burford or B. Howard in my rooms after the Commem Ball – or any of the others who stock my private case of lust, … I wonder often, having no idea, having dreaded even to find out, what all those boys are doing now, hate to think that I remember them alone … (Hollinghurst 1988: 126).

The domineering, democratic nature of boys bathing in the same room, where the sweet, civilised certainties of home were trampled by the stronger, medieval laws of school. William narrates through the experiences of Nantwich how homosexuality was expressed through male bonding, how it was just limited to rape, molestation and to some extent a senior becoming fond and obliging and calling him for no other reason but physical gratification. When Charles is cruelly raped by one boy it was a torture which was more mental than physical. There was a suppressed fright that Charles had to deal with every night. ‘He came over to my bed and put his hand down under the blankets. I shrank away, but he reached for me, and felt me fiercely’ (Hollinghurst 1988: 128).

From the moment Will starts reading the journals of Charles Nantwich, new truths are opened to him. The people he thought he knew are thrown into new light, new histories are revealed, and all the while his life goes on, clawing its way towards a new maturity. Like
Firbank’s flowers which is often trampled, the courage, and the beauty of the history of
Nantwich goes through tramplings, violence and racism, darkening the quest for homosexual
expression in many forms and compromising the spoiled ease and the inheritance of its hero;
which can be seen in the later life of Nantwich as he enters foreign service and travels to
Sudan as a regional administrator. He is enchanted by the land and powerfully drawn to
African men but find himself cut off from his race, his rank and his position as a colonial, to
express his feelings freely without repression. Charles ruminates as an administrator on the
sense of devotion that homosexuality can foster between men and how that devotion aids
duty and right action. The opera scene is important in bringing in the subject of eroticism and
homoerotic power through music and musicians. Will goes to the opera with James and his
grandfather. The opera is a performance by Billy Budd, a past gay. Will is almost struck to
tears by the homoerotic and emotional power of the work.

It was *Billy Budd*, an opera I recalled as a gauche, almost amateur affair, and I had not in
the least expected to enjoy it; and yet, when Captain Vere’s monologue ended and the
scene on board the *Indomitable* opened up, with the men holy-stoning the deck and singing
their oppressed, surging chorus, I was covered in goose-flesh. When Billy, press-ganged
from his old ship, sang his farewell to his former life and comrades – ‘Farewell, old *Rights
o’ Man*, farewell’ – the tears streamed down my face. The young baritone, singing with the
greatest beauty and freshness, brought an extraordinary quality of resisted pathos to Billy;
in the stammering music his physiognomy, handsome and forthright and yet with a curious
fleshy debility about the mouth, made me believe it as his own tragedy (Hollinghurst 1988:
138-39).

Will’s conversation with his grandfather about the music and the magical effect it had
on him is important in revealing the interest that is aroused in Will for the past. This talk with
his grandfather later emerges as an irony showing ‘how mad the hetero world is’ (Tillyard 2005: 3).

We must all have recognised it, though it would have had an importance, even an eloquence, to James and me that would have been quite lost on my grandfather. He had spent all his adult life in circles where good manners, lofty savoir-faire and plain callousness conspired to avoid any recognition that homosexuality even existed (Hollinghurst 1988: 140).

During Will’s conversation with his grandfather on the subject of Benjamin Britten’s homosexuality, his grandfather mentions about his relationship with E.M. Forster who later co-wrote the Libretto with him. There was something distinctly contrary in his grandfather about the issue and he openly criticised the music of Britten calling it ‘soggy’. He had wanted it to be more open and sexual.

But I do clearly recall the first night of Billy Budd. Britten himself was in the pit, of course. It made a fairly big impression, though I remember opinion was very divided about it. Many people understandably didn’t altogether care for the Britten-Pears thing. James looked blank and I frowned, but my grandfather went on. There was a party afterwards that Laura and I went to and I had quite a long chat with old Forster about the libretto (Hollinghurst 1988: 140).

Their conversation leads to discussions about the contemporaries of Forster, Britten, Pears, Budd, Firbank and later that of Nantwich. Will’s grandfather openly shows his dislike for Pears and Britten making fun of their gayness. This dislike reminds Will of the unpleasant truth hinted not just at them but a dislike which he might as well take for himself and all gays through life, wanting either to forget it or to disprove it. Yet, for William it was an opportunity of a lifetime as Pears enters to witness the opera.
Pears was shuffling very slowly along the aisle towards the front of the stalls, supported by a man on either side. Most of the bland audience showed no recognition of who he was, though occasionally someone would stare, or look away hurriedly from the singer’s stroke-slackened but beautiful white-crested head. Then there was the protracted an awkward process of getting him along his already repopulated row. James and I were mesmerised, and seeing him in the flesh I felt the whole occasion subtly transform, and the opera whose ambiguity we had carped at take on a kind of heroic or historic character under the witness of one of its creators. Even though I felt he would be enjoying it, I believed in its poignancy for him, seeing other singers performing it on the same stage in the same sets as he had done decades before, under the direction of the man he loved. It had become an episode in his past, just as the blessing of Billy Budd was in the memory of the elderly Captain Vere. Indeed, gazing at Pears, who was doubtless embarrassed and uncomfortable as he finally regained his seat, I reacted to him as if he were himself an operatic character – just as I had entered with spurious, or purely aesthetic, emotion into Charles Nantwich’s war-time adolescence, and the loss of his shell-damaged idol in a Hertfordshire mental hospital. It was an irresistible elegiac need for the tenderness of the England long past (Hollinghurst 1988: 142).

Through these stories of inheritance and tales of the past, the relationship between gay sexual expression and art is gently explored. Hollinghurst intertwines the London of William Beckwith and the experiences of Charles to make explicit a world that had dark under-leanings with the persecution, cruelty of homosexuals in the hands of law makers and politicians. Nantwich towards the end of his dairies writes about how his life was ruined. The African man whom he loved was beaten to death for being a homosexual. Heartbroken and unable to share his grief, Charles wanders the streets of London and desolately solicits a man for sex. The man is a policeman, who arrests Charles for public indecency. Despite his rank, Charles is ruthlessly prosecuted by a conservative politician of the time, who wants to make
an example of him. This incident is similar to the trials of Oscar Wilde, one of the most high-profile scandals of London.

Wilde’s passionate relationship with the son of the Marquis of Queensberry Alfred Douglas, led Wilde to take a libel suit against the Marquis who publicly accused Wilde of ‘posing as a sodomite’. Wilde’s libel failed and it was only a matter of time before the authorities prosecuted Wilde under the ‘Labouchere Amendment’ of the 1885 Criminal Law Act. Wilde heroically, if tragically, did not flee to avoid the expected criminal prosecution. The outcome is well known - Wilde defended his love for Alfred Douglas (Bosie) and was imprisoned for two years at Reading Goal. Although Wilde was born in Dublin and died in Paris, his legacy on London’s gay history is of huge importance. Before Wilde’s defence of homosexual love, London’s lesbian and gay relationships took place behind closed doors and on the fringes of the prostitution trade. London’s earliest ‘gay haunts’ were said to be in the streets around St. James Park. ‘Molly Houses’ were the name given to brothels where cross-dressing and gay sex took place. In 1916 the World newspaper described ‘painted and perfumed travesties of men openly leer[ing] at the passer-by’ in Piccadilly. ‘Certain bars and restaurants are meeting places for these creatures’, the newspaper went on, adding that it was ‘lamentable to know that their victims or accomplices are largely drawn from the ranks of the British Army.’

