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THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY*: NEGOTIATING THE SPACE OF THE HOME AND THE SCHOOL

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Abstract:

The quest for identity in Funny Boy is crucial to the politics, both personal and political in the eponymous novel by Shyam Selvadurai. Arjie's quest for identity against the backdrop of the social and political turmoil of Sri Lanka charts the tumultuous journey of a young boy as he confronts familial and societal pressures while grappling with his homoerotic desire. Arjie is a young upper-class Tamil Sri Lankan boy whose family is extremely conservative and orthodox. The novel examines the way in which the personal and the political intertwine with each other and affect the lives of individuals in ways that are often detrimental to the pursuit of individual desires. What emerges as an interesting point is the way in which the supposedly conservative sites of identity formation i.e. the home and the school emerge as the very sites upon which non-heteronormative subjectivity gets inscribed.

Keywords: Identity, patriarchy, heterosexual, heteronormative, gender.

Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy* is written in hindsight as the protagonist Arjun Chelvaratnam, nicknamed Arjie, writes from his exile in Canada and reminisces the past which he had spent in his homeland Sri Lanka. Shyam Selvadurai himself had also grown up in Sri Lanka during the 1970s before he also left for Canada after the outbreak of the ethnic riots and civil war in 1983. Though *Funny Boy* is not an autobiographical novel, Shyam Selvadurai, like Arjie is a gay. The postcolonial nation state perpetuates the agenda of its erstwhile colonial masters in and through its emphasis on the family with its underlying premise of heterosexuality which is the primary ideological weapon of patriarchy. The culture in which the protagonist of the novel, Arjie grows up is defined by the postcolonial patriarchal state which endorses the majority Sinhalese forces as the dominant group and overtly supports them against the Tamil speaking minority who are rallying for autonomy. The novel critiques any and every ideology that is intolerant of differences and hence Arjie's tag of being "funny" lies at the core of the way in which Arjie subverts the nationalist agenda of the postcolonial nation state and the heteronormative agenda of the patriarchal family setup. From his subject position of firstly as a Tamil and secondly as a gay, he subverts both these underlying ideologies and his homoerotic desire for a Sinhalese boy cuts across the ethnic and the sexual divides that define the post colonial Sri Lankan nation of his times. Through his relation with Shehan Soyma, Arjie is able to transcend the ethnic divide that rips the Sri Lankan nation and he shows an example of how the marginalized groups can offer alternative spaces where the established notions can get truly revised and revamped. In fact, in his dedicatory lines addressed to his parents, the author encapsulates the agenda of his novel in just a few words. He says:

To my parents
Christine and David Selvadurai
For believing that pigs can fly

The entire novel becomes a way of showing that the world could perhaps become a better place if more and more people could think out of the limiting tendencies of the heteronormative discourse.

The primary focus of this article are the first section and the last section of the novel titled “Pigs can't fly” and “The Best School of All” respectively. Both the home and the school emerge as distinctly heteronormative spaces which seek to stifle differences till the point where the individual subverts them through acts of “queerness” and thereby transgresses the so called legitimate limits of nation, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gender . The public and the private intertwine as the heteropatriarchal violence perpetrated by the masculine nationalism of the post colonial Sri Lankan state interpenetrates with the domestic strife within the home and the family. Arjie's quest for identity is therefore both an act that gets materialized in and through the act of transgression of the heteronormative and institutionalized ideals. Through his realization of his own queer identity, Arjie hits back at a family and at a nation whose very ideals are driven by underlying assumptions of heteronormativity.

