

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 emerging 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

There are only two sexualities—male and female—whose social identities are in line with each other since gender inequality is so engrained in human civilization. But sex and gender can be understood in more nuanced and varied ways than ever before, thanks to the increased visibility of transgender and gender nonconforming people. Gender defines distinctions between males and females based on social structures and cultural norms that are common in the community, whereas sex is a biological truth acknowledged by the reproductive system. Thus, feminist researchers provide evidence to support their claim that gender is a social construct and sexuality is a biological trait. Even if a person's sexual orientation is a natural identity, external factors such as the law, popular culture, and public policy work hard to develop, regulate, and change that person's identity. As a result, a person's gender identification describes how much the general public considers them to be male or female. Regardless of gender, new-borns are indoctrinated from birth with acceptable social standards and behaviors, which include how to behave with people of both sexes in the home, community, and workplace. When people or groups reject the dominant gender norms, they often encounter discrimination, social marginalization, or shame. The purpose of the study is to provide insight into Arjie's circumstances as she pushes the limits of her unusual sexual orientation and ethnic minority in an attempt to confront the oppressive system on a personal level. In the novel under study, which is set in the middle of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, a minority Tamil teenager battles both

externally and emotionally to come to terms with his growing same-sex desire and his daily problems in the largely Sinhalese metropolis of Colombo. The plot highlights the exclusions that occur in Sri Lankan society in a number of areas, including business and education. In Sri Lankan society, homosexuals are stigmatized and seen as outsiders. Homosexuality and other forms of sexual deviance are not accepted by any of the two ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. However, in the narrative, the homosexual bond between two men from disparate ethnic backgrounds brings the nation together. *Funny Boy* talks about the violent ethnic strife that led to a lot of hostility between Sinhalese and Tamils, but also how these two groups came together to address issues related to female inequality. Gender issues are what bring the two groups together; ethnic conflict divides people, while discrimination and gender binary connect them. Nonetheless, figures that stand in for the Tamil and Sinhala communities face challenges at home and in the classroom due to an ethnocentric mindset. Neither a truth nor anything intrinsic, gender is the result of discourses shaped by power relations, according to Butler and Foucault. Being gay or queer is not a weakness, despite the fact that it is frequently viewed as a disease or aberrant behavior. Gender is therefore not a problem for anyone and is normal for everyone. It's not repaired either. People have been brainwashed by society to believe that being "hetero" is acceptable and being "homo" is incorrect. In the middle of the nation's excruciating ethnic tension, the protagonist of the text under study is continually plagued by his quest for identity, both inside and outside of his heterophobic home environment. Every community has normative standards for the proper conduct of men and women according to their gender. It's more important to act in a way that fits your sex than it is about physical characteristics. A person's gender identity is hardwired from a young age. He or she expresses their emotions through actions, demeanour, and clothing. The contrary is true, though, according to "societal views regarding the distinctions between the sexes define appropriate gender roles" (p. 335). In a patriarchal society, interactions between people shape and reshape gender roles. The social construct of gendered identity refers to the assignment of specific traits, roles, or moral principles to people on the basis of their sexual orientation. However, with time, both within the same society and between cultures and nations, these established norms alter.

The widespread consensus is that the third gender is no longer a marginalized minority because of its increasing popularity and that current gender rhetoric has shifted toward inclusivity. The third genders, however, have to take a risk, handle the consequences, and put up with societal disgrace in order to stand on their own. Social acceptance is elusive, and even if they are making their way through life on their own, they don't know how far they still have to go before arriving at their promised goal. In this regard, Sri Lanka was not an exception; the troubled island saw an outbreak of ethnic violence in the 1980s. The voices of minorities calling for rights were silenced, and their prospects were cast into question. Because of the minorities' violent actions, they were forced to leave the island and navigate an unknown future. Consequently, the minorities set out toward unknown terrain and in search of new places. Sexuality and ethnicity are juxtaposed, and ethnic minorities and third-gender individuals brought this to our attention because of their common experiences with uncertainty and an unknown future. Though not autobiographical, Selvadurai's account of the increasing violence between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka during the 1950s and 1980s served as the basis for the 1994 film *Funny Boy*. It follows 7-year-old Arjun, also called Arjie, as he makes the difficult transition from the carefree days of childhood to puberty. The novel is told from Arjun's point of view, highlighting his attempts to come to terms with his homosexuality and Sri Lankan culture. Arjie has been excluded from his so-called usual household group since he was a small child. In the game "bride-bride," his cousin Tanuja has stated that she firmly feels

that a boy should not play the role of a bride; instead, a girl must be the bride. But it's clear from his desire to transcend himself and his love of having a bride like appearance when he says:

