

---

**THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICS IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY***

---

**Dr. P. Veerasamy,**

Assistant Professor of English,

Arul Anandar College (Autonomous), Karumathur,

Madurai District.

Email: [veerasamymeera@gmail.com](mailto:veerasamymeera@gmail.com)

---

Abstract

Sri Lankan literature has a rich tradition and a remarkable history. The history of Sri Lanka can be sketched under five phases—the Asian powers, the Portuguese reign, the Dutch settlement, colonization by the British, and post-independent Sri Lanka. But the post-independent Sri Lanka was known as a land of ethnopolitical conflict. A very few novels delve into the ethnic conflict that wrecked the country. Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* is one such novel which reverberates the post-independent political turmoil through fictional mode. This paper explores the nexus of the countries' politics with literature.

Keywords: *ethnic groups, Sri Lanka, political turmoil, ethnopolitical conflict.*

-----

Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* chronicles the life of Arjie Chelvaratnam, the protagonist. The story covers the period between 1977 and 1983, the crucial period in the history of Sri Lanka. Foregrounding homosexuality as its main theme, *Funny Boy* traces out the important political stances on the ordinary civilians. The first chapter, "Pigs Can't Fly," is about Arjie's sexual awakening. The second chapter, "Radha Aunty" deals with his association with his aunt, Radha. The third chapter, "See No Evil, Hear No Evil," talks about the relationship of Arjie's mother with Daryl Uncle. The novel highlights the influence of politics in literature.

Political resolutions have given Selvadurai to weave the plot with fictionally in the sense that Selvadurai immigrated to Canada after the July Clash in 1983. Paul Briens, in *Modern South Asian Literature in English*, observes:

After the family emigrated to Canada to escape the riots of 1983, Selvadurai was able to look back on his early years with some perspective. He wanted to understand better the events that had resulted in his family's exile, so he began to research various aspects of the conflict, wearing them eventually into his first novel. (149-150)

*Funny Boy* offers the influence of the country's language policy, that is, "Sinhala Only" policy. It highlights how ethnic clashes affect ordinary people and their day-to-day affairs. For example, the story, "Radha Auntie," is written against the backdrop of the language riot of 1958. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, in his *Between Cultures: Essays on Literature, Language and Education*, highlights the intricacy of implementing the language policy as "In 1956, when Sinhalese replaced English as the national and official language as well as the medium of instruction in secondary schools and later universities for the Sinhalese, the linguistic situation was complex and tense" (24).

Dubey highlights the Sinhala fanaticism that prevailed during the fifties:

In Parliament, speeches were made in Sinhala for Sinhalese. The Minister of Education went a step further and pleaded for the abolition of all English medium schools and admission to Teacher Training Colleges be restricted to Sinhala only . . . an elementary knowledge of Sinhala would be a pre-requisite for recruitment in Government and semi-Government understandings . . . To crown all these, it was made compulsory to inscribe Sri (a Sinhala specious word) on all number plates of vehicles. (84-85)

This made the Tamils helpless who felt that they would not have any future. This was disgusting to them and it transformed their attitude towards the Sinhalese. The decisions taken by the powerful damaged the lives of the Tamils. With the introduction of Sinhala, they believed that they would be able to annihilate the identity of the Tamils. The Tamil language gave the Tamils their cultural identity. But the sudden abrogation of their language alienated them. J. Neethivanan, in his article "Ethnic Identity Among the Mauritian Tamils: Opposing Roles of Language and Religion," argues that "Language is the most important issue which decides one's ethnic identity" (168). For Stuart Hall, cultural identities "are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the courses of history and culture. Not an essence but *positioning*" (113). The Tamils lost this *positioning* and became "individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless" (Hall 113). Thus, the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Tamils deteriorated. Varshney, in *Ethnic Conflict and Civil Life*, observes: "because of language issues, Tamil-Sinhalese relations in Sri Lanka moved from bad to worse after the late 1950s" (284).

In *Funny Boy*, the rift occurs when Radha gets a lift after the rehearsal of the play, *The King and I*, at St. Theresa's Girls' Convent. Her mother, Arjie'sAmmachi, questions them. Radha Auntie lies to her that she came by bus. But her mother learns that she was dropped by Anil Jayasinghe. When she comes to know about Anil's surname, she cries out despairingly to her Appachi: She was getting a lift from a Sinhalese. Ammachi is biased against Anil because he is a Sinhalese. She does not like Radha getting a lift from a Sinhalese. According to her, taking a

lift is something mundane but Ammachi considers it public ignominy. She even suspects Radha: "Is there something going on with this Sinhalese boy?" (58).

