

Incitement to Ethnic Aggravations : Interpreting Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy

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Abstract

The paper has narrated the difficulties of finding a space of belonging or aligning one's ambitions with those of his socio-political environment among ethnic, cultural, political, class and sexual conflicts. However, it is presented that Arjie's coming of age is set against the backdrop of a particularly, unstable moment in Sri Lankan History because of ethnic tensions. Growing awareness from one's childhood mirrors the precarious future of Tamil Sri Lankans within the Sinhalese population. Finally people try to make sense of the feuds in upper-middle-class Tamil family, which erupt over issues of Tamil disloyalty, terrorism, violence, and death.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic, disloyalty, terrorism, violence, and death

A long-standing rivalry between Tamil and Sinhalese inhabitants of Sri Lanka has ensured an extremely volatile relationship between the two groups. This ethnic difference continues to create violent conflicts between them although they have shared Sri Lanka for innumerable centuries. The Tamil minority originated from India, immigrated to Sri Lanka between the 3rd century B.C. and the 13th century A.D. making up a small portion of the population. Tamils constitute almost the entire Hindu population of the land. In the 5th century B.C., Indo-Aryan emigration from India created the Sinhalese population in Sri Lanka. They hold the majority and thus, much political power. The Sinhalese have retained the power throughout most of Sri Lankan history because of its size compared to the Tamil population, the second largest group in the country. With unquestioned economic and political power, the Sinhalese inhabitants have been hated for their supremacy and face the anger and bitterness of the minority Tamils, who must struggle to have their voice heard.

Shyam Selvadurai, a Canadian novelist has given voice for the ethnic encounters among the Sinhalese and the Tamil. Born in Sri Lanka, he has his mixed heritage: Tamil and Sinhala. He writes his serious piece of writing with a lucid style. He succeeds in exploring the tensions of socio-economic, racial, sexual and religious, which are amid the rising waves on Sinhalese and Tamil violence. The possibilities and impossibilities of similar 'mixings' dominate his fiction. With his ironic insight, he expresses the most exasperating human foibles of the society through his writings.

The selected novel for discussion *Funny Boy* is written in clear, simple prose, and masterly in its mingling of the personal and the political. The remarkable debut novel is a

profound understanding of the human heart. It comprises of discrete six chapters, presented as a series of short stories narrated by Arjie. It deals with a narrative of the Sinhala and Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, which first erupted in the early 1980s. The protagonist and narrator Arjun Chelvaratnam "Arjie" is the second son of a prosperous Tamil family. Even though the novel is very much about the personal growth of the protagonist, Arjie, each individual episode in some way highlights the growing unrest occurring in the nation. Arjie's own journey is the journey of the nation, moving towards social upheaval and violence. He is a "funny boy" who prefers to be in the company of his girl cousins than with the boys. The life of the family is visible through Arjie's eyes as he struggles to come to terms with the racism of the society in which he lives. Kee Levi narrates "In the north of Sri Lanka there is a war going on between the army and the Tamil Tigers, and gradually it begins to encroach on the family's comfortable life. Sporadic acts of violence flare into full-scale riots and lead, ultimately, to tragedy" (Paperback Blurb).

Ethnicity in literature is produced by identifiable ethnic groups either marginalized or subordinates. Selvadurai notifies the ethnic conflicts which exist in Sri Lanka even from the first part on the novel "Pigs Can't Fly". At the age of Seven, Arjie huns to play cricket with his male group of cousins, who have the pleasure of standing for hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun. He says, "For me the culmination of this game, and my ultimate moment of joy, was when I put on the clothes of the bride" (4). Arjie explains that he feels, "like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema, larger than life; and like them, like the Malini Fonsekas and the Geetha Kumarasinghes" (5). Thereference to the two kinds of "goddesses" of Srilankans and Tamils is the opposition to each other. Arjie is accustomed to the two ways of ethnicity which is focused through the two goddesses.

Naturally, Arjie feels that playing with the boys would be too boring and dull. The problem starts from the day he is taught wearing a sari by his Kanathi Aunty. At this act, his Cyril Uncle cries out: "Looks like you have a funny one here" (14). On the other hand, Arjie's father is deciding to treat this matter in a very serious way, he sends him to a school where "The Academy will force you to become a man" (210). Although Arjie completely disagrees with this idea, he feels he has no other choice but to obey his father's commands whose values towards life create a lot of confusion for Arjie to find his sexual identity.

