

## A “Matriarch” In Patriarchy: Gendered Ageism In Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*

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### Abstract

Ammachi, the grandmother in Shyam Selvadurai’s debut novel, *Funny Boy*, seems to be a powerful, controlling matriarch when we meet her in the first two stories. Yet it gradually becomes obvious that she is only enforcing patriarchal dictates and is marginalised when her voice becomes inconvenient. At the intersection of oppressive conditions marked by her ethnicity, age and membership of a certain social class, she is both constructed and destroyed by the trauma that has marked Sri Lankan history of recent times.

**Keywords:** Gendered ageism, ageism, ethnicity, matriarch, patriarchy, trauma.

“Clearly there is one preconceived notion that must be totally set aside – the idea that old age brings serenity” (de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 485).

Shyam Selvadurai’s much-acclaimed debut novel, *Funny Boy*, has been studied as a gay coming-of-age story, as diaspora writing and as a personal record of the ethnic conflict. A lesser known aspect is its contribution to literary gerontology through its finely nuanced portrayal of gendered ageism through the figure of Ammachi, the paternal grandmother of Arjie, the protagonist.

Ageism – a social and cultural construct, refers to attitudes regarding the elderly which manifest in certain types of behaviour towards them. The aged themselves internalise such stereotypes and often play out those roles. Ageism works in tandem with other inequalities such as gender, caste, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and health status. Thereby, the elderly are denied access to shared resources and a role in decision making, even in matters which concern themselves.

Gendered ageism refers to how older women are viewed and how they see themselves. Since women are shaped by their situations, everything about them – their character, manners, behaviour and values – is contingent on the situations in which they find themselves (de Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 635). Being accustomed, from an early age, to their role as objects of the

male gaze, it is but natural for the elderly woman to continue to be impacted by the patriarchal environment in which she finds herself. Writing about de Beauvoir's perspective on the double consciousness of women – objectified by males and yet conscious of their own subjectivity, Susan Pickard (2023) explains that “complicity is a key aspect of women’s subjugation” (813). A post-menopausal woman may choose to exercise the option of retrieving her pre-pubertal unified sensibility and completely refuse her object status (Pickard 814). Yet many women remain in thrall to patriarchal norms and, what is more, enforce those directives on deviant family members. Upper class women are especially likely to defend their class interest and repress all “critical judgement” (*Second Sex* 638).

Arjie’s paternal grandmother, Ammachi, is one such patriarchally-conditioned woman. She claims to identify with her role as a grandmother – when her grandchildren dutifully greet her on the Spend-the-day Sundays, she says: “God has blessed me with fifteen grandchildren who will look after me in my old age” (*Funny Boy* 2). However, the children only associate her with her cruel canings. They are careful, while at play, never to bother her: “Like the earth-goddess in the folktales, she was not to be disturbed in her tranquility. To do so would have been the cause of a catastrophic earthquake” (ibid 3). Janaki, the cook, is assigned the duty of keeping the children quiet. When the children fight noisily in the kitchen, her entrance is the sign for total silence “like the hush that descends on a garrison town at the sound of enemy guns” (ibid 36). It is as if she has “uncommit[ed]” herself, that is, cut off her emotional ties with them. (Cummings, quoted in de Beauvoir, *Coming* 471).

When seven-year-old Arjie is caught playing a childish game of bride-ride with the girls, instead of joining the boys at cricket, it is a matter of consternation for the family. His father tells his mother, Amma, that if Arjie is to turn out “funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing stock of Colombo,” it will be her fault (*Funny Boy* 14). Amma therefore stops allowing him to share her dressing-up rituals and half-heartedly tries to get him to play with the boys. When Arjie is caught red-handed again, it is Ammachi who undertakes the responsibility to master his “devil’s temperament” – not content with caning him mercilessly, she stops his play forever and assigns him a task for each Spend-the-day to “keep him out of mischief” (ibid 43). The chores – like dusting furniture and polishing brass ornaments – are unpleasant for Arjie and she is a harsh taskmaster, demanding excellence and cuffing him for mistakes. While Janaki offers some succour, it is only when his aunt Radha calls Ammachi out, for treating him like a servant, that Arjie finds a respite from her harsh treatment.

In the second story, Radha and Arjie join rehearsals for a play and Radha falls in love with Anil who happens to be the young son of their Sinhalese neighbour. The young couple are ready to carry their Tamil-Sinhala alliance through in the face of strong opposition from both their

families. Arjie and Janaki are Radha's only allies in the home. Radha tries to be discreet but Ammachi is hypervigilant and has her own system of surveillance. She visits Anil's home to "fix everything" (*Funny Boy* 62), uncaring that Anil's father finds her "downright insulting" (ibid 65). When Radha remains adamant, Ammachi slaps her. Radha leaves the dining table in tears and Ammachi justifies herself: "I am a good mother and I challenge any of you to say otherwise" (ibid 77).

Radha blames this attitude on Ammachi's racism. It is Janaki who reminds her of the trauma that underlies Ammachi's extreme reaction. Arjie learns that her father had been brutally hacked to death in the anti-Tamil riots of 1958. While Radha casually dismisses it as a long-ago event that needs to be forgotten, when she herself is injured in an attack by a Sinhala mob, the horror of the experience leads her to break up with Anil.

