

Funny Boy

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Funny Boy

Unit 3

Shyam Selvadurai: Funny Boy

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Funny Boy

Introduction



Shyam Selvadurai was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father. Due to the ethnic riots in Sri Lanka, the Selvadurais were forced to leave Sri Lanka in 1984. They immigrated to Canada when Selvadurai was nineteen. He studied creative writing and theatre and has a Bachelor of Fine Arts from York University. He also has a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia where he studied creative writing.

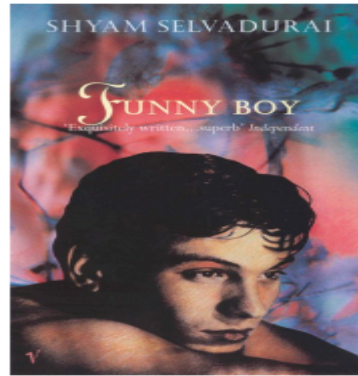
Shyam Selvadurai's novels have been published in translation in Spain, Italy, Germany, Israel, Denmark, Sweden and Turkey. His first novel, *Funny Boy* was published in the year 1994. In 1998 Selvadurai came out with *Cinnamon Gardens* a novel which has been published in nine languages. This was followed by *Story Walah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* (2004) which is a collection of short stories edited by him. He also authored *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, a young adult novel which won the Lambda Literary Award. His latest work is *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) which was short listed for the 2013 Governor General's Award for Fiction.

Selvadurai even contributed to *Time Asia's* special issue on Asian diaspora; in his essay "Coming Out" he talks about the discomfort experienced by him when he visited Sri Lanka in 1997 along with his partner. Articles by him have appeared in several magazines and newspapers including the *Time Magazine*, the *Enroute Magazine*, the *Toronto Life*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Walrus Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and the *Toronto Star* to name a few.

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About the Novel



Selvadurai's first novel, *Funny Boy*, has been translated into eight languages and was published in 1994. It won the Books in Canada First Novel Award in as well as the Lambda Award for Best Gay Men's Fiction in 1997. It was also recognized in 1996 as an American Library Association Notable Book.

Although not autobiographical, *Funny Boy* does draw on Selvadurai's experience of the escalating violence between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka. It traces the journey of a seven year old boy, Arjun a.k.a. Arjie from the simplicity of childhood to a more complex and almost brutal world of adults. Set in an upper middle class Tamil family, the events in the novel are narrated from Arjun's perspective as he struggles to come to terms with Sri Lanka's racist society as well as his homosexuality. As Arjun spends more and more time with sympathetic adults, he begins to realize that dilemmas are an intrinsic part of the human condition. As the novel progresses, sporadic acts of violence turn into full scale riots bringing devastating consequences to Arjie's family.

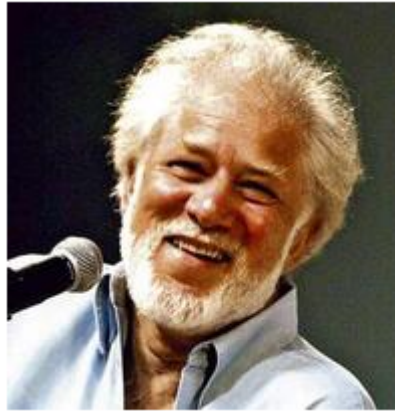
Sri Lankan Literature

Sri Lankan literature for the largest part has been written in Sinhalese. However, there is a considerable amount of work in other languages spoken in Sri Lanka viz. Tamil and English. A very small amount of Sri Lankan literature is also published in Pali. The first novel written in English by a Sri Lankan was *The Dice of the Gods* by Lucien de Zilva in 1917. Another important Sri Lankan novel is *The Knight Errant* by S.J.K. Crowther. Both novels are about the politics between the colonizer and the colonized. *Our Lanka*, a play by Sri Nissinka depicts the Sri Lankan national struggle and its intensification over time. Aware of the fissures that exist, his play pleads for Sinhalese-Tamil unity. Sri Lankan poetry is even more articulate of nationalism. The Lake Kandy Poets, who wrote between mid-1930s and early 1940s, gave impetus to Sri Lanka's latent cultural nationalism. Sunetha Wickramasinghe's "The Perahera Passes" and Earle Mendis's "Anthem" are instances of Sri Lankan cultural nationalism. Ironically, both were products of a colonial educational system. Ediriwira Sarachchandra's literary journey is a testimony to this phenomenon. He began his literary career writing in Sinhala and then graduated to writing in English since for most Sri Lankan writers there was no real choice; English was the language they were most fluent in. Lakadasa Wickeramasinghe's poem "To My Friend Aldred" and *O Regal Blood* are examples of his attempt to reconcile eastern and western sensibilities. In a "Note" to his first collection of poems *Lustre: Poems*, he says that to write in English is a kind of cultural treason.

