

Political and Personal Angst in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

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Abstract: The article attempts to portray the traumatic outcome of the Sri Lankan Civil War that led to killings, human rights violations and mass assaults on many Ceylon Tamils by Sinhalese mobs resulting in huge civilian casualties. Consequently, there was a large exodus of Sri Lankan Tamils to other parts of the world, particularly the West which offered an asylum for persecuted Tamil refugees. Against this backdrop of escalating political tensions, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* narrates a boy's evolution from the innocent games of childhood to sexual awakening in a country that is intolerant towards any deviation from the accepted mode of sexual orientation.

Keywords: Ethnic, identity, 'funny', conflict, exodus

Sri Lankan expatriate writer Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* was published in 1994 and is a poignant portrayal of the life of a Sri Lankan Tamil family in a nation racked by communal tensions between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil minority. When the Sri Lankan government passed the Official Language Bill in 1956 that stipulated Sinhalese to be the only official language of Sri Lanka, it angered the Tamils and triggered communal riots which resulted in the Sri Lankan Civil War that began on 23 July 1983. The war led to killings, human rights violations and mass assaults on many Tamils by Sinhalese mobs resulting in huge civilian casualties. Consequently, there was a large exodus of Sri Lankan Tamils to other parts of the world, particularly the West which offered an asylum for persecuted Tamil refugees. Set against this backdrop of escalating political tensions during the seven years leading up to the 1983 riots, the *Funny Boy* is a *bildungsroman* that narrates a boy's evolution from the simple and innocent games of childhood to maturity and sexual awakening. It is a remarkable debut novel in which the author skilfully blends an individual's growing personal turmoil with the rising political chaos of the land, weaving together assorted aspects such as love, politics, race, sexuality and terrorism. It presents the ethnic violence that has long dominated Sri Lankan society and politics. The title also focuses on the narrator's emerging awareness of his homosexuality in an antagonistic society which strongly opposed anything other than the accepted order. The book's significance is heightened by the fact that it introduced gay fiction to literature in South Asia. Set in the late 1970s, the author deftly traces Arjie's transition from childhood to adolescence at a time when the rising ethno-cultural tensions between the Tamil and Sinhala groups of Sri Lanka led to the 1983 riots and his family's subsequent decision to immigrate to Canada. Internationally acclaimed, it deftly tells the story of the central character Arjun Chelvaratnam or Arjie who discovers his homosexual identity in a country where homosexuality is considered an offence. The protagonist's struggle with

his realisation of a gay identity is juxtaposed through instances of repression of Ceylon Tamils by the Sinhalese. Various events are recounted in chronological order through six independent stories by the chief protagonist Arjie who was a young boy of seven growing up in an extended upper-middle-class Tamil family in Colombo before the 1983 riots.

Arjie's earliest encounter with gender barriers occurred in his grandparent's home where every month on a Sunday, he along with his brother Diggy, sister Sonali and other cousins would be taken so as to allow their parents to spend the day "free of their progeny" (Selvadurai 1). The playing areas in the house were clearly demarcated as male and female spaces where the boys played cricket in the front part of the house, while the girls played dress-up bridal games in the back garden and the kitchen porch. On these spend-the-days at his grandparent's house, Arjie preferred to play with the girls and partake in an elaborate pretend wedding in which he was the bride. He considered the activity of dressing up as a bride highly symbolic for he felt free to transcend the "constraints of [him]self, and transcend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self" (Selvadurai 4). Arjie and his girl cousins continue to take pleasure in their fancy play, free of any notions of gender correctness, until the arrival of a new cousin who they nickname Her Fatness. Unlike the others, she refuses to accept a male cousin playing the lead role of a bride and insists that boys cannot play like girls because they cannot be girls. However, his cousin nicknamed Her Fatness, who wanted to play this role, is peeved and envious of Arjie's exclusive position in the game of bride-bride and calls him a pansy, faggot and sissy, "A boy cannot be the bride ... a girl must be the bride" (Selvadurai 11). While Arjie comprehends that he was being insulted, the consequences of such terms does not dawn on him as yet. This forced awareness about the rules of the real world early in Arjie's life intrudes into the idyllic pretend world of the children forcing them to play in ways that were socially proper, thus forming rigid views about how girls and boys were expected to behave as per the conventions of society. Arjie's problems start when he is caught wearing a sari by his Kanathi Aunt and his Cyril Uncle remarks to his father, "looks like you have a funny one here" (Selvadurai 14). These words seem to make an appeal for remedial action. He soon learns that his being termed as a 'funny boy' on account of dressing up as a bride was not meant in a humorous sense but implied a different sexual orientation which was not tolerated either by his community or his family. Banished from the fancy games of the girls and unable to fit in the world of boys, Arjie becomes aware of the implicit restrictions in his family and culture, and realizes that he belonged neither with the girl cousins nor the boy cousins, "caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (Selvadurai 39). This is a precursor of the identification of his homosexuality but captured in the naive terms of a child.

