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Norm and Deviance: Re-envisaging Gender and Sexuality in Shyam Selavdurai's Funny Boy

Abrona Lee Pandi Aden
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sikkim University, West Bengal, India

Abstract:
Shyam Selvadurai's novel Funny Boy is the story of a Sri Lankan boy, Arjies who witnesses his country falling prey to violent currents of nationalism by way of the Sinhala- Tamil antagonism. This communal antagonism is further intensified by Arjie's falling in love with a boy, flouting heteronormative stances of gender and sexuality. In a world structured by rigid binaries, Arjie finds himself sucked into the vortex of his own feelings which seem completely "normal" to him, though his elders sneer at the thought of his turning out "funny". This paper seeks to read Funny Boy as a text that is steeped in the politics of heteronormativity and one that seeks to interrogate and invert rigid gender binaries that make life for people like Arjie difficult. It seeks to establish the text as a tool of interrogation and revision of hegemonic discourses that propagate ideas associated with what is conventionally accepted as "normal" behaviour.

Keywords: *Deviance, gender, identity, norm, sexuality.*

Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy beautifully weaves together a narrative of resistance against heteronormativity and the futility of communal antagonism spurred on by the rather slippery concept of a "pure" national culture and identity. The protagonist Arjie's experience of being homosexual in a world clearly demarcated by heterosexual margins and of being a part of the Tamil minority puts him in a space that is doubly displaced from what is claimed to be the norm. Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy* is an audacious celebration of the daring 'deviation' of a Sri-Lankan boy who pursues his love and passion – for another boy-in the face of an acute turmoil in his home soil. Selvadurai tells a touching tale of a country battered by ethnic violence and political tensions, bringing together the political and the personal through the mouthpiece of Arjie. While the Tamils and the Sinhalese are at loggerheads to assume the epicentre of their cultural identity- the Sinhalese assert they are truly "Sri Lankan", the Tamils assert the same- Arjun Chelvaratnam is baffled by his own gravitation towards Shehan Soyza as he feels the epicentre of his own sexuality being mocked at by his elders and called "funny" by his father. Arjie feels that he has his own demons to battle while his country battles its own demons of ethnic violence and nationalistic ego.

Arjie's gravitation towards the feminine is evident from his fascination with the bride-bride game he takes immense pleasure in playing with his female cousins. In this game, the bride takes pride of place and gets to bask in all the limelight the game has to offer. Arjie is always the bride, he gets to undergo the almost sacred ritual of dressing and adorning the bride:

- The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki's cracked full- length mirror- by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes- I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world, represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palu, seemed to revolve. It was a self-magnified, like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema, larger than life; and like them, like the Malini Fonsekas and the Geetha Kumarasinghes, I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested. (4-5)

What is striking about this game and Arjie's position of centrality in the game is that Arjie is the unchallenged claimant to the coveted position of the bride. Nobody questions or challenges Arjie's playing the bride simply because all the children have not been inducted into the so called normative divisions between the female and the male, the feminine and the masculine. Everything is completely normal until the children's cousin, Tanuja, whom the children name "her Fatness" arrives from abroad and challenges Arjie point blank: "A bride is a girl, not a boy" (11).

A breach into the children's happy world occurs when Tanuja's mother, Kanthi Aunty, comes to where the children are along with her daughter and drags Arjie, dressed elaborately as a bride, to where the adults are and makes a spectacle of him. The disapproving and rather embarrassed looks Arjie gets from his parents and the amusement of his aunts and uncles bursts Arjie's happy bubble and for the first time he feels self-conscious, shy, and confused:

- As we entered the drawing room, Kanthi Aunty cried out, her voice brimming over with laughter, "See what I found!" The other aunts and uncles looked up from their papers or bestirred themselves from their sleep. They gazed at me in amazement as if I had suddenly made myself visible, like a spirit. I glanced at them and then at Amma's face. Seeing her expression, I felt my dread

deepen. I lowered my eyes. The sari suddenly felt suffocating around my body, and the hairpins, which held the veil in place, pricked at my scalp" (13).

This is Arjie's first induction into the world of divides and differences, which he realizes are crucial to be observed and maintained lest he wants to turn out "funny". His Cyril Uncle rings out a bitter warning coated in a sweet pill: "Ey, Chelva," Cyril Uncle cried out jovially to my father, "looks like you have a funny one here" (14).

Later, Arjie's parents start to fight once they get home. His father blames Arjie's mother for having egged him on by letting him in their room when she dresses and by letting him play with her jewellery: "If he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing-stock of Colombo, it'll be your fault. . . You always spoil him and encourage all his nonsense" (14).

