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## UNIT 4 SHYAM SELVADURAI : *FUNNY BOY*

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Queerness and Self Identity
- 4.3 *Funny Boy*: Summary & Analysis
  - 4.3.1 Section I/ Chapter I: *Pigs Can't Fly*
  - 4.3.2 Section II/ Chapter II: *Radha Aunty*
  - 4.3.3 Section III/ Chapter III: *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*
  - 4.3.4 Section IV/Chapter IV: *Small Choices*
  - 4.3.4 Section V/ Chapter V: *The Best of All Schools*
  - 4.3.5 Section VI/ Chapter VI: *Riot Journal: An Epilogue*
- 4.4 Gender and Sexuality
  - 4.4.1 Gender and Space: Home
  - 4.4.2 Gender and Space: School
- 4.5 Nation and Community
  - 4.5.1 Acts of Rebellion
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.8 Glossary
- 4.9 Suggested Readings & References

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will contextualise Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* as a novel that deals with the coming-of-age of a queer protagonist amidst the conflict ridden nation of Sri Lanka. It will provide a brief introduction to Sri Lankan history, especially the long and arduous ethnic conflict and civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. It will also study the processes through which individuals establish their social, national and sexual identities. This will be done by taking a closer look at gender constructs in society and how they influence the young protagonist's journey from innocence to maturity. Finally, it will attempt to comprehend the nuances of the word 'funny' in the title with respect to queerness and homosexuality. Some of the points discussed here have also been examined in Unit 3, but do keep in mind that this helps reiterate and reinforce ideas that may be new to you.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Published in 1994, *Funny Boy* is set in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, in the months leading up to the 1983 riots. The novel is narrated from the point of view of seven year old Arjie and details his experiences within his family and in his school. In each of the six sections of the novel, Arjie learns valuable life lessons through his interactions with different characters. Through these relationships, he inches closer towards embracing his unique identity, both as a queer homosexual and as a member of an ethnic minority who is forced to flee his

country and immigrate to Canada. This becomes the lens through which the novel examines the ways in which people with different social, ethnic and sexual identities relate to the idea of belonging to a nation.

Shyam Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist who was born in Sri Lanka and currently lives in Toronto. When Selvadurai was nineteen, his family migrated to Canada during the ethnic riots of 1983. These riots were triggered when the Tamil militant group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) attacked and killed several soldiers of the Sri Lankan Army. In response to this incident, anti-Tamil riots broke out in Colombo and spread to other parts of the country. As is evident, there are several similarities between Selvadurai's biographical details and Arjie's fictional persona; yet, Selvadurai has often categorically stated that *Funny Boy* is not an autobiographical narrative. *Funny Boy* as we know by now talks about a queer identity as Arjie is a queer. How did this term/ word come to evolve and how did it acquire the connotation it has today is what we shall look at next.

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## 4.2 QUEERNESS AND SELF IDENTITY

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Queer is a sort of broad rubric term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or are not cisgender. The word 'queer' actually means strange or peculiar or weird, but later it was often used to describe those men and women who were interested in people of the same sex. Needless to say, the usage of the word 'queer' (particularly in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century) was in a pejorative/ negative manner. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the word 'queer' was used to define or describe men who were more feminine than masculine and who were believed to have had same sex relationships. In short, it began to acquire the connotations of men engaged in a homosexual relationship. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, homosexuality began to be recognised as a category of people with non heterosexual needs and relationships and there developed a male gay subculture that included distinct sub categories such as - queer, fairy, trade, and gay. Gay men themselves began using the term 'queer' to kind of claim or identify with what was perceived by society as masculine. **George Chauncey** (1954), a historian at Columbia University states that many men who identified themselves as queer were, "repelled by the style of the fairy and his loss of manly status, and almost all were careful to distinguish themselves from such men". This they felt was necessary because they lived their lives in the shadow of the dominant 'straight' culture. The term 'trade' was used for so called straight men/ heterosexual men who would sometimes engage in same-sex activity/ a homosexual relationship.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the word 'queer' began to be used, it had the sexually loaded connotation of same sex relationships as well as other terms such as 'fairy' or 'faggot'. Mind you these were all derogatory terms used to describe somebody who might have been perceived as being extremely flamboyant. The historian Chauncey says that the terms 'fairy', 'faggot' were "the predominant image of all queers within the straight mind." While the homosexual men and women, and the cisgender and the transgendered people, used the word queer to describe themselves, in medical terms and by the police, they were being referred to as "invert", "pervert", "degenerate", and "homosexual". Whatever the queer people chose to call themselves or whatever the medical fraternity or the police termed them, the general idea/ concept of a homosexual identity, only emerged because

of a binary understanding of sexual orientation in the 1930s and 1940s which was heterosexual vis a vie homosexual. Gradually as this binary between the heterosexual and the homosexual began to be accepted by society, the queer identity began to disappear gradually and it was only in the 1950s, that the Queer began coming out beginning with the underground gay bars of the 1950s, then, gradually moving more into the open in the 60s and 70s, by which time the identity of men engaged in same sex relationships began to undergo a change in terminology. This coming out from underground bars became possible in the aftermath of the World Wars, once the younger gay men began to realise that the term 'queer' was a derogatory/ pejorative term and began using the term 'gay' as they felt that the word 'gay' was gaining wider acceptance from society.