A number of queer men were picked up in the circle at the Empire and Prince of Wales theatres. Queer men used to go to the London galleries to cruise, preferring these and the numerous ‘tremendous’ cottages to the bars, clubs and theatres which they associated with a particular ‘style’ of man. There was a lively pub culture throughout the period and, like the cottages, different places catered for differing queer punters. The Running Horse in Shepherds Market was popular with a cross-section of men and women. The pub clearly
welcomed queer men and women, and there was indeed some cross-over of male and female queer scenes.

In the 1930s, the Caravan Club and Billies Club in Soho were popular with a similar crowd and there were queer dances and parties. Two were exposed within weeks of each other in 1933 – one in Holland Park Avenue organised by ‘Lady Austin’ for his ‘camp boys’ and the other in Baker Street in the city. They were not uncommon in the eighteenth century. ‘The chronicles of gay history in London, Rictor Norton, writes that many of London’s streets derive from the activities of prostitutes such as ‘Maiden Lane’ and ‘Grub Street’; close to ‘Maiden Lane’ are ‘Cock’s Lane’ and ‘Lad Lane’ suggesting that male prostitution may have been prevalent there. Today, London’s gay quarter is traditionally Soho, the social centre of London’s lesbian and gay community’ (http://www.pridelondonhistory.org/html).

Although Soho is the social centre of London’s lesbian and gay community, a number of key areas around London are popular with lesbian and gay men. In the South of the City, Vauxhall and Clapham are popular while in the North of London Earl’s Court, Hackney and Stoke Newington have strong lesbian and gay communities. Charles mentions about his night-outs in Soho in his diaries.

Afterwards I wandered through Soho & then in Charing Cross Road saw three black GIs loitering along rather idyllically, smoking cigarettes & looking at girls. They had that touching quality which off-duty soldiers so often do have, as if they knew they ought to be up to something but didn’t quite know what it was. There was a fat one, a thin one & an in between one with a lost, ingenuous expression which was decidedly heart-stopping. He was clearly the butt of his two smart friends’ humour & had an infinitely tolerant, good-hearted glow about him. I walked beside them to pick up their talk, & then went on & took up an insouciant pose on the other side of Oxford Street, by the Lyon’s Corner House (Hollinghurst 1988: 262).
As William reads through the diaries, he learns that the politician who had ruthlessly persecuted and imprisoned Charles was his own grandfather, now Viscount Beckwith. This is a realisation that makes Will experience the painful life that Nantwich, Forster, Britten, Pears and all the contemporaries of their times had to go through in the hands of politicians and law makers for choosing to be open and gay. Will’s wealth, his rank and his leisured day existence are all built on a foundation of homosexual persecution. He also learns that Bill, a man at the Corinthian Club, knows about Charles and his persecution where Bill, then a young man, had been thrown for having a love-affair with a boy three years younger than himself. The diaries reveal several sinister home truths about Beckwith’s own, grandfather, a former Director of Public Prosecutions who along with the Home Secretary and the police was the driving force of the Anti-gay movement of the 1920’s. These gradual revelations are counter-pointed by Beckwith’s own current affairs: platonic with his Oxford friend James, frenetically sexual with Arthur, a young black man, and other working class gays. The theme of natural love and sexuality destroyed by government oppression is very powerful. In the words of Charles Nantwich, Will captures the extent of the damage that his grandfather had done as a tyrant to a cause that Will himself is a part of.

My life seemed to go into reverse, and for a month, two months, I was a thing of shadows. It was in vain to tell myself that this was not my way: I was impotent with misery and deprivation. Then, as the end came insight – it was the dead of winter – something hardened in me. I saw the imaginary verdure beyond the frosted glass. I began to think of the world I must go back to, with its brutal hurry and indifference. I would have to take on a new man. I would have to move again in the company of my captors and humiliators and be glanced at critically for signs of the scars they had inflicted. I would have to do something for others like myself, and for those more defenceless still. I would have to
abandon this mortal introspection and instead steel myself. I would even have to hate a little (Hollinghurst 1988: 304).

Will decides he cannot now write Charles’s biography, nor was he intended to do so. Charles had been educating him on his own past, the sacrifices and persecutions he and his contemporaries had to experience to promote and pass on the inheritance of privileges and elegance that Will had all along taken for granted in the present. In Charles Nanwich’s own words he writes ‘My journal has always, since my childhood, been my close, silent and retentive friend, so close that when I lied to it I suffered inwardly from its mute reproach. Now, though, it seemed to hold out the invitation to something shameful – self-pity, and, worse, the exposure of my narrow, treadmill circuit of memories and longings’ (Hollinghurst 1988: 291). The easy possession of the sexual imaginations of Will as a gay was a product of the un-giving world of the past that Charles Nantwich had lived and survived. Desires brutal or tender, silent or evolved were in the shiftless air of the present that Will lived in, that seemed as a farce, which was more entertaining to read and watch than to enact.

4.1.1 Class, Sexuality, Race, Social Politics, Gay Liberation Movement

‘Anne Ferguson argues sexual freedom requires oppositional practices, that is, transgressing socially respectable categories of sexuality and refusing to draw the line on what counts as politically correct sexuality’ (cited in Glick 2000: 24). Hollinghurst in his novels tries to present this refusal to draw a line by arguing and celebrating the liberatory value of marginalised sexual practices and identities for queers and gays. Hollinghurst contents to argue for the promotion of politics grounded in transgressive sexual styles as a necessary effect for the logic of identity politics and to be finally understood in terms of the central role that identity politics plays in social and political movements through his works and his characters. ‘Kauffman also states that identity politics expresses the principle that
identity – be it individual or collective – should be central to both the vision and practice of radical politics. It implies not only organising around shared identity, as for example classic nationalist movements have done. Identity politics also express the belief that identity – its elaboration, expression, or affirmation – is and should be a fundamental focus of political work’ (cited in Glick 2000: 31). Hollinghurst through his works lays focus on creating a climate in which self-transformation is equated with social transformation, the new identity politics valorising a politics of lifestyle, a personal politics centred upon who we are – how we dress or get off – that fails to engage with institutionalised systems of domination. The characters in his novels portray this consistent seek to deconstruct and displace the importance of dominant identity categories for a performative production of pro-sexuality movement politicising self-exploration and lifestyle as radical acts. His works also continuously pay attention to cultural ideologies that privatise the sexual eschewing a politics of collective, social change for a highly localised politics of personal transformation and also examining how these practices function within the racists, imperialists and capitalist social transformations that structure contemporary society.

