



# The Creative Launcher

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## **Strong Urge for Racial and Gender Identity amid the Cultural Chaos in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy***

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### **Abstract**

The Sri-Lankan author Shyam Selvadurai colours his imagination within the racial experiences, gender hierarchy and ethical society of the place to share the world unfolded social dichotomy of the place where the conflict between the Tamils and Singhalese is the key problem of the society which needs to be changed and flexible granting freedom and choice to people promoting the democratic values and the social values as well. The novel *Funny Boy* paints beautifully to the urge of a child for his choice and freedom on the sensitive issue of race and gender like. The violence between Buddhist Sinhala Majority people and Hindu Tamil Minority due to the issue of homosexuality is central cultural thread which affects the mindset of the youths in the country. The novel reveals the extended chaos, troubles and tensed environment involving consistent fights and clashes of the people in Sri-Lankan society happening frequently.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Homosexuality, Violence, Hierarchy, Sexuality

Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri-Lankan, noted eminent author and critic projects his own experiences of cultural conflicts that he has gone through in his life due to his origin from Tamils and Singhalese parents in his autobiographical novel *Funny Boy*. Sri-Lankan society has been very rigid and strict in maintaining its social values and ethics. The Tamils and Singhalese are in constant conflict because of their differences in context of cultural and moral values. The author was extremely restless and overwhelmed to disclose and raise the issue of sexual identity he had felt for himself. His experience as being gay has been the central thread in interweaving the plot of this novel as the issue of homosexuality escalated violence between Buddhist Sinhala majority and Hindu Tamil Minority in Sri-Lanka.

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Through this novel, author intended to reveal the extended chaos, troubles and tensed environment involving consistent fights and clashes of the people in Sri-Lankan society happening frequently. The author has very sensitively touched the tissues of race and gender hierarchy to raise his voice for homosexual urge of common people which was obsessed since years in the country.

Selvadurai has unfolded the emotional intensity of adolescence age very sensitively gliding over the experiences and wonder of childhood and then after the restlessness and disappointments of the adolescence which makes one distressed and torn out as he/ she finds incapable to fulfil his/ her expectation in life in the realistic manner. Arjie Chelvaratnam, the protagonist in Selvadurai's novel, finds himself going through similar problems. He finds him shattered, disappointed and finally lost because his attitude towards life differs greatly from the other people who are around him. His character reveals us how conflicting cultural beliefs of the society and nation can lead to confusion and alienation. He also depicts the affectionate but strange picture of an imperfect family in a perturbed state where all of the family members look to stand and stay together in the time of stress and problems. "It's a very fine picture of Sri-Lankan childhood projecting the nuances of adolescence and racialism at a place that ultimately influences one's life in a very bitter manner."<sup>1</sup>

The novel *Funny Boy* is set under the impact of the Sri Lankan civil war which inserts deep influence over the characters. They are constrained at an individual level by the tensions between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, which includes Arjie and his family. The relationship between Radha Aunty and Anil couldn't continue because of their ethnic communal differences. Radha belongs to traditional Tamil family whereas Anil belongs to Sinhalese that led conflict between their relations and ultimately breaking their marriage. Arjie's father foresees the difficulties of being a minority Tamil and enrolls him in Sinhalese language classes at school, so that future opportunities for his son wouldn't be limited for him and family too. Arjie's father is optimistic and is eager to see the tensions between the two ethnic groups to end, and is reluctant to see that the best option for his family is not to migrate Canada.

The novel *Funny Boy* centres around the perspective of adolescence, which encodes innocence of the child and reflects that how the childhood of a child is influenced by the different factors and views such as political, cultural, social and historical tensions in India and Sri Lanka in context of his developing sense of identity. The protagonists observe their life experiences and try to understand their queries and understanding with the persisting cultural conflicts and controversies. The child narrator is an outsider as he does not merge with the cultural norms imposed upon by the society. Arjie, belonging to an upper-class Tamil family, goes beyond the social expectations crossing the borders as he realizes that he

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is a homosexual who falls in love with a Sinhalese, despite his parents attempt to create a masculine identity for him. His parents intend to make him learn that he should abide him by the social boundaries, orders, values and ethics which has been the part and parcel of people's life and which is also expected from him too. Here he is imposed to understand what does mean racism by introducing that he is one of the Typical Tamilians. He is caught in such a mental conflict from where he is not capable to enjoy the life which he dreams ultimately this unachieved desires shatter him. The need to understand identity determines the characters' individual relationship to the tensions surrounding them. Although children might not understand what is going on in social dilemma, yet they eagerly look in to the social haze from a new angle to bring some concrete picture of a child's mental conflict and his curiosity to understand the tensions of the surroundings.