*In calling themselves gay, a new generation of men insisted on the right to name themselves, to claim their status as men, and to reject the "effeminate" styles of the older generation. [...] Younger men found it easier to forget the origins of gay in the campy banter of the very queens whom they wished to reject.*

*Chauncey, 1955, pps 13-16*

Gradually the homosexual identity began to be replaced by a 'gay' identity. In the early years of the 1970s, the term 'gay' was more of an umbrella term that included: gay men, lesbian women, bisexual men and women, as well as transsexual and gender-nonconformists. We must remember that being a homosexual or a gay was something people were not really open about and this was to change gradually over a long period of time. So the movement went from being quiet and introverted, to being a homosexual being and then on to being called gay which was a term that was used in a derogatory sense to indicate men who were passive and receptive in sexual encounters with other men. However, sometime in the late 1980s various queer activists, members of the Queer Nation, began to use the same word 'queer' to describe themselves and to appropriate the word in order to provoke a sort of reaction from the rest of the heterosexual or the so-called 'straight world'. Let us begin with an analysis of the novel the *Funny Boy* in the next section. As mentioned earlier, the term 'queer' was initially used as a disparaging term for people whose sexuality did not conform to the binary of heteronormative roles. Much like the word 'funny' is used in the text, 'queer' was used to exclude people from the domain of normalcy. Over the years, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning or the LGBTQ community has reclaimed the word and radicalised its many associations. As a result, it is now used as an umbrella term for people of all sexualities that lie outside the ambit of heteronormativity. In the case of Arjie, his queerness will play an important part in his coming-of-age journey as he moves from a stage of confusion and denial to a gradual acceptance of his queerness. In the next section we shall look at the summary and analysis of the novel.

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### **4.3 FUNNY BOY: SUMMARY & ANALYSIS**

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The novel *Funny Boy* is divided into six chapters, the first few parts capture Arjie's childhood and recall the various episodes that introduce the whole family and the protagonist Arjie himself. The later chapters start to focus on the political tension brewing up in the nation and Arjie's discovery of his own sexuality. The Six chapters are titled - *Pigs Can't Fly*; *Radha Aunty*; *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*; *Small Choices*; *The Best School of All*; and *Riot Journal: An Epilogue*. The first

chapters titled "*Pigs Can't Fly*" and "*Radha Aunty*," helps to shape Arjie's understanding of love, relationships and sexuality.

### 4.3.1 Section I/ Chapter I: *Pigs Can't Fly*

#### Summary

In the very first section/ chapter, called "*Pigs Can't Fly*" the readers are introduced to the rigid patriarchal set-up of Sri Lankan Tamil society where there are very well-defined spaces and activities for young girls and boys. While the area outside the domestic space i.e. "*the front garden, the road and the field that lay in front of the house*" belonged to the boys, the girls' territory was "*confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch*" (Selvadurai 3). *Pigs Can't Fly* takes place during the "spend the days." By virtue of the "*force of his imagination*" (Selvadurai 3), Arjie is selected the leader of the girls' territory and orchestrates the games they play which essentially re-enacts ceremonies related to weddings and domestic chores. Told from his point of view *Funny Boy* is about coming to terms with being queer, a taboo in a close-minded Tamil family, as well as an "unnatural offence ... against the order of nature" in the Penal Code of Sri Lanka (Sri Lankan Penal Code Chapter XVI section 365); and the story of how political and regional conflicts affect people's lives. As Arjie grows up, his parents continue to do what they can to 'man up' their son, as they are worried that he may turn out to be gay. Arjie is made to feel different from the rest of his male cousins in terms of his sexual disposition. He is unable to comprehend the taboo surrounding his desire to indulge in what are traditionally associated as 'feminine' activities. As **Gayathri Gopinath** states, "her answer attempts to grant to the fixity of gender roles the status of universally recognised natural law" (171). This marks the beginning of a sense of exile and loneliness for him as he is "*caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either*" (Selvadurai 39). The feeling of being different from the kids around him begins to define Arjie's self-identity. The sense of pleasure he derives from dressing up as a bride or his preference for games played by girls sets him apart from other boys and earns him pejorative titles like '*funny one*'.