In contemporary Sri Lankan literature, prominent names are Carl Muller, Shyam Selvadurai and Michael Ondaatje, to name a few. Carl Muller is a journalist, writer and poet. He is best known for his trilogy about the Burgher community in Sri Lanka: *The Jam Fruit Tree*, *Yakada Yaka*, *Once Upon A Tender Time*. Muller is a prolific writer and has published collections of short stories and poetry, novels, children's fiction, historical fiction and even science fiction. Some of his well known works are *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Cemetery*, *All God's Children*, *The Python of Pura Malai and other Stories*, *Rajit Discovers Where Kandy Began*, *Colombo: A Novel*, *Children of the Lion*, *City of the Lion* and *Wedding Night*.



Michael Ondaatje is of mixed descent. He was born in Colombo and moved to England where he received university education. His works include autobiography, poetry and film screenplays. His *Collected Works of Billy the Kid* received the Governor General's Award. Some of his prominent works are *Coming through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient* (also a movie), *Anil's Ghost*, *Divisadero*, *Raj Jelly*, *The Cinnamon Peeler*, *Handwriting*, and *Secular Love*.



Outline of Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

Sri Lanka: A demographic overview

The Tamil population, which is in a minority in Sri Lanka, originated from India in two waves: the immigrants to Sri Lanka between the third century B.C. and thirteenth century A.D. and the Tamil labourers brought by the British, 1825 onwards to work in the tea plantations. In the fifth century B.C., indo-Aryan emigrants from India created the Sinhalese population in Sri Lanka. Broadly speaking, Sri Lanka's population is divided into three "ethnic" categories or communities: the Sinhalese who are the majority, constituting about 75% of the total population; the Tamils, the besieged minority, at about 16%, and the Muslims, who make up 7.4%. [The 1981 census (obtained from Tambiah 4), quoted the Sinhalese population at 74% and the Tamil population at 18.2%. There has not only been a decline in their percentage population, but the decline in the case of the Tamils has been more owing to riots and Tamil migration to other countries.] The Tamils themselves are by general consent further divided into two categories: the Sri Lankan Tamils, who comprise 2% of the total Tamil population and consider themselves indigenous and the Indian Tamils, who make up 5.6%, the majority of which trace their origins to the south Indian labourers brought by British from 1825 onwards. The religious affiliations of the people of Sri Lanka are: Buddhists form 68% of the population, Hindus 17% and Christians and Muslims 8% and 7% respectively. However, the quantitative and distributional facts of Sri Lanka's population are not as simple and the Sinhalese and Tamil profiles require a closer look in order to understand the complexity of their conflict. The mother tongue

of the Sinhalese, the Sinhala language, belongs to the Indo-European family. The mother tongue of the Tamils (and also many Muslims) is Tamil, a Dravidian language. The majority of the Sinhalese are Buddhists. The remaining are Christians. The majority of Tamil population is Hindu, though they too have a Christian minority. The descendants of these Portuguese and Dutch form a miniscule part of Sri Lanka's population called the Burghers.

The Beginning of Tamil-Sinhala Conflict

Prior to colonial occupation, the Tamils living in Sri Lanka controlled the northern part of the country, while the Sinhalese ruled the southern region of the land. Sri Lankan history as a colonial settlement began in 1505 when the Portuguese took control of the country. Sri Lanka obtained independence in 1948 when the British left and the country became a self-governing dominion with a government dominated by the Sinhalese elite assuming power and Stephen Senanayake as the elected prime minister. [Sri Lanka was then called Ceylon and acquired its present name in 1972.] 1948 also saw the passing of the Citizenship Act that made more than a million Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin disenfranchised and stateless. Thus, beginnings of a long-standing argument between the Sinhalese and the Tamils can be dated back to the country's independence since the Act was an attempt to "purge" Sri Lanka of people belonging to a certain race. [It was in 1964, nearly sixteen years after the Citizenship Act, that the Sirimavo-Shastri pact was signed for the repatriation of stateless plantation workers to India.] But perhaps the most critical moment in the history of Sinhala-Tamil conflict was the SLFP's (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) victory in the 1956 general elections: a victory that was based on the wave of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism with strong anti-Tamil overtones. This became further visible when S.W.P.D. Bandranaike, the new prime minister, declared Sinhalese as the *sole official* language of Sri Lanka. This outraged the Tamil minority and Colvin de Silva spoke out against "Sinhala Only," warning that it will divide the country along ethnic lines. The year is also important for the first anti-Tamil riots that broke out then.



MAP OF SRI LANKA

Early Tamil Protests and Government Response

The initial “aggressors” in Sri Lanka were not the armed Tamil terrorists, the LTTE, but leading Tamil politicians in 1958, “mounting a *non-violent* Gandhian *satyagraha* campaign to make known their fears” (Tambiah 71). [Prime Minister Bandranaike and FP leader Chelvanayagam had signed a historic agreement (the B-C pact) on a federal solution, devolving wide-ranging powers to the Tamil-majority north and east province. Barely a week later was the pact abrogated under pressure from UNP which, led by Jayawardane, supported solely Sinhalese aspirations and mobilized opposition to what is called unacceptable concessions made to the Tamils.] The government reacted *violently* by sending police and military forces to Jaffna to suppress the agitation. W. Howard Wriggins’ description of the riots, reprinted by Tambiah, help in an understanding of the crisis.

