

Conflict of 'Self' and the 'Other' in Shyam Selvadurai's Novel *Funny Boy*.

Janardan Chetia

Research Scholar

Department of English

Nagaland University

Mail Id: janardanchetia666@gmail.com

Lakiumong Yimchunger

Research Scholar

Department of English

Nagaland University

Mail Id: lakiuyimchunger@gmail.com

Abstract

As much as *Funny Boy* represents a painful transition to sexual and adulthood, it also paints a stark portrait of the distinctions society makes between what is considered normal and abnormal behaviour. The story depicts a great deal of the inner workings of the main protagonist, Arjun Chelvaratnam, and is set against the communal riots in 1983. The idea of the socially recognised identity of "self" and the frequently hurtful term "other" will be the main emphasis of this essay. The tension between these two polarities as it relates to the narrator's life and the Sinhalese-Tamil fight will also be a major subject of this essay.

Key Words: Self, Other, Homophobic, Heterosexual, Trauma, Queer

Largely a product of the 1960's, Queer theory is an umbrella term encompassing a vast majority of sexual identities known to human in this generation. "Queer" is an inclusive term for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, pansexual, asexual and all other sexual identities that people prefer. Some of the key concepts of the theory is the idea that sexual behaviours and all concepts that links sexual behaviours to sexual identities as well as all categories of normative and deviant sexualities are social constructs, meaning they are the product of social and historical construct. Queer theorist follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies rejecting the idea that sexuality is an essential category, something determined by biology or judged by eternal standards of morality and truth. For the supporters of this theory sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces. It is a field of critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s. Its history can be traced back to a wide variety of social and activist movements through the 1960s and early 1970s. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 is often considered as the origin of the gay liberation movement. Organisations like Gay Liberation Movement (GLF), Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) and others started to sought medical, legal, social freedom and rights for gays and lesbian and thus started a rift in the representation of the gay and lesbian subjects which has given the theory its present shape. It is a branch of study which has its roots in the gay and lesbian literature and their representation in popular media. The core of the theory lies in the 'reversing' (Nayar, 185) the accepted and traditional norm of heterosexuality. Although Queer theory has its origin from the gay and lesbian literature, it encompasses other practices, identities and communities as well. The communities that the theory includes for its studies all have been marginalised or are a minority of the population, such as the bisexuals, sado-masochism, the transgenders, drag and camp. In general terms queer theory cannot be compartmentalised into water tight molecules. It is because of the fact that our understanding and absorption of gender is ever changing and transforming. "Queer theory looks at the history of cultural representations of the gay/lesbian as deviant, sick or criminal, while foregrounding sexuality as an important category of critical analysis when dealing with cultural texts. Queer theory moves between literary analysis and activism because it shows how cultural

representations contribute to very real material oppression of homosexuals.” (Nayar,184). According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick Queer theory, “It’s about trying to understand different kinds of sexual desire and how the culture defines them”. As mentioned above the theory draws upon the experiences of the gay and the lesbian movements while adding philosophical and critical insights into the nature of the body. Queer theory looks at the general construction of sexuality in discourse of medicine, law or religion and tries to understand the dynamics of alternatives of sexual preferences. As evident in many popular literatures of this century, the theory is a struggle to search and bring out the hidden history of the writings in literature pertaining to the homosexual paradigm and representation. Queer theory also looks at the idea of oppression and discrimination faced by the LGPTQ community. It includes the form of oppression such as patriarchy and racism at home or workplace. The varied dimensions of one’s sexuality and preferences with a specific reference to ‘ghettoization’(Nayar,184) of the LGPTQ community is another subject of concern for the supporters of this theory. To this plethora of innovation can be added the poles of queer diaspora, which corresponds more to the present book in focus. According to Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory; from Structuralism to Ecocriticism* (2019), “Queer diaspora, built on the commonality of sexual preferences rather than racial-ethnic identities, now constitute a global queer culture that has a political agenda and presence. Queer theory sees such a diaspora as both an effect and a counter to globalization.” (Nayar,198). Sub-continent authors like Hanif Kureishi, Suniti Namjoshi, Leela Gandhi, and Shyam Selvadurai among others have written and expressed the queer concern in many of their reputed publications.

Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, ‘is a story of acceptance, love and inclusion’ The Indian Express, (Oct 31 2020). The novel is not an autobiography yet it has a very deep connection to the authors life. Witnessing the 1983 riots, moving to Canada in his teen years and growing up in a free environment, devoid of the ideologies as old as the ancient temples themselves, Shyam Selvadurai and Arjun Chelvaratnam shares a similar path of life. In his article “Shyam Selvadurai ‘s Funny boy: Reclaiming space/ dignity for queer identity” (2018) Mohammad Ahmad says that the author “very effectively correlates “the queer figure” and protagonist Arjie’s increasing awareness of his ‘funny’ sexuality with his awareness of how Tamil ethnicity disrupts the possibility of belonging within the prevailing discourse of national identity in late 1970s and early 1980s Sri Lanka” (Ahmad,3&4). *Funny Boy*, can be seen from the critical eye of a protester, a fighter for the rights of the LGPTQ community and most importantly for oneself. It talks about the place that these people, the so called ‘others’ are given as an inevitable state of being. This often happens inside the four walls expanding and spreading to the far reaches of the society in the later years. The novel also speaks volumes about the mental trauma and torture that the poor boy had to go through. Of constantly being reminded that “A bride is a girl, not a boy” (Selvadurai,11), and that boys should play with boys and girls with girls only. Arjie, is in a sort of, bubble of dilemma; of what is accepted of what from whom and why. The shame and embarrassment that is heaped upon him on one of the spend-a-day at the grand parent house, the torture of playing cricket with the boys and the tag of being referred as ‘funny’ amounts to a disillusionment and a feeling of detachment in the protagonist mind. This dire situation of confusion grows and begins peeling its petals one by one as he (Arjie) leads his life to his adolescence which culminates after his realisation of what his father has dreaded that Arjie would made himself into.

While the world has moved a long mile ahead in connection to the LGPTQ advocacy and rights, the Indian sub-continent still lacks behind. We still are living in the pocket of traditional norms of gender roles and stereotyping, while ignoring a bigger share of the picture. Apart from other differences that the characters showcase in the novel, there is a clear and often repeated demarcation of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. This distinction according to Peter Barry is “the distinction between the naturally given, normative ‘self’ of heterosexuality and the rejected ‘Other’ of homosexuality” (Barry,147). Further Barry appoints that this lot called the ‘other’ is ultimately secluded and dejected. Thus, leading to the social, economical and political problems that they had to face. Another critic and crusader of queer theory Ms. Sedgwick is of the opinion that in order to understand the plight of the community inclusive of the LGPTQ it is very important to first understand the relationship between man and woman. This ideology

of hers have found place in many of her notable publications such as *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and *Tendencies* (1993).

The 'self' comprises of characters in the novel who projects and follows the natural law of love and reproduction. They are the heterosexual lot of the society, straight and norm conforming. Appa, Diggy, Dayrl Uncle, Anil, are all male; Amma, Radha Aunty, Sonali, Ammachi, Chithra Aunty are all female and nothing in between. They are the ones with power and authority, like the Sinhalese in majority in Colombo. Bending rules and making adjustment are not at all an option for them or that matter is against the empty principal they follow. They go by the rules and breaking them is an abomination. In the chapter 'The Best School of All', Black Tie, the keeper of the 'ills and the burdens'- the principal is an epitome of strictness and exactness of things in life. Appa, keeps the rules intact, he believes that boys should behave like boys do. Arjie is bent, bruised and bashed for not fitting the requirements according to the society. He is barred from playing Bride-ride and sent to play cricket much against his will. An instance of 'self' could also be seen in the play of power infused with madness. It is the mob's fire that burns the ideal atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. One is reminded of the multiple records of murder and destruction in Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* (1993). 'What ailed the city?' (Nasrin,210), Suronjon asks. Arjie is stucked by the same feeling of remorse at the sight of their house, when he comes back from Shehan Soyza, his friend's house "in the exclusive neighbourhood of Cinnamon Gardens" (Selvadurai,251). The streets are deserted and forlorn. In-fact, the society is, the 'self' here. The government, the political parties, the angry mob and the Tamil tigers are its machineries. It is through these that the subjugation of the individuality of the citizens takes place.

