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Naturalizing 'Queerness': A Study of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

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"The past is another country. They do things differently there."
L.P. Hartley

If the representation of same-sex sexuality in punitive terms leaves gays in shock, then the legitimizing of Article XVI Section 377 (which bars gay sex) in India made gays all over the world, especially in South Asia speechless and traumatized. In response to this universally misconstrued image of an 'unnatural' man, Shyam Selvadurai, a Canadian-Sri Lankan writer creates a narrative which not only offers an 'innocent peek' into the biased perspectives of heterosexuals towards queers but the use of a child narrator is a deliberate ploy with which he deconstructs the craving for a so called 'healthy' text.' Thus, this article, by musing on Selvadurai's most acclaimed text *Funny Boy* (1994), attempts to examine how and why 'unhealthy' texts are constructed. Secondly, it elaborates on the subtle literary strategies used by Selvadurai to debunk pre-conceived notions of a heterosexual literary text. Finally, the article while locating a gay narrative in the social and cultural context of Sri Lanka, presents a gendered analysis of homosexuality in Sri Lanka.

Unhealthy Text

A healthy text is a heteronormative construct, which refers to a text where first, heterosexuality is naturalized and homosexuality is either sidelined or demonized; secondly, where the writer manages to exorcise the demons of unheard voices, and finally, the writer can prevent the eruption of contested spaces. Since Selvadurai challenges all the above mentioned conventions connected to a heterosexual text, his text can be considered as a snapshot of what one can call as 'unhealthy text.'

Jonathan Ned Katz while chronicling the history of heterosexuality discussed the idea of "invention of heterosexuality." Following the argument of Freud, Katz points out that "heterosexual" is not merely a noun but frequently an adjective, describing a "drive," a "love," an "instinct," and a "desire," as well as a sexual activity and a type of person (66). What Katz called "the invention of heterosexuality" referred to his idea that "heterosexuals were made, not born." According to Katz, the idea of heterosexuality emerged at a specific point in history, and its history intertwines with the story of industrialization and urbanization, the rise of the middle classes, the complications of empire, and the scientific and philosophical legacies of the Enlightenment. The term heterosexuality was created to give medical and intellectual legitimacy to the desires of

the emerging middle class. Building on the thesis of Katz that heterosexuality is an invention, Blank underlines that:

“Heterosexual” became a success, in other words, not because it represented a new scientific verity or capital-T Truth. It succeeded because it was useful. At a time when moral authority was shifting from religion to the secular society at a precipitous pace, “heterosexual” offered a way to dress old religious priorities in immaculate white coats that looked just like the ones worn among the new power hierarchy of scientists. At a historical moment when the waters of anxiety about family, nation, class, gender, and empire were at a rather hysterical high, “heterosexual” seemed to offer a dry, firm place for authority to stand. This new concept, gussied up in a mangled mix of impressive-sounding dead languages, gave old orthodoxies a new and vibrant lease on life by suggesting, in authoritative tones, that science had effectively pronounced them natural, inevitable, and innate. (8)

One can extend the Freudian idea of heterosexuality to homosexuality and claim that homosexuality is also a love drive that is invented to serve as a binary opposite of heterosexuality, and perhaps its emergence is directly connected to the middle class morality. Challenging this middle class morality for the sake of same sex love has been one of the agendas of Selvadurai’s novel. To illustrate Selvadurai’s unquestionable penchant for love over middle class morality, one can cite the example of the prize giving day when Arjie mangled two poems and “reduced them to disjointed nonsense” (Selvadurai 281) to take revenge on the Principal who made his lover suffer. Later, when asked by his lover Shehan: “What made you do it?” (284) Arjie responded to Shehan’s query by saying: “I did it for you...I couldn’t bear to see you suffer any more” (284).

