

# Challenging Gender Binary: A Study of Shyam Selvadurai's the Funny Boy

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**Abstract** – Shyam Selvadurai's novels give a vivid picture of the fears provoked by gender non-conformity and have the background of the battle of the spirit against the repression of gender, race, and sexual orientation. His protagonists find it challenging to accommodate their desires within the heteronormative structure of the family. Selvadurai's most acclaimed novel, *The Funny Boy*, focuses on coming-of-age of Arjie Chelvaratnam and follows his awakening as homosexual living in Sri Lanka. This novel is set against the backdrop of Sri Lankan social and cultural tensions in the 1980s. It explores the barriers around love, marriage, and cultural tensions, specifically in the Sinhalese and Tamils. Selvadurai's choice to place his narration in an unnamed center space in between established sexual and gender boundaries in several manners parallels the inability of diasporic individuals to be located within cultural and ethnic frontiers. This paper tends to explore the issue of being a gender non-conformist and of being different in a funny way. It highlights how the protagonist, through boundary transgressions and the destabilizing character of his subjectivity, challenges the fixity and finality of the socially constructed categories of gender.

**Keywords:** Gender Binary, Identity, Homosexuality, Non-Conformist, Sexual Orientation

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender is a term that refers to social or cultural distinctions and roles associated with a person's biological sex. Understandings of gender identity evolve continually. Earlier gender was associated more with sexuality but Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coined the term "homosocial" to oppose "homosexual," describing nonsexual same sex relations. In highly patriarchal societies with the development of a gender variant category is totally unacceptable. It is either treated as a defect or transvestism that needs to be corrected. The polarization of the sex and gender into what theorists' term a "binary system" has largely eradicated legitimate third or fourth gender roles. Those who do not behave in ways considered appropriate for their biological sex are regarded as transgendered, for they have crossed over the socially constructed boundaries of gender. Third gender roles and cross dressing in traditional societies entails a system of multiple genders that can exist only outside dichotomous gender systems, which polarise sex, gender and sexuality into categories of male and female. Thus in a binary system androgyny becomes the only available alternative.

ShyamSelvadurai, a Sri Lankan Canadian, holds a prominent position in South Asian diasporic literary

canon. His stories give a rich view of Sri Lanka's history, its people, and the stories they have to tell. Selvadurai, in most of his novels, brings together the discourses of cultural and gender identity politics to provide an alternative outlook on the recent history of Sri Lanka. His protagonists find it challenging to accept and disclose their sexuality within the heteronormative structure of society. The child narrator of *The Funny Boy* is an outsider and does not submit to the social standards forced upon by society. Arjie, son of an upper-middle-class Tamil family, crosses boundaries in coming out and accepting his identity. He falls in love with a Sinhalese boy regardless of his parents' continuous struggles to earn a virile identity for him in order that he may conform to the gender boundaries and social norms imposed upon him by society. In this narrative, we find characters who are non-conformists and do not submit themselves to social stereotypes. However, at the same time, they live with a sense of the impending threat of them transgressing societal barriers. In this novel, the personal and the political are interwoven as the recognition of Arjie's own identity is associated with the political turmoil of Sri Lanka during his time.

This paper examines the essential and the gradual passage the Arjie takes in awakening as a homosexual and realizing his identity. In

Selvadurai's own words, as he describes his decision to come out and disclose his identity,

I remembered how it was for me feeling there was no one out there who was a role model of any sort. When I decided to be out in public, I was really thinking of that version of me in Sri Lanka who would read my book and feel relieved to not be alone. If I decided not to be out, I would be sending a message to that young person that I was still afraid and ashamed (Hunn 2005: 2).

The title *The Funny Boy* itself suggests the nature of the background in which the protagonist and narrator Arjie, negotiates his sexuality in the middle of family and political tensions. As a teenager or young adult, Arjie exhibits "certain tendencies" (162), what his father calls them, that challenge established standards of the ways men and women are supposed to behave.

The ritual of dressing up as a bride during his "spend-the-days" is crucial to him because it is when he is dressed up in a sari that he is no longer weighed down by any conventional gender roles. This practice of dressing in a sari somehow helps him to explore his identity and attain a level of autonomy that remaining within the confines of a boy's world does not. It is illustrated by the following line in which Arjie is describing the dressing up a ritual in 'bride-bride,'

"I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world, represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palm, seemed to revolve." (11)

Although this practice of dressing in women's clothing is nearly sacred to him, it earns him the title of "funny," a word whose implication he does not entirely apprehend, but that he can feel nonetheless has a shameful implication. In the first part of the novel, "Pigs Can't Fly," Arjie considers himself as belonging to the world of the back garden to which he "seemed to have gravitated naturally." It is the girls' territory, and he is the only boy there, but at the early stage, he does not feel any embarrassment in playing with his female cousins and dressing up as the bride in their favorite game, 'bride-bride.' This game instead allows him to give a free play to his fancies in a way which feels he cannot do if he plays the drab game of cricket with his male cousins instead, as the narrator tells us: "The pleasure the boys had standing for hours on a cricket field was incomprehensible to me." (11)