As a boy, Arjie is powerless to probe this issue further. He exclaims innocently at her reaction: "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." (*Funny Boy* 58-59). Janaki, the maid, informs him the reason for Ammachi's disapproval of RadhaAunty's love affair with Anil: "You were too young to remember when they brought the body home. You should have seen it. It was as if someone had taken the lid of a tin can and cut pieces on out of him" (*Funny Boy* 59).

Later, Arjie learns from his father that his great-grandfather, Ammachi's father, was killed by the Sinhalese "because he was Tamil" (*Funny Boy* 60). The government brought about drastic changes in the 1950s. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 4 highlights the results of this politicization of language: "The language policy alienated the Tamils who, under the Federal Party, carried on a bitter opposition. Educational policies alienated the small but influential Christian community. Cultural and Buddhist reforms alienated different factions within the Sinhalese" (9). In *Funny Boy*, the wedge between the two ethnic communities is created by the political stance of the country.

Before independence, the English language "served a politically useful role as an important unifying factor in the country" (de Silva 47). After independence, bilingualism, that is, Sinhala and Tamil were followed till 1956. But the leader of Sri Lanka Freedom Party, S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake was adamant in his decision to declare Sinhala as the only official language of the country and a riot broke out in 1958.

After the country's independence on February 4, 1948, the whole country was integrated and all the ethnic and minority groups joined hands to work for the progress of the country. In 1956, the government decided to implement the "Sinhala Only" policy to appease racial and religious factions. Sinhala was made mandatory in government business establishments and English, which was used before and after independence, was replaced by Sinhalese. Dubey highlights the linguistic chauvinism as,

In Parliament, speeches were made in Sinhala for Sinhalese. The Minister of Education went a step further and pleaded for the abolition of all English medium schools and admission to Teacher Training Colleges be restricted to Sinhala only . . . an elementary knowledge of Sinhala would be a pre-requisite for recruitment in Government and semi-Government understandings . . . To crown all these, it was made compulsory to inscribe Sri (a Sinhala specious word) on all number plates of vehicles. (84-85)

Because of these factors, the tension between the two ethnic groups was rising. To maintain order and avoid further tension, the then Prime Minister, Bandaranaike, had discussions with the

leader of the Federal Party, Chelvanayagam, and they signed a pact on July 27, 1957, known as Bandaranaike–Chelvanayakam Pact. The Pact included five provisions. One of the provisions was to "recognize Tamil as the language of a national minority of Ceylon and it is made the language of administration in the Northern and Eastern provinces" (Dubey 85). The then Prime Minister was opposed by various Buddhist groups and they labeled the Pact an act of breach against the Sinhala nation. Eventually, the then Prime Minister abrogated the Pact. An ethnic riot broke out in 1958 over the Tamil issue and the government was forced to declare an emergency. Narayan Swamy talks about this as, "the violence spread to major cities, including Colombo and its suburbs, claiming the lives of hundreds of Tamils in just four days and forcing 20,000 to flee their homes and take shelter in refugee camps" (14-15). Arjie's mother reminds him of the massacre, "The Sinhalese wanted to make Sinhala the only national language, and the Tamils did not like this.

Understanding the ongoing political trend and social scenario, Arjie father admits him in Sinhala because it would be "the real language of the future" (*Funny Boy* 61). Selvadurai brings out the effect of political policies in the children's world too. Everything in the novel is looked at from a political perspective. For example, cricket is played not against the Sinhalese boys but only with the Tamil boys in Arjie's school.

To put an end to her love affair with Anil, Radha is sent to Jaffna. The riots break out when she returns from Jaffna after a month. Mr. Rasiah, Ammachi's family friend, helps her to get out of the Anuradhapura station quickly. Radha is assaulted by two men and she comes to terms with the ground realities. As planned, Anil visits Radha's house and notices the change in her. She attends the rehearsal again but does not want to see Anil. Later, her engagement with Rajan Nagendran takes place on Appachi's birthday.

The worst effect of the politics results with the disappearance of Daryl, one of their oldest friends. Daryl is a Sri Lankan-Burgher journalist who visits Sri Lanka from Australia on a two-month vacation. To him, "War . . . signified guns and soldiers and armored cars" (*Funny Boy* 109), but he sees no evidence of them in Colombo.