The outbreak of violence began when a train, presumed to be carrying Tamil delegates [...] was derailed and its passengers beaten up by ruffians. The next day Sinhalese labourers set fire to Tamil shops and homes in nearby villages where they lived intermingled with Sinhalese. Police stations were surrounded by large crowds and their communications cut so that effective protection to scattered Tamil residents could not be assured [...] arson and beatings spread rapidly to Colombo. Gangs roamed the districts where the Tamils lived, ransacking and setting fire to homes and cars, and looting shops. Individual Tamils were attacked, humiliated and beaten. Many were subjected to torture and killed outright. The outbreaks threatened to become religious riots when a Hindu priest and temple were burned and a Buddhist temple demolished. Some ten thousand Tamils were reported to have fled their homes to seek safety in improvised refugee camps established in requisition schools and protected by police and army units [...] after three days of terrifying disorders, the prime minister broadcast a message to the people, urging them to remain calm. But his reference to a prominent Sinhalese who had been killed in Batticaloa only incensed the Sinhalese masses the more and the riots grew in intensity [...] the toll during [...] included an estimated 300-400 killed, over 2000 incidents of arson, looting and assault, and 12,000 Ceylonese transformed into homeless refugees [...]

(Tambiah 145-6)

Tamil-Sinhala Conflict and Militancy

Some nine years later, the political situation of Sri Lanka took a new turn, when, in 1967, the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP-People's Liberation Front) was formed by educated but unemployed, predominantly Sinhalese youth. In April 1971, this front led an armed insurrection that had been characterized as the "first large-scale revolt against the government by the youth in this country" (ibid 14). The JVP has been described as an ultra-left organization, dominated by educated, unemployed or disadvantageously employed youth. It appears that the insurgents were children of the rural poor, all Sinhalese and mostly Buddhists. There were among them hardly any members of any other ethnic and religious minority..



JVP PROTESTS ACROSS SRI LANKA

This armed insurrection was brutally put down, with thousands of Sinhalese youth being killed. A state of emergency was also declared, which was to continue for six long years. The insurrection was indicative of the malaise of frustrated aspirations among the newly educated youth of a country whose liberal education program was at odds with its insufficient economic expansion. [Socio-political and economic circumstances of the country — its being embroiled in problems and issues of economic development, modernization etc. are often quoted as the critical tension underlying the real cause for the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka.] Further it also led to the fear of the frustrations being redirected (in the near future), toward a more defenseless scapegoat, an ethnic minority credited with undue advantages and privileges. The government subsequently, in 1972, enacted a Sinhalese-supremacist “Republican Constitution” for the country, which made Buddhism as the de facto state religion. [Ironically, the architect of this constitution was the same Colvin de Silva, who had made the famous “one language two nation” speech in 1956.

Resentment against the government grew as this constitution supported Buddhism as the state religion on an official level. Consequently, a small group named Tamil New Tigers was formed in the Jaffna peninsula to fight for Tamil rights. [A 17-year-old high school student named Velupillai Pirabhakaran formed the group. This is the beginning of the notorious LTTE.] In 1974, the Sinhalese police attacked the International Tamil Cultural conference in Jaffna: an attack which the Tamils describe as “unprovoked.” In addition, the Tamils felt that the state was discriminating against Tamil students’ admission to universities. The Sinhalese favoured an admissions policy based on a quota system that gave an edge to their population ratio. The government introduced a “standardization policy” that claimed a rise in the number of Tamil students admitted. But since university admissions are calculated largely on the basis of district populations, and since the Tamils form a majority in only six of the total of twenty-four districts, the Sinhalese students enjoy a conspicuous advantage over their Tamil counterparts on the basis of their demographic rather than a merit based criteria.

In recent times language has become a powerful marker of ethnicity and of national identity. “Secessionist nationalism [is often] based on radical ethnicity, or at least politically mobilized forms of ethnicity [and] can take many forms, of which the two most prevalent are ethno-linguistic nationalism and ethno-religionism” (Gerard Delanty 129). In many ways, the Sinhalese-Tamil tensions in the form known to the world are part of a twentieth century phenomenon, an increasing “ethnic” mobilization and polarization previously unknown. These regimentations owe more to the ideas and polemics of contemporary “nationalist” ideologues and the politics of nation making and election winning than to earlier concerns and processes. The year 1977 onwards politics in Sri Lanka took a more racist turn with JR Jayawardane back in power with a thumping five-sixths majority in parliament. The TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) contested on a platform which sought a mandate for a sovereign Tamil Ealam. The party won overwhelmingly in the North and performed very well in Tamil dominated areas of East, becoming the major opposition party in parliament. Severe anti-Tamil riots broke out immediately after elections in Sinhalese majority areas, killing hundreds of Tamils.

In two years time, armed activities of Tamil militant organizations increased. So did the anti-Tamil riots in Sinhalese majority areas and Jaffna peninsula was effectively brought under martial law. As Tamil violence continued, military repression was increased in the north. The extent of the violence is visible in the act of the burning down of the invaluable Jaffna Public Library by Sri Lanka’s armed forces, allegedly under the direction of two government ministers, Gamini Dissanayake and Cyril Mathew. But the major orgy of anti-Tamil violence took place in 1983 and the entire country came under its grips.



