

*Because Most People  
Marry Their Own Kind:  
A Reading of  
Shyam Selvadurai's "Funny Boy"*

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A NEW PHASE has begun in writing from the Indian subcontinent with the emergence of the Sri Lankan novelist Romesh Gunesequera, whose novel *Reef* (1994) was recently on the Booker Prize shortlist. Gunesequera describes *Reef* as a story of a society in transition and as a narrative that "illuminated the political, moral and emotional realities we all live by, whatever our circumstances and our obsessions" (*Literature Matters* 3). Less well-known than Gunesequera is another contemporary novelist from Sri Lanka, Shyam Selvadurai, whose first novel, *Funny Boy* (1994), was published in 1994 by Jonathan Cape, and reprinted by Penguin Books in India. Selvadurai, born in Colombo in 1965, left Sri Lanka after the 1983 riots in Colombo and settled with his family in Toronto, Canada. The year 1983 marks the beginning of the secessionist struggle in the island, in which the Tamils, mostly Hindu by faith, wanted to break away from the Sinhalese majority (mostly Buddhist), and form their own homeland in the north, in and around the province of Jaffna.

I propose to look at *Funny Boy*, a novel with a Sri Lankan boy as its protagonist, against this political backdrop, from the angles of race, sexuality, and gender, and to show that a subaltern identification exists between minorities in the three groups, who constitute the "other" of the male fanatical self. What I mean is this: in each of the domains of race, sexuality, and gender, there are those who are empowered and those who are not; I use "male-ness" and the chauvinism associated with it as a metaphor to incorporate the other two categories of race and sexuality (thereby hinting at a fusion), and I invent the phrase "male fanatical self" to explore the notion of the self as empowered, the

other as disempowered. I also suggest that in the final analysis gay fiction needs to be mapped differently, with sexuality rather than nationality, race, or gender as the determinants of identity, so that if a writer is gay it does not matter that he comes from the developed or developing world, or is white or black. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, "a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth century Western culture are . . . quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition, notably though not exclusively male, from around the turn of the century" (qtd. in Dollimore 29).

The protagonist of *Funny Boy* is Arjun Chelvaratnam, known as Arjie to his friends and family. The Chelvaratnams are members of the Tamil minority in Sinhala-dominated Sri Lanka. Arjie is barely six or seven years old when the novel opens. By the time it ends, he is on the threshold of adolescence, trying to come to terms with his homosexuality. Although the members of his extended family are not entirely orthodox, they still endorse male supremacy, with the father as the head of the family and bread-winner, and the mother as the wife submissive to his decisions and opinions even if she finds herself in disagreement with them. This is true not just of Arjie's own parents Appa and Amma, but of his grandparents Appachi and Ammachi, as well as his numerous uncles and aunts.

Selvadurai calls *Funny Boy* a novel in six stories. While the six stories are chronologically interconnected, with Arjie figuring in all of them, they are slightly more autonomous than the mere chapters of a novel would be. Each story concerns a particular character, who can be classified as subaltern in terms of race, sexuality, or gender. The first and last stories are about Arjie himself; the second is about Radha Aunty who returns from America and dares to respond to the advances of a Sinhalese boy, although her family is arranging her wedding with a Tamilian they know; the third concerns the Burgher Daryl Brohier who was once Amma's lover; the fourth is about Jegan, the son of an old chum of Appa's, who has connections with a militant organization known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelaam (LTTE); and the fifth involves Soyza or Shehan, who initiates Arjie into homosexuality.

Male space and female space play an important role in the opening story "Pigs Can't Fly." Every month on a Sunday, Arjie, his brother Diggy, sister Sonali, and their many cousins are deposited at their grandparents' home, so that their parents can spend the day "free of their progeny" (1). We are told that "the front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys" (3), while the back garden and the kitchen porch belonged to the girls. While the boys played cricket in the front of the house, the girls played bride-ride at the back. Arjie tells us that he "gravitated naturally" (3) to the territory of the girls, and in fact beat all of them at landing the role of the bride. He enjoyed this game much more than he enjoyed cricket. This causes one of his cousins, a girl from Canada, to call him "pansy," "faggot," and "sissy" (11), and the boys on the cricket field to call him "girlie-boy" (25). It is also this that eventually gets him into trouble with his parents, when they discover him in a sari during a game of bride-ride. Appa warns Amma: "If he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing stock of Colombo, it'll be your fault" (14). Arjie reflects: "I thought of what my father had said about turning out 'funny.' The word 'funny' as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, 'that's funny.' Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone" (17). The story ends with Arjie confused about his identity: "I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (39). Throughout the period of his struggle, only his sister Sonali is his ally.

