

Whimper of a Peripheral Queer in Shyam Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*

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Abstract

Shyam Selvadurai in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* navigates his home country's multifaceted politics and evokes its culture and environment in ways that dazzle all the senses. Queer theory is applied for redefining the sexual identity of an adolescent boy named Amrith. It is a coming of age story that transcends labels and deserves to theorize the sexual identity. An attempt is made to show that where homosexual is no more perverted or sick or the other of heterosexuality. Selvadurai becomes a representative to inform the cultural representations of the queer. It destabilizes the assumptions and privileges of secure heteronormative models of study and everyday life. It delineates the prospects of testimony the queer encounter at its biggest hurdle in finding out someone who can listen and understand the testimonials of the catastrophe they experience.

KEYWORDS: Queer, Culture, Identity, Environment.

Cultural facts are modes of social control. The cultural construct of the nation is distracted by various transformations occur in human nature. The question of identity is not only in terms of being 'female' or in terms of 'male' but the sexual politics, which is formulated, is assigned by identity. Queer theory is committed to analyzing and problematising previous ways of theorizing identity. Queer theory follows and expands upon feminist theory by refusing the belief that sexuality and gender identity are essentialist categories determined by biology that can thus be empirically judged by fixed standards of morality and truth.

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The repressed sexuality on account of tradition during seventeenth century in Western society has find its progressive liberation and enlightenment in the twentieth century. Foucault's concern is more about how sexuality functions in society rather than pursuing the illusory truth of human sexuality. A figure of an authority seems to be powerful in the matter of complex relationships than property inherent in a particular individual or class. During the late 19th and early 20th century, homosexuality is under the negative aspects of cultural construct. The homosexual was subject to the disciplining, marginalizing subordinating effects of social control.

Gay theorists have reminded us that definitions of heterosexuality and homosexuality can differ from culture to culture. In United States, sexual relations with, or even sexual desire for, a same-sex partner define a man as gay. But not the same case with white working-class American culture and ancient Athens culture.

Finally, queer theory, which is an outgrowth of lesbian gay theories rejects definitions of sexuality that depend upon the sex of one's partner.... Queer theorists believe that the biological sex of the people to whom we are sexually drawn tells us nothing other than the biological sex of the people to whom we are sexually drawn. That is, queer theorists find human sexuality much too complex, ambiguous, and dynamic to be understood by this single biological fact: many more personal factors must be taken into account in order to begin to understand human sexuality.(Tyson 173)

The homosexual literary traditions deal with bisexuality the politics of representation, lesbian aesthetics, and gay male writing. Shyam Selvadurai a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist has published a young adult novel, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* in 2005. It has won the Lambda Literary Award in the Children's and Youth Literature category in 2006. As a writer who concentrates on gay male writing has brought together the powerful renditions of the trauma of prevailing tensions and struggles of sexuality. Stripped to its most fundamental form, the novel documents Amrith's move to his own sexual identity.

The backdrop of the novel is the season of monsoons, set in Sri Lanka , 1980. A fourteen year old boy Amrith lived happily in a well-to-do life with his Aunt Bundle and Uncle Lucky, while disowned by his remaining relatives. He often seems to be nostalgic about his doting mother. The summer helped the children out of the school and Amrith's holiday plans seem unpromising. Though Aunt Bundle and Uncle Lucky treated him with nothing but kindness, Amrith still feels the sting of having been rejected by his own family.

Until, like an unexpected monsoon, his cousin arrives from Canada, and his life suddenly becomes storm-tossed. When his cousin Niresh comes to visit for the summer from Canada, Amrith is thrilled that his estranged maternal uncle agrees to let him spend time with him. The two boys become quick friends, and soon Amrith realizes that there may be more to his feelings for Niresh than he had imagined.