ANTI-TAMIL RIOTS OF 1983

The 1983 Riots

It is believed that the riots started over a relatively “small” incident. On July 23, Sri Lanka’s Tamil youths, calling themselves the “Liberation Tigers,” ambushed an army truck and killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. This attack occurred in Jaffna, which was within Tamil territory under army occupation. The army leaders then brought the mutilated corpses into Colombo, to display them to the people. Some Sinhalese, disgusted and horrified at the sight, went out of control: killing Tamils, as well as burning houses, businesses, and factories. For three days, this burning and pillaging continued and the Tamils accused the president and the government of doing nothing. [The president seemed powerless to act, for he himself, for fear of being besieged, was scaled off and protected in his residence.] On July 25 and July 27, 53 Tamil prisoners were killed within city jail. [These 53 Tamilians were believed to be “terrorists.” The official version of the incident is that outraged Sinhalese prisoners in the same jail conducted the murder. But since the Tamil terrorists were kept apart in maximum security, the murders could not have taken place without official collusion.]



TAMIL PRISONERS IN CITY JAIL

All in all, more than three thousand Tamils were killed and over 150,000 became refugees, many fleeing the country to India and the West. The fall out was that thousands of youth joined militant organizations. All these events mark the beginning of a brutal civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, which continues today, with non-combatants from both sides systematically targeted — first by Sri Lanka’s armed forces and then by Tamil guerillas.



BLACK JULY REMEMBERED



TAMILS IN REFUGE CAMPS

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

The LTTE is a highly organized militant outfit with approximately 10,000-armed combatants in Sri Lanka; about 3,000 to 6,000 form a trained cadre of fighters. Known for recruiting both women and children, the LTTE also has a significant overseas support structure for fundraising, weapons procurement, and propaganda activities.



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Today the LTTE is the most ferocious and notorious terrorist group to recon with. In their unrelenting drive for a separate homeland, the Tigers have carried out more suicide bombings than Humus. [The LTTE justifies its demand for a homeland by accusing Sri Lankan government of a racist attitude towards its Tamil population and feels that Sri Lanka has failed in protecting minority interests. However, in spite of many rounds of peace talks, the LTTE is decided that it will settle for nothing less than an independent nation.] Perhaps they only fall short of the Al Qaeda and the latter's 9/11 attacks. Nonetheless, LTTE remains a ruthless organization in its own right.

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Joe Rubin, a video journalist, in “The Story” has noted the extent of their brutality. He interviewed a Tamil newspaper editor, Manoranjan, who is critical of the Tigers’ terror tactics and their use of child soldiers. According to Rubin, “this kind of reporting can get you killed in Sri Lanka [...] human-rights organizations estimate that the tigers have killed 8,000 fellow Tamils considered to be traitors to rebel cause.” Political assassinations include the suicide bomber attacks against Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993 and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, which is its only known act outside India. Rubin even ventured north onto an area filled with refugees from the fighting between the government and Tamil guerrillas and he reports that the conditions are deplorable. Ironically, the government sees these camps as a way to control terrorism, but according to Rubin, the conditions in the camps create potential recruits for the Tamil Tigers.

Funny Boy

In *Funny Boy*, most of Selvadurai's (and consequently Arjie's) time and attention is occupied by the socio-economic, racial and religious tension within Sri Lanka; a country in which he was born and lived until the 1983 riots forced his mixed Tamil/Sinhalese family to migrate to Canada. Even though the novel is very much about the personal growth of the protagonist Arjie (modeled on the author), each individual episode highlights the growing unrest during Selvadurai's residence in Sri Lanka. Since his family is a mixed (Tamil/Sinhalese) one, *Funny Boy* focuses a great deal on the complications that arise between friends, lovers and neighbours when political ethnic differences impinge upon them. The chapter titled "Radha Auntie" examines this through the oft-repeated trope of the 'star-crossed lovers,' albeit with a twist. Radha (a Tamil) and Anil (a Sinhalese), more like the 'state-crossed lovers' are unable to sustain their relationship given their ethnic differences. The couple does attempt to give their relationship a chance until violence intervenes. Radha realizes the wisdom of Mala Auntie's words: "ultimately you have to live in the real world. And without family, you are nothing [...]" (*Funny Boy* 78). The real world begins to dictate and its reality is two fold: on the one hand people like Radha and Anil end their relationship and on the other, "people [from] mixed marriages [...] find themselves in a terrible dilemma" (ibid 79).

Alix Goldberg, in "Discussion of the Sinhala/Tamil conflict throughout *Funny Boy*" says that, "after Radha Auntie's direct experience of violence, she no longer has an open mind with regards to her love for a Sinhalese man. She reflects the view of her extended family, in transferring the feelings of hatred towards her attackers onto Anil. Ammachi and Kanthi Auntie's feelings when they say, 'haven't you people done enough? Please go [...] you are not wanted here,' are indicative of Radha Auntie's transformation as she does not stop them or intervene in time [...]" Through the instances of Radha Auntie, Selvadurai tries to point out that political realities of Sri Lanka do not allow its people to romanticize love. Auntie Dorris's experience of being left alone in the world for having married a man belonging to another community is indicative of that.