The second story portrays Radha Aunty, Appa's youngest sister, who visits Sri Lanka from the US. Before she arrives, Arjie envisages her as a glamorous woman. When he actually sees her he is disappointed, even shocked, for unlike his imagined Radha Aunty, she is "as dark as a laborer" (46), has frizzy hair, is thin, and instead of a sari she wears a halter-top and strange trousers. At first Radha Aunty ignores the attentions of Anil Jayasinghe, whom she meets at a drama rehearsal, since her marriage to someone named Rajan Nagendra has been fixed. Yet when she finds that both her family and his are opposed to their friendship merely because he is Sinhalese and she is Tamil, she rebelliously

develops soft feelings for him. The family here takes on the role of patriarchal oppressor, although at an individual level it is still the women of the two households (like Anil's mother) who come to her rescue. In the end, Radha Aunty curbs her rebellious spirit. Significantly, she appeals to Anil to think of her as a friend—and as an equal, since Anil as a Sinhalese male has the balance of power disproportionately on his side. When Radha Aunty's train is attacked by Sinhalese agitators on her way back from Jaffna, the violence is portrayed entirely from the point of view of the Tamils, although it is the Tamils who have the militant LTTE organization. There is even a veiled implication that women, like the Tamil minorities on the island, need a militant movement to liberate them.

Radha Aunty marries Rajan Nagendra, "Because most people marry their own kind" (54). Ironically, Arjie would later find happiness in life if this were a universal truth. But it is not; it applies only to race not to gender. Men and women *cannot* marry their own kind. When Arjie says, "I couldn't bear to watch the ceremony. I turned away" (99), his identification with Radha Aunty is complete.

"See No Evil, Hear No Evil," the third story, begins with a reference to the introduction of a free economy and the end of socialism in Sri Lanka. Appa, who owns a hotel, even has plans to go to Europe to promote it. When he asks his children to give him a list of five things that they would like him to bring back for them, Arjie hesitates to say what he wants: a copy of *Little Women*, which Appa had once caught him reading and declared to be a book for girls, unsuitable for a boy of twelve. In the course of the story, Amma's hatred of the Tigers (members of the LTTE) is hinted at. From the first-person narrator's point of view, Amma simply seems to be taking on a male persona here and echoing the opinions of her husband. For as the story eventually reveals, she was once in love with Daryl Brohier, a Sri Lankan Burgher, who, as correspondent of the Australian newspaper *Sydney Morning Star*, is quite an "outlaw" himself. The Burghers, as Daryl Uncle explains to Arjie, are of Dutch lineage; most of them left Sri Lanka when the government made Sinhala the national language in the 1950s, because they spoke only English. A few, like Daryl Uncle, however, stayed behind.

When Daryl Uncle comes into Arjie's life, Arjie begins to like him. He even becomes a substitute father. Unlike Appa, Daryl Uncle does not think *Little Women* is a book for girls. On the contrary, he says it used to be one of *his* favorite books when he was a boy, and offers to buy it for Arjie. He is almost entirely on the side of the Tamils, for he realizes that things are only getting worse for them in Sri Lanka. And yet Daryl Uncle is as confused about *his* identity, as Arjie is about his own. When Amma objects to his uncle's visit to Jaffna, the stronghold of Tiger/Tamil power, he responds: "Nothing will happen to me. . . . Neither the army nor the Tigers care about someone who looks like a foreigner" (117). In a way, this parallels Arjie's statement in the first story about being caught between the boys' and girls' worlds, and belonging to neither. But Daryl Uncle is wrong. Evidently there *are* people who "care" about him even if he is a foreigner, for he never returns from Jaffna; he is killed during his visit there.