The first chapter of the novel *Funny Boy* is very interestingly titled “Pigs Can't Fly”. The matter of factness of the title is just a reminder in which certain constructs are established as the norm and anything that deviates from it is castigated as abnormal or as in this case “funny”. It begins with the description of the much awaited “spend-the days” (Selvadurai 1), which was the one Sunday of the month when Arjie along with his siblings were taken on a visit to their grandparents' house. It was the only occasion when the children would be free of “parental control” (Selvadurai 2) and they would be allowed to be on their own. The narrator gives a description of the territorial division of his grandparents' house viz. the boys' area and the girls' area. The gendered division of spaces is not uncommon in different parts of the world. Such a division was a part of both the territorial and the ideological division of the women's and men's spaces as the “ghar” and the “bahir” in colonial Bengal as elaborately theorized by Partha Chatterjee in his seminal work *The Nation and its Fragments*. Gayatri Gopinath examines this gendered division of spaces within the novel in the following terms:

The gendered spacialization of the domestic sphere in the story mirrors and reiterates nationalist framing of space that posit the "inner" as an atavistic space of spirituality and tradition, embodied by the figure of the woman, as opposed to the "outer" male sphere of progress, politics, materiality, and modernity. But by portraying the inner sphere not simply as a space of gender conformity but also of gender play and fantasy, the story refigures the gendered spacialization of the nation by revealing how non-heteronormative embodiments, desires, and pleasures surface within even the most hetero-normative of spaces. (Gopinath 170-71)

The front portion of the house was demarcated as the boy's territory and the back garden was the girls' territory whose appeal to the young Arjie lay in its “potential for the free play of fantasy” (Selvadurai 3). Arjie, however, despite being a boy plays in the girls' territory as he is chosen as the leader of all the games that they play simply because of his power of imagination with which he could come up with innovative ideas. Of all the games that they played, Arjie's favourite was the bride-bride. The high point of the game was the moment when Arjie would dress up as the bride. Arjie cherishes the moment he would get transformed into a self that was “more brilliant, more beautiful” (Selvadurai 4). His sense of self gets glorified through this child's game which exalts him to a being that is superior to his present self and makes him feel “like the goddess of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema, larger than life” (Selvadurai 5). Gayatri Gopinath speaks of the way in which the novel enacts a subversion of the traditional gendered spaces:

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As Arjie reminisces the past, he is struck with a deep sense of loss for the world which was once his home. His exiled existence (Arjie's family is forced to move out of Sri Lanka and settle in Canada as result of the ethnic strife) lends a deep poignancy to his crisis of identity which stems from the loss of his homeland and his growing alienation from the world of childhood. He says:

Yet those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved. 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 5)

Arjie's search for identity is a twofold enterprise—firstly he has to negotiate with the heterosexual understanding of sexuality and secondly as a Tamilian in a Sinhalese dominated Sri Lanka, he has to constantly reel under the threat of persecution. His sexual identity and his ethnic identity are both under threat in a societal set up that endorses the dictum “Pigs can't fly.”

The world of children subverts the notions of the adult world through its gender bending games and pretensions. In the bride-ride game therefore, the most unimportant role was that of the groom's which nobody wanted to play and the role was given to Tanuja whom the children teasingly called “Her Fatness” and who was rather detestable because of her tantrums. Tanuja was Kanthi Aunty's daughter and nobody liked her. During one of the bride-ride games session, Kanthi Aunty happens to intrude into the girls' area and she is quite taken aback by the sight of Arjie dressed as a bride in a sari with the accompanying make up. She drags him by the hand and takes him into the glare of the drawing room where all the adults were present. She declares him to be her find as though he were a curiosity that needed to be displayed. Recalling that moment, Arjie says, “They gazed at me in amazement as if I had suddenly made myself visible, like a spirit” (Selvadurai 13). He feels embarrassed at being drawn out of the comfort of the girls' zone and at being exposed to the gaze of the adult world. One of his uncles then starts laughing at his appearance and calls him “funny” (Selvadurai 4). Arjie's parents are deeply embarrassed at their son's actions, conditioned as they are by the social conventions and traditional gender roles and they quarrel over what they consider to be Arjie's breach of rightful gender conduct. As a child Arjie was always fascinated by his mother for he enjoyed those moments when his Amma would get dressed for special occasions. He says:

