

Funny Boy: Dismantling The System Of Carnal And Racial Autocracy

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Abstract

The horrific ethnic clashes between the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese in Sri Lanka during the early 1980s are the backdrop for Shyam Selvadurai's novel, Funny Boy (1994). Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan-Canadian writer. Six chronologically related stories that center on the subaltern core character's gender, sexual orientation, and race make up the novel. Arjun Chelvaratnam, also known as Arjie, is the main character. He comes from a Tamil minority household and is subjected to strict and oppressive rules from his patriarchal family, which prevents him from engaging in his passion of cross-dressing. These rules are contrasted with a string of tragic ethnic conflicts that occur throughout the nation. Because of his non-traditional sexual orientation, Arjie feels sexually uncomfortable in his own family and faces political limits due to his race. This research seeks to investigate Arjie's battle to liberate himself from the constraints of gender and desirability and accept his emerging¹ sexuality. Michel Foucault's concept of power is also referred to in order to obtain theoretical insight into the process of gendered "othering" and to provide critical opinions on the marginalization of the third gender as a power discourse in society.

Keywords: Conventions, carnal exclusion, minority status, same-gender desire, and racial marginalization.

Introduction

The heterogeneity of sexes is so deeply ingrained in human society that only male and female sexualities exist, whose social identities correspond to those of men and women. But now that transgender and gender nonconforming individuals are more widely visible, sex and gender can be understood in a wider variety of ways and in much more complex ways than they ever could have before. Whereas sex is a biological truth recognized by the reproductive system, gender makes distinctions between males and females based on social structures and cultural norms that are prevalent in the community. Therefore, feminist researchers justify their assertion that sexuality is biological and gender is a social construct. External factors like the law, popular culture, and public policy work hard to form, regulate, and change an individual's identity even if that person's sexual orientation is a natural identity. Therefore, a person's gender identity refers to how much society perceives them as either masculine or feminine. New-borns, regardless of gender, are taught appropriate social norms and behaviors from the moment they are born, including how to interact with individuals of the same and opposite sexes in homes, communities, and workplaces. When individuals or groups defy the established gender standards, they frequently face prejudice, social exclusion, or stigma. The study intends to shed light on Arjie's situation as she ventures beyond the boundaries of her atypical sexual orientation and ethnic minority in an effort to challenge the system of oppression from a personal domain. A minority Tamil boy struggles both internally and externally to come to terms with his growing same-sex desire and his daily struggles in the predominantly Sinhalese city of Colombo in the novel under study, which is set in the midst of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. The storyline reveals the exclusions that exist in Sri Lankan society throughout a variety of

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spheres, such as business and education. Gays are viewed as outsiders and subject to stigma in Sri Lankan society. In Sri Lanka, neither of the two ethnic groups accepts homosexuality or any other form of sexual deviation. In the story, nevertheless, the homosexual connection between two guys from different ethnic backgrounds unites the country. *Funny Boy*, discusses the bloody ethnic battle that caused a great deal of animosity between Sinhalese and Tamil people, however these two groups join together when it comes to gender conflict. People are divided by ethnic conflict, but they are united by gender binary and discrimination; gender issues are what bind the two groups together. However, because of ethnocentric attitude, characters who represent Tamil and Sinhala communities encounter difficulties at home and in school. Gender, according to Butler and Foucault, is the product of discourses that are controlled by power structures rather than a fact or anything that is inherent. Though often seen as a sickness or a deviant behavior, homosexuality or queerness is not a flaw. As a result, gender is normal for all people and is not an issue. It is also not fixed. Society has perpetuated the idea that being "hetero" is normal and being "homo" is wrong by brainwashing individuals. The protagonist of the text under study is persistently troubled by his quest for identity, both inside and outside of his heterophobic home environment, in the midst of the nation's agonizing ethnic tension. Every society has normative expectations about the appropriate behavior for men and women based on their gender. It's less about physical attributes and more about how you should act according to your sex. Gender identity is hardwired into a person from an early age. He or she uses behavior, appearance, and attire to convey their feelings. However, "societal views regarding the distinctions between the sexes define appropriate gender roles" (p. 335) are the opposite of this. Gender roles in a patriarchal society are created and recreated through interpersonal interactions. Assigning particular characteristics, positions, or values to individuals based on their sex is the social construct of gendered identity. Nevertheless, these codified standards change over time within the same society and between cultures and countries.

