

QUEERNESS, EFFEMINACY, AND ETHNICITY IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY*

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The present research paper deals with queer identity and ethnic problems that prevail through the characters in the novel *Funny Boy*. Arjie, the protagonist, learns things on his own and becomes capable enough to judge what is right and what is wrong only at the end. Moreover, the environment in which he grows drastically marks his journey towards queerness. The aim of the paper is to depict how the protagonist transgresses his queer identity and effeminacy from childhood into adulthood with reference to games, love, marriage, queerness, and racism. It also analyses violent struggles between Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups which have been brought out perfectly in the novel.

INTRODUCTION

'Queer,' the umbrella term represents the identity of homosexuals. Gay and lesbians are proud enough to say that they belong to queer sexuality. Moreover, it does not fit them into either biological needs or into gender roles. Queer theory differs from gender theory and gay and lesbian studies, but brings out concerns dealing with definitions of man, woman and sexuality. It questions the fixed paradigms on sexual identity developed on normal ideology of sex. Writers like Mahesh Dattani, Alice Walker, Shobha De etc., are some of the eminent authors who write about queerness in their works.

Queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. If queer theory is a school of thought, then it's one with a highly unorthodox view of discipline. The term describes a diverse range of critical practices and priorities: readings of the representation of same-sex desire in literary texts, films, music, images; analyses of the social and political power relations of sexuality; critiques of the sex-gender system; studies of transsexual and transgender identification, of sadomasochism and of transgressive desires. (P3) *Foucault and queer theory*

Games as a Tool to Establish the Queer Identity

Arjie, the protagonist of the novel, learns about the violence between Tamil and Sinhalese and passages through his own homosexuality. Moreover, solitariness, fear of isolation of family and friends, drives him through to discover queer identity. It starts first when he spends the day at Ammachi's home with other fifteen cousins

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where Ammachi says God has blessed me with fifteen grandchildren who will look after me in my old age. (P2) *Funny Boy*. Bride-Bride game is the very first game which he plays with all his female cousins. He wants to be a bride in the game and he always owns his mother's sari with him and uses it along with the makeup in a servant Janaki's room. Moreover, he learns to wear a sari from his mother. His imaginations stimulate him to be the best bride. Arjie says,

The dressing of the bride would 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. (P4-5) *Funny Boy*

All his happiness starts to transform into torture when one of his cousins, Kanthi aunty's daughter Tanuja, comes from abroad to Ammachi's home. Arjie feels defeated when Tanuja asks for a role of bride, instead she is given a bride groom role and is nicknamed as fatty because of her fattiness. Arjie and his followers in the game do not like Tanuja but she attracts other girls by her new dolls. Kanthi aunty keeps her eyes on Arjie because he always troubles Tanuja. Later when the funny boy is caught by his aunt with sari and she immediately takes him to the drawing room where Arjie's parents are taking rest and this is where Cyril uncle calls him 'Funny'. His parents could not even bear it and take him to their house where he gets warned for his strange attitude. Diggy, brother of Arjie is advised to look after him and asks Arjie to join in the cricket team where Diggy belongs to. Their mother does not want him to play with girls and says, If the child turns out wrong, it's the mother they always blame, never the father. (P19) *Funny Boy*

Before starting from their home to Ammachi's home, Arjie hides a sari in his sister's bag so that no one could see the sari. His brother takes Arjie to play cricket and wants him to be a player in Meena's team but she refuses and finally he is accepted in the team of Diggy after a long quarrel between Murugesu and Diggy. He is allowed to play halfheartedly by the team members, but when chance comes for him to play first, it is strongly opposed by the team players. On seeing it, Arjie is very happy but pretends to be sad and he immediately demands that he should bat first. This irritates the team boys and he is soon sent out of the ground. He walks to the back of the house where he usually plays Bride-Bride game with his cousins. Moreover, he could not bear to see it as again Tanuja mesmerized everyone and playing a Bride-Bride role. On seeing all these, he has headed towards the girls' group and requested them to include him in Bride-Bride game and stresses that he could play whatever role given to him. Immediately Tanuja says, "Go away," she cried, holding up her hand. "Boys are not allowed here." (P29) *Funny Boy*

The Struggle between Traditional Roles and Queer Identity

It is very clear that, through Bride-Bride game, he adapts an odd attitude which paves a path of having and experiencing the qualities of a girl, and engaging himself in the game develops effeminacy in him. He is rejected from the role of bride in the game but he begs for another role instead of playing cricket with the boys. A game like cricket is especially meant for boys and Bride-Bride, as the title of the game itself denotes, is the game of girls. He belongs to the territory of girls and unknowingly acquires power of transgression to otherness. Arjie is shifted from St. Gabriel's school to The Queen Victoria Academy School in order to deviate his sissiness and to keep him away from it forever; but there he finds Shehan Soyza who is believed to be in a queer relationship with the Head Prefect. Arjie's love for Soyza ends in homosexuality. Hide and Seek is the other game which associates him with the qualities of a gay. After encountering sexual identity with one of his classmates, he understands what the word 'Funny' actually means and understands the worriedness of his father and mother. It is to be noted that Selvadurai has not used any words related to queer and homosexuality but chooses the word 'Funny' to describe Arjie. The word 'Funny' to Arjie is incomprehensible when others call him funny and thinks that he has done something strange.