Shakespeare's *Othello*, with its powerful theme of disastrous jealousy, plays in the backdrop of the drama in which Amrith finds himself immersed. Amrith was reminded by his madam Mrs. Algama for the auditions and a preliminary rehearsal. The madam is a short woman with a brisk manner is adored by her students. This is because, in a curious way, she was one of the boys. She would joke with them and tease boys in a good-natured manner. The boys dared to tell suggestive jokes to her and she pretends to be shocked. "But Amrith felt curiously uneasy around Madam. . . . And what she saw made her more kind to him, more gentle. she never joked or teased him, or used her wit against him. And yet her gentleness made him all the more uncomfortable"(SMS 45).

Various popular literary texts recorded the queer framework in its canonical range. Shakespeare's *Othello* finds an example for it. "In queer theory, sexualities are conceptualized in terms of fluidity, contradiction, and indeterminacy, desire is bodily and embodied, but it is also linguistic and discursive; and sex is de-linked from gender such that sexuality is no longer understood within the framework of the heterosexual matrix"(Purvis 443-44). Selvadurai picks that element in *Othello* and uses as a tool to indicate the coming of age of Amrith who happens to act in the drama. In the audition, Amrith waits for a role of a woman. When the role of Desdemona goes to De Alwis, Amrith frowns and he "felt his euphoria diminish. He would have to prove himself or he could end up with Cassio. He silently vowed that he would work veryhard and not lose the role of Desdemona"(SMS 52).

Every boy is rejecting to play the role of Cassio. Peries' face has become red from having to bite back his fury, when he was allotted to play the role of Cassio. He says to the madam "I would rather play a guard than play Cassio"(54). She insisted him on reading the book. But Amrith reaches home and starts reading the book act 3, scene 3. He understands the reason for why the boys were teasing Peries. But Amrith did not understand why Peries was so outraged by what Cassio had done mistakenly in his sleep.

It was the point in the plot when Iago told Othello that he had shared a bed with Cassio, and how, during the night, Cassio had murmured in his sleep of his love for Desdemona and cursed Othello for having her. Iago also told Othello that Cassio mistook Iago for Desdemona and held Iago's hand in his, kissed him hard on the lips over and over again, embraced him, and pressed his leg over Iago's thigh.(54)

From that point onwards the changes happen in the life of Amrith which in a way helps him to find his sexual identity. He determines to work diligently on his role. To his dismay, his cousins' arrival distracts him and he can no longer find the time to practice. The play's themes of jealousy and distrust, however, find their way into his life.

Queer theory destabilizes sexual and gender identities allowing and encouraging multiple, unfettered interpretations of cultural phenomena. It predicates that all sexual behaviours and gender expressions, all concepts linking such to prescribed, associated identities, and their categorization into 'normal' or 'deviant' sexualities or gender, are constructed socially and generate modes of social meaning. Amrith's curiosity increases to meet his cousin, his only maternal tag. His eyes loiter around the foyer of the hotel. He begins to feel strange, almost surreal, to be seated here in front of a relative of his. He looks at his uncle and tries to find any resemblance to his mother. When Amrith could see Niresh in the pool, "His cousin was well over six feet, with gangly heavy limbs, dark hairless skin that had a golden undertone, a wide floppy mouth that hung open now as he struggled to catch his breath"(SMS 79). Amrith has seen Niresh arguing for his benefit is a wonder for him, "his voice was sraisedlounder than necessary. This was for Amrith's benefit"(SMS 79).

The prospects of testimony the queer encounter at its biggest hurdle in finding out someone who can listen and understand the testimonials of the catastrophe they experience. "Homosocial activities are simply same-sex bonding activities. Going to the

movies, playing cards, fixing the car, preparing a meal, or any other shared leisure or work project is a homosocial activity if it is performed by two or more members of the same sex. (Tyson 176). After the cousins of Amrith, Selvi and Mala enquired the visit of him meeting his cousin made him so proud of himself. He took the copy of *Othello* in his hand but he could not summon the desire to do so. “Instead, he was thinking about his cousin’s haircut. . . . Amrith found himself thinking of the way Niresch had leaned on the balustrade, drawing on his cigarette and exhaling between slightly parted lips, with the panache of those men in the cigarette ads that play before a film. Despite Niresch’s silly jokes, an aura of glamour hung around him.” (SMS 88). His cousins eavesdropping the call of Niresch irritate Amrith. He ignored his cousins and now wants to be with Niresch.

