

**“I find it impossible to imagine that the world will ever be normal again”:
Assessing Hybrid Identity in Shyam Selvadurai’s Novel, *Funny Boy***

Sayan Saha

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English
Rabindra Bharati University
Kolkata, West Bengal

Abstract

Set against the backdrop of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, *Funny Boy* traces Arjie's coming-of-age as he grapples with layers of identity that render him an outsider in his own homeland. Selvadurai's novel is not merely a bildungsroman but a searing critique of the legacies of colonialism, the violence of nationalism, and the suffocating constraints of heteronormativity. Through Arjie's journey, Selvadurai interrogates what it means to inhabit a hybrid identity - one shaped by the mimicry of colonial hierarchies, the performance of ethnic and class respectability, and the suppression of queer desire. The novel reveals how these acts of mimicry, far from securing belonging, instead compound exiles, both physical and emotional.

Key Words: colonialism, hybridity, heteronormativity, identity, violence,

Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) is a searing exploration of identity, displacement, and the lingering shadows of colonialism in post-independence Sri Lanka. Through the coming-of-age narrative of Arjie, a Tamil boy grappling with his queer identity amidst ethnic and political turmoil, Selvadurai interrogates the psychological and cultural consequences of colonial mimicry. The novel exposes how the legacy of British colonialism-manifested in the mimicry of Western norms, language, and social hierarchies-shapes the fractured identities of Sri Lanka's Tamil elite. At the same time, it reveals the ambivalence inherent in postcolonial societies, where mimicry becomes both a survival strategy and a source of alienation. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's theories of mimicry and ambivalence, Frantz Fanon's insights into colonial psychology, and Edward Said's reflections on exile, this analysis unpacks how *Funny Boy* portrays the trauma of cultural hybridity and the violence of postcolonial nationalism.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry-a performance of colonial norms that is "almost the same, but not quite" (Location of Culture 122)-frames the identity struggles of Arjie's anglophone Tamil family. The Chelvaratnams, like many Sri Lankan elites, emulate British customs to assert their social status. They adopt Westernized habits, such as playing tennis, hosting cocktail parties, and prioritizing English education, as markers of sophistication. Even their familial terms "Amma" and "Appa" blend Tamil tradition with colonial affectation

(Selvadurai 15). These acts of mimicry, however, are fraught with irony. While the family seeks to distance themselves from “backward” Tamil traditions, their performance of colonial respectability only deepens their alienation in postcolonial Sri Lanka.

Bhabha argues that mimicry is a tool of colonial control, producing subjects who mirror the colonizer's culture but remain perpetually subordinate. This “flawed imitation” destabilizes colonial authority by exposing its contradictions (123). In *Funny Boy*, the Chelvaratnams' mimicry similarly backfires. Their anglophone elitism alienates them from both Sinhala nationalists, who view them as colonial remnants, and working-class Tamils, who see them as traitors. During the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, their hybrid identity collapses: “We were Tamils... [but] not Tamil enough” (Selvadurai 272). Their colonial mimicry, intended to secure safety and privilege, instead marks them as targets.

Arjie's father embodies this ambivalence. A product of British-style education, he clings to colonial hierarchies, insisting that English is the “language of power” (Selvadurai 89). He dismisses Tamil as “too emotional”, reflecting Fanon's observation that colonized subjects internalize the “superiority” of the colonizer's language (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18). Yet, his rigid adherence to colonial norms masks his closeted homosexuality—a secret that forces him to mimic heteronormativity. His double life publicly performing as a patriarchal figure while privately engaging in same-sex relationships—mirrors Bhabha's claim that mimicry is a “double articulation”, splitting identity into public conformity and private desire (128).

Arjie's queer identity amplifies the novel's exploration of mimicry and ambivalence. From childhood, Arjie is labeled “funny” for his refusal to conform to gendered expectations. His love for dressing in saris and playing “Bride-Bride” with female cousins disrupts the heteronormative order of his conservative Tamil family. His grandmother warns him to “learn to hide” (Selvadurai 56), a directive that echoes Fanon's metaphor of the colonized subject donning a “white mask” to survive (*Black Skin, White Masks* 17). For Arjie, queerness becomes another layer of exile, forcing him to mimic heterosexuality to navigate both familial and societal expectations.

