

## Identity, Ethnicity, War and Language in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy

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### Abstract

This article draws the attention of Sri Lankan civil war and ethnic crisis on the basis of identity ethnicity language besides, concerning ethnic crisis as back bone. In addition, Selvadurai has used the theme in such an aspect that has allowed the protagonist to find an alternative route in finding his identity as a funny one. The aim of Selvadurai's novel Funny Boy is to dedicate the racial difference that existed in Sri Lanka. It traces the lead-up to the Sri Lankan Civil War, a growing tension between Sri Lanka's Sinhala majority and sizable Tamil minority that eventually erupts into violent conflict and becomes the book's driving force, uprooting Arjie and his family forever. Selvadurai presents this ethnic conflict from the perspective of a boy who scarcely cares about ethnicity. In doing so, he sheds light on the fundamental illogic of the quest to secure a country for a single group of people, and a single group of people for one's country,

in addition to showing the horrifying impact of the random violence that seems to inevitably emerge from such ethno-nationalist politics. By emphasizing personal relationships that transcend the ethnic divide, Selvadurai suggests that pluralism is the only route to political coexistence.

**Key words:** Civil war, ethnic crisis, language, majority Sinhalese, sizable Tamils linguistic identities, Shyam Selvadurai, Funny Boy, history of Sri Lanka, migration, traumas.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper has produced the dynamics of conflict at different levels, paying special attention to ethnic conflict as portrayed in the novel of Shyam Selvadurai. It is much more complex story which has several themes in various aspects on several levels, he has used the theme in such an aspect that has allowed the protagonist to find an alternative route in finding his identity as a funny one. The aim of Selvadurai's novel Funny Boy is to dedicate the racial difference that existed in Sri Lanka. It traces the lead-up to the Sri Lankan Civil War, a growing tension between Sri Lanka's Sinhala majority and sizable Tamil minority that eventually erupts into violent conflict and becomes the book's driving force, uprooting Arjie and his family forever. Selvadurai presents this ethnic conflict from the perspective of a boy who scarcely cares about ethnicity. In doing so, he sheds light on the fundamental illogic of the quest to secure a country for a single group of people, and a single group of people for one's country, in addition to showing the horrifying impact of the random violence that seems to inevitably emerge from such ethno-nationalist politics. By emphasizing personal relationships that transcend the ethnic divide, Selvadurai suggests that pluralism is the only route to political coexistence.

ShyamSelvadurai's novel *Funny Boy* presents the coming of age of Arjie, a young, gay, Tamil boy in Sri Lanka. Set against the backdrop of Sri Lankan social and cultural politics of the 1980s, the novel explores the barriers around love, marriage, gender expectations, and cultural tensions, specifically in the Sinhala and Tamil populations. The tension and change in Sri Lanka during the 1980s leading up to the events of Black July parallel the development of Arjie's own tumultuous realization of his homosexual identity. From 1983 to 2009, Sri Lanka was in a state of civil war between the reigning government, representing the majority Sinhala population, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE advocated for a separate Tamil state due to the perceived cultural marginalization of Tamil citizens in Sri Lanka. The 26-year civil war began in July 1983 with a series of massacres and riots targeting Tamil citizens. The inception of this violence is known as Black July. Despite the clear sides drawn by historical overviews, *Funny Boy* suggests that the conflict was not as clearly divided in Sri Lankan communities, with many Sinhala and Tamil Sri Lankans living as neighbours and friends. In the same way, Dennis Austin observes in his political overview of modern Sri Lanka that all history is made up, but the history of Sri Lanka is more made up than most. .