In the beginning, the romance in Sinhala films and Janaki's love comics stoke Arjie's romantic imagination for, he was obsessed with ideas of romance, love, and marriage. Before he meets Radha Aunt who was returning to Sri Lanka to get engaged, he imagines her to be someone fair and beautiful, "separated from everyday people, because she inhabited

the realm of romance and marriage”(Selvadurai 45), but is shocked when he actually sees her, for she was completely unlike his imagined Radha Aunt. However, she was the first person to defend and support him, even permitting him to amuse himself with her jewellery and make-up saying that he would have looked beautiful as a girl. This observation was unlike the antagonistic attitude of his family that opposed to any signs of a gay disposition in him. Antagonism is also seen in the way Radha Aunt's tamil family opposed to her friendship with Anil Jayasinghe merely because he was Sinhalese. Her mother Ammachi's vehement hostility towards Anil surprises Arjie, for, he was himself in a Sinhala class at school despite being a Tamil and had always seen his family co-exist in peace with the local Sinhalese. This complexity of ethnic intolerance is incomprehensible to Arjie in his childhood, “something that will inevitably have to be shed as he grows into adulthood, and develops an awareness of political contingency and the inflexibility of social perspectives” (Salgado 9). During the 1956 elections the new Sri Lanka Freedom Party that was elected promoted the interests of the Sinhala Buddhist majority and decided to make Sinhalese the official language of the country. This along with the assassination of the Prime minister in 1959 led to a strife in which a number of Tamil people including his great-grandfather were killed. The author skilfully captures this moment of Sri Lankan history through the killing of Arjie's Tamil great-grandfather because of the law that had triggered the animosity between the two groups, “The Sinhalese wanted to make Sinhala the only national language, and the Tamils did not like this. So there was a riot and many Tamils were killed” (Selvadurai 61). This way the Tamil-Sinhala conflict is personalized for Arjie's family as his grandmother who had seen the body of her father's body massacred from the riots becomes deeply prejudiced against the Sinhalas. Consequently she felt distrustful of the Sinhalese and felt that a Sinhalese surname pointed to dishonest intentions. He also learns about the Tamil Tigers in Jaffna and realises why Ammachi had often been angry with his father for putting him in a Sinhalese class, as she felt that his loyalties should have been with the Tamils.

When Radha Aunt confesses of her growing fondness for Anil, Mala Aunt comments that a marriage between them would never work as “things are getting worse between the Sinhalese and Tamils. These Tamil Tigers in Jaffna....to do it” (Selvadurai 79). The escalating communal situation has a far reaching impact on the love story of Radha Aunt and Anil when Radha Aunt's train is attacked. When Radha Aunt experiences violence on the train from Jaffna by Sinhalese agitators due to ethnic differences, it leaves her injured and traumatized and this incident forces her to change her mind about her love for Anil, a Sinhalese man. This incident combined with the opposition of her family open her eyes about the unfeasibility of matrimonial union with Anil as the atmosphere is charged with hatred, and consequently Radha decides not to marry him. The binary divide is reiterated by Doris Aunt, a Burgher woman who Arjie meets during drama rehearsals, who tries to make Radha Aunt realise what would happen if she married someone who was 'not of her own kind.' Doris Aunt admits that although she had had a

