

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Queer Diaspora Versus the Heteronormative Nation: An Analysis of Deepa Mehta's Movie *Funny Boy*

Dr. Jeeja Ganga

Associate Professor, Department of English, Govt. Victoria College
(Affiliated to the University of Calicut), Palakkad, Kerala
Email: jeejaganga@yahoo.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.3.114](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.3.114)



Article information

Article Received:20/07/2025
Article Accepted:17/08/2025
Published online:20/08/2025

Abstract

Diaspora indicates a state of in-betweenness, liminality and of being neither here nor there. The queer and the diasporic people resemble each other in that they are 'outsiders' in the heteronormative nation state. The paper probes how the movie *Funny Boy*, directed by the Indo-Canadian diasporic filmmaker, Deepa Mehta, subverts the widely accepted ideal of the nation as a space of ethnic purity and heteronormativity. An adaptation of a novel written by Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan gay writer residing in Canada, the movie depicts the fortunes of Arjie who belongs to a Tamil family residing in a racially-intolerant Sri Lanka. The queer diasporic space that endorses racial and sexual alterity enables the protagonist to triumph over the rigidity of the heteronormative nation.

Keywords: Heteronormative Nation, Family, Diaspora Space, Queer, Racism.

The nation, often described as an "imagined community", has a pervasive impact on the everyday life of its citizens. It consists of a community of people living in a well-demarcated geographic territory, drawing sustenance from an ancient past, striving towards homogeneity of thoughts and deeds, and giving weightage to the collective principle rather than to individual impulses. On closer examination, we find that the homogeneity and uniformity that the nation assumes are ridden with heterogeneities and differences and is grossly punctured with inequalities and questions of privilege or lack of privilege based on race, class, caste, gender or sexuality. These inequalities often result in a process of 'othering' or excluding of certain sections of people within the nation.

The case of diaspora or the people who exit the territorial confines of the nation brings in a spate of questions on nation and nationalism, belonging and non-belonging and othering. Diasporic people are in a state of in-between-ness, of being neither here nor there, of being the "other" both within the homeland and the land of adoption. Many scholars regard the diasporic condition as a triumph over the narrow parochial principles of the nation state with its well-drawn boundaries and obsession for purity and homogeneity. The exposure to new cultures, realities and ways of life causes the diasporic people to have a broad and eclectic perspective that transcends national limits and

boundaries. While the nation upholds the purity principle in terms of race, culture, religion, nationality and sexuality, diaspora endorses impurity and intermingling thereby bringing about a drastic reconfiguration of the idea of the nation state. Ien Ang, a reputed scholar on migration, describes diaspora as a “liberating force” that is “capable of overcoming the constrictions of national boundaries” (3). If “the nation-state is cast as the limiting, homogenizing, assimilating power structure” global diaspora “signifies triumph over the shackles of nation-state and national identity” (Ang 4). Floya Anthias, another noted scholar speaks about “the transgressive potential of the diaspora” which makes them “less essentialist and nationalistic...than those who still remain within their original homeland or nation state borders” (567).

Working on the premise that the diasporic artist, writer or film maker, who dwells in a space of confluence of cultures and perspectives, undergoes a transformation which reflects in his or her creative outpourings and artistic work, the paper focusses on the diasporic refractions that take place in the concept of the nation state as depicted in the film *Funny Boy*, by the Indo-Canadian diasporic filmmaker Deepa Mehta, which is an adaptation of the novel by the same title authored by Shyam Selvadurai, a Srilankan Canadian diasporic novelist. The script of the film was co-authored by Deepa Mehta, the Indo-Canadian film maker, hailing from Amritsar in Punjab and Shyam Selvadurai, the Sri Lankan Canadian writer who was born in Colombo in 1965 to a Sinhalese Buddhist mother and a Sri Lankan Tamil father. Selvadurai’s parents belonged to two conflicting groups of Srilanka, the Sinhalese Buddhist and the Srilankan Tamils. He emigrated to Canada with his parents in 1983 at the peak of the Civil War in Sri Lanka. A gay person himself, Shyam Selvadurai depicts the coming to age of Arjun alias Arjie, a queer Tamil Boy living in Colombo in the 1970s and 80s during the conflict between the two ethnic groups in the novel.