Perhaps the fourth story, "Small Choices," is most relevant to our discussion. Jegan is the son of Buddy Parameswaran, to whom Appa was embarrassingly close during his school days. On one occasion, Buddy and Appa declared their commitment to each other and to each other's families in writing, signing the piece of paper on which they had scribbled this out, with their mingled blood! Buddy is now dead and his wife Grace sends the yellowing piece of paper to Appa, with a request that he should do something for Jegan. At first, Appa perceives this as blackmail. However, when Jegan arrives at their house, Appa takes to him instantly, being struck by his resemblance to his father. They grow close and Jegan procures a well-paying job at the hotel owned by Appa.

Yet there is a "seamier" side to Jegan. We soon learn that he was involved in the Gandhiyam movement—a movement initiated by politically active Tamils with LTTE leanings to assist Tamil refugees affected by the 1977 and 1981 riots. When Amma asks Jegan whether the Gandhiyam people are connected with the Tigers, Appa interrupts with the words, "Chi chi chi, no politics" (110), and prevents Jegan from answering. He says, "Don't insult the boy. Why, if the Tigers had such fine chaps in it, I would be the first to support it" (160). This remark may be construed as an

attempt on Appa's part to reclaim Jegan, just as he tries to reclaim Arjie.

Arjie is attracted to Jegan, whose strong body causes in him the first stirrings of sexuality: "What had struck me was the strength of his body. The muscles of his arms and neck, which would have been visible on a fairer person, were hidden by the darkness of his skin. It was only when I was close to him that I had noticed them. Now I admired how well-built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers" (161). Appa, glad that Arjie and Jegan have become friends, thinks it might help Arjie to get rid of "certain tendencies" (166). Jegan's defence of Arjie—"I don't think there's anything wrong with him" (166)—strengthens the bond between Jegan and Arjie.

When Jegan meets some of his old comrades while jogging on the grounds belonging to the Ministry of Sports, his Sinhalese co-workers come to know of his Tiger connections and voice their protest. By this time the police are also in the picture; they detain Jegan, and he is forced to leave both the job and Appa's home. Appa's view that if you are a minority, "the trick is not to make yourself conspicuous" (173), is diametrically opposite to what Salman Rushdie recommends to marginalized people in his essay "Outside the Whale," in *Imaginary Homelands*: to shout as loudly as possible, to draw the maximum attention to one's condition (87-101).

"Maleness" automatically puts one in the mainstream and on the side of the majority. When Jegan is bullied by his Sinhalese co-workers at the hotel, only Amma and Arjie side with him. Appa openly takes the side of the Sinhalese staff and defends his stand by declaring that he will not run the hotel. He is mortified by newspaper reports that accuse him of sheltering a terrorist, and by the hate-mail he receives, alleging he is a Tiger.

When Jegan's terrorist connections are finally discovered, seemingly overcome by shame, he sobs quietly in his room. This parallels Arjie's feelings in the next story on the discovery of his homosexuality. Both discoveries are unacceptable to Appa, whose maleness in both cases is threatened. Terrorism threatens to destroy his patriarchy (this is partly because he is helpless in the face of militancy and cannot be the protector and provider

any longer), and homosexuality his masculinity. Feminism, if one were to add it to the paradigm, would pose a threat to *both* his patriarchy and his masculinity, in terms of Sedgwickian analysis (see Dollimore).

Terrorism, by extension of this argument, is not perceived as a criminal act by anyone but the patriarch (who incorporates within himself institutions such as the military and the police). Instead, terrorism, like feminism, lesbianism or Marxism, is an ideological weapon to be used against the forces of oppression. Govind Nihalani, talking about his film *Drohkaal*, based on this reasoning, says: "I wanted to make a distinction between a terrorist and a gangster . . . a terrorist looks for political change even if it involves dismemberment of the country. A gangster's aims are quite different: whether it's extortion or murder, there's no ideological motive" (4). Similarly, Ashis Nandy talks about "the tendency to see all demands for decentralization as a conspiracy against . . . unity" (5). The ones who oppose this demand, then, may no longer be seen as nationalists or patriots, but as fundamentalists and revivalists. The Bombay-based documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan operates, in his film *Pita, Putra aur Dharmayudh*, on the premise that "fundamentalists of all religions use a very male rhetoric" (qtd. by Pestonjee 5)—an observation appropriate to our analysis of Appa being torn between his maleness or masculinity on the one hand, and his ethnic minoritism on the other.