Of the three of us, I alone was allowed to enter Amma's bedroom and watch her get dressed for special occasions. It was an experience I considered almost religious, for, even, though I adored the goddess of the local cinema, Amma was the final statement in female beauty for me. (Selvadurai 15)

Arjie's privilege, however, gets abruptly disrupted after the episode of his getting caught as the bride at his grandparents' house. When his Amma gets dressed on the next occasion, he is not allowed to enter her room. He feels terribly dejected as if it amounts to an act of rejection by his mother—the very mother for whom he had a special feeling. The young Arjie finds it difficult to comprehend the nature of his transgression which has evoked such a fierce response from his parents. He has overheard the quarrel that had taken place between his parents where his father had said accusingly to his mother, “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” (Selvadurai 14). In his attempt to make sense of the word “funny”, Arjie ponders:

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 (Selvadurai 17).

The word “funny” is used to “indict Arjie's gender insubordination” (Gairola 479). The novel shows how he is made to feel uncomfortable because of his homoerotic desires. On the next spend-the-day, Arjie's brother Diggy is given strict instructions to include Arjie in the boys' cricket team. When Arjie

protests and expresses his hatred for the game of cricket and seeks an explanation as to why he needs to play with boys, Amma gives a very matter of fact reply, "Because the sky is too high and pigs can't fly, that's why." (Selvadurai 19) Gayatri Gopinath examines the reply of Arjie's mother in these words:

Her answer attempts to grant to the fixity of gender roles the status of universally recognized natural law and to root it in common sense; however, such an explanation fails to satisfy Arjie, and his mother seems equally unconvinced by it but is unable to imagine an alternative order of things. Thus the varied, multiple discourses around gender that mark the domestic sphere militate against an overly reductive reading of "home" space as merely oppressive. Instead, gender conformity and nonconformity are narrativized through competing discourses in the story, where the rhetoric of nonconformity as perversion is undercut by the antinormative performance of gender in "BrideBride," as well as by Arjie's mother making apparent the nonsensical nature of gender codification. (Gopinath 172)

Arjie is punished for what is considered to be a digression from the norm of heteronormativity. In his seminal work titled *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault theorizes the way in which disciplinary institutions operate by enforcing a certain code of conduct as "normal" and by punishing any deviation(s) from the norm. Foucault observes:

What is specific to the disciplinary penalty is non-observance, that which does not measure up to the rule, that departs from it. The whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable... (Foucault 178-89)

Arjie is too young to understand his sexuality as something that is different from the norm. The adult world, veered as it is towards the process of "normalization" thinks of ways and means to punish him and to make him conform. The notion of "disciplinary penalty" can be seen in operation in the case of Arjie too when he is banished from the girls' world. Foucault's contention is worth quoting again in this context:

The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes.

It is opposed, therefore, term by term, to a judicial penalty whose essential function is to refer, not to a set of observable phenomena, but to a corpus of laws and texts that must be remembered; that operates not by differentiating individuals, but by specifying acts according to a number of general categories; not by hierarchizing, but quite simply by bringing into play the binary opposition of the permitted and the forbidden; not by homogenizing, but by operating the division, acquired once and for all, of condemnation. The disciplinary mechanisms secreted a 'penalty of the norm', which is irreducible in its principles and functioning to the traditional penalty of the law. (Foucault 183)

Arjie therefore becomes a victim of this normalizing process imposed by his family. Amma's reply becomes the voice of the forces of totalitarianism and homogenization which are targeted at stamping out all differences. On pleading with his Amma further about the rationale behind his necessity to play with the boys, Arjie's mother says, "You're a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys." "...Life is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them." (Selvadurai 20). Arjie is confronted with a terrible crisis as his desire to play with the girls gets rudely dismissed by this injunction. When Diggy offers Arjie as the new player in the team, others resist and one of them mocks Arjie as the "girlie-boy" (Selvadurai 25) Arjie manages to escape from the ordeal of having to play cricket and he is elated at having "forever closed any possibility of entering the boys' world again" (Selvadurai 28). The gender stereotypes have been

ingrained in “Her Fatness” who forbids Arjie from re-entering the girls' territory. She says vehemently, “Boys are not allowed here.” (Selvadurai 29).