good marriage with her Tamil husband, she hypothesizes that if she had not married him, she would have had her family by her side now that her husband had died. Ammachi and Kanthi Auntie's feelings reflect the mood of the Tamils when they admonish Anil who comes to visit Radha Aunty, saying, "Haven't you people done enough? Please go... You are not wanted here" (Selvadurai 89). Radha Aunty finally marries a Tamil Rajan Nagendra, "Because most people marry their own kind" (Selvadurai 54). Her experience is also the beginning of Arjie's awareness of the existing tensions between the two ethnic groups, "From then on I began to listen carefully to the conversation of the adults to discover more about the quarrels between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. What I learned made me very uneasy, because I realized these problems were not a thing of the past" (Selvadurai 61). Arjie's opinion too is altered forever, for he is exposed to the social problems that the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict creates, and he starts to become conscious of the racial tensions plaguing Sri Lankan society. His growing awareness of the political problems in Sri Lanka equates with the rising conflict that finally erupts into violence.

When Arjie's Appa becomes a partner in a hotel and prepares to travel to Europe to promote his hotel, he enquires from his children as to what five things they wanted from there. Arjie asks for a copy of the book *Little Women* which Appa had once caught him reading and deemed it to be a book for girls but unbefitting for a boy. Appa's departure is followed by the visit of Daryl Uncle, a Sri Lankan Burgher who worked in Australia as a correspondent of the Australian newspaper *Sydney Morning Star*. He had come to investigate the rumoured torture that the Tamil Tigers were being subjected to at Jaffna. His solidarity for the Tigers was opposed to by Amma who disliked them and felt that they "...were nothing but terrorists and they were giving other Tamils a bad name" (Selvadurai 110). When Amma objects to Daryl visiting Jaffna which was the stronghold of the Tigers, he placates her anxiety by saying "Nothing will happen to me. . . . Neither the army nor the Tigers care about someone who looks like a foreigner" (Selvadurai 117). This finds a parallel in Arjie's statement about being caught between the boys' and girls' worlds and belonging to neither. When Daryl Uncle goes missing, Amma goes to the police to report the matter but their response makes her distrustful of them. She is suspicious about Daryl Uncle's death and feels frustrated at her hopelessness of living in a democratic country where no action was being taken against the perpetrators. When she seeks the advice of a civil rights lawyer Q.C. Appadurai, who they called Q.C. Uncle, he warns her against taking any action against the government advising her not to put her family in any peril. This advice makes Amma lament "What has this country come to, where a man can be murdered and nothing must be done?" (Selvadurai 142)

During his school days, Arjie's father Appa had signed a pact with his close friend Buddy Parameswaran wherein they had promised to take of each other's families. When Appa gives his friend's son Jegan a job in his hotel, Jegan's past association with the Gandhiyam movement, an association initiated by politically active Tamils with LTTE leanings to assist Tamil refugees affected by the 1977 and 1981 riots is revealed. When Jegan manhandles a man sticking posters on the wall, Appa

cautions him about the growing need for restraint to be maintained by Tamils saying "These days it is necessary to be discreet. We could have let him put up the poster and torn it down later" (Selvadurai 169). Appa warns Jegan not to directly correct his hotel staff as he felt that it would make them resentful, saying "The political climate is very volatile. With the Tigers killing Sinhala policemen and the Tamil party calling for separation, the Sinhalese are very anti-Tamil right now" (Selvadurai 172). He also tells him to remain as unobtrusive as possible since a Sinhalese named Banduratne Mudalali, who owned a lot of hotels in the same area was very anti-Tamil and had killed many Tamil families. He admits that very few Sinhalese were ready to help the Tamils and it was due to the efforts of his manager and staff that his hotel had been saved from destruction. When Arjie asks Jegan if he was a Tiger, he counters that though he was no longer one their revolutionary activities were justified, "On the other hand, what is the alternative? We cannot live like this under constant threat from the Sinhalese, always second-class citizens in our own country" (Selvadurai 176). When Jegan's terrorist links are finally discovered and the Sinhalese staff in Appa's hotel come to know of his Tiger connections, Appa openly takes their side declaring that "the best thing is to get as little involved as possible. If they find out that Jegan is connected to the assassination attempt, we could be accused of harbouring a terrorist" (Selvadurai 183).