Selvadurai parallels Arjie's repression with his father's closeted homosexuality. Though Arjie's father enforces strict gender roles, his secret affair with a male employee, Jegan, reveals his own fractured identity. Jegan's eventual disappearance hinted to be a result of blackmail or violence—underscores the dangers of queerness in a society that polices non-normative desires. Scholar Niharka Ponniah argues that *Funny Boy* frames queerness as a “site of double colonization”, where Tamil masculinity is policed by both colonial and postcolonial forces (Ponniah 37). Arjie's father, like Arjie, must mimic heteronormativity to survive, but this performance only deepens his self-loathing and isolation.

The novel also critiques how colonial laws perpetuate homophobia. Sri Lanka's penal code, a relic of British colonialism, criminalizes same-sex relationships, forcing queer individuals into secrecy. Arjie's aunt, Radha, faces similar repression when her romance with a Sinhalese man, Anil, is destroyed by ethnic tensions. Her rebellion against Tamil conservatism-mirroring Arjie's queerness ends in tragedy, as Anil is killed during the riots. Selvadurai suggests that both ethnic and sexual "transgressions" are punished violently, exposing the intersecting oppressions of postcolonial society.

The 1983 anti-Tamil riots, a pivotal event in the novel, shatter the illusion that mimicry can protect Arjie's family. The riots, historically known as "Black July," erupted after the assassination of Sri Lankan soldiers by Tamil militants, leading to state-sanctioned violence against Tamil civilians. For the Chelvaratnams, the riots crystallize their precarious position: their anglophone elitism cannot shield them from ethnic hatred. Their home, a symbol of colonial mimicry, is burned, and they are forced into hiding. "We had thought ourselves safe," Arjie's mother laments, "but we were wrong" (Selvadurai 265).

Selvadurai juxtaposes the family's plight with their earlier disdain for "common" Tamils. Arjie's mother, for instance, mocks their Tamil servant, Her Fatness, for her "vulgar" accent and traditional attire (Selvadurai 72). Yet, during the riots, Her Fatness risks her life to shelter the family, exposing the hypocrisy of their class-based mimicry. The riots force the Chelvaratnams to confront their liminality: they are too Tamil to belong in Sinhala-majority Sri Lanka, yet too anglicized to align with Tamil nationalists. Edward Said's description of exile as "the unhealable rift" resonates here, as their displacement becomes both physical and existential ("Reflections on Exile" 173).

Arjie, too, navigates linguistic hybridity. He code-switches between Tamil, English, and Sinhala, reflecting his fractured sense of belonging. His diary, written in English, becomes a space to negotiate his identity. Scholar Maryse Jayasuriya reads the diary as a "site of resistance," where Arjie reclaims agency through storytelling (Jayasuriya 112). Yet, even this act is ambivalent. Writing in English- the language of the colonizer- reinscribes his dependence on colonial norms, even as he critiques them.

In the novel's closing scenes, Arjie flees Sri Lanka, carrying his diary as a record of his fractured self. Bhabha's concept of the "third space"-a site of cultural hybridity where new identities are negotiated offers tentative hope (Bhabha 38). Arjie's storytelling, like his cross-dressing, becomes a form of resistance, allowing him to imagine a self beyond colonial and ethnic binaries. Yet, Selvadurai resists utopian resolutions. Arjie's exile is not liberation but an inheritance of loss: "I carried... the ghosts of those I left behind" (Selvadurai 299).

The novel's title, *Funny Boy*, encapsulates this ambivalence. "Funny" denotes both queerness and absurdity, reflecting the societal mockery Arjie endures. Yet, by reclaiming the term, Selvadurai

subverts its derogatory power. Arjie's journey mirrors Bhabha's assertion that hybridity is "the third space which enables other positions to emerge" (38). However, this emergence is fraught with violence and uncertainty.