Heterosexual narratives create images of essentialized men and women silencing unheard subaltern voices. These essentialized male and female images exaggerate masculine and feminine traits respectively, and participate in the politics of erasure by filtering voices that challenge their monopoly. Moreover, one feels that heterosexual writers seem to have appropriated the right to write gender. *Funny Boy* challenges this heterosexual monopoly to write imagined gender and present the realistic picture of sexuality, which transcends the heterosexual bifurcation. *Funny Boy* is an attempt to transcend male-stream and female-stream (two forms of heterosexual mainstream literature) and to bring us face to face with a contemporary understanding of sexuality, through the character of Arjun (Arjie), in the time of civil war. Selvadurai seems to suggest that a new hero is in the offing and he is not a heterosexual archer prince of *the Mahabharata* but a common homosexual man in the form of Arjie i.e. *Aaj ka Arjun* (today’s Arjun).

Also relevant here, is Devy’s analysis of ‘cultural amnesia’ as ‘an inevitable consequence of colonialism’ (52). Kosambi extended the argument to include the marginal voices of women and how they are suppressed by male writers in literature by coining a term ‘literary amnesia’ as a ramification of cultural amnesia. I shall additionally argue by coining the term ‘queer amnesia’ that the amnesia becomes manifold when it

comes to gay voices. These voices are either colonized by heterosexual narratives or they are persecuted as something unnatural and insane. Thus, one can claim that Selvadurai attempts to remember the past as it was without the interpolation of heterosexual narratives and writers. The novel without considering past as a different country, as indicated in Hartley's statement, that is the epigraph of this essay, tries to rewrite it.

Sri Lanka, which means "the splendid country" in Sinhalese found itself embroiled in queer and war crimes. Like other Commonwealth countries, queer laws are a bunch of Victorian relics left by the British colonizers that criminalize homosexual sex: "Homosexuality is illegal in 41 out of the 53 Commonwealth countries, a report released on Monday reveals." (Davidson) Despite their illegality, Selvadurai brings forth a new outlook on homosexual desires and thus underlines contested spaces. Laws in Sri Lanka oppress queers with article 365 of the Sri Lankan Penal Code:

"Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment that may extend to ten years."¹

and 365A, which has been amended in 1995 so that lesbians can also be brought under the jurisdiction of the law:

"Any person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any person of any act of gross indecency with another person, shall be guilty of an offence."²

The government and its laws increase the stigma that queers are subjected to, resulting in a situation which can be considered totally undemocratic and homicidal. An instance of ordeal, a queer has to bear in Sri Lanka can be measured from the contents of a letter by P. Alles written on August 20, 1999 and published in a Sri Lankan newspaper that advocated the release of queer offenders (Alles). When requested by a gay activist Sherman De Rose to take action against the perpetrator for igniting violence towards women, the Sri Lankan Press Council dismissed the complaint and fined Sherman Rs 2100 for promoting sadism (Sri). Like the gays in Sri Lanka, Arjie becomes a sacrificial victim of old oppressive laws promoting heterosexuality, and debasing homosexuality. Mockery of homosexuality becomes an unavoidable part of heterosexual existence as presented by Selvadurai in the novel when the family found Arjie in the sari:

Cyril Uncle cried out jovially to my father, "looks like you have a funny one here."
(Selvadurai 14)

Literary Strategies

¹ Penal Code of the Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka, Chapter 19, Article 365.

² Penal Code of the Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka, Chapter 19, Article 365A.

Selvadurai uses two significant narrative strategies – deployment of an innocent first person protagonist-narrator and a deliberate dovetailing of the political and personal to emphasize the diversity in the queer discourse. These strategies are handpicked by him to underline the diversity of narratives and simultaneously they are also used to present the perspective of the subaltern side. With these strategies, Selvadurai succeeds in accomplishing the feat of making ‘pigs fly.’