The only solution left for the Chelvaratnams and other Tamil minorities like them in Sri Lanka is to emigrate to Canada, Australia, or other Western countries. Emigration here is escape, a seeking of asylum. Therefore, logically enough, Amma (as a woman) is keen on emigrating. Appa dismisses the suggestion with the words: "I'll never emigrate. I've seen the way our people live in foreign countries" (195). Whether one sees this as nationalism/patriotism or fundamentalism/revivalism, it is a response that only the male self is characteristically capable of. Thus, when Sonali says, "Sometimes I wish I was a Sinhalese" (106), she could as well be saying, "Sometimes I wish I were a man."

Arjie of the fifth story, "The Best School of All," confronts his homosexuality directly. Appa transfers him from St. Gabriel

School to Victoria Academy, where his brother Diggy studies, because "the Academy will force you to become a man" (210). Diggy tells Arjie, "Appa is worried about you. . . . He doesn't want you turning out funny or anything like that" (210). Arjie becomes increasingly aware of the older boys at school who swagger along the railway lines or on the beach, their arms around one another. When Salgado, a noted bully in the school, demands to know why Arjie is in a Sinhalese (the language of the majority) and not in a Tamil (the language of the minority) class, we learn that his parents (his father in particular) put him in a Sinhalese class because they wanted him to learn Sinhala. The connection between Appa wanting Arjie to learn Sinhala and wanting him to be a man becomes clear.

On meeting another student, Soyza (alias Shehan), Arjie is attracted to him physically. He is fascinated by Shehan's rebelliousness, for, unlike any of the other boys, he defies the rules and wears his hair long. In Arjie's mind, this at once puts Shehan in the class of Daryl Uncle and Jegan. Diggy, aware of Shehan's homosexuality, warns Arjie to keep away from him. His homophobic contempt for Shehan parallels Appa's for Jegan's terrorist activities. Appa, too, on meeting Shehan takes an instant dislike to him. Arjie wonders whether Appa has sensed Shehan's "difference" (262). The Derridean pun is applicable here, for it is "difference" as well as "differance." Derrida argues that the imperfect signifying of language defers the expression of full present meaning to some indefinite future, or that the *appearance* of determinate meaning derives from a "trace." In other words, the unconscious sense of alternative past and future meanings is inevitably present in the very act of differentiating and deferring, and it is this that constitutes the effort to achieve that meaning. What is in question here, in the context of the novel, is the indefinite postponing of judgement pertaining to Arjie's (homo)sexuality. Homosexuality can never assume allegorical proportions; Jameson's analysis of Third World narratives as "allegories of nationalism" (68) cannot apply to fictions of the nature of *Funny Boy*, which are validated instead by some feminist theories, especially Kate Millett's that sees the personal as the political. Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern voice is also

very important, for the issue of sexuality in the postcolonial world can be appended to the category of gender, as formulated by her:

Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of "woman" seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female, you get it in three ways. If, however, this formulation is moved from the first-world context into the postcolonial . . . context, the description "black" or "of color" loses persuasive significance . . . the analogue of class-consciousness rather than race-consciousness in this area seems historically, disciplinarily and practically forbidden by Right and Left alike. It is not just a question of a *double* displacement, as it is not simply the problem of finding a psychoanalytic allegory that can accommodate the third-world woman with the first. (90)

These readings emerge not only from a careful scrutiny of the fifth story, but also from various statements made by Selvadurai in his interview published in the Sri Lankan magazine *Counterpoint*. More conventionally, on the basis of this story alone, it is possible to classify *Funny Boy* as a confessional novel, *without* the implications of sin and atonement; it is unabashedly or shamelessly confessional.