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 protagonist of the book is compelled to relocate from happy, comfortable places to more rigid, gender-conforming settings. In physical locations like the family home and Victoria Academy, where middle-class respectability is valued above all else as a prerequisite for a nationalist and patriotic agenda, the main character feels shut off from the mainstream discourse. Nevertheless, the confinement and loneliness he experiences allow him to transcend the boundaries set for him.

Arjie's homosexuality threatened the patriarchy and conventional masculine norms held by his father. Despite never being mentioned directly in the book, the terms "funny" and "tendencies" allude to homosexuality. As a result, Arjie's father Chelvaratnam takes his illness seriously and chooses to enrol him in Victoria Academy, a public school in Colombo with a British-style architecture. Puzzled by his father's choice to leave school, Arjie wonders if there's a problem with his current institution. Appa responds, "The Academy will force you to become a man." Selvadurai 210. Furthermore, Diggy states that "He (Appa) does not want you turning out funny or anything like that" (Selvadurai 140). Rather than playing cricket with his male cousins, Arjie's father, Appa, enrolls him in Victoria Academy, citing his childhood fantasies of dressing up in saris, playing bride-bride, staring at gorgeous men, and reading Little Women on the front porch as the cause for his "funniness." However, Arjie's longing is more than just a fleeting fancy; it's a serious sexual conflict and identity issue. Arjie's father, who first participated in the bride-bride game at home, has institutionalized his agenda of masculinization at school in addition to his exploration of his sexual identity. Consequently, Arjie realizes that his family will not support him in overcoming his homosexual desires or inner demons. Despite internal and external issues, his family rejects him when he comes out as gay, resulting in a gendered environment in the home. The only person who can convince Arjie to participate in sports and other traditional male pastimes is Jegan, the son of Appa's close friend Buddy Parameswaran. Arjie's father, Appa, is concerned about his son's lack of interest in these activities.

Numerous films and operas depict the ideal family, in which a boy meets a girl, proposes to her, marries her, and has a son. This paints an idealistic picture of a household in which the women are submissive and meek and the males are the head of the household. Consequently, the family is portrayed as "straight," with no room for partnerships including homosexuals or lesbians. Similarly, the book's protagonist is expected to partake in the anticipated entertainment. Prior to Arjie's parents discovering that their son wasn't "straight," all was well in their home. Arjie was divided between the worlds of boys and girls because of the gender stereotypes in his family. Many people still adhere to traditions that prescribe behavior for men and women based on gender stereotypes that are imposed by society. In a patriarchal society, social norms dictate that girls and women should behave appropriately, present a stereotypical image of femininity, and have helpful and understanding dispositions. Men are supposed to be strong, fearless, and aggressive. As a result, Arjie's parents and family thought it was inappropriate for him to

internalize feminine characteristics. A guy isn't allowed to be feminine in hetero-patriarchal culture, and Arjie's actions undermine patriarchal authority. People who do not behave in ways appropriate for their biological sex are labelled as transgender because they have broken the socially imposed boundaries of gender. However, a patriarchal society, in Lerner's view, is one in which the father or the eldest male family member holds the position of leadership within the family or tribe. Over time, the term "patriarchy" developed to denote dominance or control by men. Because of this, the term "patriarchy" has evolved over time to refer to a codified framework of male domination in society. In Western culture, patriarchy, according to Lerner, stands for the rights and privileges that males possess but are not legally entitled to. Gender stereotypes impair people's ability to express themselves and their feelings in an appropriate manner. Gender norms also encourage rejection and oppression of those who do not fit into established positions. As a result, many third genders never realize their full potential. Despite encountering gender norms, Arjie chooses to ignore them and return to the feminine realm in order to pursue his ambitions. He is attempting to subvert the norms that are supported by every family member by doing this. Every society believes that a man who steps into a woman's territory is sissy.