Selvadurai presents to the audience, a first person reliable narrator who piece by piece unravels the narrative to the readers and in the course of his narration which intersperses with his personal growth, highlights the growth of the nation as the cloud of nationalism looms large. Selvadurai rather than supporting the idea of nationalism challenges it and tells us how nationalism creates an invisible code of conduct and anything that falls out of that code becomes unnatural:

One can see that the novel is less of a *bildungsroman* than a historical novel. Transgressing the heterosexual debates of Art for Art’s sake, a close analysis of the narrative strategies can show that literature for gay writers is a conduit for social change intermingled with their lived experiences. The innocent ‘subjective’ gaze of the child narrator is utilized by the writer to analyze two postcolonial ideas: the idea of nationalism, and the idea of gay community.

Selvadurai questions the idea of nationalism, which is based on linguistic and heteronormative lines by reconfiguring the definition of home. Home, which is considered as a space where nationalist ideas are generally implemented has become a place of defiance in Selvadurai’s novel:

Within a queer diasporic imaginary, the lost homeland is represented not by the pure and self-sacrificing wife and mother but rather by a queer boy in a sari. This project of reterritorializing national space, and the uses of drag in such a project, are explicitly articulated within South Asian queer activism and popular culture in various diasporic sites. (Gopinath 174)

Moreover, in the course of the novel, we find ourselves amidst communal riots that jolt our belief in nationalism and the nation’s vows to save its own people. The text engages with history as we are forced to revisit certain dates which reek of discrimination and mayhem. Three important years with which the text engages either implicitly or explicitly are 1956 (Solomon Bandaranaike, the PM of the country enacted ‘Sinhala only’ law that led to mass protest and killings), 1972 (formation of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Ceylon became Sri Lanka, meaning “a splendid country” in Sinhala) and 1980 (burning of the public library residing rare Tamil artifacts in Jaffna and mass murders that followed the event). Although, a quick glance at these three dates shows that Selvadurai’s presentation of history is actually lopsided. Political events are presented ‘from a Tamil point of view, with no references to Tiger atrocities’ (Rao 119). But still, the child narrator makes us confront our demons, and time and again raises the question: Is it good to judge people on the basis of their linguistic identity? The case in point would be Radha Aunty and how the narrator unravels her love for a Sinhala boy, and how in the

course of the chapter this love loses its charm and significance as Radha finds herself haunted by the ghost of communal riot. These ghosts continue to pester other characters such as Ammachi (grandmother) and Nalini (Arjie's mother) too:

The novel as a whole tracks various desiring relations, both hetero- and homosexual, such as those between the Tamil Radha and the Sinhalese Anil, between Arjie's mother and her Dutch-descended Burgher lover, and between Arjie and Shehan. None of these forms of desire fit within the logic of ethnic or state nationalisms, and they are disciplined and regulated by increasingly brutal means as the novel progresses. (Gopinath 174)

Since the title of the book does not have a definite article "the," one can say that perhaps Selvadurai writes to present social conditions of all so-called 'funny' boys rather than only one i.e. Arjie. The novel was primarily positioned as a gay text, and responses ranged from one writer's enraged evaluation of the novel as filth to a national debate on the need to repeal the anti-sodomy law after the Sri Lankan President read it (Rao 118). Thus, the novel lays down the responsibilities of a gay writer towards his own sexuality or what David says while talking about his own book:

That, despite being castigated as 'shirt-lifters', 'brown-noses', 'Quentins', 'gay boys', 'poofers' or just plain 'queers' and hampered by any number of now-unimaginable legal and social obstacles, so many attained social prominence was one of the reasons for my writing this book. (David x)

Furthermore, one sees how the writer manages to redefine the phrase 'institutionalized love' which generally refers to love that presents the dichotomy between *pativrattas* (virtuous women) and prostitutes (Mies 19). This dichotomy has always remained a part of South Asian patriarchal consciousness. Although this dichotomy is used to differentiate women, but the same metaphor does not find any place when one talks about the character of men. I would like to suggest that cleverly, Selvadurai presents to us a shift in this metaphoric construction as the same tools of differentiation are applied now to draw a line between the good and 'funny' men.

