



International Journal of Research and Reviews in  
Applied Sciences and Engineering (IJRRASE)  
Vol .9. No.1 Year 2017 Pp.401-404  
©gopalax Journals, Singapore  
available at : [www.ijcns.com](http://www.ijcns.com)  
ISSN: 2231-0061

## **ETHNIC CRISIS AND APARTHEID IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY***

D.Saraswathi  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University.  
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu -627 012

---

### **Abstract**

*Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai is a compelling novel of both ethnic crisis and apartheid. More over my paper mainly lies on how the ethnic crisis revolves around the novel through the characters mainly on Sinhalese and Tamils. It is much more complex story which has several themes in various aspects on several levels, concerning ethnic crisis as back bone. In addition, 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 dedicated the racial difference that excited in Sri Lanka.

Ethnic Crisis as a term designates a sense of collective belonging, which could be based on common descent, language, history, culture, race or religion. In *Funny Boy* ethnic crisis and ethnical conflicts are constantly present, and they play a major part in how the characters live their lives. Therefore, in order to fully grasp the novel it is necessary to understand its context, the country's violent background. Sri Lanka is a country with many different ethnical groups that can be distinguished from one another on ethnic, religious and linguistics grounds. However, there are two larger indigenous groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Even though there were some minor conflicts between the tenth and fourteenth centuries they subsisted as best as they could without a conflict. It was not until the British came and divided the country that the Tamils started to feel unjustly marginalized. After the British departure, in 1948, the communal conflict was set.

In 1981, the Sinhalese mobs increased their violent assaults against the Tamil militants. They had been given orders to go to Jaffna and crush the Tamil movement so they could not get independence and gain access to Eelam. Jaffna became a militant and occupied area. Villages that helped and hid Tamils were attacked and women were abused, and thousands of Tamils took refuge in Christian missionary convents to escape the attacks. Thus, the Tamils were exiled from their own country. Andrew Lesk in his work *Ambivalence at the Site of Authority*, the fire of controversy is discussed with the character of Arjie as a witnesses of subjugation not only of Tamils to the majority Sinhalese but of various other groups, notably homosexuals and women

(ASA35). Thus, the idea of home becomes a place for him where he can take shelter from the racial oppression that takes place in Sri Lanka. In other words, it is a place which is important to him. Unfortunately, he will soon lose his shelter when he is exiled from it.

The loss of home can be identified in two different ways. Firstly, Arjie discovers that home will not be a 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. Secondly, at the end of the novel he will experience how it is to stand without a homeplace. This is so, because the Sinhalese have literally burned down the family's house, and in doing so they have also taken away the one place where they can recover, robbed them of their homeplace.

*Yet those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved. Like a ship that leaves a port for the vast expanse of sea, those much looked forward to days took me away from the safe harbour of childhood towards the precarious waters of adult life.(AHN-26)*

Arjie's statement clearly indicates that the story we are about to read is following a journey of development with dimensions of ethnic crisis within a home and a country. In other words, religion and culture are always linked to power, not only in cultural institutions but also, in society itself. In *Funny Boy*, religion and ethnic crisis are linked to power on several levels and the linking dictates how the characters live their lives in their society. It affects them personally and in their relationships with others. The novel shows specifically how culture and collective memories shape, and decide, the characters' belief in how you should treat and behave towards someone that is not Tamil or Sinhalese. In some cases, it even leads to outspoken racism. This is the case when the families of Radha and Anil hear about their relationship. Both Radha's mother and Anil's father are very outspoken in their feelings about their children's romance.

Ammachi's remark makes Radha call her a racist. She does not realise why her mother cannot put this incident behind her and move on. She does not feel that her grandfather's murder is a reason to hate every Sinhalese. Moreover, Radha is lacking the collective memory that has shaped her mother's behaviour. If she would have had the memory of her grandfather's brutally mutilated body then she also would have behaved differently. As it is now, her behaviour and open mind have been influenced by her living abroad for a longer amount of time. It has made her start to question issues like ethnic crisis.

The characters in the novel will become aware that it would lead to exclusion and exile from their families if they would go through with it and marry other. Would you allow your child to marry a Sinhalese? Yes, definitely. And yourself? What? Would you marry a Sinhalese?. Radha Auntie glanced quickly at him and then looked What I meant was that, yes, in principle I would(82). But now, She has realised that everything is not as simple as she wants it to be. From this passage we learn that even though she lacks the collective memory that her mother has about the past, she struggles with her principles.

Marecek argues that within every ethnic group, cross-cutting factors such as language,

religion, caste, region and urban versus rural residence make for multiple identifications (32). In *Funny Boy*, such an unholy alliance and mission of dividing is very much the core of the novel as representatives from all these different ethnic groups and languages can be found in it, and who, in turn, are dividing the country. The novel shows examples of such a connection, and these examples enforce the idea of the Sinhalese as a majority which holds all the power, and the Tamil as a minority.

Sinhalese and English offers many possibilities in *Funny Boy*. Speaking Tamil, however, 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. He says to his family members that we are a minority, and that's a fact of life.

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. To fully grasp the meaning and the possibilities or impossibilities, that the choice or lack of choice of language gives, you have to take into consideration not only the language of ethnic crisis, but also the language of sexuality. If Sinhalese is represented as the language of masculinity and power, Tamil becomes the unspoken language associated with an unarticulated sexuality. Although language and ethnicity often pose difficulties for the characters, we can see in this example that when ethnic crisis and sexuality are joined, and a language of possibility is created in the novel.

At the end of the novel shifts from the spoken words and languages to the words that are written down. Arjie writes down his thoughts and feelings in a diary because as he says: the only thing for me to do is write.(298) He writes in his home which is under threat from the Sinhalese mob, in a country that is ravaged by violence. It is in a moment of extreme change that Arjie is trying to connect and interpret the violence that haunts his family and his home country, Sri Lanka. When he, and his family, stands face to face with their burnt down house he can feel no sorrow.

He tries to understand that they will never again live in that house, but his heart refuses to understand this. They do not allow themselves to cry because if we started we would never stop. One thing that can cheer Arjie up, in the midst of all that horror, is when he meets Shehan. Ethnic crisis and apartheid are present in the translucent screens through which the novel should be read. Their coexistence, or simultaneity, takes the story into a time of exile, a literal exile which Arjie is forced into because of his ethnic crisis.

### Works Consulted

- [1] Chattopadhyaya, Haraprasad. *Ethnic Unrest in Modern Sri Lanka: An Account of Tamil Sinhalese Race Relations*. New Dehli: M D Publications. 1994. Print.
- [2] Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- [3] Henderson, Mae G. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, 2006. Print. Ed.

Napier, Winston. New York: New York UP, 2000. 257-267. Print.

[4] Marecek, Jeanne. "Am I a Woman in these Matters? Notes on Sinhala nationalism and gender in Sri Lanka." *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. Ed.Tamar Mayer. New York: Routledge, 2000. 139-162. Print.

[5] Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*, Haryana, India 122 002: Penguin Publishers, 1994. Print.