The male-female binary is widely accepted in society, and queers frequently feel pressured to conform to this standard. Individuals who don't conform to the prevailing paradigm are subjected to mocking, physical harassment, and intimidation. Arjie can't explore and find his "unconventional adolescent sexual orientation" (p. 239) without a solid foundation. Shehan flirts with Arjie while they play hide-and-seek in the garage. The forgotten spot at the end of the driveway, where same-sex fantasies are indulged, is hardly visited by the family. Sonali, the seeker, is unable to find them because the garage is dark. Arjie was disgusted by what had just transpired and did not realize how his sexual urge was controlled, so even though Shehan had kissed him previously, he felt violated. About his "odd" sexual and physiological wants, as well as his first gay experience with Shehan—which happened during a game of hide-and-seek—Arjie is evasive. Arjie's "latent same-sex yearning" can only be expressed in the garage—the domestic non-space—and nowhere else in the house (p. 239). Finding out one is gay can be upsetting if the person has been socialized to believe that their behavior is "wrong" and "unnatural" by parents, peers, and other authority figures. Homosexual panic thus arises when an individual's sexual orientation differs from the norms of society's acceptable sexual orientation. Arjie discovers, however, that Shehan's acts weren't meant to mock him, but rather as a sign of love as the story goes on. The main character in Selvadurai, Arjie, is designed in a way that makes it impossible for him to conform to the hierarchical systems of a heteronormative society. Rather, he forges his own path, establishing a dynamic milieu in which he can embrace his gender identity and connect with other disadvantaged individuals. Gays and lesbians face heterosexism, a system of hegemonic standards that promote heterosexuality, and homophobia, a society that denigrates gay behavior. Because of this, individuals are hated for their sexual orientation and face abuse, harassment, discrimination, and humiliation. Despite the fact that LGBTQ persons are the ones being hurt, police officers usually treat them like criminals. According to a study report by Amnesty International, people in Sri Lanka are nevertheless vulnerable to discrimination, abuse, and lack of protection because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, even though such persecution is unacceptable in today's world. Despite the fact that it is against the law for any community to discriminate against someone based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, many countries do not recognize or defend the third gender.

Arjie is frequently placed in circumstances where he has no business being in the literature that is being studied. His Tamil background is evident since he is compelled to attend classes where only Sinhalese

speakers are permitted due to his father's determination that he speak the language. He also faces daily problems because of his appearance, which separates him from other guys his age and forces him to seek out adult companionship. Finally, according to Selvadurai (p. 285), he finds himself in "a world they did not understand and into which they could not follow" due to his sexual attraction to other men in a society that does not accept non-heteronormative desire, which is heteronormative.

In this way, the primary character of Funny Boy is marginalized because of his ethnicity and sexual orientation. The book demonstrates how the heteronormative borders of contemporary Sri Lankan society are set by institutions such as the family, home, and school. As a result, gender norms have been developed in many contexts to generate suitable behavior. The non-normative experiences are kept private and concealed since the concepts are presented as being so commonplace. The dialogue between Arjie and his mother, Amma, highlights the two opposing gender ideals in the book: conformity and nonconformity. The conversations that surround the labels "male" and "female" imply that they are completely at odds with one another, however this is untrue. The differences that do occur are "overdetermined in order to produce a systematic effect of sexual division," according to McNay's observation in King's "The Prisoner of Gender" (p). Reading Foucault's account of the processes that give rise to subjectivity makes one think of the well-known statement made by Simone de Beauvoir, which goes, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (295). Arjie feels pressured to "become" someone he does not like by the family's corrective actions.