Thus the reader may notice how Arjie cuts through the inhibitions of his gendered body by this beautiful transformation, but the freedom is only short-lived. The reader realizes that the boy's family is conscious of his different gender identity or worried about what

may become of his sexuality, much before Arjie himself recognizes it. Arjie's family, throughout the novel, is determined to replace him into the male category, detaching his engagement with girls, and urging his play with boys. Arjie's family discourages any un-stereotypical gender inclinations he may have even before Arjie becomes aware of the implications of his "tendencies." Out of fear that he may turn out "funny," his parents prohibit him from playing "bride-bride" (20). This continuous attempt to put him back in the role that has been decided for him by the society is the family's adherence to the rules that have been put in place. However, when playing cricket with the boys proves equally awkward because of his "girlie-boy" (25) status, which separates him from the possibility of being either a girl or a boy.

It is the financial, racial, and religious strains inside Sri Lanka that involve the vast majority of Selvadurai and Arjie's time and consideration inside the novel. Truth be told, while Arjie's enlivening sexuality fills in as an inclination all through the book's six areas, it is extremely just the principle topic of 'The Best School of All'. That is the area in which Arjie's dad sends him to The Queen Victoria Academy, an appallingly barbarous English-style school. The Queen Victoria Academy serves an image for pioneer, refined, and white-collar class benefits. This is the custom Arjie's required to be a product of. To be a gay would, for Arjie, mean falling in the eyes of his dad and the bigger universe of white-collar class Tamil male-centric society in which he lives. To be sure, Arjie's dad discloses to him that the institute "will force you to become a man," plainly demonstrating that the school is to instill Arjie in the methods for white-collar class male benefit. Arjie's more seasoned sibling cautions him that their Father suspects and fears his homosexuality - his turn to the Academy is unmistakably intended to "cure" him of the gay affliction. Inside this specific situation, it is amazingly unexpected that the Academy is the very spot in which Arjie meets Shehan Soyza, a Sinhalese classmate whom he falls for and carries on a sexual association with.

The stereotypes of gender, imposed by his family, explicitly delimit the distinct worlds of boys and girls, leaving Arjie caught between the two worlds of boys and girls. Arjie's sexuality is negotiated merely within the confines of gender, male and female within these early incidences. His segregation from both the girls and boys indicates that Arjie himself occupies some third space in between these two worlds, but that third space is only defined as "funny" and never specified. The words Selvadurai employs to describe identity are fluid and vague and are not given a definitive name within these margins of identity. It is quite similar to Arjie's struggle to occupy a space between the boundaries of male and female. When Arjie's lover, Shehan, visits his home, his brother Diggy remarks that their father would "definitely know that

you are...," but fails to actually name what Arjie is. Just as the identity of diasporic individuals is tied to several different nations and cannot be adequately put under any single cultural label, Arjie's position, too, within male and female labels and modes of behaviour, fails to be representable in one descriptive word. The author's denial to encompass his protagonist's identity by titling him defies a western notion to categorize sexuality.

After he is inhibited by his mother to play with his girl cousins, he usually sits alone on the veranda steps of his grandparents' house. The Veranda is a space that geographically falls neither in the boys' territory nor in the girls' and is symbolic of his exclusion from both these worlds. This isolation now leads him to a different experience of his body. When his aunt drags him to the drawing-room, the same act of draping the sari, which was an act of liberation earlier, becomes the source of embarrassment for him. Arjie no longer embraces his body as he did earlier. This process of falling out or relocation of his position as a gendered subject worries him throughout the novel. Arjie constantly struggles to occupy a space outside of typical gender and sexual classifications.

To discuss this process of defamiliarization of physical spaces, we can look at different instances in the novel. Prizegiving ceremony acts as a crucial act of rebellion and resistance instead of merely an ignorant self-disrupting revenge. Arjie finds himself staring at the school building and wondering how different and peaceful it looked in the evening right before he is about to mix the two poems. His strength to be able to look at his school, where he is brutally harassed for the very trivial mistakes, in such a positive manner is one of the most influential instances in the novel. This is the only time Arjie thinks of his future in a hopeful way. The decision to not identify with proud schoolboys in the poems takes him a step nearer to self-acceptance. It is through rejection of such enforced identities that Arjie experiences freedom in the novel. This denial of enforced identities also means that he has to discover a new identity for himself and accept this new unfamiliarity.