Since the third gender is growing in popularity, there is a general opinion that it is no longer an isolated minority and that gender discourse has become more inclusive in recent years. However, by standing on their own, the third genders must take the chance, deal with the fallout, and endure social shame. Even if they are navigating through life on their own, it is unclear how far they have to go to reach their guaranteed destination, and social approval is illusive. In this sense, Sri Lanka was not an exception; in the 1980s, ethnic hostilities erupted on the problematic island. Minorities' voices demanding rights were muffled, and their futures were thrown into doubt. The minorities were compelled to flee the island and navigate an unknown future as a result of the minorities' acts of violence. As a result, the minorities travelled in search of new lands and toward uncharted territory. Due to their shared experiences with uncertainty and an unknown future, ethnic minorities and third-gender people drew our attention to the juxtaposition of sexuality and ethnicity. *Funny Boy* (1994), is based on Selvadurai's narrative of the rising violence between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka between the 1950s and 1980s, even if it is not autobiographical. It follows 7-year-old Arjun, also known as Arjie, as he transitions from childhood's innocence to adolescence's challenging awakening. Arjun's perspective is used to recount the events of the story, emphasizing his efforts to accept his homosexuality and Sri Lankan society. Since he was a little child, Arjie has been banished from his so-called typical household circle. In the game of "bride-bride," his cousin Tanuja has expressed her strong belief that a girl must be a bride and that a boy cannot play the part of a bride. However, it's evident from his wish to transcend himself and his affection for looking like a bride when he states,

I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world, represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palu, seemed to revolve. It was a self-magnified, like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil Cinema, larger than life; and like them, like the Malini Fonsekas and the Geetha Kumarasinghes, I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, and perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested.

(Selvadurai 3–4).

The novel's protagonist is forced to move from locations where he feels comfortable and joyful to more rigid and gender-conforming environments. The main character feels cut off from the dominant discourse in physical settings such as the family home and Victoria Academy, where middle-class respectability is valued above all else as a requirement for a nationalist and patriotic agenda. Still, the isolation and captivity he feels enable him to go beyond the limits placed upon him.

Arjie's homosexuality put his father's traditional masculine values and patriarchy at jeopardy. Although it is never stated explicitly in the book, the terms "funny" and "tendencies" imply the concept of homosexuality. Consequently, Arjie's condition is taken seriously by his father Chelvaratnam, who decides to send him to a public school in Colombo that is designed in the British style, called Victoria Academy. Is there something wrong with his current school, Arjie wonders, bewildered by his father's decision to drop out? Appa says, "The Academy will force you to become a man." Selvadurai 210. Additionally, according to Diggy, "He (Appa) does not want you turning out funny or anything like that" (Selvadurai 140). Arjie's father, Appa, enrolls him in Victoria Academy, reasoning that his 'funniness' is due to boyhood fancies of dressing up in saris, playing bride-ride, starrng at handsome men, and reading *Little Women* on the front porch instead of playing cricket with his male cousins. But Arjie's yearning is a deep sexual struggle and identity crisis, not just a passing whim. In addition to exploring his sexual identity at school, Arjie's father's agenda of masculinization is institutionalized at the school, where he initially engaged in the bride-ride game at home. As a result, Arjie understands that his family will not help him deal with his inner demons or his homosexual impulses. His family rejects him when he discovers his sexual identity, creating a gendered environment in the house despite internal and external conflicts. Arjie's father, Appa, is worried about his son's lack of interest in sports and other conventional male hobbies, but only a few individuals—Jegan, the son of Appa's close friend Buddy Parameswaran—have the ability to persuade Arjie towards these activities.

The perfect family is shown in a number of movies and operas, where a boy meets a girl, pops the question, marries her, and has a son. This presents a picture of an idealized family, where the men are the head of the household and the women are docile and subservient. As a result, the family is depicted as "straight," with no place for homosexual or lesbian relationships. In a similar vein, the protagonist of the book is supposed to follow the predicted entertainment. Before Arjie's parents learned that their son wasn't "straight," everything in their household was wonderful. Due to the gender stereotypes of his family, Arjie found himself torn between the worlds of boys and girls. Traditions that dictate how men and women should behave based on socially imposed gender stereotypes are still followed by many people. Sociocultural standards in a patriarchal society require girls and women to act politely, project a typical feminine appearance, and exhibit nurturing and accommodating attitudes. It is expected of men to be bold, powerful, and aggressive. Consequently, Arjie's relatives and parents felt that his internalization of feminine traits was improper. In hetero-patriarchal society, a guy is not supposed to be feminine, and Arjie's behavior threatens patriarchal power. Because they have transgressed the socially imposed bounds of gender, people who do not behave in ways acceptable for their biological sex are labelled as transgender. But according to Lerner, a patriarchal society is one in which the father or the oldest male member of the family is the leader of the family or tribe. Eventually, the word "patriarchy" came to refer to male control or authority. As a result, patriarchy has changed over time and today denotes a formalized system of male dominance in society. According to Lerner, patriarchy in Western culture represents the privileges that men have but are not legally entitled to. People's capacity to appropriately communicate their emotions and self is hampered by gender stereotypes. People who do not conform to traditional gender roles are also encouraged by gender norms to be rejected and oppressed. Many third genders consequently never reach their full potential. Arjie is subjected to gender stereotypes, but he rejects them and goes back into the female domain to follow his passions. By doing this, he seeks to challenge the accepted standards that are upheld by all members of the family. All communities hold the belief that a man entering a female's domain is effeminate.