When the Americans wanted to open their Mission in Ceylon, the British colonial government restricted them to the small Jaffna peninsula, where they set up their American Ceylon Mission in 1813. This was to be a blessing for the Tamils, the dominant ethnic group in the Northern Province. Apart from the spread of Christianity, the most important contribution of the Mission was in the field of education. They opened English language schools, as a result of which the Tamil dominated Northern Province had better educational facilities than the rest of the country. The English educated Tamils were employed by the British government as civil servants and by the time Sri Lanka became independent in 1948, about 30% of administrative services, were held

by Tamils, who formed hardly 15% of the total population. There were more Tamil doctors, engineers and lawyers than there were from any other ethnic group. This over-representation of Tamils in the administrative services and in the professions is often cited as a major grievance that was harboured against them. “In the context of this scenario, post independent Sinhala nationalism sought to curb the Tamil presence in education and thus also in the professions and civil administration” (Perera, 2001, p.11). Post-independence the dominant Sinhalese took measures to assert their authority. The insecurity felt by the Tamils was aggravated by many discriminatory policies adopted by the Sinhalese government. One of the first actions taken by the UNP after independence was the disenfranchisement of Indian Tamils who had enjoyed the right to vote since 1931. Another move that alienated the Tamils further was the adoption of the “Sinhala Only” policy in 1956 that established Sinhala as the official language of the country. When the Tamils protested against the language reform, riots took place against them. In 1972, the name of the country was changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, strengthening the status of Sinhalese as the official language and Buddhism as the state sponsored religion. These events started the conflict in Sri Lanka which was to last the next three decades, bringing with it unspeakable violence and atrocities that saw the death and displacement of tens of thousands, making Sri Lanka one of the most disturbed places in the world.

### Meaning of Ethnicity

The term ‘ethnicity’ is derived from the Greek work ‘ethnos’ normally translating into ‘nation’ or people belonging to a particular group or area. An ethnic group is essentially a group of people associating or identifying themselves with a common heritage. This heritage can be common ancestry, history, tradition, culture, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or

physical appearance. The Oxford Dictionary defines ethnicity as “pertaining to or having common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics”. Solidarity and mutuality play significant roles in maintaining and preserving ethnic identity. When this solidarity and mutuality becomes the bones of disputation conflict arises. When the practices and belief systems of one group are not respected by the other group, clash of cultures begin.

A conflict is an organised armed combat between at least two aggressive sides, resulting in massacre. The Collins English Dictionary defines conflict as “a serious disagreement and argument about something important. If two people or groups are in conflict, they have had a serious disagreement or argument and have not yet reached an agreement”.

Ethnic conflict is one of the biggest problems of the modern era. It is a worldwide problem, but the dimensions may differ with each case. The late 20th century and the early 21st have turned hot-beds of ethnic conflicts. In most of these conflicts, the key causes and issues at stake involve some elements of ethnicity or the status of the ethnic groups themselves.

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In order to explain the conflict’s growth in the narration that culminates in the disjointed final chapter, it would help to examine the book chapter by chapter. In “Pigs Can't Fly” the reader is barely made aware that any such tensions exist. The first reference to the two ethnicities occurs when Arjie describes how he feels when he is dressed up for the game “bride-bride”. Arjie explains that he feels, “like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema” . From this reference the reader can assume that these two kinds of “goddesses” are not in any opposition to each other. Other than that the chapter mostly focuses on the “spent-the-days” of his childhood

when Arjie was young, and not yet aware of the problems of his country. However, as he grows, so too does his awareness of the conflict itself.

“Radha Aunty” presents the tension that begins to enter more significantly into the narrative. Anil and RadhaAunty’s relationship cannot continue, given their ethnic differences. However, the couple attempts to give it a chance until violence intervenes. After RadhaAunty’s direct experience of the violence, she no longer has an open mind with regard to her love for Anil. She reflects the view of her extended family, in transferring the feelings of hatred towards her attackers onto Anil. Ammachi and KanthiAunty’s feelings when they say, “Haven’t you people done enough? ... Please go... You are not wanted here” are indicative of RadhaAunty’s transformation as she does not stop them or intervene in time. The failed love affair also throws light on how elders’ experience has an impact on the children’s life. Ammachi’s father was killed by Sinhala and there begins the hatred for her on Sinhala, therefore she thinks they prove deadly for the lives of Tamil. Radha aunty defends it but, eventually it proves true on how both Ammachi and Appachi are burned by the Sinhalese mobs in the end.