“Her Fatness” words turn out to be true as the quarrel between her and Arjie takes an ugly turn. “Her Fatness” tears the sari which was so preciously preserved by Arjie to be worn for the bride-ride game and as Arjie tries to salvage the sari, they enter into a scuffle for which Ammachi (grandmother) holds Arjie responsible. In his desperate attempt to flee the caning, Arjie runs out of the house and reaches the sea where he cries inconsolably. He flings the sari on the rock and bemoans the loss that the future entails for him. He reflects with a deep sense of despair:

I glanced at the sari lying on the rock where I had thrown it and I knew that I would never enter the girls' world again...No more would I step out of that room and make my way down the porch steps to the altar, a creature beautiful and adored, the personification of all that was good and perfect in the world. The future spend-the-days were no longer to be enjoyed, no longer to be looked forward to. And then there would be the loneliness. I would be caught between the boys' and girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either. (Selvadurai 39)

Arjie's narrative continues as he proceeds to chart the life narratives of the other characters and their respective struggle with their individual desires vis-à-vis the societal and familial pressures. What concerns Arjie directly is the penultimate section of the novel titled “The Best School of All”. The Queen Victoria Academy, as its name suggests, is a relic of the colonial history of Sri Lanka which imbibes the dominant codes of its erstwhile colonial masters and that of the heterosexual society in its students by cultivating an extremely rigorous code of masculinity. As Tariq Jazeel rightly points out:

The Academy, like all schools, certifies systems and structures of culture through education. Here, the cultivation of raciological thinking is underpinned by manly masculinities, thus producing the exclusionary social topographies of not only school, but by extension the nation. Victoria Academy is both microcosm of what is happening in Sri Lanka at this time (the late 1970s early 1980s), and an agent of these processes. (Jazeel 241)

The school, despite its ardent practices, its despotic principal and the cultivation of a rigorous masculinity through punishments such as slappings and canings is unable to straightjacket Arjie into heteronormative subjectivity and ironically emerges as the space which offers Arjie the experience of homoerotic encounter and the materialization of his same sex desire.

Arjie's father decides to get Arjie admitted in the The Queen Victoria Academy because he thinks that it will be better for him. In defence of his decision he says, “The Academy will force you to become a man” (Selvadurai 210). The school posits a further challenge to Arjie's sense of identity, firstly as a Tamil boy who is put in a Sinhala class and secondly as a boy whose natural sexual orientation is not heterosexual. He is bullied by one of his classmates for being in a Sinhala class despite being a Tamil but one of the other boys in his class offers a hand of friendship whom Arjie finds to be quite attractive and whose name is Shehan Soyza. Arjie finds that there is something about Shehan that makes him special and unlike the other boys of the school, he wore his hair long--an act that directly violated the school's insistence on masculinity. He is however punished for that act of “trangession” and the principal of the school who is popularly known as the “Black Tie” cuts it short to make him fit into the code of masculinity. Arjie feels devastated at the altered sight of Shehan with shortened hair and feels that it is not fair. Diggy however warns Arjie not to be close with Shehan and reveals that Shehan has a sexual relationship with the head prefect and that is the reason why he is missing during the free periods. Arjie, however is unable to comprehend the idea of sex between two boys; he says, “At fourteen, I was aware of what the sex act between a man and a woman entailed. But between two boys? (Selvadurai 233). Arjie's young mind fails to

grasp the notion of homoerotic love, having never heard of anything like it before. Arjie's bonding with Shehan grows over time and one morning he wakes up with a wetness on his sarong after dreaming of himself and Shehan getting close in the water of the swimming pool. One day Arjie is rather taken by surprise when Shehan kisses him on the lips. However, after recovering from the initial shock of the kiss Arjie recollects the moment in the privacy of his bedroom and realizes that he had "not only liked that kiss" (Selvadurai 251) but was "eager to experience it in all its detail and sensation" (Selvadurai 251). As time passes by, Arjie comes closer to a realization that he had been grappling with quite some time and this realization marks an important turning point in his struggle to come to terms with his own identity as a boy who has same sex desires. He says:

The difference within me that I sometimes felt I had, that had brought me to so much confusion, whatever this difference, it was shared by Shehan. I felt amazed that a normal thing--like my friendship with Shehan--could have such powerful and hidden possibilities. I found myself thinking about that moment Shehan had kissed me and also of how he had lain on his bed, waiting for me to carry something through. I now knew that the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known all this along. (Selvadurai 256)

As Arjie wakes up to this realization, the dark corners of his life get illuminated and he comes out as a strong boy with a fuller sense of identity which is no longer at odds with anything. He reaches an important milestone in the quest for his identity which had hitherto been enmeshed in the darkness of incomprehension. One day Arjie invites Shehan to his place for lunch and they engage in sexual intercourse for the first time inside the garage. Arjie is however struck with a sense of guilt after the act is over and Shehan accuses him of shying away from accepting the reality of his sexuality. Arjie, being brought up within a family and society that frowns upon same sex desire, is caught between the conflicting claims of his personal desire and the familial cum social dictum. His initial reaction of disgust is the consequence of his training within the norms of heteronormativity but he is ultimately drawn towards his love for Shehan as he dreams of him again the same night. His reaction can be very well understood in the context of the conflict between the personal and the social. He says, "For the remainder of the night, I tossed and turned restlessly in my bed, torn between my desire for Shehan and disgust at that desire." (Selvadurai 266) Arjie feels the unjustness of how things are termed either good or bad depending upon who holds the power. He says:

Right and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were. I thought of Shehan and myself. What had happened between us in the garage was not wrong. For how could loving Shehan be bad? Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble...How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't. (Selvadurai 273-74)

As the section draws to a close, Arjie deliberately mixes up lines from the poem that he was supposed to recite in the school award function in front of the chief guest and he does it deliberately to teach Black Tie a lesson and to take revenge for the tortures that he had perpetrated on Shehan. He concludes the section by reflecting on how his relationship with Shehan had changed him and his equation with his family had changed forever:

I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me. (Selvadurai 284-85)

In the concluding section of the novel, Arjie pens down a journal of the incidents leading up to the violent riots that spread all across the nation including the hometown of Arjie i.e. Colombo. The ethnic tension

between the Sinhalese and the Tamils reaches its worst phase as Arjie's home is vandalized and burnt by the attacking mob. What however cuts across this conflict is the very personal bond shared between Arjie and Shehan which rises above these ethno-political differences. Their friendship provides an instance of how the hegemonic discourse is subverted from within the spaces of a marginalized relationship. As Shehan tries to cheer Arjie up in the aftermath of his house burning incident, Arjie suddenly realizes something which had never thought of before i.e. Shehan was a Sinhalese whereas he was a Tamil. He says, "This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him." (Selvadurai 302) Arjie's quest for identity reaches a point of fruition as he becomes aware of his feelings for Shehan which have grown and persisted amidst and despite the differences which have been tearing his nation and which ultimately force his family to lead an exiled existence in Canada.

It is rather ironical that the home and the school-both of which are instruments of the propagation and inscription of the heteronormative discourse become the very spaces in and through which these ideals get subverted and offer opportunities for individual liberation and identity formation that do not subscribe to the heterosexual codes of the family and the nation state. Arjie's identity gets shaped through his struggles with the confrontations that he faces within the private space of the home and the public space of the school. His search of identity marks a deep struggle that gets enacted across the national, ethnic, religious, sexual and gender divides of his times.

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