#### Analysis

Arjie finds his grandparents and the formalities of his family very constricting as their roles are defined by Society approved gender roles. It is also obvious that children are aware of the binary gender –but they are alright with someone crossing the lines. While the other girls are perfectly fine with Arjie as the bride, Her Fatness Tanuja opposes his role and through her character she seems to be replacing the creative transformation of gender (Arjie being the bride though he is the only male child playing bride - bride), with rigid, adult, societal rules. She also calls Arjie all kinds of vile names that he has no knowledge or understanding of and by doing so, she ushers in the harsh, real- world that Arjie will have to face eventually. She calls him a "pansy," "faggot," and "sissy"— and introduces the prejudice against more effeminate men which Arjie as a little boy hasn't really encountered. The word 'funny' takes on a weird connotation as the adults guess or know what Cyril Uncle is hinting at, but are almost afraid to articulate their thoughts in case, Arjie's effeminate manners hint at possible homosexuality. His father Appa thinks that sexual orientation is a result of bad parenting or nurturing rather than anything else or nature. Amma fears he'll turn out to be homosexual so prevents him from playing or watching the girls play. Meena is

interesting as she is the only girl who plays with the boys but this does not seem to threaten the family's sense of integrity or social standing. Is it because in a patriarchal society an effeminate male is perceived as more dangerous to the integrity of a society than a masculine girl? Arjie soon realises that he stands totally alone, excluded from both the worlds of the girls and the boys, deeply shamed and alienated. In the next sub-section, we shall look at Radha Aunty and her role in the novel.

### 4.3.2 Section II/ Chapter II: *Radha Aunty*

In the next section titled "*Radha Aunty*", the readers are introduced to Radha Aunty, Arjie's paternal aunt who has recently returned from America. Much to Arjie's shock, Radha Aunty looks and behaves very differently from his imagined ideal of Sri Lankan femininity. She is described as "*thin, not plump, flat like a boy*" and she is dressed in Western clothes instead of the traditional saree. An acquaintance of Radha Aunty, Rajan Nagendra, proposes to her, but she does not accept his proposal and instead becomes friends with Anil Jayasinghe, a Sinhalese also involved in the play. Since Arjie is close to his paternal aunt, he becomes a witness to her romantic relationship with Anil, a Sinhalese man. When Radha's parents find out, they are aghast as the very prospect of a Tamil and a Sinhalese entering into marriage which is socially a very repulsive thought for them. This is symptomatic of how ethnic and political affiliations influence the most private of decisions. However, Radha is prepared to marry Anil against the wishes of her family. To prevent this union from taking place, Radha's family decides to send her to Jaffna for a few weeks. On her way back, she is physically assaulted by a group of Sinhalese men in an episode of ethnic violence. As her body becomes the site of the historic conflict, her resolve to fight her family weakens and she submits to their demands and marries the Tamil man (Rajan) of their choice. Arjie's sense of excitement at the prospect of being involved in a real wedding is poisoned by the knowledge that love isn't enough to sustain Radha and Anil's relationship. As he walks away from the wedding, Arjie thinks to himself, "*I thought of her love-comics and how fervently I had believed in them; believed that if two people loved each other everything was possible. Now, I knew this was not so*" (Selvadurai 100). Once again, Arjie is forced to reformulate his beliefs and accept the harsh social reality of his family and many others like him. Arjie's father then explains to Arjie the ethnic tension and conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese people and Arjie realises the gravity of the situation. As he grows up, he becomes more conscious and aware about racial intolerance, unfairness that exists in the world around him. Arjie's mother too could not marry a white Dutch colonial (Daryl Uncle), because her family did not approve of that match and she ended up marrying Arjie's father.

#### **Analysis**

Arjie reads Sinhala romantic comics but he will never be able to experience that kind of love because of his sexuality. Radha Aunty is Arjie's supporter and defender who unlike the other extremely judgmental adults, of the family listens to Arjie and takes him seriously. There are parallels drawn between Radha Aunty and Arjie, both of them are unique and independent, because, both of them deviate from preconceived notions of perfection, and conformity. Arjie learns that he does not need validation from others for his self esteem to remain intact. Eventually he comes to realise that the racist attitude his mother has is symptomatic of ethnic tensions and conflicts throughout the history of Sri Lanka

that continues till present times. *Funny Boy* the novel then talks briefly about the history of the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and while the LTTE claimed that it was the voice of all the Tamils in the island nation, many Tamils like Arije's father (Appa) do not accept the LTTE's claim and try and assimilate with the Sinhalese. The Anil and Radha Aunty's romance/ situation is weird, complicated and ambiguous yet it brings to light the racial discrimination that exists on both sides – Amma from Radha Aunty's side of the relationship and Anil's father from his side. Funnily enough it is because of the familial antagonism that Radha Aunty and Anil are drawn closer together and they fall in love. Arije realises that Doris Aunty's words to Radha Aunty are or could be meant for him as well, as, his position in his family and the Tamil community will also be threatened by his sexuality. Shortly after, Radha Aunty is attacked in a train on her way back from Jaffna along with other Tamils and this attack by the Sinhalese not only demonstrates but also consolidates the ethnic tension that is brewing and can boil over at any time. Eventually Radha Aunty ends up choosing family and stability and agreeing to marry the man her family chooses. The next subsection will deal with Chapter/ Section 3, *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*.