When Shehan first seduces Arjie in a garage behind his house, Arjie feels violated. However, he soon realizes that "Shehan had not debased me or degraded me, but rather had offered me his love" (269). After this, he becomes Shehan's friend. Arjie's reflections at this point are extremely significant:

Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble. I thought of how unfair this was and I was reminded of things I had seen happen to other people, like Jegan, or even Radha Aunty, who in their own way had experienced injustice.

(274)

But while Radha Aunty had identified the family as culprit and ultimately given in to it, Arjie acts with a little more determination. He says, "I was no longer a part of the family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me" (285).<sup>1</sup>

If this statement points to the politicization of Arjie, he is not unfamiliar with the politics that exist even within the school. Lokubandara, the Vice Principal, has the support of students like

Salgado. Black Tie, the Principal, has to work hard to prevent Lokubandara from ousting him. During the ensuing prize distribution ceremony, which is to be presided over by a certain Cabinet Minister, who is an ex-student of the Victoria Academy, Black Tie wants the poems "Vitae Lampada" and "The Best School of All" to be publicly recited, for these are poems that the Minister had liked when he was a student, and had even won an All Island Poetry Recital Contest reciting them. His calculation is the recitation, and his own speech which would be woven around it, will appeal to the sentiments of the Minister, who will then protect Black Tie from the machinations of Lokubandara. The choice for the recitation is the articulate Arjie. But Arjie is angry with Black Tie for mistreating his friend Shehan as an "ills and burden student." The altered power equation becomes suddenly apparent to him: Black Tie who is all-powerful, needs Arjie, and because he needs Arjie, the power has moved into his hands. He hits upon a "diabolical plan" (277): he would jumble lines of the poems, mangle them during his recitation, so that they did not have the desired effect on the Minister, and Black Tie would lose his job. It works. Black Tie is so embarrassed that he goes up the stage and describes the likes of Arjie as scoundrels who will bring nothing but shame to their family and be a burden to society. But as far as Arjie is concerned, he has successfully carried out his act of terrorism to avenge the persecution of his homosexual friend: he has become worthy of the affection of Shehan, of Daryl Uncle, Jegan, and Radha Aunty.

This *bildungsroman*, like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ends in a series of diary entries. The last story is "Riot Journal; An Epilogue," and it records the events in Sri Lanka for the one-month period from July 25 to August 27, 1983, when the Tamil-Sinhala conflict culminated in nation-wide violence. The riots are again seen (as in earlier scenes) from a Tamil point of view, with no references to Tiger atrocities, although the opening entry makes it clear that the first provocative act was committed by the Tigers. Significantly, the riots first make Arjie aware that Shehan is Sinhalese. Up to that point, his homosexuality appears to have disestablished him as a typical Sinhalese in a mainstream power situation. Arjie's feelings about their imminent departure

for Canada are ambivalent: he is sad about having to go to a foreign country, but the sadness is more at a personal level, grieving for home rather than grieving for country. This in spite of his admission, in "Pigs Can't Fly," to feelings of loss at having to leave Sri Lanka and forge a new home in Canada. At this point, the political implications of living a marginalized life as a South-Asian emigrant in a white country, are not on his mind; he cannot tell whether he is substituting one hell for another.

*Funny Boy* adds to the slowly growing body of gay writing on the Indian subcontinent. I started by comparing Shyam Selvadurai to Romesh Gunesequera and hinting at a Sri Lankan literary tradition, but later suggested an alternative mapping of gay fiction. This indeed seems to be a lead that must be pursued. Rather than with Romesh Gunesequera, Yasmine Gooneratne, or Jack Jaywardene, we must link Shyam Selvadurai with other gay writers in the South Asian region, where a movement is quietly beginning.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It is significant that in the story "The Best School of All," Shehan sees emigration to the West—England—as the only solution to his problems, although he will have to live there with his mother and her new husband. In this he is remarkably similar to Amma.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the first references to this was in the (now defunct) Bombay-based magazine *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (16-22 Oct. 1993), in which some gay Indian writers, namely, Firdaus Kanga, Hoshang Merchant, Dinyar Godrej, and R. Raj Rao, were mentioned. Curiously, the author of the article, Jerry Pinto, felt the need to write under a pseudonym, John Maria.

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