

TRANSPHOBIA AND SEEKING THE SELF IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY

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Abstract

The title "FunnyBoy" grabbed my attention because it is different from the usual genre. Gender plays a vital role in the society especially in recent years there has great support for people like LGBT. The aim of this essay is to pursue reading of Transphobia and Seeking of the Self in Shyam Selvadurai's novel Funny Boy. To show the importance of transphobia and in order to understand the protagonist Arjie's journal to search for his identity.

We come across many phobias like acrophobia, autophobia, homophobia, hydrophobia etc...the word transphobia is nothing but the fear of hatred of transgender people. It can be found in the forms of raging from jokes to violence to simply not acknowledging that transgender people do exist. The first and the best to fight transphobia is to speak out against violence and hateful speech about or directed towards transphobia.

Some common myths about trans people are: all trans people are gay. Some trans people are attracted to the gender opposite of what they identify, some are attracted to the same gender identity has very little to do with sexual orientation. Recently trans people have been coming out more and talking about their lives, and more attention has been focused on their issues. Breaking the silence is an important part of securing safety for transpeople.

The turning point in the protagonist's life and search for identity are crucial and influenced by issues of separation, and the theme of transphobia is prominent in the novel. Selvadurai uses the theme in several aspects on a number of levels, concerning both transphobia and sexuality. The aim of this essay is to show that the protagonist overcomes the limitations that society has to set by choosing the path that is right for him, a path that allows him to be "Funny".

Keywords: *Funny boy, Identity, masculinity, Selvadurai, Sexuality.*

It is also a story of exiles on several levels. The novel's author Shyam Selvadurai uses the term much more literally and the turning points in Arjie's life is more multifaceted than in a traditional coming - of- age story. This novel *Funny Boy* is so much more than an individual personal journey.

In this novel transphobia appears for Arjie's while playing with Tanuja. Tanuja coming from abroad has experiences of western education and therefore has a more closed bourgeois perspective. She feels that he cannot be the bride because "he's not even a girl [...] [a] boy

cannot be the bride [...] [a] girl must be the bride" (Selvadurai 02). Arjie cannot be the bride because he is not a girl. She forces the issues of gender and gender roles upon their fantasy play. And it is because of Tanuja and her parents, and the other adults become aware of Arjie playing "bride- bride" with the girls and not cricket with the boys. And here he is accused of being "Funny". "It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn't" (16-17)".

The loss of the home can be identified in a different way. He discovers that home will not be sheltered place while he is struggling with himself and his homosexual feelings. In discovering his own sexual identity it is his family that stands for the oppression and home becomes a gendered site and a place of exile. Because Arjie's family was such a typical Tamil family their views and perspectives on Arjie is quite different and here comes transphobia for Arjie about his own sex.

Arjie's family was a very good family with lots of members like grandparents, uncle, aunts, brothers, sisters, and cousins etc... His grandparents were very affectionate towards their grand Children and his grand parent's yard has been divided between the female and male cousins: the front garden, the road, and the field the lay in front of the house belonged to the boys. And for the girls "the back garden and the kitchen porch, that I seemed to have gravitation naturally....] This transformation is only possible in the feminized spaces like the backyard and the kitchen porch. These sites become sites where gender identity is fluent. Arjie is not yet aware of sexuality and gender role. He only sees the game as the neutral, as something that allows him the freedom of being himself which he cannot be in the boy's world, a world where the boys played cricket, a game which is a typically masculine Sri Lankan sport. Arjie's reason for not wanting to play their game is because of its discomforts, getting dirty and sweaty.

Arjie is the only one who is allowed and permitted into other feminized rooms such as Radha aunty's and his mother bedrooms. According to Jayawickrama "Spaces which permit and enable the performing of an idea of female identity"(128). In Radha aunty's room, he had a glance at different kinds of make-up, make-up that his either did not have. She has lipsticks and nails polish in all kinds of colors and shiny stars and circles that were like "pottus"(49). By looking all these things Arjie belongs to another world. Exiling him from these finished sites, his parents are trying to control his "funny" behavior. His mother does not know how to explain this to him maybe, because she herself does not quite understand why and therefore says "because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly, that's why"(19). Then she convinced him that "big boys must play with other boys"(Selvadurai 20). Arjie who is still unaware of the stereotypical gender roles that society has implemented is not satisfied with his mother's answer.

Through that Bride- Bride game Arjie faced many difficult situations and he felt ashamed that the thing which he had done to his cousin Tanuja. It is considered that it was an accident and it becomes a symbol for his departure of the girl's world. Then he knows that he can never enter

the girl's world again”(39) and that he never again would be able to transform himself into a bride.