From “See No Evil, Hear No Evil” the conflict pushes further into the characters of the novel. It offers a glimpse into the appalling violence systematically organised by the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan government against the harassed minorities. The chapter introduces Daryl Uncle, and with him the government’s role in the conflict and “The Prevention of Terrorism Act”. Daryl Uncle belongs to another minority community, the Burghers, and is also the love interest of Amma. Here the conflict moves from the personal ground (RadhaAunty’s failed relationship with Anil) to the political realm (Daryl Uncle’s tension with the government). In “Radha Aunty” there was violence and tragedy, but in this chapter there is death. This is also the first time that violence directly affects Arjie, shocking him into “accusing Amma and destroying

his idolatry of her” . By the end of the episode, Arjie’s perception of his life has been forever altered. The character of Somaratne, the servant boy symbolises how ethnic conflict also affects the poor people who neither belong to the Tamils nor to the Sinhalese community. It is evident when she says: “I had two sons. The first was killed by the army during the 1971 insurrection. Now my second son comes home with his right arm paralyzed. Do you want to paralyze his other arm, too, or make him lose an eye” (148).

In “Small Choices” the violent events occur at an even more rapid pace. It hints at the political and economic tensions on the island. Arjie is again directly affected by them, and at no point is there any more than a moment where the reader is not cognizant of the tension at hand. The chapter presents on how anybody can beat, abuse and torment a Tamil. “The BanduratneMudalali, who owns a lot of hotels around here, is very anti-Tamil. His thugs did terrible things. Tamil families were dragged out of their houses and hacked to death. They poured kerosene on them and set them on fire” (173). Jegan in the chapter has links to the Tamil Tigers, and plans to revolt against the atrocities of the Sinhalese army. The chapter also revolves on the unjust way of elections and the cruel play of power politics. The Tamils never get to vote and come to power. Everything is operated and bribed without anybody having the guts to question it. “A member of the parliament arrived with his thugs, held the voting officials at gun point, and then proceeded to stuff the ballot with false ballots. That evening, we watched the results... that the government has won. They would remain in power for another six years”

Language is at the heart of the conflict. Selvadurai showed how society can be divided on the basis of linguistic identity and leads to ethnic violence. Language plays a very crucial role in building a society. Arjie was heartbroken when he became aware of the ethnic violence because of the different linguistic identity. His father was an optimistic and futurist person who believes

that Sinhala will be the real language of future Sri Lanka and he put Arjie in Sinhala medium school, but he and his brother had to face problems there too, as his classmate Salgado reminded them “This is a Sinhalese class, not a Tamil class”. These impact the nurturing of Arjie, and he grew to experience the horrible effects of this identity further in terms of solitude and isolation.

By “The Best School of All” Arjie is able to formulate his own opinions about the conflict, and even as he is beginning a relationship with Shehan, a Sinhalese boy, he is made aware of the hostility around him. It also presents how ethnic and class differences are practiced in schools. The difference is evident in the divided class rooms for Tamils and Sinhalese. Salgado, the Sinhalese boy is representative of the arrogance instilled in young minds, it becomes evident when he says “This is Sinhalese class and not a Tamil class. You want 9F, Chevarathnam”(215). The importance of speaking Sinhalese as a protective act seems to echo in the attitude of Arjie’s father for having enrolled him in a Sinhalese class. Svennsson says, “after Arjie has come to an awareness of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict and the long history behind it, he understands why his father has put him “in a Sinhalese class from grade one because he wanted me to learn Sinhalese” with the reason that “Sinhalese was the real language of the future” (46). The brutal treatment of Cheliah, the leader of the Tamil class by Salgado and the other Sinhalese boys suggests the impact of the violence between the elders and its impact on children. The dispute between Black Tie and Mr. Lokubandara is a microcosm representing the macrocosm of ethnic divide and politics in school management. “Mr. Lokubandara wanted to change the name of the school, which he felt was too British... further he wanted to make the Victoria Academy a Buddhist school... Since all Buddhists are Sinhalese, that means the school would be a Sinhala school, and there would be no place for Tamils in it” (220).