Now Paskaran is dead and I'm alone. Of course my sisters want me to come and settle in England with them. But what would I do there? Sometimes I wonder if it was all worth it in the end.
(ibid 81)

Radha Auntie takes Dorris as a warning of what the future might hold for her if she decides to marry Anil. It is not that one experience with violence has 'closed her mind' or that she has transferred her hatred for her attackers onto Anil. That would be too reductive, given the complex situation that informs the novel. It is just that Radha has come to realize that, "[even] if two people love each other, the rest is [equally] important [...]" (ibid 78). The anger that she then directs at Anil is misdirected only in that she is angry at the impossibility of the situation and has come to realize that love cannot conquer all. Radha lives in a real world — one that is torn by an ethnic conflict that seems to have no resolution. The novel debunks the belief "that if two people loved each other everything was possible" (ibid 100).

Radha and Anil are not the only lovers torn apart by the conflict. Arjie too is directly affected by it in his relationship with Shehan, a Sinhalese boy. In the chapter "The Best School of All," Arjie formulates his own opinion about the conflict. As he begins his relationship with Shehan, he is made more and more aware of the hostilities around him; the hostility is not only because of his homosexuality; the tension between Black Tie and the Vice Principal of the school represent a microcosm of the larger tensions. Not wanting to "choose sides," Arjie questions the distinction between the two.

Was one better than the other? I didn't think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandara stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better [...]"
(ibid 242)

Selvadurai's objective is not to communicate that tensions mark only Sinhalese/Tamil relations. He also reflects on the manner in which tensions dominate and dictate same-race relations owing to a false sense of "nationalism" that the two warring parties circulate and survive on. In the chapter "Small Choices," Arjie's father warns Jegan, "one must be careful not to antagonize the wrong people." Jegan's protests, that he has been given the job on merit, and therefore should not enlist resentment on the part of Sinhalese employees, are justified. But the reasons quoted by Arjie's father are equally reasonable.

"You gave me the position because I was good [...] not because I was Tamil"

“They don’t see it that way. You know how we Tamils are always accused of favouring each other”

“And the Sinhalese, they never do that?”

“But we are minority and that’s a fact of life.” (ibid 173)

“The fact of life” is that the Tamil people are constantly put on the spot — both by the Tamil guerillas and Sri Lanka’s government. “The fact of life” is also that Jegan has to be ultimately dismissed from work for having had connections at one point with the Tamil Tigers. Truly, theirs is a world of “small choices”— small because people like Jegan are not welcome back into the mainstream and are thereby forced to return the world they were once associated with. It is also a world of “small choices” (as the title of this chapter indicates) because Arjie’s father, by virtue of being a member of the minority community, has to prove his “nationalism” so much more than a Sinhalese would have to. And it is also the “fact of life” that the likes of Jegan become Tamil Tigers by default.

“The police and the army are very cruel in Jaffna. They do terrible things to the Tamils there.”

“Torture [...] were you ever tortured?”

“No...but I knew somebody who was [...] a friend. We worked together in the

Gandhian movement [...] he left for Canada as a refugee, and I went off and joined the Tigers [...] if you become a Tiger you cannot question anything they do. Recently they killed a social worker because he disagreed with their opinions [...] here you can be killed by the Sinhalese and there you can be killed by the police or the Tigers” (ibid 176)

The novel does not indicate what becomes of Jegan after he is dismissed from employment by Arjie’s father. But given the odds, in all likelihood, he rejoins the Tigers. His situation is indicative of the growing stakes surrounding characters’ interactions with the political tensions of Sri Lanka. Personal relations are all marked by violence and tragedy; the relation between the populace and the state is also marked by death.

In the chapter “See No Evil” Daryl Uncle’s death/murder (his tension with the government) is only an example of the plight of those that set out to find “the truth.” Daryl tries to investigate state terrorism, as he understands and sympathizes with Tamil resentment. However, he disappears without a trace and his body later turns up, dead, floating in the river. Circumstantial evidence points to death by drowning but Arjie and his mother know better. Even before his dead body is found, Arjie and Amma suspect foul play when they realize that Daryl Uncle’s house has been ransacked. They decide to file a missing person’s report with the police only to realize that they inadvertently bring trouble for Somaratne, Daryl Uncle’s domestic help. Somaratne is picked up by the police for questioning and is falsely accused and arrested for ransacking Daryl Uncle’s place and stealing things from it. Later Arjie and Amma find out that Somaratne was so badly beaten in police custody that one of his arms is paralyzed. The two eventually reconcile with the reality of the political situation in Sri Lanka: there is no justice for the minority community and the only way that a Tamil person can survive is to lie low and not question either the government or the LTTE. In “Riot Journal,” the last chapter of the novel, the conflict continues, both in the narrative structure and Arjie’s life. Selvadurai is careful not to give his experience of the riots as a reconstruction of past events based on memory, one that could lead to any kind of mutation in the process of representation. It is therefore a “record” of his experiences in the form of journal entries and thus not a narrativization of that experience. The entries are disjointed, beginning in a rapid succession but soon falling farther apart. The linearity of the text breaks down, as if the tension can no longer serve the thread that holds the story together.