### 4.3.3 Section III/Chapter III : *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*

Uncle Daryl returns to Sri Lanka from Australia in the third section/ chapter. Uncle Daryl is a burgher who grew up in Sri Lanka with Amma. He is a journalist and has been in Australia for more than ten years when he returns to Sri Lanka for work and primarily to look into whether the government of Sri Lanka has been abusing its powers under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Daryl reads *Little Women* (1868-69) by Louisa May Alcott, as he claims he has an affinity with the book and of course, he is laughed at by Arije's entire family. Daryl Uncle then goes on to buy Arije the sequels to *Little Women* – *Good Wives* (1880), *Little Men* (1871), and *Jo's Boys* (1886). This sharing of books immediately draws Daryl Uncle and Arije closer together. Arije's family, particularly Neliya Aunty do not approve of Amma's closeness with Daryl Uncle. When on a health trip to the mountains in Central Sri Lanka with his mother, Daryl Uncle visits them. And that is when Arije realises that Daryl and Amma had a romantic relationship a long time ago, before he left Sri Lanka. Daryl Uncle leaves for Jaffna, despite Arije's mother's pleas, as violence is high in Jaffna - the capital city of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. He goes to find out for himself the atrocities that could have been committed there. Eventually, he does not return to Colombo alive but his body washes up on the shores of a fishing village. They are told that Daryl Uncle drowned but Amma and Arije are convinced that the government is to blame and that he has been murdered. Amma wants to look deeper into the death of Daryl Uncle but the lawyer tells her that she cannot do anything as such. Referring to the three monkeys, he says ... See No Evil, Hear No Evil suggesting that they put the death of Daryl Uncle to rest and not look into it any further.

#### Analysis

With Daryl Uncle's death several things come to light – (i) it does not make sense to pursue justice in a conflict ridden state, (ii) should one try and confront the might of the state or should one try and survive? (iii) ethnic tension is causing an economic slump and (iv) the Chelvaratnam family or Arije's family are economically very well off, and (v) the family's wealth could also implicate the family in various ways. Arije has also grown up quite a bit as he realises that

adults too are fallible, vulnerable and they are as much individuals as they are parents/ siblings/ other associated relationships; particularly from his observation of Amma and Daryl Uncle's, and Radha Aunty and Anil's interactions. He also realises that his father is absent most of the time being away on business trips and that Daryl Uncle's presence changes the family structure and dynamics as he sees Diggy, Sonali and Neeliya Aunty (Amma's sister) get more and more frustrated and alienated. At some point he is briefly attracted to Daryl Uncle and that is when the attraction hints at his becoming sexually aware. This relationship between Amma and Daryl Uncle is the third such relationship that threatens the family's social acceptability – first, Arije's "funniness", second, Radha Aunty's relationship with Anil and now Amma and Daryl Uncle. Just as Radha Aunty is chastised by the family, Daryl Uncle is in a sense chastised by the government officials who eventually kill him for trying to unveil the government's involvement in the ethnic violence against Tamils. In keeping with the ending of the earlier two chapters this one ends on a tragic note too.

#### 4.3.4 Section IV/Chapter IV : Small Choices

##### Summary

Arije father gives a job to his friend's son (Jegan Parameswaran at his hotel), and who apparently had ties with the LTTE earlier but claims he doesn't now. Jegan and Arije become friends and Arije becomes a little more aware of his sexuality. Meanwhile the tension between the two communities – the Tamil and the Sinhalese continues to rise till Jegan is said to have been plotting to kill a Tamil politician. Appa fires Jegan immediately.

##### Analysis

Arije develops a crush on Jegan who seems quite comfortable with the extra attention and Jegan becomes a sort of male role model for Arije as well as Diggy. Appa meanwhile is in a relationship with an English girl and Arije realises that his father is a hypocrite, as he has the affair, and is much closer to Jegan than to his own children. Arjie wonders whether his father is using Jegan to try and manipulate him.

#### 4.3.5 Section V/Chapter V : The Best of All Schools

##### Summary

Appa begins to suspect Arije's sexuality and decides that Arije needs to be transferred to Victoria Academy as he feels that this school will help change his son's sexual orientation. Victoria Academy is run by "Black Tie" the principal who wishes to keep the school open to all ethnicities as against the proposal for making it an exclusive Sinhalese school. Arije meets Shehan, a gay/oblique queer and is warned to stay away from him but the two become friends instead and Arjie is slowly deeply attracted to Shehan. Arjie is to recite some poems in an event scheduled later and this is important for retaining the inclusiveness of the school. Arije and Shehan are beaten up every time Arije forgets his lines. Ultimately Arije realises that the two of them are beaten up because they are not "manly" enough. Shehan kisses Arije who then starts comprehending and acknowledging his own sexuality and their first sexual encounter takes place in the garage of Arije's home. Thereafter, Arjie is ashamed, disgusted and feels he

has betrayed his family but on the day of the event he purposely forgets his lines to get back at "Black Tie" who has been beating Shehan badly repeatedly.