Queers often experience pressure to fit in with society's accepted ideas of the male-female binary, which is accepted as normal. People who don't fit into the dominant paradigm face physical harassment, intimidation, and mockery. Without a strong base, Arjie is unable to explore and discover his "unconventional adolescent sexual orientation" (p. 239). While they are playing hide-and-seek in the garage, Shehan woos Arjie. The family seldom uses the neglected location at the bottom of the driveway, where same-sex desires are fulfilled. The garage is dark, making it impossible for Sonali, the seeker, to locate them. Even though Shehan had kissed him before, Arjie felt violated since he was repulsed by what had just happened and did not understand how his sexual desire was orchestrated. Arjie is coy about his first gay experience with Shehan, which transpired during a game of hide-and-seek, as well as his "odd" sexual and physiological desires. There's nowhere else in the house where Arjie may express his 'latent same-sex yearning' except the garage, the domestic non-space (p. 239). Being gay is a distressing discovery since the person has been informed repeatedly that their behavior is "wrong" and "unnatural" by peers, parents, and other social structures. Consequently, when a person's sexual orientation deviates from the accepted standards of society's accepted sexual orientation, homosexual panic sets in. But as the narrative progresses, Arjie learns that Shehan's actions were really an expression of love, not a way to make fun of him. Arjie, the protagonist of *Selvadurai*, is constructed in a way that prevents him from fitting into the hierarchical structures of a heteronormative society. Instead, he creates his own world, a vibrant environment where he can accept his queer identity and relate to other marginalized people.

Gays and lesbians encounter homophobia, a society that denigrates gay behavior, as well as heterosexism, a system of hegemonic norms that support heterosexuality. Their sexual orientation is therefore despised, and they endure violence, harassment, discrimination, and humiliation. Police personnel typically treat LGBTQ people like criminals, ignoring the fact that it is they who are being harmed. Despite the fact that such persecution is unacceptable in today's world, people in Sri Lanka are nevertheless subjected to discrimination, abuse, and lack of protection because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, according to a study report by Amnesty International. Although it is illegal for any community to discriminate against individuals on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation, many nations fail to grant rights to and protect the third gender.

In the book under study, Arjie is constantly thrown into situations where he has no business being. Because of his father's insistence that he speak Sinhalese, he is forced to attend classes where only Sinhalese speakers are allowed, which makes his Tamil heritage clear. In addition, he struggles on a daily basis due to the way he looks, which makes him stand out from other guys his age and compels him to look for adult company. Finally, he finds himself in "a world they did not understand and into which they could not follow" (*Selvadurai*, p. 285) as a result of his sexual attraction to other guys in a heteronormative culture that does not accommodate non-heteronormative desire.

In this sense, the main character of *Funny Boy* experiences marginalization due to his sexual orientation and ethnicity. The book shows how institutions like the family, house, and school establish the heteronormative boundaries of modern-day Sri Lankan society. Consequently, gender norms have been established in numerous settings to produce appropriate conduct. Because the ideas are made to seem so regular, the non-normative experiences are kept hidden and intimate.

The two competing gender concepts in the book—conformity and nonconformity—are highlighted in the conversation between Arjie and his mother, Amma. The discourses surrounding the designations "male" and "female" suggest that they are diametrically opposed, however this is not the case. The disparities that do exist are "overdetermined in order to produce a systematic effect of sexual division," as McNay observes in King's "The Prisoner of Gender" (p. 3). In reading Foucault's description of the processes that make subjectivity, one is reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's famous remark, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (295). The family's corrective measures force Arjie to "become" someone he does not like.