From the very first parade of embarrassment till the moment when he sees his charred house for the last time, Arjun is continuously tormented by the thought of he being 'funny'. This newly conferred title to him does not make any sense to him. He is a free bird; a non-conforming miracle. Arjie sees a game as a game. He confides with his mother as to why he can't play with the girls while Sonali can. He is surely the 'other' in the self. He is the funny one as Cyril Uncle exclaims, "looks like we have a funny one here" (Selvedurai,14). The sense of otherness or being different is instilled in him by the ones near him. He is singled out and 'projected outwards'(Barry,147). Since he cannot play with the girls especially with the episode between him and Her Fatness and he doesn't like to play with the boys in the scorching sun, he starts staying alone with a book for company. Reading and self-contemplating seems to have become his friend. But all is not lost. Radha Aunty does let him play in her room and confirms that all is right with and in him. Daryl Uncle buys him sequels of 'the little woman', even Jegan spends time with him. They go for run in the evening after he returns from the hotel. To which Diggy is jealous but his ego gets better of him and he never gets an inch closer to Jegan. As he reaches his teen, Arjie becomes self-aware of his sexual preferences, his minute observation of the muscles in Jegan and his dark flashy skin. However, it is when he meets an another 'other' in the novel, his classmate in Queen Victoria Academy. He is Shehan Soyza. Of course, Appa is not all praise and glory for Shehan. In fact, he is disappointed. He thought that the school will make a man out of him. Arjie doesn't not stand up to his expectations. He has failed his father. Yet he has found a friend, a companion through whom he is able to channelize his inner thoughts and emotions. Diggy's explanation of Shehan's doing with the head prefect and warning does not stop Arjie from building a rapport that connects with the ill repudiated Shehan. It is from his relationship with him that Arjie is able to attain self-realisation and sexual identity. He becomes him and not 'funny' as tagged by the people around him.

The conflict, which is one of the major themes of the novel surpasses its boundaries and marks a different level of autonomy. It encompasses a variety of groups who are constantly in a kind of tug-of-war. The sole motive for this fight is, power and authority. Very natural to the society that we are living in, Shyam Selvadurai, projects the struggle in a very normal shade yet which seeps deep into the conscious of the readers. He props the socially constructed gender norms of all human being-the heterosexual, the homosexual, the powerful/authoritative, and the weaker-those without voice or choice. Arjie after his physical encounter with Shehan in the dark and misty garage fears like Kanishka Nurzada in *The Carpet Weaver* (2019). He asks himself, "could he know that I, in fact, was a Kuni?"

(Sadat, 1). He tries to hide and rushes to the bathroom to change. This act of urgency shoots out from the bitter rejection of Arjie's choices and personality traits from his family members.

