

## Resistance and Regulation: The Performance of Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

Adhikarimayum Heniya Devi

Assistant Professor

Department of English

G.P. Women' College, Dhanamanjuri University

Email ID: [heniya.adhikari@gmail.com](mailto:heniya.adhikari@gmail.com)

Contact No: 8794061320

### Abstract

This paper studies the dynamic forces of identity formation and resistance in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, showing that the novel deliberately subverts the conventional bildungsroman to reveal gender and ethnicity as rigorously regulated, fabricated narratives. Set against the backdrop of the impending 1983 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka, the narrative contrasts Arjie Chelvaratnam's queer awakening with the violent fragmentation of his national identity. This paper uses Judith Butler's ideas to show how adults use strict gender rules as a tool for control. This starts by forcing children into separate play areas and later involves restricting women's freedom to keep different ethnic groups apart. The essay subsequently analyses the hypermasculine atmosphere of the Queen Victoria Academy, portraying Arjie's public disruption of his recitations as not merely a defence of his queer relationship but as a categorical repudiation of institutional cruelty. Instead of concluding with a protagonist effortlessly integrating into the social order, Selvadurai posits that authentic selfhood necessitates active resistance against it. Ultimately, the paper interprets *Funny Boy* as a tragedy of individuals compelled to abandon their homes and migrate from their homeland. This shows how difficult it is to claim a real identity in a broken society.

**Keywords:** Bildungsroman, Gender Performativity, Queer Identity, Sri Lankan Civil War, Diasporic Exile, Identity Formation.

### Introduction

*Funny Boy* is Shyam Selvadurai's debut novel published in 1994. The novel confronts the harsh reality of a queer boy's struggle with finding his identity and a sense of belonging in a society bound by rigid expectations. The narrative unfolds in Colombo during the volatile months immediately preceding the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. The story is told from the perspective of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a young boy from an affluent Tamil family. It is a deep coming-of-age story. People often praise the text for how well it shows a queer sexual awakening in a country that is at war, but it is really more of an exploration of the social rules that govern people's private and public lives. Rather than just observing these characters, Selvadurai breaks down exactly how strict patriarchal rules of masculinity and femininity shape their lives. Through six episodic chapters, Arjie's interactions with his family and friends force him to navigate a culture obsessed with conformity. He slowly moves toward self-acceptance, but he has to do so in a society where being Tamil and being gay constantly marks him as an outsider. Ultimately, *Funny Boy* pulls apart the mechanics of identity formation, showing us that gender norms are not natural laws but deliberate tools used to enforce discipline, dictate belonging, and punish difference.

### **The Spatialisation of Gender in the Domestic Sphere:**

Selvadurai introduces the notion of gendered conditioning through the spatial segregation of the domestic sphere in the novel's opening chapter, "Pigs Can't Fly". The story often focuses on the family's monthly reunions, which they call "spend-the-days" (Selvadurai 1), at Arjie's grandparents' house. In this case, the physical space of the home is strictly divided by gender. It is clearly specified that the boys own the area outside the house, which includes the front garden, the road and the open field. The boys usually play sports like cricket there. On the other hand, the girls' area includes only the inside and outside of the house, specifically the back garden and the kitchen porch. This separation of the sexes is very symbolic, as the network of gender and political relations that make up these domestic spaces is actively reproduced at the national level.

For a while, young Arjie is able to break free from these strict gender and spatial boundaries. He doesn't care about the boys' games because they are too physical for him. Instead, he naturally goes to the girls' area because he loves the "free play of fantasy" (Selvadurai 3). Using only his imagination, Arjie becomes the clear leader of the girls and organises a game called "Bride-Bride" (Selvadurai 4), which carefully recreates the ceremonies that go along with a traditional wedding. Arjie loves dressing up and playing the bride because it lets him escape the limits of his everyday life and become what he calls "another, more brilliant, more beautiful self" (Selvadurai 4). The game also goes against patriarchal norms because the groom is the least important person in the game's hierarchy.