Like Radha auntie, Arjie too realizes that ethnic politics can impinge on relationships forged when individuals fall in love. In Arjie's case however, the private and public spheres intersect with particular intensity for unlike Radha auntie Arjie's break from tradition is twofold: not only does Arjie experience a cross-ethnic love, but also one which deviates from the normative sexual values established by society; by falling in love with a Sinhalese boy Shehan he breaks norms of ethnic allegiance as well as sexual orientation. From an early age, Arjie is targeted as a "funny boy." Arjie's father, determined to "correct" his "queerness" sends him to Queen Victoria's Academy, a school famed for its discipline. The school's principal, Black Tie, administers it under a strict hierarchy reminiscent of the British colonial era. The school's system of hierarchy includes and in fact is reinforced by a batch of prefects which police, report and discipline irregularities. Under Black Tie's direction prefects are particularly vigilant about any sign (howsoever remote) of queer sexuality. Boys are routinely whipped and given other corporal punishments if they display or are suspected of having shown any hint of effeminacy; one such instance is of Shehan being caned by Black Tie for wearing his hair long. This system of punishment replicates that which exists at the national level—it is arbitrary, unjust and intolerant and does not provide for any avenues of appeal.

Before Arjie joins his new school, he is warned by his brother, "Once you come to Queen Victoria Academy you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other bys will look down on you" (207). This and many such warnings/advice in the novel along with specific episodes of punishment underscore the social tensions which are produced by the quest for sexual identity explored in the novel. On the one hand these are obvious expressions of homophobia. On the other, they both reaffirm and complicate the binary of masculinity/femininity. Conventionally, femininity is characterized by silence particularly silence in the face of unjust abuse. However, Queen Victoria's Academy (the name of the school suggests that it imports nineteenth century notions of sexuality) attempts to make Arjie and boys like him into a "man" by torturing/tutoring them to silently suffer abuse. To be "masculine" in this school means the ability to develop resilience to pain and torture such that young boys become men without shedding a tear. But to be "masculine" also apparently means, that these boys become passive objects of arbitrary violence directed at their bodies. They thus begin to occupy the subject position of the other, the feminine, the disempowered. The fact that the boys who are subjected to acts of torture are also ones who exhibit signs of queerness problematizes any attempt on the part of society to construct gender as rigid categories as well as denies these boys the opportunity to recognize, define and express individual sexual identity. In fact, sadism imposed as "rites of passage" by the school at best contorts the boys' understanding of sexuality per se. When among these "disciplined boys" are found Tamil ones like Arjie, sexuality and ethnicity coalesce suggesting that to be a Tamil in Sri Lanka is to be the other, the less masculine, the emasculated. In other words, conventional notions of masculinity and ethnicity intersect. Regardless to say, the colonial-era discipline of Queen Victoria's Academy does not effect or influence sexual orientation for more than one boy displays queerness.

Among these "queer" boys is Arjie who makes friends with and later falls in love with a Sinhalese boy, Shehan. Arjie and Shehan begin to protect each other in the wake of abuse as much at the hands of Black Tie as the Sinhalese prefects who take pleasure in expressing their authority by assaulting Tamil boys. But for Arjie, there is no real difference between Black Tie, a Tamilian by ethnicity, trying to maintain control over a multi-ethnic school and Mr. Lokubandara, the Vice Principal who wants to transform the school into a Sinhalese one. Arjie makes the difficult choice between ethnic allegiance and sexual desire. When asked to recite poetry before a full audience which includes a minister who would determine the destiny of the school's multi-ethnic character, Arjie deliberately gives a poor performance. In the past Arjie had witnessed Black Tie regularly cane and whip Shehan who persisted in wearing his hair long and thereby showing effeminate tendencies. The novel is ambiguous whether Shehan is a regular target for Black Tie because Shehan is queer, or because Shehan is Sinhalese or because Shehan is both queer and Sinhalese. Nonetheless, Arjie comes to realize that so long as Black Tie remains the principal of Queen Victoria's Academy, Shehan will be treated brutally. By causing Black Tie to look ridiculous in the minister's presence, Arjie indeed puts an end to his authoritarian rule and thereby extends protection to his lover. His love for Shehan (thus expressed) causes him to give greater priority to Shehan's interests than those of his family. By thus expressing his commitment to Shehan, Arjie effects a kind of metaphorical exile from his ethnic group. Arjie was "no longer a part of [his] family in the same way" for he had chosen a homosexual identity over a Tamilian heterosexual one (*Funny Boy* 284). This becomes a defining moment in the novel's sexual politics. Arjie like his mother and his aunt is forced to choose between sexual desire and ties of kinship in which he prioritizes his subjectivity. Nonetheless, unlike Radha auntie and Amma (who must choose one and give up on the other) Arjie is able to pursue his love and maintain family ties until ethnic riots (in which his grandparents are killed) destroy all that his family has and force them to migrate to Canada; it is only then that he is separated from his lover. For Arjie refuge in another country becomes a reality necessitated by political and ethnic concerns, not sexual ones. To that end the novel limits persecution on account of deviation from normative sexual values to the conclave of Queen Victoria's Academy. *Funny Boy* does not explicitly state or even remotely explore whether state actors too engage in that variety of persecution of which Black Tie was guilty. However the novel does establish persecution because of sexual orientation as analogous to persecution because of ethnic identity; both are results of an intolerant and unjust society. As stated earlier, Arjie must experience not just a real political exile from his homeland, (his family settles in Canada) but also a metaphorical one from his family (he cannot disclose to them his sexual orientation). If discovered for a homosexual, Arjie faces the prospect of punishment at the hands of his father for a characteristic the latter had presumably long wanted him to overcome. The novel then casts Arjie's family into opposing roles: that of the persecuted because they are Tamils in Sri Lanka and that of the persecutors as they are heterosexual and have in the past chosen ethnic identity over sexual desires.