Nonetheless, the protagonist of *Selvadurai* is driven to challenge the oppressive system and oppose the influence of patriarchy in both his home and school. Despite being bound by heteronormative constraints, Arjie manages to escape Black Tie's gendering frameworks thanks to Shehan's non-normative gender performance. Shehan notes about the school that is split between two opposing factions, "supporters of Black Tie and supporters of Lokubandara," which is very similar to the situation in Sri Lanka (*Selvadurai*, p. 215). On the one hand, Black Tie stands for the Tamilian aristocracy, while Lokubandara represents the growing Sinhalese nationalism. Being a male assumes a propagandistic role in shaping gender norms within these two groupings. The student body must accept pain and violence as they arise. On their first day of school, Diggy tells Arjie about other boys who were "disciplined" by Black Tie, describing in great detail the consequences one boy had to bear for offending Black Tie. He once slapped a boy, smashing his teeth. Another student in my class got such a severe caning that his pants tore. After that, he made him kneel in the sun until he passed out (*Selvadurai* 206). People are usually subjected to punishment in order to "ensure control," particularly when they are being "observed," "normalized," or "examined" by society at large (p. 221). For Arjie and Shehan, the Academy was nothing less than a jail. Diggy warns Arjie not to voice his complaints when he inquires about the guys' response to Black Tie's penalties. Shehan receives harsher punishment than the other lads because he is the most obviously homosexual character at Victoria Academy. Because Black Tie is Tamil and Shehan is Sinhalese, Black Tie routinely summons him to his office and publicly chastises him for their racial differences. Black Tie's hatred for Shehan stems from a domination rivalry that is comparable to the Tamil-Sinhalese struggle.

Arjie finds solace in literature as well, and he uses it to build his fantasy world. Watching films in Tamil and Sinhala helps him to visualize himself as a powerful, ethereal woman. As a form of punishment, he reads Janaki's Sinhala love comics while imprisoned within the house. Arjie's examination of the book, which his father considers to be "a book for girls," with the help of Daryl's uncle, could be seen as a way for him to get over the limitations and assumptions that have been imposed on him. He then has the opportunity to read about strong female characters in a range of literary works, which sparks his curiosity about and love for femininity and defiance. Arjie's response to Black Tie's principles at school is obviously rebellious and postcolonial. Through his discreet homosexual affair with Shehan, he subverts the macho order represented by Black Tie, his brother, and his father. On Prize Day, Arjie deliberately misreads *The Best School of All* by Henry Newbolt in front of the important visitor, whose help the principal desperately needs. The most crucial lesson Arjie learns from his partner Shehan is that "the weak in a world governed by the strong" had to "break the rules, or perish" (365), which is consistent with Orwell's remarks in his essay [14]. Eventually, Arjie's friend Soyza taught him the importance of resistance, which aided him in the future in demolishing all the antiquated colonial ideals. While his sense of injustice at the severe punishments meted out to his beloved Shehan was the main reason, his developing indignation with the way those in authority seized the role of choosing what was right and wrong also served as a driving force behind the act of subversion. However, this is really a minor triumph

over patriarchy and chauvinism. Consequently, Arjie daringly defies convention and revels in the beauty of his uniqueness.

Conclusion

The study analysed Shyam Selvadurai's debut novel *Funny Boy* (1994) using incidents and experiences that brought up sensitive issues related to race, ethnicity, and gender. Throughout the book, Arjie, who is seven years old, uses his point of view to discuss his experiences in his family and at school. *Funny Boy* highlights the various ways in which Sri Lankan society is divided from others. The essay focuses on Arjie, the main character, and his identity dilemma. Arjie is best defined as a conflicted person because of his unique sexual orientation, which causes issues in both his code-conforming patriarchal family and society at large. He is also a quintessential outsider, alienated from society and in conflict with both it and himself. In other words, Arjie's story reflects the difficulties that many young people who identify as third genders have in creating a strong sense of self, but his crises also highlight the issue that affects everyone who is perceived as "Other" in society. The investigation found that the young protagonist's identity crisis results from his unconventional traits, which are disregarded in conformity with heteronormative norms. The partition of spaces into sections reserved for boys and girls serves to further emphasize the novel's gender biases. Playing with boys, the main character gets called a "girlie boy" and is not allowed to play with girls. This prevents him from developing into a boy or a girl. As a result, according to Selvadurai (39), Arjie is "caught between the worlds of the boys and the girls, not belonging or wanted either". However, Arjie's tumultuous life experience compels him to reassess everything he has been taught about sexuality and gender roles.

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