Though all the games which he has played make him feel effeminate, hide and seek makes him have a homosexual relationship with his friend Soyza. It is clearly shown that only the environmental game paves the protagonist's way to end up wrongly. These games are highly responsible for the changes in his attitudes. If he would have played cricket with the other cousins, then he might have been as same as he was. Through these games he has lost his originality and unknowingly adopts sissiness. It is these games which have changed his attitude but finally he keeps himself away from it. Shyam Selvadurai has portrayed the darkest side of the development of the character and the lightest side as well. Throughout the novel, Selvadurai writes sensitively about the Funny Boy's (Arjie) drastic developments and brings out the loveable portrayal of a blemished family in a promised land, annoyed to dwell together at vexed times and racism as well.

The Racial Tension between Tamil and Sinhalese

Arjie is really surprised when he learns from the 'Little women' comics that a man and a woman's relationship reaches the fullest only at the marriage. Arjie's love for little women reveals his affection towards queerness and realization of his difference as homosexual adolescent male. 'Little women' is a bildungsroman where one of the major themes is true love and the discovery of each heroine's individual identity of which Arjie has a connection with. When Ammachi speaks about the marriage ceremony of her daughter Radha aunty, immediately Arjie imagines Radha aunty to be one of the film stars. But when she arrives from America, she is not up to his expectation and imagination.

According to him, Radha aunty is supposed to marry Rajan Nagendran. Later he talks about the attire for her in the marriage, and he requests her that he needs to be one of the page boys in the ensuing marriage but everything ends in vain because Radha aunty has fallen in love with a Sinhale called Anil. They used to meet at the rehearsal where they both act in a drama called *The King and I*. Their love is being opposed by their parents and it is because of racism that the opposition is very strong. On seeing the love between Radha aunty and Anil, Arjie realizes that she does not live up to his imagination and this seems unusual to him and erases his strong determination and conviction on love. On the other side, he learns what racism means from his father.

“Appa?” I said.

“Appa who was that person who was Killed?” I asked.

“It was Ammachi’s father,” he replied, after a moment “your great- grandfather.”

“Why?” I finally asked. “Why did somebody do that?”

“Because he was Tamil.”

But you’re Tamil and I’m Tamil and nobody is killing us. (P 60-61)

Soon his father says that he would understand what it is when he grows up. Moreover, he learns about it when he comes to know that his Daryl uncle is found dead in Colombo. It is said that he has been killed by Sinhalese in Colombo at the time when he has gone there for writing an article. Then it is a long journey to know about the Tamil tigers in Sri Lanka who have been fighting for their people. He learns about Tamil tiger with the help of Jegan who is twenty-four years old and works under Arjie’s father and looks after the hotels owned by Chelvarathinam. Being a Tamil, he is tortured by other Sinhalese which makes Chelvarathinam transfer him to the south side where he could earn much money than what he earns here.

On observing this in its entirety, he gets a clear outline of what racism is. Finally, Arjie the protagonist himself undergoes racism when he hears that a group of people plunders each and every Tamil’s house to destroy the house and Tamils as well. Moreover, with the help of his neighbors who are Sinhalese, the Chelvarathinam family gets a hidden shelter, and later their plan to become refugees also ends in vain. Sinhalese burnt their house and things have been stolen by the people when he last visits his house. Religious and racial tensions that have prevailed within Sri Lanka when the author lived there have been clearly pictured through the novel. Alberto Manguel says that

Shyam Selvadurai has brought back from his Sri Lankan childhood a glittering and wise novel. *Funny Boy* keeps repeating with quiet conviction that the human condition can, in spite of everything, be joyful. You are not alone, it says to the reader. I understand you. I too was there, I remember. (P114) *Canadian Mystery Stories*.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the novel focuses on queer effeminacy of the character Arjie. Shyam Selvadurai has portrayed the theme of gender performativity as well as the theme of racism in an appealing manner in the novel. The novel therefore stands as a voice for the marginalized community in our society. Certain roles are allotted to the genders and everyone is expected to act accordingly. Arjie, when he tries to establish his real identity as a gay, he is treated as an odd one in the society. He unknowingly chooses games as a tool to establish his sissiness, which gradually makes him behave in different way from the other boys. Another major theme is the racial tension between Tamil and Sinhalese. This also shows the violation of basic rights of human being to live an independent life. The novelist has portrayed the effect of this tension in the communal life as well as individual life. The Sinhalese attacking the Tamil community shows the problem faced by the whole group and the portrayal of personal life of Ammachi and Radha aunty's marriage life shows the individual sufferings.

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