The intersections of language and sexuality in *Funny Boy* are particularly significant, as they underscore how normative discourses on gender and desire are embedded in everyday speech. Arjie's journey toward embracing his queer identity is constantly mediated by the ways in which language is used to police sexual norms. His inner life is marked by an acute awareness of the words that are used to describe what is "normal" and those that denote deviation. For instance, Arjie's recurring internal dialogues often revolve around the unspoken meanings behind the words he hears in conversations with friends and family. At one point, he even dreams of a moment when Shehan speaks to him in Tamil—a language that simultaneously symbolizes intimate connection and profound alienation (Selvadurai 242). Such imagery not only illustrates the emotional complexities associated with queer identity but also underlines the paradoxical nature of language as both a conduit for intimacy and as a barrier erected by societal norms. Critiques by scholars like Prateek, who argue that queer subcultures naturally develop their own linguistic registers to resist dominant norms, find a resonant echo in Arjie's playful yet deliberate manipulations of language. In this way, language becomes an essential medium for articulating and affirming alternative sexual identities, challenging the narrow confines imposed by heteronormative discourse.

The interplay of language and power in *Funny Boy* also extends into the aesthetic choices of the novel itself. Selvadurai's prose is notable for its simplicity and clarity; short, lucid sentences contrast with the complex, multi-layered realities they describe. This deliberate stylistic choice reflects the dual nature of language in the novel. While simple language appears accessible and direct, it simultaneously carries deep, subversive undercurrents. Every seemingly straightforward sentence is imbued with a weight of political and emotional resistance. This aesthetic form challenges the traditional association between eloquence and authority. Instead, it suggests that resistance can be found in the unadorned, the unpretentious, and the honest. Gairola's observations that the simplicity of language in *Funny Boy* masks a rich repository of subversion are illustrative of this point (Gairola 480). The plain speech of the novel undercuts the elaborate, and often empty, rhetoric of those in power.

In the broader academic discourse on postcolonial and queer studies, *Funny Boy* frequently emerges as a crucial text in understanding how language operates as a site of resistance. Influential theoretical frameworks such as those developed by Bhabha and Spivak—offer the tools to decipher the layered meanings embedded in Selvadurai's narrative. Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity resonates deeply with the text's portrayal of language as fluid and transformative (Bhabha).

The cultural and historical specificity of *Funny Boy* further amplifies the role of language as resistance. Set in a time and place where colonial legacies remain palpable, the novel grapples with the enduring impact of language policies that have historically divided and ruled. In postcolonial societies like Sri Lanka, the language of the colonizer- English- is layered with ambivalence. On the one hand, it is a tool of modernity and global communication; on the other, it represents a vestige of foreign dominance. Arjie's oscillation between using English and his native tongues illustrates this tension vividly. His fluent command over English is not simply a mark of education; it is also an expression of his desire to assert a cosmopolitan identity that transcends the parochial limitations imposed by tradition. At the same time, his use of indigenous languages reclaims a sense of local identity and resistance against a homogenizing cultural narrative. This linguistic duality is central to the novel's depiction of resistance. It encapsulates the broader struggle of a people who are caught between the exigencies of modernity and the weight of historical oppression.

In a world where the struggle for identity and recognition remains as urgent as ever, *Funny Boy* offers a timeless reminder of the power inherent in language. Selvadurai's novel endures because it captures the very essence of this struggle. It shows that language is not static, but a living, breathing medium that is capable of profound resistance. As long as there are voices willing to speak, the possibility for change is unceasing. Arjie's story is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, a spirit that finds strength in even the simplest of utterances, a spirit that transforms language from a tool of oppression into a beacon of hope and renewal.

Works Cited

Aden, Abrona Lee Pandi. "Norm and Deviance: Re-envisaging Gender and Sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*". *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*. Vol. 4, No. 2, 2016.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2008.

Jayasuriya, Maryse. "Terror and Survival in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*". *South Asian Review*. Vol. 27, No. 1, 2006, pp. 108-23.

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. McClelland & Stewart, 1994.