

## Unveiling the Tumultuous Tapestry: Exploring Conflict, Identity, and Marginalization in Shyam Selvadurai's Literary Masterpieces

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### Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate world of Shyam Selvadurai's literary masterpieces to unravel the interplay of conflict, identity, and marginalization. Selvadurai, a renowned Sri Lankan-Canadian author, has crafted narratives that explore the multifaceted experiences of individuals entangled in the complexities of societal tensions, self-discovery, and the marginalization of minority groups. Through an interdisciplinary analysis drawing from literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and identity studies, this paper examines Selvadurai's works as windows into the tumultuous tapestry of human existence.

The study employs a thematic approach, examining the recurring motifs of conflict, identity formation, and marginalization across Selvadurai's body of work. By closely examining key characters and their journeys, this research paper uncovers the nuanced ways in which Selvadurai captures the internal and external struggles faced by individuals grappling with their personal identities within the context of sociopolitical strife and power dynamics.

Furthermore, this paper explores the author's exploration of intersectional identities and the intersections of various forms of marginalization, including sexuality, race, and culture. Selvadurai's works shed light on the challenges faced by individuals living at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities, offering insight into the complexities of their experiences and the impacts on their sense of self.

Through a comprehensive analysis of Selvadurai's literary techniques, narrative structures, and thematic explorations, this research paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the broader sociocultural implications of conflict, identity, and marginalization within a diverse and globalized world. By exploring the rich tapestry of Selvadurai's masterpieces, this study not only uncovers the intricate dynamics of individual struggles but also offers a lens to examine larger societal issues such as prejudice, discrimination, and the quest for self-acceptance.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Identity, Marginalization, Culture, Self

Shyam Selvadurai's literary masterpieces, particularly his novel *Funny Boy*, intricately weave together themes of conflict, identity, and marginalization. Through a series of six distinct chapters, each with a specific title, the novel exposes the deep ethnic divisions and resulting hardships experienced by its characters. Set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's tumultuous history, including the devastating 1983 riot that shook the nation, Selvadurai vividly portrays the plight of the Tamil community. Through the eyes of the protagonist, Arjun Chelvatranam, the author skillfully reveals the clash of cultures and the societal complexities prevalent in Sri Lanka. This compelling work masterfully blends historical events with fictional elements, offering a captivating exploration of the human experience.

At its core, *Funny Boy* delves into Arjun's personal journey of self-discovery, growth, and navigation of his surroundings. Throughout his odyssey, he becomes exposed to the rigid social structures and communal violence plaguing his homeland, leading to a profound realization that unravels the crisis in Sri Lanka. Selvadurai's realist depiction of the trauma and dispossession suffered by conflict victims in the country resonates with great authenticity. Particularly, the author astutely captures the tension between the two major ethnic groups, the Tamils and the Sinhalese, with the latter forming the majority and the former being the minority. The numerical disparity between the two groups creates a deep divide, ultimately fracturing the nation. The Tamils bear the brunt of escalating violence, resulting in their forced displacement and the consequent physical and emotional upheaval. In addition to exploring the overarching crisis, the novel delves into Arjun's own struggles as a gay individual, further accentuating his sense of alienation amidst migration and societal norms.

From the very onset of the narrative, the author hints at something unconventional about the protagonist, subtly preparing the reader for a taboo subject. As the story unfolds, Selvadurai progressively unveils Arjun's sexual identity, skillfully intertwining it with the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka. It is only after providing a glimpse into Arjun's childhood experiences that the narrator abruptly clarifies that the events being recounted belong to a past life in Sri Lanka, where he once lived during more peaceful times. The forced migration of Arjun and his family to Canada due to the escalating communal violence marks a poignant

turning point in the narrative, symbolizing the loss of their motherland and the ensuing struggles they face as displaced individuals.

By delving into Shyam Selvadurai's literary masterpieces, specifically *Funny Boy*, this research paper embarks on a profound exploration of the intricate tapestry of conflict, identity, and marginalization. The novel's narrative intricacies and the author's adept blending of history and fiction elevate the reader's engagement with the profound themes presented. Through the lens of the protagonist's personal journey and the socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka, Selvadurai's work provides a compelling lens through which to analyze the complex dynamics of human existence in the face of adversity and societal constraints. As the narrator tells:

Those spend the days, the remembered innocence of childhood, are now coloured in the hues of twilight sky. It is a picture made even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them. By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada.