Deepa Mehta, who has been actively making films both within and outside India from the 1970s, has redrawn the contours of nation and nationality in her films, especially in *The Elements Trilogy* comprising *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*, films which deal with the politics of sexuality, nationality and religion respectively. The corpus of Mehta’s movies portrays the lives of marginalised people like homosexuals, widows, minors, the disabled, the victimised and the dispossessed, thereby becoming correctives to mainstream national cinema’s penchant for the privileged and the pure. These films by the diasporic film maker, imbued by principles of alterity, fluidity and border-crossing, challenged notions of purity and propriety upheld by the nation. If *Fire* and *Water* were known for “challenging constructions of idealized Indian womanhood” (Barron 90) and for critiquing conservative notions of patriarchy, religion and the heteronormative family within India, Mehta’s *Funny Boy* moves out of the Indian subcontinent to confront questions of nationality, diaspora, ethnicity, sexuality, and family values in Srilanka, the island country lying at the southern tip of India. In a way, the small nation is a prototype of Avtar Brah’s diaspora space where “the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested” (Brah 205). Set against the turmoil of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict from the 1970s to the 80s, the film *Funny Boy* intertwines the personal fates of characters with that of a nation engulfed in the rivalry between two ethnic groups, the majoritarian Sinhalese and the minoritarian Tamilians, with the former striving to evict Tamilians from the island, and the latter striving to have a Tamil nation or *eelam* in the northern part of Sri Lanka.

Paradoxically, the majoritarian Sinhalese and the Tamilians had both come to the island as migrants. The ancestors of the Sinhalese, who spoke Indo-Aryan languages migrated from northern India around 5th century BC and the Tamilians who spoke Dravidian languages migrated from Southern, Eastern, Central India to Sri Lanka from 3rd century BC to about 1200 AD. Likewise, Hinduism and Buddhism, the religions practiced in ancient Sri Lanka had spread to the island from India. While ethnic rivalries had existed between the two groups for centuries, the hostilities aggravated due to the advantages received by the Tamilians during the British rule in terms of educational facilities and employment opportunities. Once Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, there was a reversal of

the situation with Sinhalese people entering professions and high positions in the civil service. Bills like Sinhala Only Act of 1956 which made Sinhalese the only official language of Sri Lanka, made it difficult for Tamil people to enter government jobs, hold positions in Civil Service and get admission in educational institutions. The marginalisation and discrimination escalated, creating a sense of insecurity among the Tamilians and led to the demand for a Tamil Eelam or separate Tamil state within Sri Lanka spearheaded by groups like the LTTE or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The conflict evolved into a civil war which was fought for nearly three decades and forced Sri Lankan Tamils to migrate to different parts of the world.

The movie, *Funny Boy* traces the fate of a Tamil family in Srilanka caught in the vortex of this racial conflict, ultimately leading to the migration of its members to Canada. The family is a mini-nation that adheres to the norms and interests of the nation. Given that the fate of any family is intertwined with the fate of the nation where the family resides, the narration of a family story is tantamount to the narration of the nation's tale. The extended Tamil Sri Lankan family depicted in *Funny Boy* consists of Ammachi, the matriarch and her children – Chelvaratnam, Kanthi and Radha and their spouses and children. The movie focusses specifically on Ammachi's younger daughter, Radha and on Chelvaratnam's family consisting of his wife Nalini and their children, Diggy, Arjun nicknamed Arjie and a daughter. The members of the extended family are educated and privileged Tamilians leading a carefree, leisurely life, basking in the goodness of family get-togethers as the movie opens. Underlying the comfort and ease pervading the Sri Lankan Tamil family is a sense of insecurity that comes from the fact that they have migrated from India are hence regarded as the 'other' by the Sinhalese. This drives them to be fiercely protective of their Tamil lineage as is palpable in Ammachi's efforts to prevent the intermingling of her family with the Sinhalese by way of marriage. The racial and heteronormative preferences of Ammachi and her family come to play in the anxiety to find a suitable Srilankan Tamil groom for the youngest daughter, Radha who has returned home after her education abroad. They succeed in their efforts to keep up the racial purity and honour of the family by fixing Radha's marriage with a Tamil youth Rajan who works in Canada. Another major concern of the family is to suppress the queer tendencies of Arjie, the eight-year-old boy. Arjie, with his queer tendencies and Radha, who is engaged in an inter-racial love affair with Anil, a Sinhalese youth, establish this Srilankan Tamil family as a diaspora space where "multiple subject positions are contested, ... where the permitted and prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition" (Brah 205).