Arjie Chelvaratnam, the protagonist of the novel, intends to dress up in a sari and play bride-ride game with his cousin sister rather than cricket in his childhood. When he is found involved in such games innocently by the adults, he is forced to come out of the girls' world. He is made aware of his gender identity by his father and grand parents that he is a boy and he should behave like a boy not in else wise manner. He was allowed to play with saris and jewelleryes of his mother by his mother only as she treated her son in a very soft manner providing him an affectionate space to groom him. But he was stunned by the treatment of his family members as he was not aware with this gender boundary that the society has made before him. When he is caught dressed in a sari while playing bride-ride, Ammachi, his grandmother assigns him manual labour to teach him a lesson how to be masculine. This is the first time Arjie feels humiliated and embarrassed about his "funniness", though he does not understand why all these things are coming to him. Arjie learns about the tension between the Tamils and the Sinhalese at first at his grand parents' home. His grandparents are extremely scared of the racism of the people. Arjie does not understand why Ammachi is so upset. He was never aware of this tension of racial conflict that their grandfather had been experiencing at the place. Even he never has had any conflict because of being Tamilians and Sinhalese. He is in a Sinhala class at school and his friends are Sinhalese. His parents' best friends and servant are even Sinhalese too. Therefore he is shocked with the response and behavior of his grandparents. Now he is left alone with his mental strife who innocently but keenly tries to know this social dilemma, and is agonised with such behaviour of seniors and adults of the family and society. But at the same he also explores the roots of racial intent to understand the meaning and values of Tamilians and Sinhalese. As a child sentiments are treated in an unknown and unrealized manner as he was not aware of this racial conflict and differences. As the plot in novel develops the civil violence and tensions mounts swallowing his family and his social sheltered world. In this manner the novel records luminous, delicate

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and simple journey of his childhood to shaded world of adults with all its secrets, injustices and capacity of violence evolving and corrupting the mind of innocents. Even he reflects his innocent intent when he follows the suggestion of his mother and plays with the jewellery his mother gives to him play. But the moment Arjie is caught wearing a sari, humiliates him in the family that makes his mother sad and humiliating too. However, after Arjie's humiliation, Amma orders Diggy to let Arjie play with the boys during the daytime and forbids him from playing bride-ride with his girl cousins. When Arjie questions this, Amma says simply, "You're a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys"<sup>2</sup>. This does not satisfy his quest because he is still unaware of society's expectations. His mother is very much upset and uncomfortable with the question Arjie asks to his mother. She doesn't know how to explain her child gender and sexuality.

Arjie represents him as innocent child who takes the readers into the tensed but curious world of a child where he displays the problems of those innocent migrated children which arise due to social and political chaos in a particular society. His difficulties make a complex environment before him where his innocence is shattered and he is led towards a violent world. He is haunted by his innocent desire but finds no way to achieve them in real life. He is fragmented and distempered in his life as a child because he doesn't know whatever is happening in his life. He finds him in the grip of social and political glitches that affect his life in a very bitter manner.

The author has very beautifully blended the social and political chaos and complexities to explore the sexuality and homosexuality of the young protagonist Arjie. The story unfolds his realization and awareness of his homosexual interest. His curiosities are unfolded and well understood by the readers because of the lesions on racism and tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese which were taught by his father in Sri-Lanka. As a boy Arjie is unaware of all these difficult things- Sinhalese, Tamilians, boyhood, gender, sex and desire for homosexual etc. that he learns afterwards in his life. The author also addresses to the Sri-Lankan history and its social realities of the time to bridge the gap.