*The Line of Beauty* focuses on gay life along with the frivolous and deadly aspects of London’s gay culture. Set in London, the novel engages the story of a young man new to both his sexuality and the manners of high society. The novel is in the 1980s, when the economy is booming, the Tories have just been swept into power. Margaret Thatcher is Prime Minister, and the country is awash in hope and excitement. Nick Guest fresh out of Oxford, is staying in London with the Fedden family – whose son, Toby, was Nick’s dearest friend at Oxford. The father, Gerald, is a newly elected conservative member of parliament and is infatuated with Thatcher, whom he calls, ‘the lady’. Nick Guest an innocent in the matter of politics and money moves into the attic room in the Notting Hill home of the
Feddens and settles on the less worldly business of postgraduate study – specifically, a thesis concerned with ‘style’ in the works of Conrad, Meredith and Henry James. The title of the novel comes from William Hogarth’s aesthetic manifest, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). Hogarth argued that there are no straight lines in nature, that everything is bent. Nick Guest uses the model of Hogarth’s beauty to pursue his own private obsession with beauty—a prize as compelling to him as power and riches are to his friends. The novel explores the tension between Nick’s intimate relationship with the Feddens, in whose parties and holidays he participates, and the realities of his sexuality and gay life which the Feddens accept only to the extent of never mentioning it. Nick experiences radical exclusion and incorporation from the Feddens in acknowledging the real him. Hollinghurst tries to show through the relationship between Nick and the Feddens that the heterosexual identity is constituted through a denied dependency on the homosexual identity. In terms of radical exclusion, Nick finds that the erotic, a perverse kind of eroticism is projected into his sexuality to such a degree that this quality is seen as the only salient feature of his queer identity. Thus, when Nick as a queer comes out, the Feddens as heterosexuals frequently conclude they know everything there is to know about him once they know about his sexuality. In terms of incorporation, heterosexuality is taken as the standard dominant gender identity and homosexuality is defined primarily in relation to that standard. Nick’s identity as a gay is incorporated only when it sounds appropriate and is conclusively disproven when sexual behaviour is equated to procreative purposes. Nick’s identity in the novel continues to behave like a slippery, elusive idea arising in a way to acknowledge and assert and at the same time valuing difference to project self-recognition and self-representation as a gay man in a non-gay society. Apart from the themes of identity, class and sexuality the novel explores themes of hypocrisy, homosexuality, madness and wealth with the emerging AIDS crisis.
As in Hollinghurst’s previous books, the sex is minutely depicted and there are two kinds of sexual attraction. First there is the obvious rather stereotyped allure of black men and working class hunks – memorably savoured by James and William in *The Swimming Pool Library* and secondly there is a love for beautiful men, the ones who have a dancer’s body and a feminine face like that of a goddess in *The Line of Beauty and The Folding Star*. James in the novel purchases his pornography from something called the ‘Third World Press’ in Chicago. William has an affair with Arthur, a black homosexual. Then there is the veneration of Christ – like objects of desire, like Luc in *The Folding Star*, a male Lolita apparently descended from a sixteenth century printer who claimed he could trace his ancestry back to the Virgin Mary. In *The Line of Beauty* it is Wani who fills the role of ‘the beautiful’. The nature of these choices shape varying degrees of intimacy and commitment, dramatising modern gay relationships. He also points out the vastly disingenuous treatment of homosexuality by politicians and by the diplomats who feel that homosexuals are to be blamed for the spread of the virus. In one of Nick’s conversations with Sally Tipper, wife of a rich businessman who very strongly claims that the best way to stop the spread of the disease is to abstain from all kinds of sexual relationships till marriage Nick tingling with ironies and astonishment says ‘But if we’re never going to get married’. *The Swimming Pool Library* and *The Line of Beauty* acutely deal with homophobes and homophobic attitude towards homosexuals in various degrees In *The Swimming Pool Library* it is Dennis Beckwith, the ‘saurian’ peer who made it his mission to demonize homosexuality. In *The Line of Beauty*, it is the supposedly enlightened Gerald, who, even, after several illuminating conversations with Nick, insists on maintaining the culture of intolerance. Apart from them Sir Maurice Tipper is an open homophobe who openly says that the issue of homosexuality fills him with acute physical revulsion and mental distaste for a culture that has been blown out of proportion. On the issue of AIDS and its widespread dangers he holds the
homosexuals responsible and states that ‘They had it coming to them’. Appearing on the BBCs *Question Time*, Gerald laughs off the idea of equal rights. Yet, as Hollinghurst implies, Gerald and his like cause far more damage than any disease: their blithely self-serving policies devastate Swaths of Britain, and their insouciant personal conduct destroys more families than any amount of gay self-expression.

Nick in the novel experiences the world of the British upper-class, their snobberies, their attitude to life and politics, their vile hypocrisies and their cold hearted treatment to issues that have no political or financial importance observing them from his own comparatively middle-class background as he stays with the Feddens wondering whether he would ever be comfortable to be open about his sexuality.

Drinks were being served on the long terrace, and when he came out through the French windows there were two or three small groups already laughing and glowing. You could tell that everyone had been on holiday, and like the roses and begonias they seemed to take and hold the richly filtered evening light. Gerald was talking to a somehow familiar man and his blonde-helmeted wife; Nick knew from his smiles and guffaws that he was being recklessly agreeable. None of his particular friends was here yet, and Toby was still upstairs with Sophie, inter-minably getting dressed. He took a flute of champagne from a dark-eyed young waiter, and strolled off into the knee-high maze of the parterre. He wondered what the waiter thought of him, and if he was watching him in his solitary meandering over trimmed grass and pea gravel. He had worked as a waiter himself, two Christmases ago, and stood about with a tray in a similar way at two neighbouring hunt balls, it was not impossible that he would do so again. He felt he might look like a person with no friends, and that the waiter might know that he didn’t really belong to this looking-glass world. Could he even tell, any more than Lord Kessler could, that he was gay (Hollinghurst 2004: 60).
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Nick’s acute sense of shyness and un-comfortableness can be seen as he tries to hide the fact that he knows Leo to the Feddens. ‘He dreaded seeing Leo, on his bike, and dreaded being seen by Leo’ (Hollinghurst 2004: 45). Somewhere deep down he disliked the image of Lord Kessler as a closeted, desperate politicised gay yet, he felt naked to the core to ever mention about being gay in a world that went silent whenever it was mentioned.

As an individual Nick is intelligent, he had just got a first class degree from Oxford University and is currently pursuing higher studies, but people meant such different things by music, politics, sexual orientation/preference that puzzled andcomplexed him in more ways than he could imagine. Nick also never talked to Catherine about his crush on her brother. He was afraid she would find it funny. Nick’s awareness of his own homosexuality is muddled up in the new world of the Fedden’s dominated by class, family, social politics and their own views about sexuality. In the presence of Catherine, Nick felt a certain nervousness that did not allow him to be comfortable with his gayness, also in his secret innocence; he felt a certain respect for her experience with men; to have so many failures, as she already had a catalogue of failed boyfriends required a high rate of preliminary success. His relationship early on in the novel with Leo is educative enough to teach Nick a few truths that dominate the hetero world against the world of the homosexuals. In his conversations with Leo, Nick fumbles in his own feelings as a gay, unable to orient himself in between the two worlds; one of the Feddens and the other world of his own self.