The second literary strategy employed by the writer to present the perspective of a gay writer is to break the linearity of the narrative by yoking the political and personal together. In Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, like Jean Genet's *The Balcony* (1957), one can notice an arbitrary eruption of different worlds without any prior information to the point that the line that divides these two worlds gets blurred. Time and again, the political keeps breaking the confinements of the personal narrative of Arjie, who fails to understand this untimely eruption, to blur the difference between the image and the reflection. This helplessness of the narrator is registered well by the writer to underline how the political activities of the heterosexual world do not make any sense to the gay narrator.

One of the best examples to understand the mingling of the political with the personal is a quick glance at the Riot Journal of Arjie. Thus, the novel becomes a literary documentary of national events recorded through a compassionate queer lens. Moreover,

one can surmise that this intermixing of two narratives – personal and political awakens us to the condition of impossibility of a future for a gay writer in a country like Sri Lanka.

Stereotyping Homosexuality in Sri Lanka

Amidst extremist factions, Sri Lanka is no haven for so called LGBT. Same sex sexual liaisons are considered unmanly and perverted. In the North and East, Tamil and Muslim extremists have established an unofficial death penalty for LGBT persons, making it impossible for LGBT rights activists to work in the area. Many accounts have been cited in newspapers of posters enlisting the names of ‘funny’ men who are accused of being homosexual or bisexual:

In 1996 the Sri Lankan gay group “Companions on a Journey” was established. During its six-year existence it has faced assaults on its founders, death threats and attacks on its headquarters. (Pritchard)

Several of these enlisted men are allegedly exposed and pushed towards enforced disappearance or are socially ostracized. LTTE members and people who live in areas that are under LTTE control are not allowed to choose when and with whom to marry. Instead the LTTE chooses their marriage partners for them.

Amidst this kind of sexual repression, Selvadurai creates an adolescent narrator who debunks stereotypes and makes us see the real face of the problem. On number of occasions, he defies accepted norms of manliness and accepts what can be considered as unmanly:

The narrator’s transgression of gender codes and roles in the game of ‘bride-bridgeman’ and his resistance to ‘becoming a man’ within the strictures of the colonial Queen Victoria Academy are enacted through the performance of staged identities against which the discourse of fixed ethnic identification serves as a counterpoint. In narrating events through the eyes of a political ingénue who is dependent on adults for information on the past, history is rendered both mobile (in the act of transmission) and fixed (weighted and coded by their prejudices). (Salgado 112)

Furthermore, the adolescent narrator in story two entitled “Radha Aunty” divulges to the readers how he has stereotypes concerning a bride and a bridegroom, and how these stereotypes are challenged in a space of a couple of pages. So, the strategy used by Selvadurai is based on three shifts in the text. First shift is marked by the creation of a stereotype. Second shift is the state of confronting the stereotype and finally comes the third shift entitled reduction, when the child-narrator reduces the stereotype to a figment of his childishness and accepts the new idea:

He [Mr Lokubandara, the Vice-Principal of Arjie’s school] was not what I expected at all. It was impossible to imagine that this man had anything to do with the fight I had witnessed that morning in the toilet. (Selvadurai 221)

Second instance in point to understand how the narrator debunks the stereotype is of the poem "*Vitae Lampada*." The poem, on a very stereotypical level, eulogizes cricket and its caliber to promote values such as honesty. How Arjie, while learning the poem by heart, makes us realize that cricket in Sri Lanka has nothing to do with honesty anymore, and this revelation on his part demolishes the stereotype. Selvadurai not only manages to challenge the stereotype of homosexuality in the course of the novel, but also succeeds in sending the message home that stereotypes take us far away from the truth.

This essay through a gendered analysis of gay narratives in Sri Lanka has endeavored to analyze and show how Selvadurai succeeds in transforming the plight of homosexuals in Sri Lanka from a private religion of pain to a public spectacle underlying "the horror! The horror" of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz. Simultaneously, one hopes that the novel can spread awareness and quell the angst of homosexuals in Sri Lanka.

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