Appa, his father, is a conservative Tamil businessman who thinks highly of tradition, values and moral ethics of the society. He expects that Amma, his wife should wear a sari for her mother-in-law's sixtieth birthday. He blames Amma for allowing Arjie to play with her jewellery. He believes that Arjie's "funniness" is a nurtured and promoted by her only. Even before few years back Appa was worried of his son's innocent but unexpected behaviour regarding the feminine behaviour he demonstrated in the family at several occasions. He sends him to the Academy expecting that it will force him to become a man and implant all the needed masculinity to grow his personality as a matured boy. In his explanations about racism, Appa is reluctant to describe the rifts between the Tamils and Sinhalese to Arjie as he

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feels that Arjie is too tender to comprehend the extent of racism. Appa is passive in his treatment of racism. He is very much susceptible of racial issues. He doubts for hiring Jegan because of his race believing that it may risk him and his family and can put him in trouble. But it is Jegan who fights most rigorously against racism. Appa reproves Jegan for confronting the people who are spreading government propaganda, because he believes that Tamils should be a careful minority: “As a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game...The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous”<sup>3</sup>. He believes that passivity can help elude racism and he does not listen to Amma’s suggestions to immigrate to Canada until it is too late. It takes many riots, burnt houses, and the deaths of Ammachi and Appachi to persuade him to flee Sri Lanka with his family.

Radha Aunty, a well educated one who flew back to homeland from America, clarifies Arjie’s curiosity on the issues of gender and race in an easy manner. However she breaks the funny image of Arjie to people and explains his queries as a natural intent of an innocent child. She is a liberal and open-minded lady who confronts many social boundaries in her life that teaches her the art to live the life in enthusiastic beautiful manner. Like others she too observes Arjie childish funny deeds but she takes it as good one. Though she remembers well how Ammachi’s father had been killed by the Sinhalese. She questions racism, “But is that a reason to hate every Sinhalese?”<sup>4</sup>. Witnessing Radha aunty’s earlier romance with Anil belonging to Sinhalese, Arjie realizes the extent of her loss due to racism. Anil does not distinguish people due to their ethnic backgrounds. He treats Radha as a lady, and supported her in all the manners. Even he does not eat before her. Anil believes that race should not be a factor in the matters of love. He says to Radha: “If you really like me, together we can make our parents accept us”<sup>5</sup>. This is very similar to the love story of Amma’s and Daryl Uncle. In the same manner Amma was restricted to marry due to his Sinhalese race.

He is shocked to see Daryl Uncle who looks like a white man but speaks Sinhalese perfectly. He is in fact a Sri Lankan, just like his family who explains patiently to the issues of race and sexuality to Arjie. He narrates Arjie how many Burghers left Sri Lanka in the 1950s because they spoke only English and the government had made Sinhala the national language. Discovering Amma’s past romance with Daryl Uncle, Arjie questions why love and race must conflict at times. Daryl Uncle explains to Arjie that “It was not that easy...Some Sri Lankan people thought Burgher people were too white to marry their children and some Burgher people thought Sri Lankan people were too brown to marry theirs”<sup>6</sup>. Daryl Uncle has influenced Arjie so deeply that the lessons he has taught are set in his mind whose untimely death seems to exist outside Arjie’s senses of reality (136).

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Jegan, another character from the novel, plays significant role in developing the plot on the theme of race and sexuality. He turns role model for Arjie because of his honest beliefs. Arjie learns more about him when he meets Jegan and starts realizing that he is attracted and inclined towards his dark athletic body. Jegan's move into his house "filled [Arjie] with an unaccountable joy"<sup>7</sup>. Jegan is possibly homosexual, for he hesitantly mentions a "very good friend" who looks just like Arjie. Jegan is the person who defends his "tendencies" which promotes Arjie to ponder his sexuality further. His promotion in his office prompts him to take an active role in dispelling racism and government propaganda. Appa and Sena Uncle promote Jegan to a senior supervisory position, but the other employees resent him because he is Tamil. He is forced to leave when Appa and Sena Uncle's hotel business is threatened with graffiti and staff complaints. It comes as a blow to Arjie when Jegan comments bitterly before departing: "What do you know about it, you're just a boy"<sup>8</sup>. This is the worst moment when Arjie finally understands typically more about gender and race through Jegan who disappears from his life.