Selvadurai highlights another aspect of politics, that is, POTA. Arjie. Through Daryl, he calls it a "tool for state terrorism" (*Funny Boy* 110). He promises Arjie's Amma that he would return in a week but he does not come back at the stipulated time. Meanwhile, they learn that "the Jaffna library was burned by the police this morning. Ninety-thousand books were set on fire" (*Funny Boy* 122). Sudha P. Pandey, in her article "The Personal and the Political: ShyamSelvadurai's *Funny Boy*," remarks that "Selvadurai trains his focus on the conflicts among the Burghers, Tamils, and Sinhalese on the island. By using a child-narrator, the narrative assumes a neutral tone" (45). Arjie, writes Jameela Begum, in "Locating the Exile's Culture: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*," "is set within the world of communal violence and relationship that are structured on convenience rather than love" (141).

When Arjie's mother seeks the help of Q. C. Appadurai, a friend of her father, and a civil rights lawyer, to know the disappearance of Daryl, he advises her: "These days one must be like three wise monkeys. He reminds her that her investigation is dangerous to her family and warns her that her phone would be tapped if she continues her inquiry. Arjie's mother hears a click when she telephones Mala Aunty. Arjie too phones his classmate and confirms that the phones are being tapped.

This novel highlights the fact that ethnic tension converts mundane matter into sensitive issues. Once Jegan, angry at the manager, complains to Arjie's father: "This man [the manager] tells me that I am not supposed to correct the staff myself. I must give him all my criticism and he will convey it to them" (*Funny Boy* 172).

The manager is distressed after this incident. Arjie's father tells Jegan that these are his orders and that is the way they do things there. Jegan misunderstands him and remarks, "It's a Tamil-Sinhala thing, isn't it... It's ridiculous" (*Funny Boy* 172). He reminds Jegan of the existing political situation: "The political climate is very volatile. With the Tigers killing Sinhala policemen and the Tamil partly calling for separation, the Sinhalese are very anti-Tamils right now" (*Funny Boy* 172). Arjie's father agrees with Jegan. Things are very unstable in this area. During the riots, the mob came here calling out my name. If it wasn't for my manager and other senior staff, this hotel would have been destroyed" (*Funny Boy* 173).

But the truth is I have given you a high position and there's bound to be more resentment in part because you're Tamil" (*Funny Boy* 173). Annoyed by his words, Jegan retorts: "You gave me this position because I was good, Uncle, not because I was Tamil" (*Funny Boy* 173). Arjie watches the ongoing tension and informs Jegan, "We cannot live like this under constant threat from the Sinhalese, always second-class citizens in our own country" (*Funny Boy* 176).

Jegan is suspected to be a Tiger involved in an assassination attempt on a Tamil minister. After the hotel incident, he is kept at the station under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. On the following day, the newspapers publish a new item: "KEY SUSPECT IN ASSASSINATION PLOT DISCOVERED" (*Funny Boy* 183). The news item carries a line: "The suspect, JeganParameswaran resides with a well-known Tamil hotelier" (*Funny Boy* 183). The Sinhalese staff who work in the hotel suspect that Jegan is a Tiger. But Arjie's father clarifies the reasons for their aversion: "There is a lot of jealousy because I gave you such a high position" (*Funny Boy* 187).

Arjie's father warns his mother: "As Tamils, we must tread carefully . . . Jegan has to learn that. Even I had to be circumspect when I'm talking to the staff. If I was Sinhalese, like Sena, I would say and do whatever I liked" (*Funny Boy* 190). Arjie's mother expresses the insecurity of speaking Tamil: "I know . . . The poor man is quite relieved. One doesn't feel safe speaking Tamil these days" (*Funny Boy* 190). She justifies the Tigers' stand, "Maybe these. Tigers and their separate state are not a stupid idea, after all" (*Funny Boy* 190).

Sensing the continuous threat and danger, his mother reacts: "Canada and Australia are opening their doors. It would be a good time to apply. But his father confronts her emphatically: "I'll never emigrate. I've seen the way people live in foreign countries" (*Funny Boy* 195). He expresses his helpless nature: "What would I do there. The only job I'd be fit for would be a taxi driver or a petrol station man" (*Funny Boy* 196). But his mother argues that it is better than living in that terrible uncertainty.

The Sinhalese assert their supremacy and become the ruling class. Once at the referendum, Arjie's parents are deprived of the opportunity to vote and "A member of parliament arrived with his thugs, held the voting officials at gunpoint, and then proceeded to stuff the ballot boxes with false ballots" (*Funny Boy* 207). Later, Arjie's family learns that the government has won and that "They would remain in power for another six years" (*Funny Boy* 207). Even after this incident Arjie's father is determined: "Never, I will never leave this country" (*Funny Boy* 207).