Arjie's father finds it very convenient to put the blame on his wife who stays silent "in the face of truth" (15) when she is accused of having encouraged Arjie by letting him watch her get dressed and by letting him play with her jewellery. She does not have anything to say to defend herself as her husband, the patriarch, holds her responsible for Arjie's being funny. It is as if patriarchy is trying vehemently to distant itself from Arjie, as Arjie's father recoils from his own son. Arjie tries to process the word 'funny' and its implications:

- The word 'funny' as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, 'that's funny'. Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone (17).

Ironically, what Arjie's elders find funny is far from funny for him- for Arjie, what they call funny makes up his very being. For the reader it is the adults who are actually funny, because they fail to accept Arjie and try stubbornly to make him behave like a boy in all conceivable ways. Arjie's father enrolls him in the Victoria Academy hoping to make him a man. It is these adults' desperate attempts at keeping Arjie "straight", a long way from what they consider "deviant", that is actually ridiculous.

While grave conflicts unfold in the form of riots and curfews as the Tamil- Sinhalese divide grows more intense, Arjie's own needs and inclinations make his situation graver. The fact that Shehan is Sinhalese and Arjie is Tamil make it apparently impossible for the two to be together. Initially, Arjie cannot make sense of his grandmother's aversion to the Sinhalese and her violent reaction to Radha Aunty's association with Anil:

- I wondered why Anil's being Sinhalese upset her so? I was in a

Sinhala class at school and my friends were Sinhalese. My parents' best friends were, too. Even our servant was Sinhalese, and, in fact, we spoke with her only in Sinhalese. So what did it matter whether Anil was Sinhalese or not? (59).

Arjie cannot comprehend the magnitude of the antagonism between the Tamils and the Sinhalese and later comes to know of his grandfather's death during the language riots of the 1950s.However, this does not deter either Arjie or Shehan and they bond with their bodies as they come together in an initial intimate and somewhat awkward encounter in Arjie's garage. Soon after this, Arjie comes to realise that he is one with Shehan and no longer one with his family. The closer he gets to Shehan, the further away he goes from his family. He realizes that he has come to inhabit a new place with Shehan – a place that his family members would not and could not follow him to:

- As I gazed at Amma, I felt a sudden sadness. What had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with her forever. I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me. (285)

This 'world' is a space that he has made for himself and Shehan- a space nobody could enter or violate. Despite his sadness at his estrangement with his family, this space gives him refuge and comfort and when he is within the security of this space with Shehan, the only rhythm that he attunes himself to is that of his needs and desires: the desires of his body and the needs of his soul. There is no judgement here, there are no codes, there is no condemnation. Arjie's fulfillment by virtue of his relationship with Shehan is complete and concrete. His identity does not undergo any confusion after he comes to realise this fulfilment.

Judith Butler's contention in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that identities figured as feminine or masculine do not require any anatomical grounding which has differentiated sex and gender identities finds full validation in Selvadurai's novel. In *Bodies that Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex*, *Butler* questions the kind of "hegemonic heterosexuality", which attempts to naturalize and stabilize sex, gender and identity. In *Funny Boy* it is Arjie's father who seems to be the most vehement perpetrator of this kind of a hegemonic heterosexual structure in which there is no place for the likes of Arjie and Shehan. Interestingly, it is this figure of patriarchal authority who stresses the need for Arjie to become a man. Here again, it is patriarchy which takes upon itself the noble task of cleansing Arjie of his homosexuality, as if it were something dirty or offensive. There are, of course, instances when Arjie's mother also tries to get Arjie interested in "boyish" activities like playing cricket with his brothers instead of playing bride-bride with his sisters, but it is his father who deals out the lethal blow by sending Arjie to the Victoria Academy where he would be coerced into acting like a man. Arjie's father's plan backfires as Arjie meets his first lover, Shehan Soyza, in Victoria Academy. Seeking to be a man, as it seems in the novel, is not always as noble and glorious an enterprise as patriarchy makes it to be. The idea of being a man is therefore an overly glorified ideal that fails to recognize the fact that gender does not necessarily mirror sex, that the relationship between gender and sex is not mimetic- one of Butler's main contentions regarding the relationship between gender and sex.

Arjie is ultimately at ease with who he is, despite his earlier confusion and anxieties triggered by those around him who see him as the homosexual 'Other'.He pursues and finds his true 'self' in and through his relationship with Shehan Soyza and no longer sees himself as an 'Other'. The homosexual/ heterosexual and the corresponding self/other dichotomy which is observed with great gusto by Arjie's elders does nothing to deter Arjie from being convicted of his true 'self'. For Arjie, there are no separate categories of 'self' and 'other' because he has come to embrace his sexuality and his orientationwith much confidence and grace. He sees his Radha Aunty's relationship with a man as perfectly normal, and as beautiful and exhilarating as his relationship with Shehan. When Radha Aunty's relationship with Anil collapses under the pressure of ethnic enmity, Arjie is crushed and sorry for Radha Aunty. He is unable to watch on as Radha Aunty gets married to Rajan Nagendra, a Tamil man:

- The Pastor now instructed Rajan Nagendra to place the ring on Radha Aunty's finger. Suddenly I couldn't bear to watch the ceremony. I turned away and walked down the corridor towards the kitchen, not quite knowing where I was going (99).

