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Funny Boy

Shyam Selvadurai

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When the repercussions of the political rift between the Tamilians and the Sinhalese during the nineteen year- long civil war in Sri Lanka that started after the 1983 race riots and ended in 2002 keep surfacing even a decade later, the fictional account of the lived experiences of people helps one dwell on the myriad forms of sufferings they underwent. The recent newspaper report¹ is one such account of the ongoing stories of loss and trauma, that covers the unresolved cases of enforced disappearance of death and disappearances of Tamil rebels, activists and the scores of civilians haunting them for years and the survivors struggle to deal with the trauma and it reminds one of ShyamSelvadurai's novel, *The Funny Boy*. When in *Anil's Ghost*, Michel Ondaatje delves into the "double-edged" fear that looms large over the lives of the people who keep visiting the fictional grave site, Selvadurai deals with the loss of relations and disappearance of people by uncovering the queer past of Arjie, against the background of the political turmoil of the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka.

The novel adopts a collage-like narrative structure that presents six short stories that revolve around and are titled upon the crucial turns in Arjie's life. The last chapter, epilogue written in the form of journal entries, adds more to the credibility of the narrator. The detailed descriptions of the forceful eviction of the Tamil community from different parts of Colombo remind one of the multiple other narratives

like the partition narratives that deal with the communal issues. When Arjie's mother instructs her children to take one thing that is important to them while leaving their house, Arjie notices that his mother took all the family albums and she says that if anything happens, they would remind them of the happier days. Following the riot, he recalls that none of the broadcasts of the radio news covered the news of the raging communal strife. The narrative also highlights the facts that the state security is denied to the Tamil lot and ironically the electoral list becomes a threat to their security as they reveal their Tamil identity. It is when Arjie's father notices that the president expressed no sympathy for the Tamils suffering while addressing the nation after lifting the curfew during the riots, that he feels no longer a sense of belonging in the country. The novel that largely deals with the human conditions of living with the sense of constant threat, loss of trust and the sense of belonging in general also deal with Arjie's sense of an "outsider" in multiple ways. Though Arjie's father decides to migrate to Canada due to the communal riots and differences magnified during the riots, Arjie's self-imposed exile from his own family primarily emerged out of his recognition of his own queer sexuality and the unacceptance within the family. His migration from his country that doesn't recognise "queer" people as its citizens and his self-imposed exile position him as a sexile.³

The position of a self-imposed exile that Arjie willingly adopts is justified in the novel by recalling his queer experiences from childhood onwards to adolescence. The sense of loss and unbelonging, Arjie's father experiences, settles down in him as he learns that his grandparents' house is burnt down by the mob. Most of his intimate memories of his childhood were attached to this house. At the outset of the novel itself, one is familiarised with this house and his "spend-the-days" that leave an indelible mark in his childhood. Arjie, recalls a particular incident from his "spend-the-day," when he gets to play with girls and says, "Like a ship that leaves a port for the vast expanse of sea, those much looked forward to days took me away from the safe harbour of childhood towards the precarious waters of adult life" (Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* 5). Thereafter, the narrative covers the precarious nature of a queer child's life and weaves together the personal history of the narrator with the political history of the nation. As the narrative enters the prism of the childhood memories of the character and refracts the single narrative of Arjie into various aspects of one's identity, the

experiences of being a person of different gender and sexuality also surface.

"Funny" in the title and throughout the narrative becomes a mnemonic for Arjie's effeminacy. The effeminacy of Arjie is expressed through his interest in playing with girls and dressing up like a bride. The scene where he dresses up like a bride and appears in front of a cracked full-length mirror, resonates with the transgender fictional account of transgender children, in which the "mirror scene" becomes crucial to reveal the character's identification with the other sex. Once the family notices his girlish adventures, they focus on making Arjie masculine enough. Ironically, the school that Arjie's father finds appropriate enough to make Arjie masculine and man enough, is where he finds Soyza or Shehan with whom he develops a sexual relationship later. Both Arjie's narrative of gender explorations and sexual adventures and the narrative of the nation's turmoil in communal riots are open-ended, allowing the reader to imagine the rest of the stories.

The major thrust of the novel appears to be the gender transgressions and sexual experiences of Arjie and it makes the novel one of the rare depictions of an openly male gay with transgender childhood experiences. Though the novel has been widely critiqued by the critics of diaspora and queer sexuality studies, it still lays open the possibility of being read as rarest of rare accounts of transgender childhood representations. The novel has received much acclaim as one that makes the existence of diasporic gay male of colour visible when the diasporic narratives largely dealt with issues pertaining to immigrant women. Though Arjie's cross-gender identification and alliances with the ethnic and racial others of Sri Lankan society throughout the novel appear to be a narrative of resistance, it falls short of ample engagement with the notions of a nation that allows the culturally intelligible identities of queer people to emerge and survive. The novel remains, at the base, a simple and moving narrative about a boy, but it also remains intense as it constantly lends itself to new interpretations.

END NOTES

1. As of 18th Jan, 2018, Mannar an island town in Sri Lanka's Tamil majority Northern province, 300 skeletons, including those of 23 children below the age of 12 have been identified. Sreenivasan, Meera. "Grave Secrets from Sri Lanka's Troubled Past." *The Hindu*, 19 January 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/grave-secrets-from-a-troubled-past/article26030954.ece>.

2. The word queer is used here as it has the possibility of including people who are different in terms of gender and sexuality.
3. Manolo Guzman coined the term "sexile" to refer to a gay cosmopolitan subject who, once exiled from national space, is relieved of the duties, identifications and demands of nationalism and become more mobile in transnational spaces. See Guzman, M. "Pa La Escuelita con Mucho Cuida'o y or la Orillita:" a journey through the contested terrains of the nation and sexual orientation" in Negron- Muntaner, F and Grosfoguel, R editors, *Puerto Rican Jam*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pg.227.

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