Nothing very personal was said. Nick found it hard to interest Leo in his own affairs, and his various modest leads about his family and his background were not picked up. There were things he’d prepared and phrased and turned into jokes that were not to be heard – or not tonight. Once or twice he took Leo with him: into a falsely cheerful dismissal of the idea that Toby, though fairly attractive, was of any real interest to him…(Hollinghurst 2004: 32-33).
Nick’s world is constantly questioned by the charming; political world of the Thatcher’s and the Fedden’s which can be seen in his disguised conversations with Leo, who on the other hand is open and undisguised. When Leo says, ‘I’m the sort of guy who needs a lot of sex…I’m like that, I always say what I think’ (Hollinghurst 2004: 33). Nick with a quick discountenancing shudder contradicts him and says, ‘I don’t bear grudges;…I’m not that kind of person. I’m sure you’re not …’ (ibid.: 2004: 33).

The introduction of Lord Kessler a sixty year old, a left wing Jewish brother of Rachel Feddens serves to illuminate the political hurdles of being gay in the Thatcher Era of conservatism. Nick dislikes the idea of being in the dark yet comes to terms with the fact that in politics, a beautiful heterosexual gains more vote than a beautiful homosexual. ‘Kessler had never married, but there was nothing perceptibly homosexual about him. Towards any young people in his social orbit he maintained a strategy of enlightened avoidance’ (Hollinghurst 2004: 50). The house of Kessler has books and paintings of some quite different sense which Nick perceives to be an expression of inadequate disappointment. He has a painting by Paul Cezanne and Rembrandt; and books on money and financial management like *The Way we Live Now* by Trollope. When Nick is questioned about the knowledge he has on money and the corresponding relationship it has with the literature of Trollope, Nick feels disqualified by his complete ignorance about money. Lord Kessler can in many ways be compared to Edward Manners in *The Folding Star*, who takes a non-committed longing for things that need commitment and intimacy. Edward Manners, James and Lord Kessler lives among the many gay men who not only longs for a relationship but possesses the sense of nervousness, excitement, sensuality and anxiety that comes with such relationships. As Will describes the house of James, we come to learn how suppressed and repressed James is as a gay.
The other mags were not left lying about. The fact that even in his own home he kept them neatly hidden away (under some jerseys in the second drawer of his dressing-table) showed I suppose the secret and illicit power they still had for him. I hauled them out to see if there was anything new – though it was actually hard to remember. He dealt largely in material put out from Chicago by the Third World Press – a title which might have been thought to chasten rather than excite the exploitative urge, though James was clearly unabashed.  

... And then what the hell had James done? Though he had his mischievous side he was a conscientiously good citizen. He parked on yellow lines, but he always displayed his ‘Doctor on Call’ sticker (Hollinghurst 1988: 251).

Nick’s relationship with Wani reveals a whole new world of the Feddens and the Thatcher’s era and its subsequent homophobic attitude towards homosexuals. Nick feels a deep sense of detachment when Toby tells him about Wani’s engagement. Wani happens to be Nick’s long crush at Oxford and it depresses him to learn about his engagement. ‘He could picture a happy alternative future for himself and Wani – who was sweet-natured, very rich, and beautiful as a John the Baptist painted for a boy-loving pope’ (Hollinghurst 2004: 64).

In one of his conversation with Paul, an Oxford homosexual contemporary, Nick openly asserts his attraction and feelings for Wani Quradi whose façade of heterosexuality seemed to tear him not just as a fellow homosexual but for the larger issue of Wani being a repressed gay all his life to satisfy his parents, society and the political world.

Wani, like Toby, remained in the far pure reach of fantasy, which grew all the keener and more inventive to meet the challenge of his unavailability. He felt the loss of him as though he had really stood a chance with him, he’d gone so far with him in his mind, as he lay alone in bed. He saw the great heterosexual express pulling out from the platform precisely on time, and all his friends were on it, in the first-class carriage – in the wagons-lit! He
clung to what he had, as it gathered speed: that quarter of an hour with Leo by the compost
heap, which was his first sharp taste of coupledom. ‘Are you and I the only homos here?’
(Hollinghurst 2004: 65).

Nick’s escapades into a make believe world of the Feddens through their parties and their
celebrations dulls certain tendencies in him that he feels are dishonest. He feels lonely and
lost within himself. He felt that he did not belong to the world of the heterosexuals or to the
world of politics that they belonged to.

He felt restless and forgotten, peripheral to an event which, he remembered, had once been
thought of as his party too. His loneliness bewildered him for a minute, in the bleak
perspective of the bachelor’s corridor: a sense close to panic that he didn’t belong in this
house with these people. Some of the guests had gone into the library and as he approached
the open door he took in the scant conversational texture, over which one or two voices
held forth as if by right. Gerald said words Nick couldn’t catch the meaning of, and through
the general laughter another voice, which he half-recognised, put in a quick correcting “Not
if I know Margaret” Nick stood at the doorway of the lamplit room and felt for a second
like a drunken student, which he was, and also, more shadowy and inconsolable, a sleepless
child peering in at an adult world of bare shoulders, flushed faces, and cigar smoke
(Hollinghurst 2004: 75).

Nick by his proximity to the Feddens, attends Swank parties, packed with MP’s, cabinet
ministers and nobility, all of whom harbour the expectation that ‘the lady’ might appear at any minute. But Nick’s love of beautiful things and his interest for a new analysis of beauty dedicates him to the quest for searching and living a life embodying a double curve line of beauty which Nick asserts in his acceptance of his sexual self.

The double curve was Hogarth’s ‘line of beauty’, the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two
compulsions held in one unfolding movement. He ran his hand down Wani’s back. He
didn’t think Hogarth had illustrated this best example of it, the dip and swell – he had chosen harps and branches, bones rather than flesh. Really it was time for a new Analysis of Beauty (Hollinghurst 2004: 200).

Nick is attracted to physical beauty in art and in men. *The Folding Star* has the same outlook on the theme of beauty. Edward Manners has an affair with a young foreigner named Cherif who falls deeply in love with him, but as Cherif is ordinary looking, Edward can never really return his affection. The novel has often been described as an expanded form of *Death in Venice*. Like his forerunner Von Aschenbach in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* who obsesses over the beautiful Tadzio, and the artist Orst, Edward is a lover of beauty, not a lover of people and people’s beauty is fleeting. Thus, the disappearance of Jane Byron, Orst’s beautiful model, and later of Luc, Edward’s version of Tadzio, represents how cruel life can be to those who worship at Beauty’s altar. Hollinghurst in *The Folding Star* evokes the mysteries of the past through two major characters who are objects of romantic obsession and who mysteriously disappear. The long lost Jane Byron, beloved model for Orst, who swam out to sea at Ostend, Belgium, decades ago and was never seen again, leaving the artist with a life-long obsession for painting her image and the beautiful youth Luc, obsessive love interest of Edward Manners who also disappears. Luc is last seen looking out from one of the many photographs of missing children on a salt-splattered bulletin board at the beach in Ostend. Edward Manners is a man who lives with his beautiful obsessions, and yet never truly finds peace with them. Nick in *The Line of Beauty* is so taken by Wani’s beauty at Toby’s birthday party that Wani becomes for him an analysis of his own beauty in the lines and curves of his perception of the beautiful one.