When Arjie is admitted to a Tamil class, a conflict arises between Mr. Abeyasinghe, the Principal, nick-named Black Tie, and Mr. Lokubandara. Mr. Lokubandara is a "political appointee." He wants to change the name of Victoria Academy to a Buddhist name since he feels it is too British. "Since all Buddhists are Sinhalese, that means the school would be a Sinhala school, and there would be no place for Tamils in it" (*Funny Boy* 210). But Black Tie, a Buddhist, opposes Lokubandara's ideas and wants the school to be open for all races and religions.

The final chapter of the novel, "Riot Journal: An Epilogue" pictures the 'July Clash' which broke out on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1983 as a result of the murder of thirteen soldiers by the Tigers. The atrocious tone of the clash is recorded in this journal. Arjie notes down all the incidents carefully in the form of a diary: "All the Tamil houses there [Kanaththa] are burnt, and the trouble has begun to spread to other parts of Colombo as well" (*Funny Boy* 287). Arjie's mother questions: "How can the government be doing this?. After all, we Tamils helped vote them in" (*Funny Boy* 289). She declares that the riot is sponsored by the government, "Of course they are. If not, why aren't they declaring a curfew, and why aren't the police and army stopping the mobs?" (*Funny Boy* 289). The Sinhalese mobs capture the "electoral lists, they know which houses are Tamil and which houses aren't" (*Funny Boy* 289). Later, the government declares a curfew and passes an order: "Anyone caught on the road without a curfew pass will be shot on sight" (*Funny Boy* 290). The situation goes out of control and

The police and the army just stood by watching and some of them even cheered the mobs and joined in the looting and burning . . . There was a car in the middle of the road [Galle Road] with a family inside it. The car was surrounded by thugs . . . The thugs were siphoning petrol out of it and pouring the petrol on the car. (*Funny Boy* 291)

Meanwhile, Arjie's mother places a ladder against the sidewall to go into Perera's garden the escape from the rioters, Arjie's Amma removes "her thali and gold bangles" and his Appa saves their "birth certificates and bankbooks" (*Funny Boy* 293). They go to bed fully dressed with their shoes on and all the adults are given a torch. Arjie writes his riot journal with the help of a torch. When the mob comes to Arjie's house, all escape through the ladder into Perera's home and hide in the storeroom.

Looking at his ruined house, He speaks in remorse: "I try to remind myself that the house is destroyed, that we will never live in it again" (*Funny Boy* 298). Finally, Sena Uncle arrives in his van and picks them up from his home. Arjie's house and his father's hotel are severely damaged by the rioters. Eventually, Arjie's father realizes: "It's very clear that we no longer belong in this country" (*Funny Boy* 304). To make matters worse, a mob sets "the car on fire with Ammachi and Appachi inside it" (*Funny Boy* 306).

Arjie cries out for the loss of his house. Jayawickrama, in "A Home in a Nation? Negotiating Identity in ShyamSelvadurai's *Funny Boy*," comments that "Arjie's voice becomes the power of the writer as violence is used to radically redefine the self and its place in the world. Arjie's first attempts to write are in the form of a journal and his expression takes place within the home under intense threat" (135).

Selvadurai is keen on the political occurrences of his country. While exposing the dangers of the political stances in his writings, he strongly supports the rulers of his country. He makes a coherent dialogue between politics and literature through Arjie's story. He becomes a mediator between politics and literature. He is very clear in his narrative. He calls the opponents of the government, 'terrorists.'

#### Works Cited

- Begum, Jameela, A. "Locating the Exile's Culture: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*,"  
Writers of Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice. Ed. Jasbir Jain. Rawat Publications:  
1998, pp 139-144.
- Brians, Paul. *Modern South Asian Literature in English*. Greenwood, 2003.
- Dubey, Ravi Kant. *Indo-Sri-Lanka Relations: With Special Reference to Tamil  
Problem*. Deep and Deep, 1989.
- Swamy, Narayan. M. R. *Inside an Elusive Mind: Prabhakaran: The First Profile  
of the World's Most Ruthless Guerilla Leader*. Konark, 2003.
- Neethivanan, J. "Ethnic Identity Among the Mauritian Tamils: Opposing Roles of  
Language and Religion," *Journal of Dravidian Studies*. vol. 5, no. 2, July.  
1995, pp. 167-173
- D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, in his *Between Cultures: Essays on Literature, Language  
and Education*. Sri Satguru, 1987.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*.ed. Padmini Mongia. OUP, 1996.

Pandey, Sudha. P. "The Personal and the Political: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*." *Litcrit*, vol.28, no. 1, 2002, pp. 41-48.

Varshney, Ashutosh. *Ethnic Conflict and Civil Life*.OUP, 2002.

*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 4 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc, 1978.