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. (5)

The narrative seamlessly oscillates between the past and the present, skillfully constructing the overarching theme of the harrowing experience of forced displacement. The protagonist's exile stemmed from the volatile communal strife fueled by the ethnic schism between the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Although he and his family have resettled in unfamiliar territory, they remain estranged from their new surroundings. He openly acknowledges that he has been plagued by the profound anguish of losing his cherished homeland.

Beyond the external turmoil gripping the nation, an internal turmoil plagues the protagonist's psyche. By illuminating the trauma of being a homosexual in Sri Lanka, the author reveals how the crisis that unfolds beyond Arjun's personal life serves as a catalyst for

his psychological instability. Arjun gradually becomes aware of the prevailing tensions engulfing his native country, thus deepening his anguish. The realization of his Tamil identity amplifies his suffering, for the Tamil population in Sri Lanka endures subjugation as a marginalized minority, deprived of equitable rights. In their pursuit of justice and empowerment, a group of fervent individuals known as the Tamil Tigers emerges, fighting vehemently for equality and advocating for the establishment of a separate Tamil state. The hostilities between the majority and minority factions in the country foster an atmosphere of animosity, culminating in acts of violence and terror. Asoka Bandarage has elucidated the division in Sri Lanka in her book *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka* as:

Minority carries a negative connotation of inferiority. The terms majority and minority do not necessarily pertain numerical size but to inequality in prestige, privilege, and power. Accordingly numerical superiority does not ensure the dominant majority status and numerical inferiority does not always relegate a group to the subordinate minority status. It is, rather a concept pertaining to power. With the introduction of electoral democracy and the empowerment of numerical majorities, many numerical minorities that were privileged groups under European colonialism, such as the Sri-Lankan Tamils, have struggled to obtain international recognition by establishing new states in which they would become majorities.(11)

The second segment of the literary work entitled “Radha Aunty” uncovers the essence of communal division in Sri Lanka. While the initial chapter alludes to the clash, the subsequent section vividly portrays the conflict within the nation and its profound impact on the characters’ lives. The intertwining of gender disparity and racial differentiation becomes apparent in this particular portion. The novel’s third segment, “See No Evil, Hear No Evil,” masterfully depicts both the national and internal conflicts experienced by Arjie, exemplifying the growing sense of dispossession alongside his mental maturation. The conflict extends beyond physical violence, encompassing inner turmoil as well. In addition to the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, another rift emerges, namely the conflict between Sri Lankans and Burghers. The Burghers, English individuals residing in Sri Lanka, departed the country when the government designated Sinhala as the national language, marginalizing other languages. While delving into the country’s turmoil, Arjie detached himself from the miseries

associated with his unconventional sexual identity. However, the fourth segment, “Small Choices,” unifies both crucial aspects of the novel, exploring homosexuality and ethnic disparities while revealing the plight of Tamil gays in the country. As a Tamil and a gay individual, Arjie confronts dual oppression. The narrative subsequently shifts to the other side of suffering in the fifth segment, “The Best School of All.” As a gay person, Arjie endures suppression within his own household, ultimately being ostracized. It is within this section that he finally confesses his feelings and explores his sexual identity with a fellow student at his new school. However, the Sinhalese-Tamil division persists in this section as well. He is marginalized not only within his family but also within the country at large. Robert Chelvatranam enrolls his son in a new educational institution called Victoria Academy, with the intention of enforcing traditional masculinity upon him. “The Academy will force you to become a man”(210), his father asserts. Yet, this notion later proves to be ironic. A school cannot alter Arjie’s essence. In fact, his father transfers him to a different school in an attempt to suppress his inclinations, only to provide him with an opportunity to embrace them instead. The school itself becomes an instrument that perpetuates the conflict. Deliberately, the author employs the school as a catalyst for Arjie’s transformation, ultimately casting him as an outcast. Minoli Salgado portrayed the writer’s objectives in his book *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*:

From its opening story on the cross-dressing boy narrator, Arjie, who gravitates to the ‘girls’ territory during playtime, to the final story of his homosexual relationship with a Sinhalese school friend, Shehan Soysa, it is clear that the cultural coordinates of identity in the novel are marked along exclusionary lines determined by ethnicity and gender identification. It seems that Selvadurai positions desire an unpredictable force field which threatens both to disrupt the established order of an ethnically divided society while simultaneously offering it its only means of redemption.(119)

Shyam Selvadurai, an erstwhile member of that society, experienced the same oppressive treatment due to his gender identity being derided and ostracized. Thus, he conjures a character to symbolize the bleak plight of homosexuals in Sri Lanka. The final segment of the novel, titled “Riot Journal: An Epilogue,” unveils the pinnacle of turmoil and anarchy in Arjie’s existence. It serves as a significant juncture within the novel, as its absence would

render the narrative fragmented and incomplete. This juncture marks not the climax of suffering, but rather the initiation of the Tamils' anguish. It draws inspiration from the real-life event of the 1983 Sri Lankan riot, a seismic upheaval that shook the entire nation. The year 1983 inflicted indelible and ignominious blemishes upon Sri Lanka's history. The upheaval of 1983 not only physically uprooted numerous individuals but also inflicted deep emotional wounds. Political intolerance, pervasive violence, and social segregation coerced the protagonist to embark on a migration to a foreign land, serving as a representation of the sociological phenomenon of Sri Lankan Tamil migration, a significant event in the country's history.

Selvadurai's second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*, portrays a multifaceted crisis encompassing personal, familial, socio-political, and ethnic dimensions. At its center are the primary characters Annalukshmi Kandiah, a self-reliant 22-year-old woman, and her middle-aged uncle Balendran, who is gay. Residing in the affluent enclave of *Cinnamon Gardens*, an emblematic title referring to the colonial residential area occupied by Sri Lanka's upper-class citizens, the protagonists encapsulate the intricate social fabric of the nation.

Recognizing the contextual significance of the depicted region in the novel, Minoli Salgado, in her book "Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place," underscores its importance.

The central characters of the novel are all urban, anglicised comprador Tamils who live in the most affluent residential part of Colombo. Selvadurai's meticulous mapping of the area and his careful historicisation reveal not only that this novel is intended to inform and elucidate those who are unfamiliar with this region and period of Sri Lanka (making it readily accessible to western readers), but also that it is intended to be in alignment with realist perspective. (124)

The author utilizes the character of Annalukshmi to vividly illustrate the subjugation of women within Sri Lankan society. Annalukshmi, who has two sisters, serves as a poignant example of the prevailing gender disparities. Despite being younger than Annalukshmi, Kumudini is considered the eldest due to her unwavering obedience to her mother and prioritization of family over personal desires. She embodies maturity within the household. Marriage emerges as a central theme in the novel, intricately intertwined with the conflicted

state of Sri Lanka. The author adeptly emphasizes the societal significance of marriage, particularly through Annalukshmi's own marital journey, which assumes a prominent role in the narrative.

Another pivotal character in the novel is Balendran, a homosexual man whose life is subjected to the controlling influence of his father. Balendran is introduced in the novel's second chapter and is the son of Mudaliyar Navaratnam, a highly esteemed figure within both the family and the region. Mudaliyar, who served as a British government interpreter across different provinces of Ceylon, exerts authority and instills obedience in his dutiful son. Through the lens of Balendran's perspective, the author unveils various other characters, such as Mudaliyar Navaratnam himself. This character embodies a sense of superiority, looking down upon those of lower social status. By portraying Mudaliyar, the author delves into the less desirable aspects of Sri Lankan society.

Mudaliyar possesses knowledge of Balendran's true self, yet suppresses his desires due to the unacceptability of homosexuality within their society. As an orthodox elder in the community, Mudaliyar represents resistance to change, rejecting the idea of his son's marriage to a lower-caste woman and disapproving of Balendran's homosexual tendencies. The oppression of the underprivileged is exemplified by Mudaliyar's dominance in the region. Viewing himself as wealthy and occupying a higher social position, he resolves disputes and bestows favor upon petitioners seeking his assistance. The novel effectively depicts the societal imbalances prevalent in Sri Lanka. The parallel narratives of Annalukshmi and Balendran serve as testaments to the societal constraints endured by females and homosexuals, respectively. Furthermore, the inclusion of other characters within their respective narratives sheds light on the various social maladies afflicting Sri Lanka.