Nick had a moment of selfless but intensely curious immersion in his beauty. The forceful chin with its slight saving roundness, the deep-set eyes with their confounding softness, the cheekbones and the long nose, the little ears and springy curls, the cruel charming curve of
hollinghurst 2004: 91).

Hollinghurst focuses in exposing the frivolous and deadly aspects of London’s gay culture. He can be in many ways compared to Henry James. Just like Henry James who exposed the late nineteenth century New York and the European society, Hollinghurst with a sly wit confirms the stereotypes about class, family, society, politics and sexuality of the 80’s era London. The material and the social excesses of the 1980’s are deftly portrayed through his characters Nick, Will, Wani, the Feddens, Alex and Danny. Hollinghurst artfully crafts and weaves a piquant satire of privilege and sexuality in all its forms by juxtaposing the themes of social politics with issues like class, morality and the gay liberation movement.

4.2 Enticing Panorama of Metropolitan Gay Life: Clubbing, Gay Parties, Music, Dance

Apart from the theme of the past history of gay men, Hollinghurst’s novels show a clear exposition of contemporary gay life and the lives of gay men leading a metropolitan existence in his novels like The Spell, The Swimming Pool Library and The Line of Beauty. The enticing panorama of metropolitan gay life is spread out in The Swimming Pool Library in the life of its narrator ‘William Beckwith’. William Beckwith who is initially conscious only of ‘riding high on sex and self-esteem – it was my time, my belle epoque’ (Hollinghurst 1988: 6) roughly portrays a life of ease and comfort before the pre-Aids era of reckless sex and multi-relationships Beckwith’s hedonistic lifestyle revolves around daily exercise and gossiping visits to the Corinthian Club, ‘… a gloomy and functional underworld full of life, purpose and sexuality’ (ibid.: 13). Apart from the club, his pastimes include cruising to the pubs, restaurants, discos and gay cottages. Disease and death are far from the mind of young
connoisseur William Beckwith who’s rapid and fast lifestyles never allowed him to ponder about it. Highly privileged, cultivated and a promiscuous young gay man William Beckwith is the grandson and heir of Viscount Beckwith, an elder statesman. ‘I was beckoned on having too much money. I belonged to that tiny proportion of the populace that indeed owns almost everything. I’d surrendered to the prospect of doing nothing, though it kept me busy enough’ (Hollinghurst 1988: 6).

The Corinthian Club where Will is a member and where he swims, exercises and cruises men is not explicitly described as a gay club but one that has a pervasive homoerotic atmosphere. Boys, from the age of seventeen, could go there to work their bodies in the weights room and older men would drop in to cast an appreciative glance at the showering youngsters. The Corry, as it was popularly known as was among the city’s famous brother clubs. More than once, Will had ended up in a bedroom of the hotel above with a man he had met at the showers of the Corry.

The Corinthian Club in Great Russell Street is the masterpiece of the architect Frank Orme, … Like Orme himself, the edifice is both mean and self-important; a paradox emphasised by the modest resources of the Club in the 1930s and its conflicting aspiration to civic grandeur. As you walk along the pavement you look down through the railings into an area where stream issues from the ventilators and half-open top-lights of changing-rooms and kitchens; you hear the slam of large institutional cooking trays, the hiss of showers, the inane confidence of radio disc-jockeys. The ground floor has a severe manner, the Portland stone punctuated by green-painted metal-framed windows; but at the centre it gathers to a curvaceous, broken-pedimented doorway surmounted by two finely developed figures – one pensively Negroid, the other inspiredly Caucasian – who hold between them a banner with the device ‘Men of All Nations’ (Hollinghurst 1988: 12).
The Spell presents one of the most enticing pictures of metropolitan gay life among the novels of Alan Hollinghurst. A range of gay hangouts like clubs, restaurants, night-bars and modern gay blocks are introduced to Alex as Danny takes him around. Alex loved being with Danny as he got to see a whole new world alien to him. He wanted passers-by to stop and watch them leaning together in the candle light and speculate enviously about them. He met beautiful men in the cascades and strafing of coloured light. Danny introduces him to house music as the music pounded and dazzled Alex, he felt grand and cavernous and ravishingly happy. With the effect of the drugs and the music Alex feels different kinds of happiness. It seemed that happening and happiness were the same. He gets up and dances rapturously with the other dancers. The music possessed him; he felt that he was living the music with his whole body. The novel represents a modern taste of the gay sub-culture along with undertones of the side effects of a life lived in total liberty and recklessness. Nick in The Line of Beauty is benumbed by swanky lovers, smarmy politicians and drug dealers. He brings to light both his sexuality and the manners of high society into focus. The swank party packed with politicians and nobility booming with hope and excitement touches and dazzles Nick and seduces his being. Nick embarks on two love affairs, first with Leo, a young black London clerk, and later with Wani, a Lebanese millionaire and a friend from Oxford. Nights of parties, drugs, sex and scandal dramatizes the dangers and rewards of his own private pursuit of beauty, a pursuit as compelling to Nick as the desire for power and riches among his many friends. The novels of Hollinghurst highlight young gay males like Will, Nick, Alex and Danny going through a period of sexual experimentation before seeking more committed relationships. Erotic sexual adventures are part of the enticing panorama of metropolitan gay life which includes sexual activities performed in public sex environment, sex clubs and a broad range of additional cruising areas. All the characters of Hollinghurst are primarily organised around recreational and anonymous sexual encounters. Many of these
experiences revolve around meeting men at gay bars. Some of these places find mention in *The Spell* like the bathroom breaks, afternoons in the park, party boy sex and club sex. Circuit parties are a common feature in the novel where gay men pay fees to party all night or all weekend, typically large dance floors playing techno music are packed with men with no shirts on. Many use drugs like crystal, ecstasy and marijuana regularly and visibly. Although *The Line of Beauty* has a different outlook on gay culture and its activities, Nick and his friends no doubt have parties in the Feddens home and have joint sessions and gay sex.

But Wani ignored Shepton and stepped through the group towards the bed and Toby…

Nick had a moment of selfless but intensely curious immersion in his beauty…everything in the house seem stale, over-artful, or beside the point… Wani gave no answering sign of special recognition…Wani said nothing about the turban, as if they were almost too familiar with each other time and culture (Hollinghurst 2004: 91).

Hollinghurst explains the joint that Nick takes part in as he walks around in daze and in thrill looking at his friends who lay in the damp still night.

A joint comes round again, and Nick took a serious pull on it. Then he got up and went to the open window, to look out at the damp still night. The great beeches beyond the lawn showed in grey silhouette against the first vague paling of the sky. It was a beautiful effect, so much bigger than the party (Hollinghurst 2004: 92).