One major aspect of the diasporic cinema's deconstruction of national values is manifest in its moving away from the heteronormative to the homosexual. The nation and its miniature form, the family keep intact principles of purity based on the heteronormative order and spurn sexualities or gender norms that contest the male-female binary. The increasing number of films from the diaspora that investigate questions of queerness and homosexuality is a proof of this. The diasporic people who cross borders and boundaries of nations, belong neither to the home nor host country and possess hybrid and fluid identities, the queer person also dwells in the interstices or spaces between gender and sexual identities and practices. The diasporic population dwells on the margins of society of both the home and host countries just as the queer people live in the margins. Gayathri Gopinath makes this clear in her book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*: "queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation. If within heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate of the heterosexual, so too is diaspora within nationalist logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation" (11). Daniela Berghahn explains how hybridity which involves mixing is "the antithesis to purity" and this impurity applies both to the diasporic as well as the queer individual. Hybridity "negates essentialist notions of ethnic absolutism, [and] purity" and is used by "[dis]courses on nationalism, post-nationalism and diaspora" as a "critique" of purity (Berghahn 133). Such a critique of absolutism and purity happens in the case of queerness too: "Queerness constitutes a further dimension of fluidity, gender ambivalence and boundary crossing,

representing a vector of alterity that challenges dominant expectations of heteronormativity" (Berghahn 134). The film as well as the novel, which are diaspora spaces as already mentioned, are also queer spaces where the notion of racial purity and heteronormativity as foundation stones of the family and the nation are challenged by characters like Arjie and Radha.

The movie opens with glimpses of verdant natural scenery on the verge of the sea shore in Colombo where children are engrossed in their games, oblivious of racial and national barriers. The natural world also transcends heteronormative boundaries and gender rules as is evident in the game played by children on the seashore. They enact a marriage in which Arjie, the boy is decked up as a bride in a red saree and his lips smeared with lipstick, whereas Sonali, his female cousin is dressed up as the groom. The bride is physically larger than the groom, a subversion of the convention that the bride should be diminutive when compared with the groom. When another female cousin named Fatty claims her right to be the bride, pointing out that Arjie is a boy, Sonali vehemently asserts, "Arjie is the bestest bride of all!" (Funny Boy 00:03:47) reinforcing and validating queerness. In contrast to his elder brother, Diggy who loves playing cricket, Arjie prefers such games where he can cross-dress as a bride. This opening scene of gender fluidity is punctuated with the imagery of a moving train and the waves striking the shore, suggesting transition and the blurring of boundaries. The image of the train occurs frequently in the movie, suggesting travel and a diasporic way of life, in contrast to static and sedentary notions.

As the scene shifts from the open spaces of the seas and skies to the interiors of the sprawling mansion where the Srilankan Tamil family resides, the queerness of Arjie comes under censure, with his uncle calling him a "funny one" (00:05:11), an expression of derision. The denunciation of the boy's queerness by the family is quite predictable given that "fantasies of purity underpin and legitimize dominant social formations that rely on discourses of inclusion and exclusion.... [and] decide who's in and who's out, who belongs to or is expelled from the nation state, traditionally imagined as a family" (Berghahn 142). Increasingly alarmed that Arjie may be excluded from the family and society, his parents start taking measures to curb his queer tendencies. Chelvarathnam, Arjie's father tries to wean him out of his queerness saying, "funny means a bad man. A bad man who does bad things!" (00:21:24-28). His mother, Nalini forbids him from indulging in his usual 'feminine' practice of fondly watching her wear her jewels and feeling them with his hands. She instructs her elder son Diggy to include him in the game of cricket played by the boys. Arjie strongly dissents to the attempts of the family members to straighten him: "I hate cricket, I hate cowboys. How can doing something I hate make me good?" (00:21:45-50). His words become an assertion of the need to be genuine to one's feelings and tendencies rather than forcefully conforming to the existing norms of society. Despite the efforts taken by his family to wean him off his queerness, the boy continues with girlish activities like playing 'bride -bride' or knitting and feels uneasy with masculine games like cricket or badminton. This strong assertion and upholding of the queer identity by Arjie, a young boy coming from a family regarded as intruders and outsiders in Srilanka, reinforces the principle of alterity in the rigid and pure space of the nation state.