The Theme of Children's Games

The theme of children's games is explored in the first few chapters of the novel, in particular, the first chapter, "Pigs Can't Fly." These games are played by the children on "spend-the-days," a monthly event when the children are free of their parents as they spend the day with their Ammachi and Appachi. The children, Arjie, his sister Sonali, his brother Diggy and all his cousins get together at their grandparent's place and play to their hearts content. In their games however, are expressed the dynamics of Sri Lankan society. The children divide themselves into two groups: one has boys with the exception of Meena (a girl), the other has girls with the exception of Arjie (a boy). This also served to resolve any conflict which may arise between them.

In order to minimize interference by either Ammachi or Janaki, we had developed and refined a system of handling conflict and settling disputes ourselves. Two things formed the framework of this system: territoriality and leadership...territorially, the area around my grandparent's house was divided into two. The front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys...the second territory [was] confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch...
(ibid 3)

Evidently the method devised by the children to prevent conflicts echoes that proposed to settle the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka; a territorial divide. The boys' side is further divided into two groups each of which constantly struggles for domination over the other. Meena, the odd one in the boy's side, can never "naturally" assume leadership but must fight for it. On the other hand, the girl's side provides the possibility of free play of fantasy and merit. Arjie (unlike Meena) need not struggle to gain leadership as his superior imagination is recognized by the girl's side and acknowledged in the form of his unchallenged leadership of it. The girl's side is shown as more accepting of a minority member (Arjie, a boy) than the boy's side is which expects Meena to display brute force. However, as stated earlier, the games which these children play articulate the social, political dynamics of the country they inhabit. For instance, the appearance of Kanthi Aunty's daughter, cruelly nicknamed by the children as "Her Fatness," highlights the undemocratic nature of the girl's side.

The girl's side mostly amused themselves by imitating adult domestic functions or by enacting some much-loved fairy story. Whatever be the enactment, Arjie always played the part of the heroine of the piece. The most favoured game played by the girl's side in *Funny Boy* is bride-ride in which Arjie invariably played the part of the bride. When "Her Fatness" joins the girl's side, she declares that she too wants to play the bride, a demand over which the others are aghast. They are unable to provide a reasonable excuse for allowing Arjie to play the bride in all enactments of the fantasy.

"Well I don't want to be the groom any more. I want to be the bride."

We stared at her in disbelief, amazed by her impudent challenge to my position.

"you can't," I finally said.

"Why not?" Her Fatness demanded. "Why should you always be the bride? Why can't someone else have the chance too?"

"Because..." Sonali said, joining in. "Because Arjie is the bestest bride of all." (ibid 10)

By not allowing everyone a fair chance to play the role of the bride in the enactment, the game played by the girl's side emerges in spirit as undemocratic as the political institutions of Sri Lanka. Arjie cannot argue with the logic provided by Her Fatness for the conventional gender roles as constructed by society dictate that girls be brides and boys be grooms. Arjie's game on the one hand subverts such conventionality by allowing a boy to play the bride in the enactment but on the other hand by not extending the role to others in the group its subversive potential is at best limited.

Funny Boy: Title and Narrative Structure.