### Analysis

The reasons why Appa sends Arije to Queen Victoria's Academy are very apparent he thinks he will be able to make Arije more masculine. The school is still a practitioner of colonial style education revealing a postcolonial Sri Lanka still living with the relics of colonialism. The Tamil-Sinhala ethnic divide is also very obvious and it is interesting to note that Arjie though a Tamil is always in the company of Sinhalese students and the language – Sinhala. Soyza, Cheliah and Salgado are instances of bullying be they the perpetrators or the victims that is, typical of particularly boarding / residential schools. The students and teachers of Queen Victoria Academy too seem to be divided between the Principal "Black Tie" and Lokubandara, and are symbolic of the ethnic tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Arije is shamed time and again as the family tries to change his behavior and are worried that he is gay/queer or will turn gay/queer. Spending time with Soyza, Arije realises that he is indulging in flirtation with him.

### 4.3.6 Section VI/Chapter-VI: Riot Journal: An Epilogue

#### Summary

The tension that has been building up through the years is now reaching its pinnacle. The rioters' start burning down houses and commercial establishments owned by the Tamils and Arije and family have to seek asylum in a neighbour's house. Their hotel is burned down and Arije's grandparents - Ammachi and Appachi are killed. Arije's family then decide to leave the country and Arjie and Shehan end up making love for one last time, before he is forced to say goodbye, never to see his friend and lover again. Then Arjie and his family leave their country, their homeland Sri Lanka and move to Canada.

#### Analysis

Civil unrest and ethnic violence has started in Sri Lanka and all across the country, atrocious acts of violence are committed against the Tamils. Arije's house is razed to the ground, as is his grandparent's place. Ammachi and Appachi are trapped in their car and burnt to death by the rioters. That is like the last straw and Arije's parents decide that they need to flee from Sri Lanka and move to Canada. Arjie is deeply troubled by all the happenings and by the fact that he needs to leave everything and everybody he has known and loved including Soyza. In the next section, we will look briefly at gender and sexuality.

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## 4.4 GENDER AND SEXUALITY

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In *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai attempts to uncover the many social gender constructs that govern the private and public lives of individuals. It looks at the ways in which masculinity and femininity are defined in a social matrix and how these norms influence the identity and experiences of a wide spectrum of characters. Let's look at Gender and Space in the home/ domestic front next.



#### 4.4.1 Gender and Space: Home

In the first section titled “*Pigs Can’t Fly*”, the young protagonist Arjie is forced to confront social gender stereotypes. His parents have joined their extended family for a monthly reunion at his grandparents’ house. At these occasions, all his cousins would get together and play two games – the boys usually played cricket in the field outside the house while the girls played ‘Bride-Bride’, a game where they enacted the many ceremonies associated with a wedding. As the narrator tells us, “Territorially, the area around my grandparents’ house was divided into two. The front garden, the road and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys” (Selvadurai 3). As opposed to this, the second territory of the girls was “confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch” (Selvadurai 3). Already, one can see a gender-based spatial segregation at work. There are specific sections of the house designated for activities involving girls and boys. While girls remain within the household and play a typically domestic game, boys venture out and engage in physical activity.

This gendered division of domestic space prefigures a similar phenomenon which takes place at the national level. In other words, the domestic spatial segregation along gender lines mirrors the national segregation along ethnic lines that will tear apart the narrator’s and his family’s lives. This draws our attention to how space is divided along gender and ethnic parameters, both at the microcosmic domestic and the macrocosmic national sphere. **Gayatri Gopinath** argues,

“the gendered specialization of the domestic sphere in the story mirrors and reiterates nationalist framings of space that posit the ‘inner’ as an atavistic space of spirituality and tradition, embodied by the figure of the ‘woman’, as opposed to the ‘outer’ male sphere of progress, politics, materiality and modernity” (170).

However, Arjie, has managed till now to transcend these boundaries as he has always been the most significant member of the Bride-Bride gang owing to the force of his imagination. It is the “free play of fantasy” (Selvadurai 3) which attracts Arjie to games played by his girl cousins which imitated adult domestic functions or enacted fairy stories. Arjie’s favorite game is called ‘Bride-Bride’ and he derives utmost pleasure from dressing up like a bride. Unfortunately though, his happiness is curtailed by the arrival of his cousin Tanuja who is very cross at being made the groom, the person with the least importance in the hierarchy of ‘Bride-Bride’. When her desire to play the bride is met with derision from her fellow cousins, she tells her mother who drags a sari-clad Arjie in front of the adults of the house. This revelation causes a stir in the family and becomes a source of embarrassment for Arjie’s parents as one of his uncle remarks sardonically to his father, “Ey Chelva! Looks like you have a funny one here” (Selvadurai 14).