Trauma, says Cathy Caruth, is "the story of a wound that cries out ... in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Bessel Van der Kolk, in *The Body Keeps the Score*, speaks of how a traumatic experience actually rewires the brain so that the individual is always alert to repetitions of the same traumatic event. Sudden trauma – of the kind represented by Ammachi's father's killing – creates a cognitive dissonance in the brain which cannot make sense of the unexpected event and therefore returns repeatedly to its memory of it. The ensuing state of hypervigilance means that anything can trigger the trauma memory and cause an exaggerated reaction. Healing from this kind of trauma requires a repeated re-telling of the story, by the survivor, who can then make some sense of it and allow the brain to process it. Significantly, in the first two chapters, Ammachi seems to display a sort of alexithymia – a condition of 'emotional flatness' (Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* 50). Yet, at her funeral, Arjie remembers how she would hold her head "when she was upset about something and didn't want anybody to see it" (*Funny Boy* 308). There is also the mention of a piano which she never played. Thus, Arjie in his retrospective narration, hints that Ammachi could never tell her own story except through her outbursts of repressed rage.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, speaking of Freud's book on the collective trauma of the Jews – *Moses and Monotheism*, Caruth notes the "unconscious identification with the father" (93). The trauma of her father's death is the situation that seems to have shaped Ammachi in her violent interventions with her grandchildren and Radha. Her trauma has a collective dimension as we see the ethnic faultlines in Sri Lankan society – marked in the stories of Amma and Daryl Uncle, Doris and Paskaran, Jegan, the seething tensions in Queen Victoria's Academy and, finally, the outbreak of violence in Colombo. Thus, Caruth writes: "the theory of individual trauma contains within it the core of the trauma of a larger history" (*Unclaimed Experience* 71).

When we first see Ammachi and Appachi, her husband, Arjie's grandfather, it is she who takes an active role in greeting the children. She is the one who oversees Janaki and maintains order in the house. Appachi seems almost invisible, as he goes back to his newspaper reading. They seem to represent what de Beauvoir, in *The Coming of Age* represents as "the normal evolution of the average couple" – the old man taking a submissive, background role, dominated by the wife who is now "the ruling partner, the embodiment of the law" (262). Yet, it is the law of the fathers that she embodies – policing transgressions and enforcing normativity. He tacitly endorses her. She enforces the ideological stand and dominator model of the patriarchal family – the 'patriarchal masculinity' based on 'violence, aggression, the will to power, isolation, dominance and control'. (bell hooks quoted in Lahkar, *Unmasking* 55). de Beauvoir, in *The Coming of Age*, notes that old women often display a negative and sterile kind of wisdom – "in the nature of opposition, indictment and denial" (608). They defend the 'old gods' and 'the most outdated causes' (612) and embody a "state of repressed rage" (617). Rage is often an indicator of unbearable frustration.

While Ammachi seems all-powerful as a matriarch, we see that her power is only relative to the children when they are away from parental supervision and under her guardianship. She tries to exert the same power over Radha as an unmarried daughter. Calasanti et al note how different age groups gain identities and power in relation to each other (17). Both Arjie and Radha initially flout her directives. Arjie as a child is forced to give in, but the adult Radha's turnaround comes only as a result of her own experiential understanding.

Old age as a "political location" is always related to that of other age groups (Calasanti et al. 25). Ammachi's matriarchal role is therefore only on the sufferance of the patriarchal elements in the family. Arjie's father, Chelva, as already pointed out, wishes to see heteronormativity imposed on his son. While he never intervenes in Radha's affair, in his own immediate family and in his professional life, he encourages assimilation with the Sinhalese, seeing it as the future of the country. He puts Arjie in a Sinhala class in his very first school, against Ammachi's expressed wishes. She had quarrelled bitterly saying that 'he was betraying the Tamils' (*Funny Boy* 61). de Beauvoir writes about the duplicity in the adult's attitude towards the aged – there is a pretence at upholding the traditional respect and regard but actually the adult wishes to convince the aged person to let go and accept an inferior and passive status ( *Coming* 218). Hence, the grandparents disappear from the stage in the 3rd, 4th and 5th stories – signifying their reduced role in the Chelvaratnam family. It is as if they have already become "living corpses" ( *Coming* 461). de Beauvoir quotes Gide: "It is a long time now since I ceased to exist. I merely fill the place of someone they take for me" (ibid 460). It is likely that in this interval, the grandparents have reached the stage of deep old age – the fourth age, marked by serious infirmity (Calasanti et al, 14). Arjie himself has reached the age of sixteen in the 6th story where they reappear.

In this 6th chapter, titled “Riot Journal: an Epilogue”, we are told of how Tamil homes – including those of Arjie and the grandparents’, are burnt down. The latter show a lot of courage in coming to visit the Chelvaratnams in their shelter. Arjie is amazed when Ammachi continually moans the loss of her home. It is however typical of the elderly to identify with their possessions – since they have understood that they no longer have a role in the bustling world outside, it is their belongings which seem to validate their existence. de Beauvoir quotes Sartre: “the totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being” (*Coming* 479). She quotes Flaubert too: “when one grows old ... Everything that vanishes, everything that leaves us has the character of that which can never be undone, and you feel the tread of death upon you” (*Coming* 469). Forty five minutes after they leave for the sanctuary of Kanthi Aunty’s house, they are dead – burnt alive in their car by a Sinhalese mob – victimised by the intersectionality of ethnicity, ageism and class privilege which ironically made them visible targets.

While Caruth notes how history is “the endless repetition of previous violence” (*Unclaimed Experience* 63), in the life of Ammachi we notice a playing out of a life story whereby as the aged, gendered subject moves from the active 3rd age – that of a ‘busy body’ (Katz quoted in Calasanti 10) – to the stage of deep old age, there is a total loss of power, control and relevance vis a vis the family. There is a tacit understanding of this and we may conclude with de Beauvoir’s words about those old men [and women] “who possess something indomitable and even heroic: they will coolly risk a life to which they no longer attach much importance” (*Coming* 490).

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### Bio-Note

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