Next, the author foreshadows the Srilankan riots which happened during the innocence of his childhood. When he describes the scene, he becomes nostalgic and even more sentimental by the loss of all that is associated with them. He feels "By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada" (5). He is young enough to understand the problems his country face. However, as he grows, his awareness of the conflict becomes stronger.

The paper never fails to focus how ethnicity has brought about myriad changes in the personal life of the Sri Lankans. Banerjee remarks that the chapters in *Funny Boy* are in "queer ethnic performance" (149). In Radha Aunty the tension begins more significantly into the narrative. The relationship between Anil and Radha Aunty cannot exist because of their ethnic differences. When Ammachi comes to know of Radha Aunty getting a lift from a Sinhalese, the whole family gets irritated. When Ammachifinds from

RadhaAunty that his name is “Jayasinghe,” she lets out a small cry that is both triumphant and despairing. “A Sinhalese! I knew it! . . . Only a Sinhalese would be impertinent enough to offer an unmarried girl a life”(58).Radha Aunty pounces on the banana seller who spreads this message to her mother,and calls her “a racist”(59). Janaki reminds Radha of the incident which affects the mind of Ammachi: “You were too young to remember when they brought the body home. You should have seen it. It was as if someone had taken the lid of a tin can and cut pieces out of him. . . . “I know, I know,” Radha Aunty said, brushing aside Janaki’s remarks. “But is that a reason to hate every Sinhalese?””(59). However, Radha and Anil Jayasinghe attempt to give a chance until violence intervenes. Radha Aunty is attacked in the train coming from Jaffna at the Anuradhapura station. Her face is dark and swollen with a bloody bandage and there is gash on her forehead.

Mr. Rasiyah who has saved her from the riot, narrates what had happened in the train. He says, “Radha Aunty had been assaulted by two men, one carrying a stick and the other a belt, and how he had managed to save her because he spoke good Sinhalese and the men had believed he was Sinhalese”(90). After RadhaAunty’s direct experience of the violence, she no longer has an open mind with regard to her love for a Sinhalese man. Radha Aunty’s transformation as viewed by Arjie is that she does not stop them or intervene in time. Arjie’s opinion is distorted as well, whereas once he romanticized weddings and hoped fervently for RadhaAunty’s wedding. Finally when time arises he is not pleased, as he has been altered by the ethnic tension and violence around him.

The characters’ interactions with the tensions prevailing in politics are also presented. Daryl Uncle, a Burgher, notifies the political conflicts and exploitations within the country through “The Prevention of Terrorism Act”. His tension with the government is expressed to Arjie’s Amma, Nalini. They argue matters regarding politics, and war going on in Jaffna, between the army and the Tamil Tigers. Nalini finds fault with the Tamil Tigers who involve in terrorist acts. Daryl refers this as “chillies and large red ants”(110).It seems that the victims are “hung upside down and made to breathe chilli fumes, how honey was spread over their bodies and red ants allowed to eat at them”(126). He blames ‘the Press’ for being silent for such conflicts. He also disagrees for the “The Prevention of Terrorism Act” a new law that allows the police and the army to arrest anybody they think as a terrorist without a warrant. He calls it a “tool for state terrorism”(110).Daryl tries to write the issue in the paper, *Sydney Morning Star* in which he is working as a journalist.

Daryl decides to go to Jaffna for a week to fulfill his patriotic urge. He couldnot tolerate, and hence he expresses his concern as ““People are being tortured and killed even as we sit in all this opulence””(117). After his departure to Jaffna, the radio news frightens Arjie and the violence directly affects Arjie. It is shocking for him to admit his mother’s lover. Later his mysterious death affects him by and large. Daryl’s body is found out by some fishermen and he realizes the reality. He says, “these realities my heart skipped madly as if joyful at the prospect of a holiday. By the end of the vignette Arjie’s perception of his life has been forever altered. In a stunning passage he describes “A man I had known, a man who was my mother’s lover, was now dead. I was aware that it was a significant thing, a momentous event in my life even, but, like a newspaper report on an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, it seemed soothing that happened outside my reality,

my world”(136).It is identified that within such ethnic clashes one could never find out the murderers. He says, “Daryl Uncle’s killer would never be brought to justice”(153). The murderers forget the fact that one day or other, they will be caught hold of. The words of Lord from the *Bible* in Proverbs 16: 4-5 says: “The LORD hath made all things for Himself: yes, even the wicked for the day of doom. Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; though they join forces, none will go unpunished”(423).