However, the arrival of Arjie's cousin Tanuja, whom the kids refer to as "Her Fatness" (Selvadurai 5), disrupts his mental sanctuary. Tanuja is frustrated at being made to assume the role of the groom. She interrupts this world of make-believe by insisting that "a boy cannot be the bride" (Selvadurai 11). She mirrors the language of adults by calling Arjie nasty, homophobic names like pansy, faggot, and sissy, which brings the harsh prejudices of the real world into their play. When Tanuja complains to her mother about being excluded from this game, Kanthi Aunty exposes Arjie, dragging him in front of the adults while still wearing a sari. This revelation stirs up a lot of trouble. Cyril Uncle jokes, "Looks like you have a funny one here" (Selvadurai 14), which makes Arjie look like a deviant. The adults' reaction indicates that they believe bad parenting leads to a certain sexual orientation, which prompts Amma to prevent Arjie from playing with the girls. Judith Butler's theory of gender performance asserts that gender is not an intrinsic biological characteristic but rather a socially constructed role that individuals are expected to enact every day. In *Funny Boy*, Arjie's conflict does not stem from an ambiguous identity but rather from his unwillingness to embrace the aggressive masculinity mandated by his culture. His family feels very uncomfortable and threatened when he plays "Bride-Bride", perfectly illustrating Butler's point. If these gender norms were really natural, society wouldn't need to use such harsh punishment to enforce them. When Arjie asks why he has to join the boys' cricket game, Amma defends her decision by saying, "Because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly." (Selvadurai 23). Arjie has trouble keeping up with the competitive spirit of the game of cricket. The other boys notice that he is indifferent to traits that are typically considered masculine. Sanjay uses the "girlie boy" (Selvadurai 25) slur on purpose to push Arjie away and make the strict rules of boyhood even stronger. Cousin Sanjay's public taunt is not just

name-calling; rather, it is a planned attack meant to enforce the strict rules of masculinity. So, the cricket match is less about the game and more about the boys having to show off their manhood. Arjie is quickly kicked out of the group because he can't follow this strict gender script. He is no longer able to play on the pitch, and he is left with the painful realisation that he is completely lost, having been exiled from the girl's safe space and aggressively rejected in the boy's space. Following his confrontation with Tanuja, he retreats to the beach, where he reflects on the abrupt transformation in his sense of belonging. He recognises, with a sense of quiet resignation, that he is "caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (Selvadurai 39). This leaves him with a deep sense of estrangement, as though he has been cast out from a world to which he once felt he belonged.

### **Performing Femininity: Resistance and Regulation**

Arjie slowly understands that the community's stringent gender rules aim to safeguard its ethnic boundaries. The adults say they are protecting family honour, but they are really controlling women's bodies and personal choices to protect a fragile Tamil identity. Radha Aunty's story is a clear example of this. It shows how harshly society treats women who don't adhere to these strict rules. The chapter about Radha Aunty clearly demonstrates how closely society scrutinises women's bodies and choices to safeguard family honour. Radha Aunty's return from America immediately challenges Arjie's strict idea of what an ideal Sri Lankan woman should be like. She has wild hair and dark skin, is flat-chested and likes to wear Western clothes, which indicates that she doesn't follow the strict beauty and gender rules dictated by her community. She goes against the stereotype of Tamil femininity and is a unique, independent person who actually listens to Arjie and takes him seriously, unlike the very judgemental adults in the family. Radha goes against the family by pursuing a romantic relationship with Anil Jayasinghe, a Sinhalese man. When Radha's parents find out about this, they are horrified. The idea of a Tamil and a Sinhalese getting married is considered socially unacceptable, showing how deeply ethnic and political ties affect even the most personal choices. To stop this relationship from happening, the family sends Radha to the northern city of Jaffna for a few weeks. The real tragedy happens on her train ride back to Colombo, when a group of Sinhalese mobs attack her during a sudden outbreak of ethnic violence. Her body becomes both a victim of violence and a site upon which the ethnic conflict is enacted. The attack traumatises Radha, making her stop fighting against her family. She ultimately yields to her family's pressure and agrees to marry Rajan. Arjie, who had always believed in Sinhala love comics and the idea that love could conquer all, is defeated by the fact that love is not enough to keep Radha and Anil's relationship going against the heavy weight of society's prejudice.