The word “funny” here has obvious connotations of taboo and shame resulting from the fact that Arjie indulges in actions which are inappropriate for his gender. This is the first time that Arjie becomes painfully aware of such gendered restrictions even as he can’t comprehend their rationality. This also marks the beginning of the sense of gendered alienation Arjie will continue to feel for a long time. As the narrator remarks rather poignantly, “Yet those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved” (Selvadurai 4). The exile mentioned here ensues from his sense of difference from normative

gender roles prevalent in the society. Thus, even before his family goes into exile geographically (when they migrate to Canada under dire circumstances), he is already living in a state of psychological alienation because of his non-heteronormative sexuality. The next section will examine Gender and Space but in the public domain of the School.

#### 4.4.2 Gender and Space: School

The other space where Arjie is forced to contend with ethnic and gender divisions is in his new school. In the section of the novel titled "*The Best School of All*", Arjie's father decides to change his school to Queen Victoria Academy because it will "force [him] to become a man" (Selvadurai 210). This educational institution is governed by an ethos of hyper-masculinity and young boys are expected to pattern their behavior according to dominant masculine stereotypes. The students refer to each other with their last names and ardent physical punishments are relatively common. Arjie's elder brother, Diggy, advises him never to complain about the use of strict punishment since, "Once you come to Queen Victoria Academy, you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other boys will look down on you" (Selvadurai 211).

It is within this ethos of hyper-masculinity that Arjie meets Soyza and their relationship will play an important role in the journey through which Arjie begins to accept his homosexuality. Soyza is described as a misfit in the Academy, he is often bullied by his classmates and is deemed an "ills and burden" student by Black Tie, the principal. There are also rumours about his alleged homosexuality due to which he has become the laughing stock of the whole school. At the same time, the school is also driven with ethnic and political tensions and anxieties. There are separate sections for Sinhalese and Tamil students and there is an ongoing tussle between the Principal, Mr. Abeysinghe (referred to as Black Tie by the students) and the Vice-Principal, Mr. Lokubandara, a "political appointee". The struggle between them is coloured by the prevailing ethnic conflict and a debate about the future of the academy and by extension, the country. While Black Tie imagines a modern, multicultural academy where diverse communities will be given equal representation, Lokubandara is a firm believer of the grassroots Sinhala movement i.e. a return to the idea of Sri Lanka as a pure Sinhala nation. **T Jazeel** says that "essentially, this is a battle for which type of modernity is best for the Academy, thus linking the school to larger debates about appropriate geopolitical templates for the modern Sri Lanka nation-state" (242), when he talks about the turf war between Lokubandara and Black Tie aka Mr. Abeysinghe, the principal.

It must be noted here that both the house and the school are emblematic of the larger concept of the nation-state. The network of gender and political relations that constitute these spaces are reproduced at the national level. Within this rubric, the family is meant to function as a heteronormative unit where each gender has a definite social role. While men are supposed to be providers who venture in the external social realm, women are identified as nurturers and care-givers within the domestic household. In this rather rigidly ordered framework, there is no clearly defined role for queer people i.e. individuals who don't identify with either of the two binaries of the heteronormative set up. Similarly, the school is meant to mould young boys according to pre-ordained, socially sanctioned models of masculinity. Anyone who goes against these roles is either labelled as 'funny' or classified as 'ills and burdens' of the country. In other words, an individual

who cannot be accommodated into the traditional heteronormative binary will occupy a rather ambiguous position vis-a-vis the society and the nation-state. As a result, they are often persecuted by the traditional moral code of communities. Let us look briefly at the ethnic conflict that plagued Sri Lanka for decades next.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How is Arjie's life informed by the traditional gender norms of the society?

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- 2) Comment on the alienation experienced by Arjie in his home and school? How are these spaces symbolic of the nation-state?

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## 4.5 NATION AND COMMUNITY

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Arjie's family belong to the Tamil community and his great grandfather had fallen victim to the nefarious riots that took place in the 1950s. Radha Aunty's failed relationship with Anil marks Arjie's first serious encounter with ethnic differences. When he transfers to a new school called the Queen Victoria Academy, he finds himself in a partisan environment as the school is clearly divided between Sinhala and Tamil identities. Not only are there separate classrooms for each ethnic community, there is an ongoing rivalry between the Principal, Mr Abeysinghe (referred to as Black Tie by the students) and the Vice-Principal, Mr Lokubandara, a "*political appointee*". While Black Tie intends to preserve the multicultural inclusivity of the academy, the Vice-Principal wants to turn it into an exclusive Sinhala Buddhist institution which has no place for Tamils. Both of them are slated to speak at the Annual Day celebrations of the school, an event which will have an important influence on the future of the school. The speech delivered by Black Tie revolves closely around the two poems meant to be narrated by Arjie. As he prepares for the event, Arjie is repeatedly reminded of the contribution he can make to the Tamil cause by way of his performance.