When all members of his family spurn Arjie for his alterity, Radha, his paternal aunt, who has just returned after her studies in Canada, dotes on him and treats him with understanding and empathy. In Radha, we have the diasporic person with liberal views manifest in her way of living, views, attitude and attire. While the other women in the family stick to the traditional attire of the sari, she dresses in modern clothes like pants. She soothes young Arjie by painting his toe nails and applying makeup on his face. She reassures him that he is not hurting anyone by his deeds and is just doing what will make him happy. His painted toe nails could be hidden under his socks as "a joyful secret" (00:12:03-09) just like his queer identity. Further, she encourages his musical skills and artistic talents by enrolling him as an actor in a play that is being rehearsed in her previous school, despite his father's fear that music and art would strengthen his "girly tendency" (00:13:29). Radha's words of consolation to Arjie who faces constant reprimand and corrections for his alterity and "difference" is notable: "The

thing is Arjie, life is full of boring people, like, well, your father. ... And like many, he is afraid of anyone who's different. And different is wonderful. And you are different, precocious and wonderful." (00:22:18-48). The nation is afraid and suspicious of anything that is different, be it difference in religion, language, race or sexuality. Radha's words to Arjie augment the worth of the difference and alterity manifested by the queer individual and the diasporic person. A close bond develops between the two and they become mutual confidants of each other.

Radha, the diasporic woman is a nonconformist who breaks free from the norms set by the family. A daughter of marriageable age is supposed to be coy, demure and chaste, but Radha's revelation of her "riotously good time in Toronto" (00:19:09) proves she was the antithesis of this ideal. She confides to her friends that back in Toronto she would "work hard, party hard" (00:19:12) and go to the bar with her "gay pals" (00:17:35), thus crossing of boundaries of heterosexuality. Radha trespasses not just the rules of feminine chastity prescribed for a betrothed girl by society, but also the rules of racial purity when she falls in love with Anil Jayasinghe, a Sinhalese youth she meets during the drama rehearsals. Anil admires her for her liberal way of thinking and has an instant liking for her queer nephew, Arjie. When the family comes to know of this affair, Radha is censured and Ammachi blurts out: "Only a Sinhalese would seduce a betrothed girl! You are a traitor to our father's memory.... He was butchered by a Sinhalese" (00:27:46). She opines that Radha should be sent to Jaffna, a Tamil-dominated area because "only our Tamil homeland will straighten you out" (00:28:22). To Arjie, who sulks at this chastisement of Radha, his mother explains, "Radha aunty will never be allowed into any of our houses if she marries a Sinhalese" (00:29:38-42). The height of racial hostility and the disgust at the breaking of the rules of chastity can be perceived in the family. Amid all this hostility and disgust, Radha's disregarding of the sanctity of marriage and the principle of racial purity is an instance of the diasporic impulse for racial mixing and impurity.

The ethnic strife raging in the nation is encapsulated in the fight between the families of the lovers from different ethnicities. A fierce verbal battle is waged before the closed gate of Anil Jayasinghe's house between Ammachi and his father, with the former declaring with vehemence: "Keep your son away from my daughter. Bloody Sinhalese in my family? Never!" (00:30:30-37). Racial hatred mingled with concern about the honour of women being violated by the enemy is also expressed: "First you rape our women, then you steal our daughters" (00:33:22-25). Anil's Sinhalese father is a match to the Tamil matriarch in racial loathing which is expressed in equally strong language. He calls her a "tamil bitch" exhibiting "typical Tamil arrogance" (00:30:38-51). The intolerance to people with racial differences and the tendency to exclude them and even evict them is evident when he says, "A minority with a majority complex thinking they can have half our island.... Sinhalese is our national language. Speak it or swim back to India" (00:30:55-00:31:12). The expectation by the racial majority that the minority should assimilate if they want to survive in the nation is expressed here – and this is also a problem that most diasporic people face.

Victoria Academy where the grown up Arjie enrolls in for his higher studies becomes a diaspora space of queerness and racial inter-mingling. Here too, hostilities run high with Sinhalese students attacking Tamil students both verbally and physically in the name of ethnicity. Arjie's family had thwarted the prospect of racial intermingling by putting an end to Aunt Radha's affair with Anil, the Sinhalese youth and marrying her off to Rajan, a Tamil Srilankan residing in Canada. As a counterbalance to this, we witness the grown up Arjie developing an inter-racial homoerotic relationship with his Sinhalese classmate, Shehan, who comes to his aid when he is bullied by the other Sinhalese students of Victoria Academy. The intensified ethnic conflict raging in Srilanka is offset by the homoerotic relationship that develops between the two boys who look at the whole scenario from a more rational perspective. The duo is drawn close by a realisation of the dehumanising effect of ethnicity-induced violence. They confide to each other that they are ashamed of the violence and inhuman acts perpetrated by their respective communities. This disowning of the hatred and violence