The enticing panorama of metropolitan gay life is spread out for the characters of Hollinghurst, whether they live off inherited wealth like Will, or work in its pubs, clubs and restaurants or as scholars and metropolitan sophisticates. Money and its capacity for instant access to pleasure with ambiguous moral consequences, is a persistent theme in the generally well-to-do world of Hollinghurst’s metropolitan gays. Sex and art are even more pervasive within them: they show beautifully how the sexual and aesthetic instincts are inextricably and heartbreakingly entwined.
4.3 Sex, Drugs and Secrets: Shadows of AIDS and Death

By the end of the 1970’s, events were conspiring to put lesbian and gay life into crises. A backlash against homosexuality punctured illusions of a coming era of tolerance and sexual pluralism. The AIDS epidemic both energised the anti-gay backlash and put lesbians and gay men on the defensive as religious and medicalised models which discredited homosexuality were rehabilitated in public discourses. Although the AIDS crises also demonstrated the strength of established gay institutions, for many lesbians and gay men it underscored the limits of a politics of minority fights and inclusion. Both the backlash and the AIDS crises prompted a renewal of radical activism, of a politics of confrontation, coalition building, and the need for a critical theory that would link gay empowerment to broad institutional change. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the *Epistemology of the Closet* writes,

I think anyone who was around gay communities in the eighties would agree that, far beyond the changes in legal interpretations, the difference that’s hardest for younger people now to fully imagine has to do with the then – encompassing pressure of the AIDS emergency. The first reports of the disease had come out only in 1981, and its sheer newness, its untreatableness, and its ballooning mortality brought a sudden, encompassing devastation into the lives of urban gay men and their friends. It was a common experience then to be in a room of vibrant young people, conscious that within a year or two, all but a few of them would have sicken and died. Furthermore, the excessively potent fusion of homophobic stigma with deadly medical mystery resulted in uncanny fractures within families as well as society at large. If gay communities were experiencing an unremitting horror comparable to that of war time, it seemed to be a war full of disowned losses without a home front, generating grievous news that no one was willing to receive (Sedgwick 1990: 14-15).

Alan Hollinghurst in his novels fashions a culture of drugs, sex and secrets around the lives of gay men in his novels. Homoerotic lifestyles defining the parameters of living and
acceptance defines sex as a property of the individual, whose personal expression was shaped by social norms and attitudes. Sex and society and the secrets that shaped this relation are viewed as antithetical. The idea of a sexual regime, of a field of sexual meanings, discourses and practices are interlaced with social institutions and movements in his novels. These fine layers of inter-related discourses around sex, drugs, secrets and AIDS are the new social models of homosexuality that Hollinghurst elaborates through his characters as a continuum. *The Spell* is a comedy of manners depicting torrid emotions and passions of well-bred British gay men. It is a story revolving around four men and their actions ranging from casual cruelty to anxiety to adoration. Hollinghurst through the lives of these four men explores London’s drug-addled discos in the late 90s. The novel is an attempt to make an exploration of modern gay male experiences and relationships at the backdrop of drugs and AIDS. Set in London and the idyllic countryside of Dorset, the narrative tracks the interlocking passions of four men as each character falls successively under the spell of love or drugs, country living or urban glamour. *The Spell* unfurls into a richly witty picture of modern gay life. The first introduction to the modern gay world in the novel is when Danny and Alex meet up in Soho where they walk into Aubrey and Hector. It is clear that Danny knows many attractive gay men and has slept with most of them.

They got out in Soho, where the cab was immediately taken by someone else and whisked off, leaving Alex with an odd subliminal feeling of no return. He’d forgotten how crowded the streets were, and wondered if in fact they had been quite so busy in the old days. Danny’s mobile phone rang, and he turned away to laugh and jabber into it, while Alex stood and was bumped into. There was something festive about the streams of people; but he felt he hadn’t yet entered the fun. He thought of his usual Saturday nights in Hammersmith, with only the noise of dinner-parties breaking up, and then the distant rumble of the Great West Road … (Hollinghurst 1998: 73).
Alex is introduced to a new world of gay cruising as he walks with Danny. It was as if Danny knew every beautiful or interesting looking gay. There were bestowed stooping embraces, casual hand-holdings, caresses, mildly hilarious nonsense as he sat on people’s laps and walked past the bars and the café in Soho. Words and terms like trade, Miss Pamela and Guest-list were produced and received with gratified modern understanding between Danny and the other gays. As they go to a dancing club after dinner, Alex loved being with Danny.

Alex loved being with him, it went off like a rocket in his heart, the fierce ascent and all the soft explosions of descending stars. He wanted passers-by to stop and watch them leaning together in the candlelight and speculate enviously about them (Hollinghurst 1998: 77).

Alex is first introduced to Ecstasy by Danny in the dancing club. For the first time, at Danny’s instigation, virgin to drugs Alex experiments with hallucinatory, rapturous narcotics.

Have you ever done E?’ he said, and gave him an amiably calculating look.

Alex said, ‘No’, firmly and quietly, perhaps primly. ‘No, I’m a narcotics virgin really… (Hollinghurst 1998: 78).

Alex’s desire quickly blurs as he is unsure if it is the drug or his attraction to Danny that allows him to enjoy the evening. He finds himself talking joyously to strangers that previously he would wait for ‘ten years for an introduction in writing’. With the introduction of techno-music, the earth tremor bass and penetrating shimmer of high metallic noise, Alex and Danny dance on to the edge of the immense dance floor, swept by brilliant unpredictable stabs of light.

Crowds of men were moving in blurred inexhaustible unison with it. Others, in tiny shorts and lace-up boots, danced alone on platforms above the heads of the crowd, some strutting like strippers, others sprinting on the spot with a flickering semaphore of the arms. And all
around the floor, and trailing away into other unguessed spaces, there was an endless jostling parade of half-naked men, faces glowing with happiness and lust. After thirty minutes Alex acknowledged to himself that he felt quite pleasant, but he could easily argue the feeling away as the elation of drink and dancing and the company of a thousand half-naked men. Though the men were beautiful, it was true, in the cascades and strafings of coloured light. Each of the men round him seemed somehow distinct and interesting; in a way he hadn’t understood when he wandered in past the long line of cropped heads and top-heavy torsos. But of course people were unique, one tended to forget. He twirled round with a smile and saw Danny getting out of his short-sleeved shirt without stopping dancing. He thought he was lost in a world of his own, chewing and licking his lips … (Hollinghurst 1998: 81-83).