However, Selvadurai's protagonist is compelled to reject patriarchy's influence at home and at school as well as the oppressive system. Shehan's non-normative gender performance allows Arjie to break out from the gendering frames of Black Tie, even if he is still subject to heteronormative limitations. Shehan points out that the school is divided into "supporters of Black Tie and supporters of Lokubandara," two competing factions that are strikingly comparable to the circumstances in Sri Lanka (Selvadurai, p. 215). Black Tie is a symbol of the Tamil nobility, while Lokubandara is a symbol of the rising Sinhala nationalism. Within these two groups, being male takes on a propagandistic role in forming gender norms. The student body has to accept suffering and aggression when they occur. Diggy informs Arjie, on their first day of school, about other guys who were "disciplined" by Black Tie, going into great detail about the repercussions one boy had to endure for disobeying Black Tie. He once broke a boy's teeth with a slap. In my lesson, I gave another student a caning so hard that his pants tore. He forced him to kneel in the sun until he passed out after that (Selvadurai 206). Punishment is typically applied to people to "ensure control," especially when that control is being "observed," "normalized," or "examined" by the general public (p. 221). The Academy was nothing more than a prison to Arjie and Shehan. When Arjie asks about the lads' reaction to Black Tie's penalties, Diggy tells him not to air his grievances. Since Shehan is the most overtly gay figure at Victoria Academy, he is punished more severely than the other boys. Black Tie frequently calls Shehan to his office and openly chastises him for their ethnic differences because Black Tie is Tamil and Shehan is Sinhala. Black Tie's animosity for Shehan is a result of a rivalry for dominance akin to that between the Tamil and Sinhala peoples.

Literature provides comfort for Arjie as well, and he utilizes it to create his fantastical world. He finds that watching movies in Tamil and Sinhala helps him see himself as a strong, ethereal woman. He is confined to the house and forced to read Janaki's Sinhala love comics as a kind of punishment. With the assistance of Daryl's uncle, Arjie examines the book—which his father views as "a book for girls"—in an effort to overcome the constraints and presumptions that have been placed upon him. As he reads about strong female characters in a variety of literary works, his interest in and love for femininity and resistance are

piqued. Arjie's reaction at school to the Black Tie tenets is undoubtedly postcolonial and rebellious. Black Tie, his brother, and his father represent the macho order, which he subverts with his covert gay liaison with Shehan. On Prize Day, Arjie purposefully misreads Henry Newbolt's *The Best School of All* in front of the significant guest, whose assistance the principal sorely needs. It is congruent with Orwell's observations in his article [14] that the most important 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). After a while, Arjie learned the value of resistance from his companion Soyza, which helped him later on to destroy all the outmoded colonial beliefs. The primary motivation for the subversion was his sense of unfairness at the harsh punishments meted out to his beloved Shehan, but it was also fuelled by his growing fury at the way individuals in positions of power assumed the role of determining what was right and wrong. Still, this is actually just a small victory against chauvinism and patriarchy. As a result, Arjie boldly rejects tradition and appreciates the beauty of his individuality.

Conclusion

The study used events and experiences that raised delicate topics pertaining to gender, race, and ethnicity to analyze Shyam Selvadurai's debut novel *Funny Boy* (1994). Seven-year-old Arjie uses his point of view to talk about his experiences at school and in his family throughout the entire book. *Funny Boy* draws attention to the different ways that Sri Lankan society differs from other societies. The main character Arjie and his identity crisis are the subject of the essay. Because of his unusual sexual orientation, which presents problems for both his code-conforming patriarchal family and society at large, Arjie is best described as a conflicted individual. In addition, he embodies the stereotypical outsider, estranged from society and at odds with both it and himself. Stated differently, Arjie's tale illustrates the challenges faced by numerous youth who identify as third genders in forging a solid sense of self, but his crises also call attention to a problem that impacts everyone who is viewed as "Other" in society. According to the inquiry, the young protagonist's identity issue is caused by his unusual characteristics, which are accepted in accordance with heteronormative norms but are ignored by others. The division of areas into sections designated for boys and girls highlights the gender prejudices in the book even more. When the main character plays with guys, he gets called a "girlie boy" and isn't permitted to play with girls. He cannot become a boy or a girl as a result. Consequently, Arjie finds himself "caught between the worlds of the boys and the girls, not belonging or wanted either," as stated by Selvadurai (39). But Arjie's turbulent life experience forces him to reconsider all he's been taught about gender norms and sexuality.

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