The novel *Funny Boy* does not have a conventional narrative structure. The larger narrative of the novel comprises of six short stories (which form six chapters) told from the perspective of a school-going boy named Arjie. Each story reveals some aspect of adult life to Arjie and also contributes to the larger story which the novel tells. The first chapter, "Pigs Don't Fly" reveals how children's games reflect the larger social structures of Sri Lanka. Arjie learns that for the most part, his family will be ashamed of what he is and would expect of him to pretend conformity with normative values of sexuality. His mother's statement at the end of the chapter, that Arjie must play cricket because "pigs don't fly" makes him realize that to be different and to be allowed to express that difference is as unusual as the prospect of flying pigs. Arjie cannot express his sexual orientation without incurring the disgust of an intolerant and unjust society of which his parents (particularly his father) are a part of. The second chapter/story "Radha Auntie" is a further learning experience for Arjie. Mesmerized by Janaki's romance comics, Arjie has a rather orthodox notion of how Radha auntie would behave; he expects that she should be coy and reticent, that her entire world should revolve around her fiancé. Instead he meets a girl who can hold her own and even resort to subterfuge to meet the man she loves. This is the story in the novel in which Arjie realizes a fact of Tamil life in Sri Lanka which will reappear in the last story; that the political situation in Sri Lanka is such that try as others may, inter-race relations cannot be maintained. Radha auntie's experience and choices debunk notions that Arjie believed to be universal truths; the hero and heroine of every love story do not marry and live happily ever after and personal choices are dictated by political situations. The resulting conflict is reiterated in the chapter/story "See no Evil." When Arjie and Amma realize that Daryl Uncle's house has been ransacked, Arjie does not want to keep quiet. Both he and his mother want justice for Daryl Uncle and to expose the people who are behind his death. At the same time, Arjie also experiences a rush of fear and anger when he and his mother visit Somaratne in his village and are first followed by some unidentified people and then even attacked with stones. For the first time Arjie is able to appreciate the dilemma that his parents, Radha auntie, Anil and many others face. He learns that the only means by which one can survive in a conflict prone country is to turn practical and to forgo idealism. Perhaps emotional ties and Arjie's innate sense of justice demand that Daryl uncle's murderers be brought to justice. However, the world that the likes of Arjie inhabit cannot be painted black and white; that people like his father are not evil or villainous for sacking Jegan in order to preserve their own families. His conflicting emotions regarding Daryl uncle's death and the events there after then reflect the conflicting emotions experienced by Amma, Appa and Radha Auntie.

The word "funny" means odd, strange or unusual or peculiar. It is also often used to suggest homosexuality. The title of the novel plays on the word "funny" to indicate both Arjie's sexual orientation as well as the many unusual experiences (social and political) that he has. From the beginning, it is Arjie's involvement that ties all the stories together. He is Radha auntie's confidant in her quiet trips to meet Anil. He is also his mother confidant when she has a brief affair with Daryl Uncle. He even accompanies her on her many trips to the police station, Daryl Uncle's house and Somaratne's village to piece the story of Daryl Uncle's disappearance. After Daryl Uncle's body is discovered, it is Arjie who lends his mother quiet support in the face of her loss. Thus his experiences are funny or unusual from those of his brother (Diggy) and sister (Sonali); while the latter two have only known the trauma of political conflict and displacement, Arjie has been closely associated with the many instances in which political strife successfully has torn personal lives. Even before Diggy, Sonali and Appa had experienced the death of Ammachi and Appachi due to communal riots, Arjie had heard what the government and its people are capable of from Jegan. He had also witnessed the power wielded by the government and its capacity to destroy people, in Daryl Uncle's death. In other words, Arjie's experience of life in Sri Lanka are organized through each of these stories and are in that very different and peculiar to that experienced by other boys of his age. Each story then both structures and is in turn structured by Arjie's experience of the world; each story as would a children's story, comes with a moral in the end which teaches Arjie means by which to survive in the world.

Conclusion

This unit discussed *Funny Boy* in the context of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict in Sri Lanka. The novel has been written from a young boy, Arjie's perspective. It documents Arjie's struggle with discovering and accepting his homosexuality. It also documents a parallel struggle to come to terms with the second hand status that is meted out to Tamils in Sri Lanka and the impending migration to start life afresh in a new country. The unit begins with a brief discussion of the history of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict. It then goes on to discuss the novel's various themes like sexuality, representation of the political conflict in the novel, children's games etc. A final note is on the significance of the novel's title and narrative structure.

Glossary

Disenfranchised: Deprived of the rights of citizenship, especially the right to vote.

Ethnic: The meaning of the term ethnic is of, relating to, or characteristic of a sizable group of people sharing a common and distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic, or cultural heritage.

Normative: Generically the term normative means relating to a standard model or ideal. The term has specialized contextual meanings across academic disciplines. For instance in philosophy normative statements are those that make claims as how things ought to be or should be. In the social sciences, particularly sociology and literature, the term also related to the role of cultural norms and values which people believe constitute and maintain social structures.

Queer: The word queer is conventionally used to denote something that is odd, strange or unusual. It is also an umbrella term for people that are not heterosexual and do not subscribe to conventional gender binary.

Riots: A kind of civil disorder. It is characterized by disorganized groups lashing out in sudden and intense acts of violence directed against people, property, authority etc. of late there has been evidence which indicates that not all riots are caused by disorganized groups. For instance, in *Funny Boy* the rioters got hold of an electoral list with the help of which they identified Tamil houses and business establishments suggesting that anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka had a degree of organization.

Subvert: To undermine or overthrow an existing or established system, practice or institution.

Summary

The study material is divided into five sections. The first provides a note on the author, Shyam Selvadurai. The second section introduces the novel *Funny Boy*. This is followed by an outline of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict in Sri Lanka. The third, fourth and fifth sections of the content discuss the novel at length. They examine the representation of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in *Funny Boy*, the theme of children's games in the novel and the ways in which these games reproduce some of the power structures of the society in which they live. A final note is on the significance of the novel's title and narrative structure.

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