While Arjie has to go through a lot as he scales his days towards his maturity, there are other characters in the novel also who has to take the decisions meted out to them silently without much resistance. Anil seems to have fallen for Radha Aunty. She and Anil meet while they go to rehearsal for the play *The King and I* (Selvadurai,54). There is a short span of flowering in their relationship but which do not last for a long time. Ammachi would never agree to her getting married to Anil. He is their neighbour's son but a Sinhalese. Communal affiliation seems to be stronger than love for her. Although she has a very dark reason behind this hatred of her towards the Sinhalese. Yet again as readers of the present generation we sympathise with the young lovers and thus birds of same feather are flocked together. Whether they (the newly matched couple) would find love stands a big question throughout the book. In fact, it is not only Anil and Radha but later in the novel we also find that Amma has also a past. This comes in flesh and blood with the coming of Dayrl Uncle. Arjie is surprised as well as fascinated by the prospect of the relationship. Through these encounters in the present and the past, Selvadurai makes a point clear that the conflict of power politics revolves in all corners of life and generations. It is all inclusive. And so, the communal riots that halts life also justifies the author's argument. The rift between the Tamil tigers and the Sinhalese may be co related to the struggle between the Mindu and the Muslims in Taslima Nasrin epoch making book *Lajja*. The Tamils are in minority in Colombo. Just like Sudhamoy Datta's family and the rest of the Hindus in Bangladesh, after the Babri Masjid demolition. Arjun's father is as loyal; he loves his country like his counter Sinhalese brother and business partner Sena Uncle. But he has to move from one house to the other, hiding and taking refuge leading to the final decision to leave the country for Canada. Selvadurai's tone, in this part of the novel echoes with that of other sub- continent writers writing about the diasporic enigma of an individual, of the displacement and disposition caused by communal riots. What happens in Tamil majority Jaffna recoils and reciprocate in double momentum in Colombo. Dayrl uncle is a victim of the riots. Where Radha Aunty merely escapes the horror, dayrl uncle is killed; his murders being the mob enraged by the communal fumes of half-baked patriotism. Ammachi and Appachi are tragically burnt inside their own car, their once fully furnished house is charred into ashes and even ransacked. The gardens are nothing but a bed of debris now and Arjie sighs at the look of their house for the final time. Kaustav Bakshi in his article 'funny boy and the pleasure of breaking rules: bending genre and gender in "the best of school of all" (2015) states funny boy "not only breaks rules by transfiguring an overtly masculinist genre to accommodate queer desires. It also opens up a dialogic space by confronting authoritative discourses on a colonial system of values perpetuated through the educational institutions, compulsory heterosexuality and ethnocentric nationalism of the postcolonial nation state".

These conflicts and rifts between different poles for control and power results in confusion and chaos. Everyone is affected and at the same time devastated by it. These troubles hit like the double-edged swords that cuts the victim and also the victimiser. The inter-play of power politics emerging out of the game of controlling and maintaining a dictatorship leads to a sort of mismanagement and disarray. This also results in a shift of power; like a sort of tables have turned situation. Arjie loses his vitality when he is warned of becoming a 'laughing stock of Colombo'. He seems to be losing control over his own life. Appa, Amma, the school and other institutions of the society decide what is good and bad for him. But as the plot of the story unravels and with that he comes to maturity, Arjie regains power and control, which can be seen in his going to Shehan's house without any fear and bondages to see him for the last time. There is a shift of power, of which he himself is not aware but which cannot be hidden from the readers eye. He is an underdog, who fights his way up to self- realisation. Although some readers may be appalled by the physical relationship of an underage boy in a not so acceptable according to the traditional gender norms of the society, yet when it is seen from another angle of the mental trauma and pressure that the poor boy has to go through, one cannot but feel apathy for the 'funny boy'. It is a celebration of his coming out from the closet. The irony lies in the fact that while all his family members loses their belongings, their home and friends, Arjie finds himself. The ladder that

they use to climb up and jump into safe grounds from the mob, can be taken as a very apt symbol of his emancipation. He is a free bird and this bird shall fly freely. The author is successful in bringing the message ashore. Through a powerful stroke of narrative from the mouth of a young boy, Shyam Selvadurai tries to lay bigger issues of homophobia, the atrocities that homosexuals or for that matter the LGPTQ community has to go through. And so, he champions at interlinking the struggle of the country to that of the funny boy. Arjie, is successful in finding his worth. He is successful in making a way for himself. With Arjie's victory the final blow at the baseless discrimination and mental trauma heaped upon people believing in a lifestyle free from all gender stereotypes and socially constructed norms is placed and an era of emancipation is heralded.

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