The novel further elaborates the metro-cosmo life of Danny and his gay partners as Danny organises his birthday party. The scene is a contemporary one of clubbing, dance music, recreational drugs, rent boys and affluent gay life-styles. Most of the friends are metropolitan sophisticates in search of the country good life. Drawn out of himself by ‘the mood of sexual jostling that went so oddly with the pastoral’, Alex is turned on by Danny, who supplies him with Ecstasy, introducing him to ‘house’ and ‘techno-music’. Alex, middle-aged, discreetly gay encountering the youth culture starts on a journey of self-discovery feeling himself ‘released’ by the drugs, allowing himself to indulge in romantic illusions about Danny. While dancing at the club, he feels ‘the yes of sex and something bodiless and ideal beyond it – what it might be like to float over a threshold into total acceptance by another man.’ More significantly, Alex begins to observe the inside of life, rather than the outside. The depiction of the night club euphoria, the house music, the tribal dancing and the scintillation of gorgeous dancing bodies lightens the world of Danny and projects the modern pub culture of gay men.
The Line of Beauty touches upon the emergence of HIV/AIDS as well as the relationship between politics and homosexuality, its acceptance within the 1980s Conservative Party and mainstream society. AIDS is a central theme in the novel but it is not an AIDS novel. Yet it is seriously dealt with and it is actually given a shape. Someone is well, then they get ill, then they get more ill, and then they die. Hollinghurst writes about AIDS as a fact of life rather than a fact of death. In The folding Star and The Spell, AIDS is dealt with very obliquely and marginally but in The Line of Beauty AIDS becomes a bigger picture and of that arc from naïve romance at the beginning to more disillusionment and even tragic ending. Even in The Spell, Hollinghurst’s sunniest book, AIDS is a penumbral presence. In The Line of Beauty, there are frequent teasing connections between sex and money and AIDS is linked to the cash-soaked immoralities of the Thatcher age. But AIDS is a killer beyond time, at the book’s end, Nick Guest, its hero and scapegoat sees himself already faded away. Hollinghurst projects AIDS as a backlash against homosexuality, spearheaded by the new right but widely supported by non-conservatives and mainstream Republicans. AIDS is shown as a punctured illusion of a coming era of tolerance and sexual pluralism in his novels. The AIDS epidemic both energised the anti-gay backlash and put homosexuals on the defensive as religious and medicalised models which discredited homosexuality were rehabilitated in public discourses. Nick, Wani, Leo and Robin experience the strength and the limitations of a politics of minority rights and inclusion as their homosexual identity and gay life enters into the AIDS crisis. They are like gay men infected with HIV who are no longer seen by the nation as sexual predators but as victims who deserve the deadly disease. They are reduced to objects of national pity by characters like Gerald.
The Folding Star, the most medieval of Hollinghurst’s works has the darkening shadows of AIDS and death. The Folding Star, a novel about narcissism, and a lover’s doomed search for love in the twilight world of symbolist art, ends with its hero looking out into the grey North Sea past a picture of his lover Luc; whose baffling disappearance stands for the sudden extinction of too many lives and hopes. Robin Woodfield, a forty year old architect in The Spell is mourning the death of his lover from AIDS. Leo Charles, Nick’s black lover in The Line of Beauty dies from AIDS, presumably contracted from his ex-boyfriend Pete. Pat Grayson, Catherine’s gay godfather in The Line of Beauty also dies of AIDS. And lastly Antoine Wani Quradi, a friend of Nick and Tobias from Oxford University, contracts AIDS after having a sexual relationship with Nick.

Apart from being a novel dealing with homosexuality, The Line of Beauty is a novel that minutely projects the material and social excesses of the 1980s, with the culture of drugs, sex, snobbery and scandal – in which Nick plays an unwilling part.

A joint came around again, and Nick took a serious pull on it. Then he got up and went to the open window, to look out at the damp still night. The great beeches beyond the lawn showed in grey silhouette against the first vague paling of the sky. It was a beautiful effect, so much bigger than the party: the world turning, the bright practical phrases of the first birds. Though there were hours still, surely before sunrise … He stiffened, grabbed at his wrist, and held his watch steady in front of him, it was 4.07. He turned and looked at the others in the room, in their stupor and animation, and his main heavy thought was just how little any of them cared – they could never begin to imagine a date with a waiter, or the disaster of missing one. He made the first steps towards the door, and slowed and stopped as the pot took his sense of direction away. Where, after all, was he going? Everything seemed to have petered into a silence, as if by agreement. Nick felt conspicuous standing there, smiling cautiously, like someone not on to a joke; but when he looked at the others
they seemed equally stilled and bemused. It must be some amazingly strong stuff
(Hollinghurst 2004: 92).

As the boom years of the eighties unfold, Nick finds his life altered by the rising fortunes of
the Feddens family. His two vividly contrasting love affairs, dramatize the dangers and
rewards of his own private pursuit of beauty, a pursuit as compelling to Nick as the desire for
power and riches among his friends. Unlike his relationship with Leo, Nick’s relationship
with Wani is secretive and full of disguises, which brings into question the larger fantasies of
a ruthless decade.

Nick was confident that none of them knew he was sleeping with the boss, and with ten or
more years of practice he could head off almost any train of talk that might end in a
thought-provoking blush. Part of him longed for the scandalous acclaim, but Wani exacted
total secrecy, and Nick enjoyed keeping secrets (Hollinghurst 2004: 207).

In his relationship with Wani, a beautiful millionaire, Nick finds himself immersed in sex,
drugs and secrets. This relationship teaches him about the lives of the rich and the famous,
the way of the world and the experiences of doing and buying dope.

They stooped in turn and zipped up the powder, and then stood for a minute, sniffing and
nodding, reading each other’s faces for compassion and confirmation of the effect. Wani’s
features seemed to soften, there was a subtle but involuntary smile that Nick loved to see at
the moment of achievement and surrender (Hollinghurst 2004: 217).

Always discreet and secretive of their relationship, Wani always felt insecure to be open
about his status as a homosexual.

For a second he imagined telling Bertrand the truth, in all its mischievous beauty, imagined
describing, like some praiseworthy business initiative, the skinhead rent boy they’d had in
last week for a threesome. Just then he felt a kind of sadness – well, the shine went off
things, as he’d known it would, his mood was petering into greyness, a grey restlessness. He felt condemned to this with Bertrand. It was just what had happened at Lowndes Square: the secret certainty faded after half an hour and gave way to a somehow enhanced state of doubt. The manageable joke of Bertrand became a penance. Nick was powerless, fidgety, sulkily appeasing, in the grip of a man who seemed to him in every way the opposite of himself, a tight little bundle of ego in a shiny suit (Hollinghurst 2004: 149-50).

The ironic conversation between Nick and Wani categorically presents a clear homophobic picture that Nick feels from Wani’s World. ‘Darling, no one even knows I’ve got anything to hide’’. He passed Wani the packet and smiled reproachfully. ‘It’s just like our wonderful secret love affair’ (Hollinghurst 2004: 252). Nick longs to make a declaration of their affair and he feels violently angry about Wani’s secrecy. He squeezes Wani’s neck and tells him.

‘I wish we didn’t have to carry on like this, I feel I’ve got to tell someone, I wish we could tell people.’

‘If you tell one person you’ve told everybody,’ Wani said. ‘You might as well take a full-page ad in the Telegraph’ (Hollinghurst 2004: 254).

The book is a wide exploration on the gay identity and its fight for recognition amidst the snobbery and the scandal of a conservative party. Gerald Fedden’s world is a direct representation of the secrets that makes Nick contempt the hetero world of its viles and hypocrisy. He thinks of Gerald’s regular visits to Barwick with Penny, his secretary, almost always without Rachel. It was a system, a secret so routine which almost seemed secure. This affair makes Nick loathe Gerald. At the Fedden’s home, Nick navigates through his thoughts and wonders about all the secrets and despair behind the quite walls.

A little later he woke and the house was silent again, and the shock of what was happening came over him, his grown-up scorn of its utter banality and his child’s ache of despair. He saw it had already become a secret of his own, a thing to carry unwillingly, a sour
confusion of duties. He lay awake listening to the silence, which was illusory, a cover to a register of other sounds … the sigh of a grey poplar, the late half-conscious toppings-up of the cistern overhead, and within his ears remote soft percussions, like doors closing in nonexistent wings of the house (Hollinghurst 2004: 290).