Arjie, for the first time, recognizes the borders he has transgressed in both his sexuality and in bridging the gap between Tamils and Sinhalese population when he is banned by his parents to play with the girls, and later when he comes to know that Shehan is a Sinhalese. As the teenager or young narrator matures and experiences more of life ahead throughout the novel, he gains to recognize his identity and attempts to define his newly discovered identity.

Gender doesn't play a part in the world these children construct until Her Fatness, a cousin from abroad, intervenes. Her persistence that "A boy cannot be the bride ... a girl must be the bride"

enforces gender stereotypes onto this idealized world of this children's game of "bride-bride" (11). That is how the world of mature people intervenes in the fantasy world of the kids. Furthermore, it forces them even to play games, which are according to the rules and norms of society. By doing this, the children understand and follow the notions of the world beyond their game of "bride- bride." Arjie's mothers' similar assertion that "boys must play with other boys" highlights the contradiction between the real world of adults and the fantasy world the game of "bride-bride" (20).

In their game, the role of the bride is given to somebody who plays it best, which is Arjie, rather than his cousin from abroad. The bride is not viewed as especially female, as is apparent in the scene where Arjie is taking on the appearance of. In that section, he considers the activity not taking on the appearance of a lady, but instead as occupying the exceedingly symbolic role of the bride as "icon." Arjie, as a bride, is allowed to recognize himself as rising above the "constraints of self, and transcend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self" (4). There is no language of sex or sexuality, just of romanticized, unbiased structures. Arjie's mindfulness that he maybe does not have a place with either the young lady cousins or the kid cousins can be found in this genderless language. His hesitance to connect himself with a defined gender in his "more beautiful self" demonstrates his acknowledgment that he is "caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (39). This idea is the forerunner of his later acknowledgment of his homosexuality, yet in the naive, simple terms of a child.

As Arjie develops matures in body and mind, he comprehends the things that would have prior gone over his head, for example, common difficulty and socially acknowledged gender roles. His love for Shehan just serves to make these things all the more evident, as they disturb the idealizations of the society. These broken standards usher out the period of his adolescence and set him up for the wild occasions of his later life. The narrator's transgression of social roles in their game of 'bride-bride' and his protection from 'becoming a man' inside the strictures of the British Queen Victoria Academy are sanctioned through the execution of organized characters against which the talk of fixed ethnic recognizable proof fills in as a contradiction.

Besides, the immature narrator in story two entitled "Radha Aunty" unveils to the readers how he has generalizations concerning a bride and a groom, and how these generalizations are tested in the space of a few pages. Along these lines, the technique utilized by Selvadurai depends on three moves in the content. The first move is set apart by the production of a generalization. The second move is the condition of going up against the

generalization lastly comes the third move entitled reduction, when little Arjie diminishes the generalization to the fabrication of his childishness and acknowledges the new thought: "He [Mr. Lokubandara, the Vice-Principal of Arjie's school] was not what I expected at all. It was impossible to imagine that this man had anything to do with the fight I had witnessed that morning in the toilet." (Selvadurai 221)

Second case in point to see how the narrator exposes the generalization is of the lyric "Vitae Lampada." The lyric, on an extremely stereotypical level, praises cricket, and its gauge to advance qualities, for example, trustworthiness. How Arjie, while learning the lyric by heart, influences readers to understand that cricket in Sri Lanka has nothing to do with honesty any longer, and this disclosure on his part decimates the generalization. Selvadurai, not just figures out how to challenge the generalization of homosexuality throughout the novel, yet also succeeds in giving the message to his readers home that generalizations take us far from reality.

The *Funny Boy* can be perused as a bildungsroman. It is a narrative of a youthful gay child's formative years and integration set against the background of his nation's disintegration. It is amid rising tensions of Sinhalese and Tamil that Arjie must comprehend and deal with his homosexuality. Turning out is troublesome for any gay as it is accompanied by common sentiments of dejection, disengagement, and dread of dismissal by family and companions. Selvadurai challenges this working-class ethical quality for same-sex love. He also defies the gay monopoly to compose envisioned gender and present the realistic picture of sexuality, which rises above the hetero double.

## CONCLUSION:

Selvadurai, through the character of Arjie, attempts to transcend male-stream and female-stream and to bring us face to face with a contemporary understanding of sexuality. Arjie gradually overpowers his inner turmoil and comes to terms with his homosexuality. Accepting his true identity gives him the strength to challenge stereotypical gender binary. His hyphenated identity, Sri Lankan-Canadian, is analogical to his nonconforming identity, and in-between-ness. This paper through a gendered analysis of gay narratives in Sri Lanka has attempted to analyse and present how Selvadurai succeeds in transforming the plight of homosexuals in Sri Lanka from a private religion of pain to a public spectacle underlying homophobia. Exploding the myth of heteronormative he creates a new kind of identity for his characters.

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