The relationship unleashes the trauma of their sexual identity. As Niresch had said about his meeting with Amrith, he found it impossible to concentrate on his typing exercises. He kept glancing towards the door every few minutes, for the arrival of Niresch. A giddy exhilaration took hold of Amrith and Niresch as they left the office. Both changed sarongs. Amrith outside the dressing room could hear or concentrate “Niresch unzipping his shorts, the shuffle of his sandals as he pushed them off to slop into the sarong. He heard the rustle of the sarong being pulled up” (SMS101). Niresch made a mess in not, and Amrith untied the mess. Niresch stood in front of him. His hands were shaking and before bringing the ends together, he got a glimpse of Niresch’s white underpants. “When he had stood close to him, there had been a nice smell to Niresch, of well-matured leather” (SMS102).

The more Amrith learnt about Niresch, the more he felt that Niresch’s life in Canada was not as much fun as he explained before. During the shower, they exchanged their looks and felt odd. Niresch changed his clothes in front of Amrith where “Sri Lankan men were modest and did not strip down in front of each other” (SMS128). But he covertly looked at Niresch’s reflection and watched by Niresch. Amrith’s penis sprang up. In the bathroom, he closed his eyes and tries one of his remedies- “reciting ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling. When that failed he tried the prayer ‘Hail Holy Queen’”. Finally he got up and willed himself to urinate, the one thing he was certain would end this embarrassment” (SMS129). The past that tortures and makes them sense the darkness had terrified them.

Selvadurai spotlights how sexism affects both men and women, and of how it and homophobia are often connected. The society Amrith lives in is not exactly gay friendly. When Amrith realizes that he’s attracted to his cousin, all the derogatory remarks he has heard about homosexuality immediately come to his mind. Amrith once heard boys in his school mention Lucien Lindamulge’s secretaries and refer to the old man as a “ponnaya” – word whose precise meaning Amrith didn’t understand, though he knew it disparaged the masculinity of another man, reducing him to the level of a woman. Moreover, “a ponnaya, that was what he was, a ponnaya” (SMS204). He did not know what to do about thing within him, where to turn, who to appeal to for comfort. He felt the burden of his silence choking him. Then for him masculinity is superior are a big part of the reason why Amrith feels the way he does as he discovers his own sexuality.

Heavy misery took hold of Amrith, when Peries was looking at him with a triumphant smile on his face performing the role of Amrith in *Othello* drama. It is Mala

and Niresh were responsible for his hosing the part of Desdemona. In the monsoon sea, Amrith jealously guards Niresh from his sisters. He resents Mala's attraction to Niresh and gradually he becomes so irritated by their relationship and by the other boys' teasing that his anger boils over and he lashes out at Mala. "He thought of how Mala's resistance had grown weaker as he held her under, and he shuddered to think what might have happened if Niresh had not intervened. How could he have done that to his sister? . . . 'Why did I do that, why?'"(SMS180). The final act of anger because of Mala accusing him of being jealous that Niresh loved her. Suraj had called him Cassio and asked him if he was waiting of darling Iago. Eve Sedgwick argues the fluidity of identity, including sexual identity " 'coming out of the closet', . . . concerns the way subject identity is necessarily a complex mixture of chosen allegiances, social position, an professional roles, rather than a fixed inner essence"(Barry 145). Amrith realized him as a queer, "Amrith felt a deep horror seep into him. He loved Niresh in the way a boy loves a girl, or a girl loves a boy. He had been jealous of Mala because of this love and not because Niresh was his cousin"(SMS181). He learnt that Madam, Fernando and Suraj had understood the nature of this love. Madam had referred "to this unnatural defect in him"(SMS181).

The cousins part as friends; Niresh shares the truth about his ordinary life in Canada, and Amrith tells him all about his mother. Amrith's great-aunt Wilhelmina uses her wealth to rescue his mother's Sanasuma house for Amrith. Amrith becomes dear to Aunt Bundle and gains the strength to cope with his homosexuality.

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