spread in the name of ethnicity becomes the first inevitable step that binds them together. The young queer couple come to terms with their homoerotic love and Arjie, whose queer tendencies had been discouraged so far, is reassured by Shehan that homoeroticism is legal abroad. If Arjie's home is a place where homosexuality is forbidden, Shehan's mansion becomes a place where queerness and homoerotic love blossom. Just as Aunt Radha had pacified Arjie when he was a little boy, Shehan, confirms to the adolescent Arjie that homosexuality is not an offence. After attending a class on Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" Shehan tells Arjie that their love too is normal. Such a reaffirmation after a rendition of lines from a classic poem that idolizes heterosexual love validates queerness and makes it on par with heterosexuality. Shehan and Arjie, who are gay lovers belonging to the two warring ethnic factions of a nation emphasize the need to transgress boundaries of race and sexuality. In the words of Berghahn, "[b]eing queer is essentially about resisting containment within clearly demarcated borders and categories.... [and] implies transgression, subversion and dissent" (132). The love of Arjie and Shehan is a subversion of the ideals of purity upheld by the family and the nation state.

Despite such instances of merging and mixing and the transgression of boundaries, we see racism and homophobia becoming rampant as the movie progresses. There is the mounting hostility of Arjie's family to his homoerotic affair as well as the escalating violence in the name of ethnicity all over Srilanka. Hatred and hostility gain upper hand and acts of massacre and arson make normal life difficult in the island nation. Arjie takes refuge with his family in the garage of a Sinhalese neighbour and watches hooligans looting his house and destroying everything there. In the next few scenes, we witness his whole family taking refuge in a church with thousands of other Tamilians. Arjie finally bids good bye to his gay lover and depart to Canada with his family. The closing of the movie which shows the family's reunion with Radha at Toronto airport is crucial as it emphasizes the diasporic condition. Over the ages, thousands of Srilankan Tamils had migrated to different parts of the world including Canada to escape ethnic violence. Arjie's family is also a part of that exodus. Fleeing from ethnic violence and relocating to Canada, the family now has become a part of the global diaspora. At the airport, they come to know about Radha's separation from her husband. Radha's present status as a single diasporic woman is a stark blow to the attempts of a family to tie up a daughter in the mesh of a heteronormative, intra-racial marriage. Arjie and Aunt Radha engage in a long warm embrace in the snowy night of Canada as his family awaits in the car, a gesture that shows the final triumph of alterity in the diaspora space.

The last scene takes place in the airport, a space signifying the fluidity of travel and new beginnings for the diaspora. The scene, despite its fleeting nature, is a convergence and summing up of various values upheld by the movie. The Tamil Srilankan family, belonging to a marginalised ethnic group in Srilanka, had hitherto fiercely defended racial purity and heteronormativity. They have now become refugees in a foreign land, necessitating the adaptation of a new culture and an overcoming of racial prejudices. The family of Srilankan Tamils migrating to Canada has travelled a long way from the narrow constrictions of the nation marked by racial hatred and homophobia. The family now constitutes the "queer diaspora" that challenges "essentialist notions of the nation and nationalist ideologies" (Daniela Berghahn 132). The diaspora space implicit here endorses the ideas of racial alterity and queerness and transcends and triumphs over the rigid contours of the heteronormative nation state. The 'queer diasporic space' created by film makers and writers of the diaspora like Deepa Mehta and Shyam Selvadurai in *Funny Boy* advocates openness, inclusivity and tolerance to difference and alterity, qualities much in need in the contemporary world.

Works Cited**Journal Articles:**

- Ang, I. (2003). Together-in-difference: Beyond diaspora, into hybridity. *Asian Studies Review*, 27(2), 141–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820308713372>
- Anthias, F. (1998). Evaluating 'diaspora': Beyond ethnicity? *Sociology*, 32(3), 557–580.
- Barron, A. L. (2008). Fire's queer anti-communalism. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 8(2), 64–93.
- Berghahn, D. (2011). Queering the family of nation: Reassessing fantasies of purity, celebrating hybridity in diasporic cinema. *Transnational Cinemas*, 2(2), 129–146.

Books:

- Brah, A. (2005). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Routledge.
- Gopinath, G. (2007). *Impossible desires: Queer diaspora and South Asian public cultures* (Original work published 2005). Seagull Books.
- Selvadurai, S. (1994). *Funny Boy: A novel*. McClelland and Stewart.

Film:

- Mehta, D. (Director), & Hamilton, D. (Producer). (2020). *Funny Boy* [Film]. Array Releasing.