Finally, the “Riot Journal: An Epilogue”, written in the form of a series of entries in a diary, documents the brutal violence that broke out in 1983. This was when hundreds of Tamil homes and businesses were destroyed by Sinhalese mobs. Arjie’s grandparents are burned to death in their car, while he and his family members escape and take shelter in the home of their sympathetic Sinhalese neighbours. The disjointed, fragmental form of narrative also symbolises the fragmented identities, families, and communities of the Tamil people in their homeland. The conflict acts at two levels: in Sri Lanka and Arjie’s own life. Since the tension can no longer be the thread that holds the story together, the linearity of the text breaks down. It also presents the picture of Arjie’s migration to Canada to live in peace. Arjie writes down his thoughts and feelings in a diary because as he says: “the only thing for me to do is write” (287). When he, and his family stand face to face with their burnt down house he can “feel no sorrow” (298). He tries to understand that they will never again live in that house, “but his heart refuses to understand this” (298). They do not allow themselves to cry because “if we started we would never stop” (298). This shows the consequence of ethnic conflict and how it affects the innocents who have no role to play in the power politics.

Some of the common themes recurring throughout the novel are the importance of Sinhalese over Tamil, the thought that being born a Sinhala is safer and the failed love affairs due to the lovers belonging to different ethnic groups. Speaking Tamil, has limited possibilities in a society which is dominated by the Sinhalese. In a society where the Tamils belong to the minority, many are afraid of speaking Tamil and some even wish they were Sinhalese so they could have freedom and possibilities. Arjie’s father is aware of these circumstances and realises how they have to act in order to survive: “We are a minority, and that’s a fact of life. ... As a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game. Play it right and you can do well for yourself” (173); “If I

was a Sinhalese, like Sena, I could say and do whatever I liked” (190); Arjie’s mother says that “one doesn’t feel safe speaking Tamil these days” (190). Also it is evident that Sinhalese becomes a language of power in the scene where Radha Aunty is attacked on the train from Jaffna back to Colombo. Attacked by two Sinhalese men, “one carrying a stick and the other a belt” (90), she only manages to escape because the family friend who was travelling with her “spoke good Sinhalese and the men had believed he was Sinhalese” (90). Another example of Sinhalese and English, being the languages of power can be found in the scene at the police station in which Arjie’s mother is concerned about Daryl’s mysterious disappearance. Sonali, Arjie’s younger sister, even goes so far as to wish that she “was a Sinhalese or a foreigner” (196). Jayawickrama argues that “Selvadurai’s representation of the values and identities of Sinhalese and Tamil foregrounds the idea of languages of power and how various individuals or groups are positioned within or outside them” (Svenson 38).

Because of the novel’s background, namely the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, ethnicity becomes an issue that influences the way the characters lead their lives. It affects how they treat people of another ethnicities. In the end one’s ethnicity exiles them from each other because ethnicity is a permanent marker of identity. In other words, ethnicity becomes a notion that does not allow the characters to marry the one they love or pursue their sexual desires. If they were to subvert their ethnicities the sacrifice would be the expanse of their own families.

## Conclusion

In *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai shows both how real people are far more complex than ethnicity and also how they are nevertheless reduced to it by political forces. In doing so, he points to the insolubility of ethnic conflict over national identity: people will never be as one-dimensional or

cut-and-dry as nationalists and racists want them to be, and so nationalism and racism, beyond perpetrating horrible violence, cannot achieve the kinds of societies they want to begin with. It is only because some Sinhalese and Tamils do not care about being Sinhalese or Tamil, in other words, that the efforts to create a fully Sinhalese or Tamil nation will inevitably fail. How ethnicity develops and create trauma of minorities in war further the cultural politics became change to political power we understand innocents of Tamils minorities lost their identity, lives assets these atrocities established another kind of life to common people in the conflict.

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