He feels for Radha Aunty's relationship with the same kind of intensity he would have felt for his own. For Arjie, a boy-girl relationship holds as much significance and excitement as a boy-boy relationship. Therefore, there is no question of the existence of hackneyed binaries like homosexual and heterosexual, 'self' and 'other' in Arjie's world. His is a world that is beyond the divisions, beyond the binaries imposed by his elders and his society at large. It is this annihilation of boundaries and binaries that makes Selvadurai's novel a truly profound one.

Upon considering the communal clashes that break out in Arjie's homeland and reach impossible frenzied heights, one realizes that this madness after pure culture is void of meaning. Both the Sinhalese and the Tamils claim themselves to be true Sri Lankans. For the Tamils, the Sinhalese are bad blood and vice-versa. The language riots of the 1950s, in which Arjie's grandfather is killed, is born out of the enterprise of marginalizing the Tamils by making Sinhalese the official language of Sri Lanka by virtue of the Sinhala only Act (passed in 1956).This violence and mutual antagonism is meaningless because both the Tamils and the Sinhalese have a shared history in the making of the nation. Exclusive claims at nationhood thus spark off a host of problems which make it impossible for Arjie's family to stay behind in Sri Lanka.Radha Aunty is assaulted by the Sinhalese mob as she travels unsuspectingly. Arjie's paternal grandparents are burnt alive inside their vehicle in broad daylight. Arjie's house is attacked and set ablaze by the political pariahs that threaten to erase their very existence from Sri Lanka. Arjie finds that he and his family members cannot cry as they behold the heap of rubble and ashes their home had been reduced to; for the simple reason that they knew that once they started crying, they would never be able to stop. There was utterly no consolation to be had in this country they had been calling home for so long. Arjie is shocked at the fact that their house has not only been burned, but also looted. As he tries to shut what remained of the burnt gate, Arjie realizes it is a futile exercise as there is nothing to protect within that gate. The safe haven that they called home had been burnt to the ground and all Arjie and his family could do was to behold this destruction in numb silence and leave for safer shores. They are rendered homeless in their own homeland as the riots take on an unprecedented violence in the name of nationalism and nationhood. Upon hearing his father say they would make plans for Canada, after things settled down a bit, Arjie simply writes in his 'Riot Journal':"I am glad he said that, because I long to be out of this country. I don't feel at home in Sri Lanka any longer, will never feel safe again." (304)

For Arjie, Shehan's being Sinhalese hardly matters. When Shehan tries to console him after their house is burned down, Arjie observes:

- "... He was trying to cheer me up, and as I listened to him talk, something occurred to me that I had never really been conscious of before- Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not...." (Selvadurai, 302)

For Arjie, this realization that he and his lover belong to enemy camps dawns only after the riots. However, this does nothing to alter his relationship. Later, when Arjie is endowed with the great privilege of reciting lines from the poems "The Best School of All" and "Vitae Lampada" at the prize-giving function by the Principal, Black tie, he realizes that the recitations are a sort of ploy Black Tie hopes to use in order to impress a minister of the cabinet who was next in line for the presidency. It is a grand plan, Arjie figures, conceived by Black Tie to save the school from falling into the wrong hands. As he considers how his loyalties should lie with black Tie, by virtue of him being a Tamil, he also realizes that Black Tie is no better than Lokubandara, the Vice Principal, whom Diggy describes as a "snake in the grass". Arjie feels there was no way of establishing whether one was better than the other. Though he belongs to the Tamil camp, Arjie decides to side with justice rather than with Black Tie, as he mangles up the words of the poems, around which Black Tie had prepared his speech appealing to the minister to leave the school as it was- in his able hands. He feels that people like Shehan have been treated unjustly by the likes of Black Tie with his weird rules- no blinking, no licking of lips, no long hair- and that Victoria Academy was hardly anywhere near being the best school of all. He wonders how such a wonderful thing as loving Shehan could be bad:

- I thought of Shehan and myself. What had happened between us in the garage was not wrong. For how could loving Shehan be bad? Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble. I thought of how unfair this was and I was reminded of things I had seen happen to other people, like Jegan, or even Radha Aunty, who, in their own way, had experienced injustice. How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge: everything had to do with who held power and who didn't. If you were powerful like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. If you were like Shehan or me, you had no choice but to follow what they said. But did we always have to obey? Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? I thought about this, but no answer presented itself to me (274).