He learns more about the Sinhalese-Tamil tension from his Sinhalese classmates and from the bathroom terrorizations he witnesses at school. He meets Soyza at the academy where she defends him from Salgado's racist remarks about Tamils. He appreciates his handsome look and body that attracts him towards Soyza. But he is still unaware innocent of his sexuality and its conflicts. On the other hand, Soyza knows that he is homosexual. They develop intimate relations. Meanwhile Arjie begins calling Soyza by his first name, Shehan. He is bewildered with the Shehan's kisses on his lips and does not know what to do in his bedroom. When at last Arjie invites Shehan for dinner, the two boys enjoy intimate physical relations in the garage during a game of hide and seek. From this moment Arjie comes know that he has transgressed the sexual boundaries and alienated himself from his family forever. The scent of Shehan on him after their last sexual intercourse lingers on Arjie's mind as his family prepares to immigrate to Canada. This culmination of the experiences with Shehan allows Arjie to reach a new level of understanding about his place in a world where race and gender are of utmost importance. His realization that his lover, Shehan, is a Sinhalese makes aware to the readers of his mounted tension and his intent that he has diminished some of the boundaries that society has put in place. The innocent Arjie, as a child, needs time and explanations to understand the world around him from the historical, political, social and cultural aspects. The first explanation regarding the differences between Tamil and Sinhalese is given at the moment when Anil brings Radha Aunty at his home who tells her mother her name. Her mother immediately responds that he is Sinhalese and that she shouldn't be seen with him for what people might assume. This is the moment he turns aware of racial differences and the differences between communities and their cultural values. Arjie too

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becomes aware of the fact that he has broken the boundaries of the political, cultural and social dilemmas by making his relationship with Shehan in the process of following his desire. The recognition that Shehan is Sinhalese occurs in the novel at the end of the novel, where Arjie is no longer a child and has experienced the world to make adequate choices for himself knowing the consequences of his action. Arjie is confused of his sexual intent in the beginning of the novel but this is characteristic of children's curiosity and every child goes through the same nerve. Arjie knows that he wants to play with girls rather than boys, yet he isn't exactly sure of all these things what exactly meant for him. "The Funny Boy draws readers into the characters and problems of a child that we can recognize in any family."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the entire novel, Arjie's family consistently motivates him to involve with male boys while playing. This makes his family aware of his sexuality, or aware of what may become of his sexuality, even before he himself realizes of it. His desire to play 'bride-bride' with the girls, rather than playing cricket with the boys makes difference in his orientation of sexuality that led him to transgress of the set gender boundaries. Sri-Lankan society is a typical society which abides it with its moralities and ethics in a very strict manner. His family is obsessed to the same that consistently enforces it to place him in the role he deemed to assimilate as per the social behavioural code but child Arjie is incapable to adhere these social norms to prove him at the expectation of family and society. His attempt to break the gender hierarchy brings social and political chaos to him and his family too. But as a child he is not capable to understand the complexity of the issues evolving around him. He questions many things he does not know that an adult won't ask. He, very innocently, asks his father of racism which is very challenging to his parents to satisfy his queries. His father replies, "It's too hard to explain. You'll understand when you're older."<sup>10</sup> In the similar manner even he asks to his mother, "Amma why he can't play with the girls? Amma answers, "Life is full of stupid things and sometimes you just have to do them."<sup>11</sup> Unconsciously Arjie refuses social codes and rules, breaks the set boundaries and moves towards imagination and his freedom of choice to chase of his desire and homosexual sentiments.

Arjie is a character who is depicted very delicately to show the readers that how an innocent child is impressed by his family and friends upon the issues of race and gender. His innocence is mocked by the family members, friends and the society which placed him in an uncomfortable funny situation that humiliates him and made him experience the social and gender hierarchy in bitter manner. His innocent funniness turns as the root cause of tension for the family and even for Arjie too as he doesn't understand why people take him in such a funny manner. The lives of family and friends merge together for a short span of time, yet the values that these friends cherish linger on in his conscience. His acquaintances with the fact that as a boy he should play with only boys, or his inclined interests of playing with girls

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and its revealed meaning to him that he is homosexual or the fact what exactly means for Sinhalese and Tamils makes him feel that he has transgressed the set boundaries of the society in the both arena- sexuality and the society. Now as adolescence he experiences the reality of the society in his life and that makes him aware of his own recognition and the identity he has created for himself. He also displays that his inner yearnings and thoughts are not yet changed under presiding social pressure which he keeps nurturing continually and even chases his desire in the same manner as he dreamt of about his own life. Though he lacks experience which allows the readers to question the authenticity of his views and ideas revealed in the narrative but we should not forget at the same that children may not understand the seriousness of the social hierarchy but they provide a new insight of the children's psyche which must be the subject to realisation and recognition by the social spectrum.

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