A similar situation happens with Arjie's mother, Nalini (Amma), after the suspicious death of Daryl Uncle. Daryl Brohier is a white Burgher journalist who grew up in Sri Lanka with Amma. They had a romantic relationship before he moved to Australia. Daryl goes back to Sri Lanka to find out if the government has been misusing its powers in Jaffna under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Daryl Uncle refuses to listen to Amma's warnings about the rising violence in the north and insists on looking into the conflict himself. He never comes back. When his body washes up on the beach in a fishing village, the police quickly say he drowned, but Amma and Arjie are sure the state killed him. Amma goes against the passive obedience that is expected of a traditional housewife because she is desperate to uncover the

circumstances surrounding his death. She takes huge risks to do her own investigation. She even goes to Somaratne's village to learn more about the murder, but the villagers chase them away by throwing stones at them. In the end, the fear of state violence makes her give up the search. Q.C. Appadurai, a civil rights lawyer, tells her to follow the "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" (Selvadurai 141) philosophy of the three monkeys. In a conflict-ridden society, she shouldn't fight the state's power, as it will endanger her family. Unfair rules push Amma, like Radha, to the edge. Both women attempt to challenge the traditional social order, but ultimately, they must succumb to the terror imposed by the state and the pressures of their ethnicity.

### **Institutions of Power: Hyper-Masculinity at Queen Victoria Academy.**

The societal demand for gender conformity reaches its zenith in the public domain of the school. In the chapter called "The Best School of All", Appa decides to send Arjie to the Queen Victoria Academy, which is his older brother Diggy's school. He does this because he thinks, "The academy will force you to become a man." (Selvadurai 210). The school is like a small version of the larger social world, where young boys are expected to act like stereotypical boys who are very masculine and tough. Diggy warns Arjie that at Queen Victoria Academy boys are expected to follow a rigid code of behaviour: they must not keep long hair; leave the top button of their shirts open; blink too noticeably, lest the Principal, Black Tie, interpret it as a wink; or lick their lips in his presence. To Arjie, these rules appear almost absurd in their severity. Yet Diggy's warning takes a more serious turn when he cautions Arjie never to complain about the punishments, insisting that he must "take it like a man or the other boys will look down on you" (Selvadurai 211).

Queen Victoria Academy is also a very partisan place, which shows how the Sri Lankan nation-state is breaking apart. There are separate classrooms for Sinhalese and Tamil students at the school. The principal, Mr. Abeysinghe (also known as Black Tie), and the vice-principal, Mr. Lokubandara, are also involved in an ideological tug-of-war. This conflict is rooted in the larger ethnic tension that is afflicting Sri Lanka. Black Tie wants the school to be a modern, multicultural place where people from all backgrounds feel welcome. Lokubandara, on the other hand, is a political appointee and a strong supporter of the grassroots Sinhala movement. He wants to make the school an exclusive Sinhala Buddhist school that doesn't admit Tamil students. Arjie meets Shehan Soyza in this hostile, hyper-masculine setting. Shehan is considered a misfit, and his classmates often bully him, and Black Tie calls him an "ill and burdens" (Selvadurai 224) student because he is gentle and has long hair. Rumours about his supposed homosexuality are also circulating, making him the subject of ridicule at school. Even though they were told to stay away, Arjie and Shehan become very close. Arjie slowly realises that he is flirting with Soyza, and their friendship grows through shared vulnerability, which is very different from the aggressive domination that is common at school. However, Arjie's first reaction to his sexual awakening shows how well society has conditioned him. After their first sexual encounter in Arjie's garage, Arjie doesn't feel free and content. Instead, he is filled with deep shame, disgust, and the feeling that he has let his family down. He has fully adopted his culture's homophobic beliefs, which equate being different or funny with being immoral and taboo.