Arjie's father was very much worried about his transformation and his father forces his idea of what masculinity is how a proper man should act upon him. Then he realized that Arjie's "funniness" is some sort of a danger to the norms of masculinity. There are several examples of counter types, however, the ones that are considered most frightening are homosexuals and this kind of fear is nothing but transphobia. Diggy, Arjie's elder brother is aware and afraid. Another example is when his male cousins give him the nickname "girlie-boy"(25). The novel will show that Arjie is able to find alternative masculinity together with his alliances with uncle Daily, Jegan and Shehan.

Both Amma and Radha aunty include Arjie in their secret relationship with Daryl and Anil. They entrust Arjie with their secrets, the secret that no one else could know anything about because Arjie is a girlie-boy. In these situations, Arjie had a great fear of transphobia whether he is feminine or masculine. Arjie's mother also finds out that she would be sacrificing, just like Aunty Doris, her own family if she does not stop looking for answers regarding Daryl's disappearance. In her quest for answers she gets advice from several people around her to leave it to be, Arjie experiences relations of the alliance together with Uncle Daryl, Jegan and of course with Shehan, all of whom see Arjie for who he is beyond his tendencies. Arjie finds the difference between the two men especially in their opinions about Arjie's reading.

Arjie's favorite book is "Little Women", a book that according to his father is "a book for girls". Daryl's view is quite different he does not think that it is a girl's book and he even offers to go and buy Arjie the sequels. This made a crucial turning point in Arjie's journey. His father who is very much inflexible likely to "reward the child for choosing gender – appropriate toys" (20). The girls should play with girls oriented toys and the boys should play with their toys. If they change the activities of playing with other gender toys and the girl's label as "tomboy" and if the boys play with the girl toys and they were label as "sissy". This can all be linked to Funny Boy.

The masculine alliance with Jegan, like one with Daryl, can be linked to Arjie's homosexuality. Both of these men are men that trigger homosexual feelings and desire in him. Jegan changes Arjie's perspective of the home when he comes to their family. Arjie's father decides to transfer him to the Victoria Academy, a school that he feels will be better for his son because "the Academy will force him to become a man" (Selvadurai 210). In this school, there have a two group of pupils Tamil or Sinhalese. Here Arjie becomes more intimate with Shehan and they start to call each other by their first names instead of their surnames.

Chelvaratnam and Soyza, which are ethnically indicating. Both Arjie and Shehan in similar that the fact neither of them fit the standard of the masculine ideal, instead both of them are feminized. Shehan is a boy, who like Arjie, is different. He has something that Arjie lacks and that is power and self-confidence. A power and self – confidence that could be connected to him being more confident with this sexuality than what Arjie is. Arjie refuses to follow the political and social structure at the school admits his friendship with Shehan that makes him go against everything that his father fears. This is because Shehan is both Sinhalese and rumor has it that he is gay.

One night Arjie had an erotic dream its about him and Shehan and the following morning he feels“ the familiar wetness on Sarong” (23). Then one day Shehan suddenly surprises him by giving him a kiss: "my mouth must have opened in surprise because I felt his tongue against mine for a brief instant. Then it was over (24). It is a kiss that confuses him and he does not know what to think of it. But still it is a kiss which makes him long for more kisses: In Shehan he finds a kindred spirit, someone that is“I felt amazed that a normal thing “I now knew that the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along” (256).

After all these things there has a game called hide-and-peek, which in this context is very suitable. Shehan seduces Arjie and they have sex. Arjie has been forced to hide his homosexual love to Shehan in the darkness of the garage. After everything had happened Arjie think of his family and he doesn't know how he is going to face his family members. Then he realized that if his mother and Radha Aunty were right in their way means and what he had done is right to his gender. "right and wrong, fair and unfair, had nothing to do with how things really were... what had happened between us in the garage was not wrong”(273-274).

I have focused on the theme transphobia and Seeking the Self is Shyam selvadurai's Funny Boy. And finally Arjie faced the ultimate turning point, and particularly Arjie had courage to refuse to be silent and explore the powerful and hidden possibilities (256) such relation could give the courage which he choose "the wrong path" a path that is the right path for him and now he is in his own world and that it does not look to be a "funny one". Arjie has experienced in many situations and finally, he searched his identity that who he is... The world Gay Day is celebrated on May 17 of every year. And people like Arjie now overcome their fear and they are the identities to the world. And they are one among the common people.

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