Selvadurai's fourth novel, *The Hungry Ghosts*, serves as a platform for the author's exploration of social, cultural, religious, and political consciousness. The novel intricately weaves together multiple themes, including gender discrimination, Sri Lanka's social order, cultural clashes, class differences, and, most significantly, the country's conflict. Through this work, the author effectively portrays the profound impact of ethnic strife on individuals. The consequences stemming from this ethnic divide are meticulously examined within the novel's pages.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the novel, the profound sufferings endured by the main character, Shivan, are revealed. He emerges as a victim, burdened by the weight of his past and the entrenched social rigidity prevalent in his homeland. The ethnic divide is intricately interwoven with numerous other issues plaguing the country, resulting in a narrative characterized by bloodshed, turmoil, chaos, and unrest. The distinctive aspect setting this literary work apart from others lies in its portrayal of Buddhist mythology, particularly the profound philosophy of Karma. The essential essence of the novel revolves around grappling with one's past. To achieve a state of harmonious existence, it becomes imperative to come to terms with one's previous experiences, as vividly depicted through the transformative journey of the protagonist, Shivan, who is burdened by the repercussions of his former life. As a homosexual individual, he endures the oppressive weight of discrimination, yet his Tamil identity affords him an opportunity to seek refuge in a foreign land where he can freely express his non-conforming sexuality. However, his attempts to do so prove futile, compelling him to confront and reconcile with his past. The narrative intricately weaves together key political events, illuminating the far-reaching impacts of the conflict experienced by Shivan. The novel exposes the tyrannical rule of the government, as well as the involvement of various entities such as the JVP and LTTE, which significantly contributed to the nation's deterioration. It becomes evident that these two groups are not solely responsible for the ensuing chaos; indeed, numerous other actors played a pivotal role in exacerbating the nation's plight. The internal clashes within the country created opportunities for external interference in the pursuit of peace. The novel reflects upon India's involvement in Sri Lanka's struggle, wherein its efforts aimed at fostering peace ironically led to further chaos and unrest. India's interference compounded the impact of the conflict within the nation. However, the political parties of Sri Lanka vehemently opposed India's role, ultimately compelling it to withdraw from the country.

Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan native, bears witness to the tumultuous clash and personal victimization that occurred during his visit to the country. His literary masterpieces serve as a reflection of both the ethnic discord and his own life experiences. Within the realm of his fictional narratives, the author skillfully portrays the tragic historical backdrop of Sri Lanka, capturing the essence of its controversial political landscape and intricate social



dynamics. The profound themes present in Selvadurai's works resonate with the prevailing social, cultural, and religious upheaval, as well as the political unrest that plagued Sri Lanka.

Through meticulous textual analysis of these novels, a myriad of themes emerge, including the exploration of ethnic conflict, the subjugation faced by homosexuals, and the pervasive issue of gender discrimination. Notably, the protagonists in Selvadurai's works are predominantly gay individuals, allowing for a poignant portrayal of the struggles endured by homosexuals in Sri Lankan society, where homosexuality was deemed a criminal offense. Moreover, the oppression of females also finds its place within these narratives, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of marginalization. Identity crisis serves as a vital thread woven throughout the fabric of these stories, with the central characters predominantly belonging to the Tamil community, an ethnic group marginalized within the borders of Sri Lanka.

This paper was an attempt to examine Shyam Selvadurai's literary masterpieces, to explore a thought-provoking tapestry of conflict, identity, and marginalization. His works stand as powerful testimonies to the socio-political realities of Sri Lanka, delving deep into the intricate layers of human experience and challenging readers to confront the complexities of a society torn by discord and injustice. Through his narrative prowess, Selvadurai invites us to confront uncomfortable truths and engage in a collective conversation about the urgent need for compassion, understanding, and social change.

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