### **The Epiphany of Power: Subversion and Rebellion**

Arjie's internal conflict is a key turning point in his coming-of-age journey. While he thinks about his shame, he has a deep realisation about what morality and social rules are. He asks, "How did some people get to decide what was right or wrong, fair or unfair? It all depended on who was in charge; everything depended on who had power and who didn't." (Selvadurai 274). This realisation is the beginning of Arjie's journey to develop a sense of self. He understands that there is nothing wrong with his relationship with Shehan; instead, it is the arbitrary, fear-based rules of a biased society that make these judgements. This new understanding leads to a crucial act of political and personal rebellion. Arjie is selected to read two poems at a major school event, one of which is "The Best School of All". This event is crucial for Black Tie, who wants to use Arjie's performance to impress a powerful politician and keep his job even though Lokubandara is trying to take over his position. The poem that Arjie is supposed to read praises the institution with lines that celebrate "great days and jolly days" (Selvadurai 273). This is the opposite of what Arjie actually went through, which was physical punishment and mental abuse. Witnessing the horrible abuse Shehan goes through at the hands of Black Tie functions as a moral awakening for Arjie. He now realises that silence implies consent. Arjie knows exactly what will happen if he deliberately blunders his public recitation, but he does it anyway. This isn't just a random act of rebellion; it is a promise of loyalty to Shehan and a direct attack on the school's oppressive culture. Selvadurai completely changes the story of a young person's coming of age. Instead of having his main character grow up by finally fitting in, Arjie finds his true self by going against society's cruel expectations.

By doing this, *Funny Boy* actively goes against the traditional structure of the bildungsroman. Franco Moretti contends that a bildungsroman generally delineates a protagonist's transition from adolescence to adulthood, ultimately seeking to provide a cohesive resolution that balances the individual's aspiration for autonomy with the prevailing imperatives of social integration. The genre typically culminates in an individual's successful assimilation into a standardised, homogeneous social structure. However, Selvadurai undermines this expectation. Arjie attains self-recognition and embraces his sexuality not through submission to societal norms but by actively resisting them, progressing towards a comprehensive understanding of his identity by rejecting the biased moral codes of his community.

### **The National Exile: The Fragmentation of Belonging**

The profound tragedy of *Funny Boy* resides in the harsh intersection of Arjie's personal awakening with the complete disintegration of his nation. Sarah Graham notes that the bildungsroman is deeply concerned with the consequences of participating in a nation's life. Arjie's ethnic identity as a Tamil is in direct conflict with his national identity as a Sri Lankan. In July 1983, the growing tension between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities reached a breaking point, resulting in the most violent ethnic conflict the country had ever seen. Across the country, Sinhalese mobs attack, steal from, and kill Tamils in a planned way. The violence has completely destroyed Arjie's family. Their family hotel is set on fire, and their huge house is torn down. The family barely makes it out by going to live with their Sinhalese neighbours and friends. The ethnic conflict reaches its brutal climax when the rioters trap and kill Ammachi and Appachi by setting their car on fire. Arjie's parents face a bleak future in their homeland, as the destruction of their home and the shattering of their

basic sense of safety have left them vulnerable. Because of this, they make the terrible decision to flee to Canada, which seals Arjie's tragic change from citizen to exile.

Before they leave, Arjie and Shehan have one last intimate moment together, making love for the last time before he has to say goodbye, knowing he will probably never see his friend and lover again. Arjie is very upset that he has to leave behind everything and everyone he knows. This forced migration breaks the usual ending of a coming-of-age story. A bildungsroman narrative ideally fosters the cultivation of a stable national identity. For Arjie, this process comes to a sudden and painful end. The growing anti-Tamil sentiment violently undermines his claim to a Sri Lankan national identity, forcing him to join a diasporic community as an immigrant and refugee, separated from his homeland.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* employs the dual traumas of queer alienation and ethnic persecution to reveal the profound arbitrariness of the social constructs that bind individuals. The novel dictates that the notion of home itself is achingly difficult to define for a character like Arjie. He is exiled on many levels: first from the gendered spaces of his childhood play, then from the heteronormative expectations of his family and school, and finally from his homeland. In the end, Selvadurai's book shows that gender and national identity are not natural truths; they are strict rules enforced by those in power. Arjie's journey is not just about survival; it also shows the profound courage it takes to define oneself in a society that wants to violently erase differences.

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