Arjie is aware, and painfully so, of the fact that he and Shehan and many others like Jegan and Radha Aunty were victims of a power play between contending forces. Just as Black Tie gets to decide how pupils are to behave in Victoria Academy, Arjie's father gets to decide how Arjie is to behave, to dictate what games he could play and even to dictate whom he could love. Once again, power plays into the hands of patriarchy, represented by the imposing figures of Black Tie and Arjie's father. In this power play, Arjie finds himself helpless and wonders if it would ever be feasible to be able to live life on his own terms, and not on Black Tie's or his father's terms. Inspite of all these tensions, Arjie is convinced that loving Shehan could not be bad and he goes ahead with his plan to mangle up the words of the poem and get back at Black Tie and also his father by wounding both their egos. He finds a way of telling them that they no longer exercise any power over his decisions and his feelings.

In the face of communal tension, Arjie's family decides to leave Sri Lanka for good. What does that do to Arjie's identity as he goes beyond the borders of his homeland into foreign shores? Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* examines the cultural and political boundaries which exist in between the spheres of gender, class, race and sexuality. He observes: "It is in the emergence of the interstices- the overlap and displacement of domains of difference- that the intersubjective and collective experience of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated." (Bhabha, 2) He goes on to ask a series of significant questions: "How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender,etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?" (Bhabha, 2)

The question of a true Sri Lankan culture, which is the bone of contention between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, is an extremely complex and problematic one. Where then is this Sri Lankan culture located? Is it located within the Tamil community or is it located within the Sinhalese community? And where does Arjie fit in this essentially rigid heterosexual set up? Does he have no share in this Sri Lanka which

he has called home since he first realized what the word 'home' entailed? The antagonism that Bhabha talks about makes it very difficult for Arjie to establish his identity in his homeland. Can an identity like that of Arjie's be negotiated in the 'interstices' that Bhabha talks about? These are important issues and questions that *Funny Boy* evokes and addresses as readers encounter one instance of violence after another. "...In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them', almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent 'returns' to culture and tradition. These 'returns' accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behaviour that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridity. In the formerly colonized world, these 'returns' have produced varieties of religious and nationalist fundamentalism." (Said, xiv)

Culture in Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* takes on a combative identity as such and the 'return' to culture and tradition both the Tamils and Sinhalese try to effect takes on a nasty nature. In the midst of all this nationalistic fervor, Arjie's position within the ambit of this rather restrictive and limiting space claimed by culture is highly vulnerable. Can Arjie never be a part of this culture which scales unprecedented heights of madness, culminating in the bloody riots of 1983? The author Selvadurai himself discusses these issues in a talk on *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens.*[1]

He says how, upon arriving on Canadian soil, he was forced, like all other immigrants to ask himself questions regarding his identity: what did it mean to be Sri Lankan? What aspects of his culture made him Sri Lankan? Selvadurai says that it was clear to him that the pure sense of being Sri Lankan was based on rigid heterosexual and gender roles. This of course led him to wonder whether he was no longer Sri Lankan because he was gay. He began to wonder what it meant to be both Sri Lankan and gay. Selvadurai goes on to say that in order to make sense of all this, the emphasis must shift to a sense of cultural identity that is eclectic and diverse, that is transforming itself, making itself new over and over again. He contends that this sense of cultural identity could have many important points of similarity, as also many points of difference between its people and that these differences such as sexuality and gender and class also define who we are. "This sense of cultural identity stresses not just who one was in the past but who one might be in the process of becoming."

Arjie's homosexuality, or his difference is very much a part of his Sri Lankan identity. The idea of a heterosexual nationhood is something Selvadurai's novel strongly refutes. Nationalism and nationhood thus inevitably become sites of contest and tension as they jeopardize the essence of Arjie's identity. Arjie has to somehow find his way through this wasteland of restrictive ideas and hold fast to his own convictions in a world clouded by pre-existing ideals. Is the homosexual individual deviant, or is he just different? As we partake of Arjie's journey to self-realization and self- fulfilment, we get to see how difference is not always deviance. Selvadurai's novel helps us see into the heart of things as they stand in Arjie's world and to revise our oftentimes overly self- righteous stance. We know and are convinced that Arjie is neither different nor deviant. He is just like the rest of us, only looking to be loved and understood - looking for that one thing that heals and betrays, exhausts and restores, rewards and punishes, makes and breaks; the one thing that we must have nevertheless- the thing called 'love'.

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