Arjie also becomes conscious of his status as member of an ethnic minority through his friendship with Jegan. Jegan is the son of his father's late buddy Parameswaran, one of Arjie's father's closest school friends. Jegan soon starts working for Arjie's father's business and also develops a close friendship with Arjie. As Jegan rises through the ranks in the office, other Sinhalese employees begin harbouring hostile, antagonistic sentiments against him. It is also revealed that Jegan was affiliated with the LTTE in the past. As tensions rise on the political

front and clashes between the two communities begins to take place, Jegan is arrested and soon, Arjie's father is forced to fire him. Through the *dramatis personae* of Jegan, Arjie learns the nuances of ethnic conflict and how minorities are forced to live in fear and submission. Even though his father leads a successful and prosperous life, he has been forced to make many concessions along the way.

**Sarah Graham** writes that the "*bildungsroman* is profoundly concerned with what it means to be an individual and to participate in the life of a nation" (4). Arjie's ethnic identity as a Tamil is violently in conflict with his national identity as a Sri Lankan. The end of the novel is set in the backdrop of the 1983 riots wherein Sinhalese mobs attacked, looted and killed Tamils in Colombo and other parts of the country. Arjie's family escapes this attack narrowly as they are protected by their Sinhalese neighbours and friends. When their survival within the country is threatened, they decide to migrate to Canada. This complicates Arjie's notion of national identity. For multiple generations, his family had identified as citizens of Sri Lanka. However, as they are forced into exile, they become members of a diasporic community, alienated from their home and without a sense of national belonging. Under ideal circumstances, a *bildungsroman* narrative leads to the development of a secure national identity. In this case, however, this narrative is brought to an abrupt and agonising halt as Arjie's national identity becomes a contentious issue. His claim to a Sri Lankan national identity is discredited by the rising anti-Tamil sentiment in the country and he will remain an immigrant or a refugee in Canada. Clearly, there are no easy answers to be found in the case of Arjie and his national belonging. We will now look at the various acts of rebellion that takes place in the novel.

#### 4.5.1 Acts of Rebellion

In each of the six sections of the novel, Arjie is introduced to a new facet of life and society and this also constitutes his coming-of-age journey. His interaction with different characters like Radha aunty, Daryl Uncle, Jegan and Soyza shape his sense of self as he moves from a state of innocence to experience. Hence, *Funny Boy* can be classified as a *bildungsroman*, a novel of formation or education which charts an individual's actual or metaphorical journey from youth/childhood to adulthood. Franco Moretti argues that a *bildungsroman* attempts to offer a harmonious solution for the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the demands of socialization (15). In other words, an individual is often drawn between two forces, the ideal of unique self-expression which might come into conflict with the need to assimilate within the social fabric. The goal of a *bildungsroman* is to narrate the journey through which an individual finds reconciliation between these antithetical forces by giving into social demands. The novel of education then delineates the process through which individuals are integrated into the standardised homogenous social make-up.

However, *Funny Boy* attempts to destabilise this process as the protagonist rebels against the social order instead of conforming to it. This section will look at the many expressions of dissent in the novel wherein different characters question and subvert status quo, albeit only temporarily. Before the 'Spend-the-Days' become traumatic for Arjie after the incident with his cousin Tanuja, Arjie is able to transcend spatialised gender boundaries. He has always been the leader of the girls group primarily due to his superlative imagination. He is attracted to the girls' territory primarily because of its potential for "free play of fantasy"

(Selvadurai 3). Through his fantasy, he is able to imaginatively fulfill his desires by accessing an alternative realm of existence. He says in the novel, "I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self" (Selvadurai 4). This amounts to a re-figuration of gendered spatialization as it shows how non-heteronormative desires and pleasures can surface within the most traditional of spaces (Gopinath 170). It is also interesting that the game played by the girls is called 'Bride-Bride' and the person with the least importance is the groom. This symbolically overturns the patriarchal fabric of the society which always privileges masculine gender roles. Therefore, we see how normative gender roles are subverted in the realm of imagination by presenting the possibility of an alternative world order.

The more tangible act of rebellion happens towards the end of the novel when Arjie deliberately mangles the two poems he was meant to recite at a major school function which could decide the future of the institution. He makes this courageous decision knowing that this could have dire repercussions for him. This is a significant moment in his coming of age journey as it is here that he consciously decides to go against societal and familial expectations. The nature of his rebellion is at once personal and political; on the one hand, he goes against the very ethos of discipline and submission that the school demands of him while on the other hand, he is also motivated by his personal feelings for Soyza and this is meant to be a gesture of solidarity. Arjie's experience at the Queen Victoria Academy is marked by alienation and disillusionment. The school demands blind obedience from its students and victimises anyone who doesn't follow their prescribed model of masculinity. The poem that Arjie is expected to recite is titled "The Best School of All" and certain lines from the poem read as follows, "For working days and holidays,/And glad and melancholy days, /They were great days and jolly days" (Selvadurai 273). Quite the contrary, Arjie's time here has been marked by physical punishment and psychological harassment and doesn't resonate even remotely with the sentiments expressed above. Therefore, his act of dissent can be read as a form of protest against the nefarious policies of the school which victimised students like Soyza.