As days go by the violent situations deteriorate in Sri Lanka. In “Small Choices” the violent events come at a more rapid pace. They again directly affect Arjie. A letter from the widow of an old friend of Mr. Chelvaratnam informs the death of his friend Parameswaran and a request from his wife Grace to offer a job to their son Jegan, a qualified accountant. He is twenty five years old and he works as a relief worker for the Gandhiyam Movement. She writes “due to recent problems, I removed him from the organization”(155). When Amma thinks of it she says “people say that they are in league with the Tigers. A little while back, the police arrested Gandhiyam workers”(157). Such conflicts trouble the domestic life of ordinary people. They suffer a lot because of torture, unemployment, loneliness and isolation. The fear of being troubled irritates his father and asks Jegan about the details of his organization. He replies “It’s an organization to assist Tamil refugees who were affected by the 1977 or ’81 riots. We help them settle in Tamil areas”(160). Out of the experiences Jegan receive from his organization, he realizes a fact that such ethnic conflicts never end and says “We cannot live like this under constant threat from the Sinhalese, always second-class citizens in our own country. Arjie’s father used to say that to live in this country is like small choices of rotten apples. He warns Jegan “Here you can be killed by the Sinhalese and there you can be killed by the police or the Tigers”(176).

A microcosm of the larger ethnic tensions through Black Tie and Mr. Lokubandara, the Principal and Vice Principal of the Victoria Academy in “The Best School of All” is also represented by the author. Mr. Lokubandara wants to change the name of the school, based on Buddhist tradition. Soyza who has made a great impact on Arjie, and moulds him to formulate his own opinions about the conflict. Soyza is made more aware of the hostility around him and teaches everything to Arjie. He says “Since all Buddhists are Sinhalese, that means the school would be Sinhala school, and there would be no place for Tamils in it”(220). He opts not to “choose sides”but asks instead, of the distinction between, “Was one better than the other? I didn’t think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandara stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better” (247).Rajiva Wijesinha opines “Selvadurai draws between Black Tie and the President, both of whom rely on violence alone and have no scruples while in pursuit of their own ends about treating others as instruments without any rights or feelings of their own”(Web). The poison of ethnic clashes is induced through even children’s way of living. When Arjie enters as a new boy in a new school, he is ragged by Salgado who also insists Arjie to move from 9C to 9F class which is meant only for the Tamils. He says, “This is a Sinhalese class, not a Tamil class. You want 9F, Chelvaratnam. . . . We don’t want you here,. . . . Go to the Tamil class”(215). Educational institutions that should promote equality and peace in a society have then become a source for creating differences in the mind of children.

Ethnic clash is pointed out at an extreme level at the end of the novel. The Tamils who are staying in Colombo frightened by the news heard in and around their place. In "Riot Journal: An Epilogue" the conflict culminates, both in the narrative structure and in Arjie's own life. On 25th of July 1983, the family of Arjie is in tension when they have taken steps to overcome such problems. Their relatives who have come for rescuing them are also affected because of it. At last, they have seen their house is burnt by the mob. Neliya Aunty says in a panicked voice "Oh God, they are setting the house on fire"(296). Arjie becomes a witness to his destroyed house. He also heard the news about Ammachi's and Appachi's burnt house and they are all right and moving to Kanthi Aunty's house. Arjie ponders over his childhood days in his grandparent's house: "These thoughts made me cry. I couldn't cry for my own house, but it was easy to grieve for my grandparents' house"(299). Later the mob has set fire on the car in which Arjie's grandparents travelled and they are burnt alive. This leads the members of Arjie's family to set out to Canada, mainly because the conflicts have come to fruition and it can no longer hold the adhesive for the events in Arjie's life.

However, it is presented that Arjie's coming of age is set against the backdrop of a particularly, unstable moment in Sri Lankan History because of ethnic tensions. Growing awareness from one's childhood mirrors the precarious future of Tamil Sri Lankans within the Sinhalese population. Finally people try to make sense of the feuds in upper-middle-class Tamil family, which erupt over issues of Tamil disloyalty, terrorism, violence, and death. The paper has narrated the difficulties of finding a space of belonging or aligning one's ambitions with those of his socio-political environment among ethnic, cultural, political, class and sexual conflicts.

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