Newspaper reports accuse Appa of sheltering a terrorist and he receives hate-mail alleging that he is a Tiger but when Arjie and his family are attacked by Banduratne Mudalali's sons and their friends, it is the last straw for Arjie's mother Amma who suggests that they emigrate abroad saying "It's better than living in this terrible uncertainty" (Selvadurai 195). Although Appa dismisses the suggestion at the outset, he succumbs to this recourse of emigrating and seeking asylum in countries like Canada, Australia or other Western countries since they were defenceless against militant attacks. It was evident that there would be no fair elections either as was apparent when voting officials were held at gunpoint by ruffians associated to a member of parliament and the ballot boxes were filled with false ballots. Amongst all this political turmoil and the growing anti-Tamil sentiment, Arjie's sexuality slowly begins to evolve and he feels sexually attracted to Jegan. His father on the other hand felt that their friendship would help Arjie to get rid of "certain tendencies" (Selvadurai 166) which indicated his disapproval of any orientation other than the established ones. Arjie finally deals with his homosexuality with his first sexual encounter with a Sinhalese boy called Soyza, alias Shehan when Appa transfers him from St. Gabriel School to the Victoria Academy where his brother Diggy studied, and who informs him "Appa is worried about you.... He doesn't want you turning out funny or anything like that" (Selvadurai 210). The Queen Victoria Academy embodied the colonial and aristocratic tradition that Arjie was expected to be a part of, since to be gay would mean a fall from grace. Diggy warns Arjie about the principal Mr. Abeyesinghe whom the students called 'Black Tie' for he administered strict punishment and students disobeying his orders were categorized as 'ills and burdens.' Arjie experiences racial discrimination even in school as seen when

Salgado the noted bully in the school says “This is a Sinhalese class, not a Tamil Class. We don't want you here. Go to the Tamil class” (Selvadurai 215). The school was divided into two factions, one supporting Lokubandara who wanted to change the name of the school as he felt that the name of the school was too British and wanted it to be an exclusive school only for the Sinhalese without any Tamils in it. The other faction supported his opponent Black Tie who wanted the school to be open to all races and religions. These two groups represent a microcosm of the larger tensions and Arjie wonders “Was one better than the other? I didn't think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandara stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better” (Selvadurai 247). Thus, both personal and political dissensions run parallel to one another even at the school level.

Soyza saves Arjie from Salgado's bullying and Arjie finds himself attracted to him to this rebel who defied School rules and wore his hair long. Their friendship grows and when Arjie is kissed by Soyza, it triggers Arjie's understanding of his own sexuality, “I now knew that kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along” (Selvadurai 256). When Arjie and Shehan have their first sexual encounter together in the garage Arjie feels remorse and believes that he had betrayed the trust and affection reposed in him by his family, “... I saw that I had committed a terrible crime against them, against the trust and love they had given me” (Selvadurai 262). Though Arjie is disgusted at what had happened, Shehan says “At least I know what I want and I'm not ashamed of it” (Selvadurai 265), showing that while Arjie was still a greenhorn, Shehan had come to terms with homosexuality and was in a sexual relationship with the head prefect of the school. Though Soyza was one of Black Tie's 'ills and burdens' he is chosen to help Arjie memorize the poems 'Vitae Lampada' and 'The Best School of All' so that they could be recited to impress a minister of the cabinet who is invited as the chief guest for the school recital. It was Black Tie's last hope to stop the government from reorganizing the school into a school meant exclusively for the Sinhalese. At the prize-giving ceremony, Black Tie's plan was to use Arjie as the quintessence of the successful integration of Tamils and Sinhalese by selecting him to recite the poems.

However, though he works hard to memorize the poems, the cane on Black Tie's table ready to wreak its painful infliction at the slightest mistake elicits a deep fear in him. Due to this he is unable to remember a single word during practice and this infuriated the principal so much that he would then beat both him and Shehan. Arjie despises his headmaster's policy of discipline maintained through intimidation and physical punishment. When he sees Shehan emotionally break down from Black Tie's beatings, Arjie decides to revolt against Black Tie's violent and abusive behaviour by deliberately mixing up the lines of his poems during the school function. His audacious attempt to ruin the school function divulges his desire for Shehan and the action acknowledges his homosexuality but he sadly recognises that “I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand into which they couldn't follow me” (Selvadurai 285). When Arjie is visited by Shehan, he realises, perhaps for the first time, that Shehan was

Sinhalese but "This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him" (Selvadurai 302). While the Ceylon Tamils felt ostracised and alienated due to the growing political hostility towards them, Arjie felt estranged from others due to his different sexual mindset.