Significantly, Arjie decides to jumble lines from the two poems after he has had his first sexual experience with Soyza in the garage of his house. Immediately afterwards, Arjie feels disgusted with himself and becomes particularly conscious of his family's gaze. He seems to have internalised the shame of being 'different' or 'funny', epithets often used by the society for homosexuality. However, he soon begins to understand that there is nothing inherently wrong about his relationship with Soyza. It's only the society's arbitrary codes of judgment that have deemed it immoral or taboo. As he contemplates his decision, Arjie comments, "How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't" (Selvadurai 274). This marks the beginning of the process by which Arjie will develop his individual sense of self and morality, one which is free from the society's oppressive codes. Instead of hiding from his sexuality, he embraces it and moves towards a fuller realisation of his identity. In doing so, he goes against the many caveats of the society regarding gender, family and so on.

Interestingly, Arjie isn't the only character in the novel to stage such a rebellion. At different points, Radha and Arjie's mother, Nalini, also challenge the traditional social order. When Arjie sees his aunt Radha for the first time, he is shocked as

her body through her “dark skin, unkempt hair, flat chest and American apparel” defies the ideal of Tamil femininity (Gairola 5). Moreover, she exercises her free will and agency when she decides to go against her family and continues her relationship with Anil, a member of the Sinhalese community. However, this resistance is short lived as she becomes a physical target of the ethnic conflict and eventually decides to marry a Tamil man chosen for her by her family.

Similarly, when Daryl Uncle is found dead under suspicious conditions, Arjie’s mother, Nalini, goes against her sister’s advice and tries to conduct an investigation into the murder. She also pays a visit to Daryl’s house help Somaratne’s village in order to procure some information about Daryl’s murder. Quite like Radha, the fear of physical violence forces her to retreat and put an end to the investigation. However, both these characters actively defy gender roles prescribed by society, even if their transgression is eventually curtailed. Just like Arjie, they find themselves marginalised by the unjust norms of the society and attempt to challenge them. Rahul K Gairola argues that these characters may be perceived as “funny girls who transgress Tamil femininity and even emulate some masculine character traits” (7).

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the many interpretations of the word ‘funny’ in the title of Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*?

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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Set in the backdrop of an ethnically divided country, *Funny Boy* traces the coming-of-age narrative of a young boy who is only beginning to come to terms with his homosexuality. The novel looks at the many ways in which social, cultural and political norms affect the personal lives of the characters. Children are introduced to gender roles at a tender age and Arjie soon feels alienated by these rigid constructs. At the same time, his identity as a member of the minority Tamil community also relegates him to a relatively marginal status. As the novel progresses, Arjie learns, rather painfully, to mediate his way through such social constructs and create a new form of identity for himself. He achieves this self-acceptance by transgressing the status quo and by rejecting the prejudiced moral order of the society, according to which homosexuality is associated with disgust and shame.

Through these tropes, the novel explores the many linkages between the personal and the political, the private and the public. The alienation experienced by Arjie in his school is intricately tied to his sexual identity. Similarly, his sense of belonging (or the lack of it) to his family is heavily mediated through his personal identity as a homosexual. And finally, his status as a member of the nation is put under doubt because of his Tamil ancestry. The notion of home itself gets achingly

difficult to define for a character like Arjie as his entire family is forced to leave their country behind and adopt a foreign country (Canada) as their own. Ultimately, *Funny Boy* is about exploring different possible forms of belonging to a community or a country, depending on the cultural, ethnic and gender identity of the individual in question. By giving us a character who has witnessed exile at multiple levels, both within and outside his home and country, *Funny Boy* examines the arbitrariness and fragility of the many ties that bind individuals and societies.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) How do the personal and the political interact in *Funny Boy*? Discuss with relevant examples from the text.

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## 4.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read Sections 4.3 and 4.4 carefully and answer the question in your own words.
- 2) Read Section 4.4 carefully and then answer the question in your own words.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read Section 4.6 carefully and then answer the question in your own words.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) By now you will have read all the sections and the novel, cull out your answer from your reading of the unit.

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## 4.8 GLOSSARY

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- Bildungsroman** : a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of a young protagonist who undergoes a journey from innocence to experience.
- Burgher** : an ethnic group in Sri Lanka of mixed Dutch, Portuguese and Sri Lankan origins. They are offspring of Dutch and Portuguese officers from the colonial period who married women of Sri Lankan descent.
- Heteronormative** : is a worldview or a belief that promotes heterosexuality as the default or standard form of sexual identity. Under this system, only two forms of sexual identity, masculine and feminine, are recognised as natural forms of sexuality.

- Jaffna** : Jaffna had a population of 88,138 in 2012, making it the 12<sup>th</sup> most populous city. Jaffna has a Tamil majority.
- Queer** : Queer is an umbrella term for sexual and gender identities which do not conform to the heteronormative binary which is masculinity and femininity. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was used as a pejorative term for homosexuals. Since then, it has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community and has emerged as a radical political slogan.

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## 4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

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