The book has a neat explanation on the theme of money, madness and wealth – clearly worked out when Gerald points out and says, ‘My daughter tends to think we should give everything we’ve worked for away’ (ibid.: 330). Catherine neatly presents her arguments and says, ‘I just don’t see why. When you’ve got say, forty million you absolutely have to turn it into eighty million’ … ‘I mean who needs so much money? It’s just like power, isn’t it. Why do people want it? I mean what’s the point of having power?’ (ibid.: 331). And finally justifies herself by saying that if she had power, ‘I think I should stop people having a hundred and fifty million pounds’ (ibid.: 331).

Margaret Thatcher’s appearance in the novel has been compared to that of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As Nick asks her to dance, he begins to realise that the big picture that Gerald had painted about her was not all true. He noticed that she moved in her own accelerated element, she noticed nothing and yet she remembered everything. The song they dance to ‘Get off of the cloud’ is symbolic of the clash between the two worlds of varied sexuality. The rampant nature of HIV infuses the characters’ lusts with a deadly significance. Hollinghurst is not a polemical writer but he casts a revealing light on the implications of the virus for homosexual men. This social criticism is important to Hollinghurst’s art. He delights in sounding the lubricious fathoms of male sexuality, yet combines this with both an unsentimental moral intelligence and an ear for the glorious fatuities of fine living that recalls Thackeray as well as Firbank. During one of his conversations with Rachel, Nick feels an instant pang of awareness as Catherine tells her mum,
‘Mum, for Christ’s sake!’ said Catherine. ‘He had AIDS!’ – with a phlegmy catch in her voice, which her anger fought with. ‘He was gay … he liked anonymous sex … he liked …’ (Hollinghurst 2004: 335).

The news of Leo’s death and the consequent illness of Wani of AIDS introduce an altogether new world that terrifies Nick of his status as an HIV positive and as a gay in the emerging AIDS crises. As he looks at the last photo of Leo brought by his sister, Nick is speechless.

The last photo she had shown him was terrible: a Leo with his life behind him. Nick remembered making jokes, early on, in the first unguarded liberty of a first affair, about their shared old age, Leo being sixty when Nick was fifty. And there he was already; or he’d been sixty for a week before he died. He was in bed, in a sky-blue hospital gown; his face was hard to read, since AIDS had taken it and written its message of terror and exhaustion on it; against which Leo seemed frailly to assert his own character in a doubtful half smile. His vanity had become a kind of fear, that he would frighten the people he smiled at. It was the loneliest thing Nick had ever seen (Hollinghurst 2004: 410).

Apart from exploring the theme of money, power, AIDS and death, there is the theme of scandal and hypocrisy which can be seen as another important theme in the lives of the Feddens and the Quradis. When Wani tells Nick that Martine was never his girlfriend and that his mother had made a charming arrangement of giving her a hefty allowance to keep her as his girlfriend Nick’s amazement knows no bounds. More scandals are exposed in the novel as the Fedden’s world is stripped of its vile hypocrisy. The affair of Gerald Feddens with Penny and the accusations against Nick for misleading Rachel, the scandalous life of Gerald Feddens steeped in sex, money and power. Nick is finally made to leave the house paying a heavy price for the choices he made in life. When Gerald accuses Nick of not being
loyal, Nick, for the first time experiences the ruthlessness of an era he never actually thought existed.

It’s the sort of thing you read about, it’s an old homo trick. You can’t have a real family, so you attach yourself to someone else’s. and I suppose after a while you just couldn’t bear it, you must have been very envious I think of everything we have, and coming from your background too perhaps … and you’ve wreaked some pretty awful revenge on us as a result. And actually, you know …’ he raised his hands, ‘all we asked for was loyalty (Hollinghurst 2004: 481).

The hypocrisy of Gerald is further made clear to Nick as he continues to accuse Nick of being the vile one, the one who is responsible for living like a parasite out of the Feddens and the Quaradis and exploiting them using the ‘typical homo trick’.

Do you honestly imagine that your affairs can be talked about in the same terms as mine? I mean – I ask you again, who are you? What the fuck are you doing here? The slight rephrasing, the sharpening of his position, loosed a flood of anger, which moving visibly through his face seemed almost to bewilder him, like a physical seizure (Hollinghurst 2004: 482).

The publication of his magazine ‘OGEE, ISSUE I’, was an event for Nick. It was his magazine. As he held the magazine in his hand he felt like the winner of a price, happy and unable to hide sharing it courteously with the boy, who brought for him. It felt like all the scandals had faded out, and what he saw was a wonderland of luxury, ‘for the first three glossy spreads, Bulgari, Dior, BMW, astounding godparents to Nick and Wani’s whimsical coke-child’ Elated and emotionally relieved Nick finally feels that his parents would see his name in print as a distinction, and not a shameful worry. It fortifies him to go through the magazine with his name as the consulting editor. He finally is able to connect to that ‘line of beauty’ illustrated with sumptuous photos of brooches, mirrors, lakes, the legs of rococo
saints and sofas in the magazine with that of his own life and his analysis of beauty. Nick feels extremely high of himself, his initial timidity of being verbally degraded by Gerald as a homosexual was flooded out by its opposite with a conviction that he had produced a masterpiece. As Nick leaves the Fedden’s home, his life ahead fills him with a muted dryness and also with a beautiful moment of realisation of a larger life.

It came over him that the test result would be positive. The words that were said every day to others would be said to him, in that quiet consulting room whose desk and carpet and square modern armchair would share indissolubly in the moment. There was a large tranquil photograph in a frame, and a view of the hospital chimney from the window. He was young, without much training in stoicism. What would he do once he left the room? He dawdled on, rather breathless, seeing visions in the middle of the day. He tried to rationalise the fear, but its pull was too strong and original. It was inside himself, but the world around him, the parked cars, the cruising taxi, the church spire among the trees, had also been changed. They had been revealed. It was a drug sensation, but without the awareness of play (Hollinghurst 2004: 500).

Hollinghurst brings to light through his works a set of emotions ranging from an awareness of the history of being a homosexual to the contemporary lifestyles of being gay, from politics to sexuality and from madness to wealth, an exploration of a life alongside art and sex. At a time when the British writing establishment is coming to terms with overt gayness, Hollinghurst can be seen as a representative of the new wave, a serious writer addressing a wide audience, for whom the sexual orientation of the personae is of little import for plot or character development. His works has been acclaimed for its sensational treatment of what the British press seem to regard as scandalous and salacious topics – life in a gay subculture, the workings of homosexual friendship networks and the physical activities of past and contemporary gay males. The novels of Hollinghurst have profound themes of
memory, wit, mystery and the passing sense of time with the linked sense that comedy and tragedy are always intertwined; that nothing makes life either more terrible or more ridiculous than the promise of the oblivion. His novels are a cause of celebration for various themes involving the skilful redolence of life lived forwards, of the rich and the evolving consciousness of wealth, of understanding social history, part social comedy and the ordinary business of living and of the fearless erotic tales of transgressions meditating on the changing social, sexual and cultural attitudes towards issues that are aesthetically transgressive and private.