The novel ends with a succession of diary entries about the events in Sri Lanka in the one-month period from July 25 to August 27, 1983 when the Tamil-Sinhala conflict erupted into a full-fledged civil war resulting in the burning of the houses and establishments of Tamils. The worsening situation makes Amma question the government's uncooperative behaviour saying "After all, we Tamils helped vote them in" (Selvadurai 289). They are now afraid that the police would not be able to stop the frenzied mobs from hurting the Tamils. Despite the government announcing a curfew, the fighting continues and Arjie's house is burnt down. The situation worsens and many of the grocery stores owned by Tamils are burnt down causing great inconvenience to people who wanted to buy food when the curfew was lifted for a few hours. Their Lakshman Uncle in Canada informed them that the riots were being televised there, and in Canada and England, there were demonstrations against the atrocities of the Sri Lankan government. Finally when their hotel is burned down, Appa realizes that "It is very clear that we no longer belong in this country" (Selvadurai 304) and they decide to apply for passports and move to Canada as refugees. Arjie feels relieved for he no longer feels safe or at home in Sri Lanka. Arjie's melancholy caused by their forthcoming departure to Canada is more because of the home that he is leaving behind rather than the country, and when his grandparents Ammachi and Appachi are killed, Arjie grieves that "I find it impossible to imagine that the world will ever be normal again" (Selvadurai 308). This thought echoes the sentiments of the Tamils who lost their home and their life due to the civil war. While in the past Arjie and his siblings would often talk about the fun of going abroad the circumstances had now altered drastically and they were uneasy about living off the charity of somebody particularly since they would only be allowed to take five hundred pounds each due to government regulations. In her essay *Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora*, writer Gyatri Gopinath opines that "this experience of migration forms the ground on which the narrative unfolds" (Gopinath 165). The novel ends with Shehan's scent lingering on Arjie's mind after their last sexual interaction as his family prepares to immigrate to Canada.

Funny Boy is a clever narrative of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict showing how the Tamils and the Sinhalese are in a state of constant cultural conflict in spite of Ceylon Tamils having a long and significant place in Sri Lankan history. The novel blends personal identity with national identity against a backdrop of communal tensions in war-torn Sri Lanka, and is a gay coming-of-age novel. In each chapter, issues of ethnicity and sexuality ingeniously highlight the growing unrest in the protagonist and in the nation, and the construction of sexual identity against the setting of communal strife is most striking. The identity of homosexuality corresponds to the rising political tension, and both Arjie's involvement as well as the nation growing unrest are movements towards social upheaval,

one on the personal front and the other concerning the country. The autobiographical trace is seen in both the protagonist and the author having gay identities and both immigrating to Canada due to the 1983 riots. *Funny Boy* addresses the covert sphere of sexual identity within a backdrop of social turbulence, thereby appealing to the psyche of a postcolonial diaspora impacted by civil unrest. Arjie's situation is quite complicated since his family comprised upper middle-class Tamil that neither supported the ideals of the revolutionary Tamil Tigers nor understood the attacks of the Sinhalese. Despite being Tamils, they had assimilated with the Sinhalese way of life and were unsupportive of the radical responses of Tamil Tigers. The situation becomes trickier as both Amma and Radha Aunty get romantically involved with Sinhalese men. In addition to the Tamil-Sinhalese ethnic conflict, the book also makes references to the Burghers who are descendants of the Dutch. Thus, Selvadurai presents panoply of romantic liaisons, Burgher-Tamil, Tamil-English, Tamil- Sinhala and these alliances cross ethnic, racial and cultural boundaries.

All through the novel, it is evident that social contrasts and gender restrictions create oppression and injustice that affect the behaviour of the characters. This oppression is reflected by the hostility between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lankan society and by the rigidity of gender roles in Sri Lanka's patriarchal society. The book reveals how ethnic differences are imposed within the realm of both private and public spheres. While the title is suggestive, the author refrains from using any explicit tags such as homosexual and simply positions Arjie in an in-between space which is at the centre of discernible gender and sexual boundaries. In this brilliant novel, the authorial experiences cleverly shade Arjie's personal incidents and not only introduce the horrors of the island's civil war but also the political rivalry and personal hatred that go with it.

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