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REPRESENTATION OF QUEERNESS IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY*

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Shyam Selvadurai, born in Sri Lanka in 1965 spent most of his childhood in Colombo and after the 1983 riots, he and his family moved to Canada. His first novel *Funny Boy* not only explores the cultural and racial conflicts of the Tamils and the Sinhalese but also the gender and sexual identity of a boy named Arjie who grows up within an extended upper middle class Tamil family in Colombo.. The novel is set in 1980s Sri Lanka and it deals with the life of Arjie from childhood through adolescence in six chapters. It is amidst rising waves of Sinhalese and Tamil violence the narrator becomes aware of his own homosexuality. He finds it difficult to come to terms with his own identity in an unsympathetic and hostile society. The novelist conveys how a society creates an invisible code of conduct and anything that falls out of it is considered to be unnatural and unacceptable.

Selvadurai explores the identity crisis of Arjie caught up in the normative pressure of the society. Arjie's lack of insights about his sexual identity is due to the rigid society which lacks the language and expressions to encode homosexual sensibility. Even the adults discuss about homosexuality in fragments which confuses Arjie and he considers it a sin without a reason. Arjie's parents try to control his "funny" behaviour by forcing him to play with boys but Arjie does not even realize the meaning of "funny". Arjie's queerness is reflected in his longing to play with his girl cousins when he is a child and his desire to have relationship with Shehan Soyza as he grows up as a teenager. Through this novel the novelist succeeds in portraying the plight of homosexuals in a so called perfect heterosexual society.

The first chapter "Pigs Can't Fly" deals with Arjie in an early childhood in which he does not like playing with boys. He prefers dressing up like a girl and playing together with girls in a game called "Bride-Bride" which he has invented himself. While the other boys are busy at cricket, Arjie revels in playing games with girls. He says:

For me, the primary attraction of the girls' territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagination, I was selected a leader....The reward for my leadership was that I always got to play the main part in the fantasy. If it was cooking- cooking we were playing, I was the chef; if it was Cinderella or Tumberlina, I was the much- beleaguered heroine of the tales. (3-4)

Arjie's happiness is interrupted when his cousin Tanuja refuses to accept him as a bride. All the children in the family are not aware of the difference in Arjie's behaviour until the arrival of Tanuja. She is the first person to compete with him saying, "A boy cannot be the bride, A girl be bride" (11). It is of course the foreign-returned Tanuja's family who humiliated Arjie with the name "funny" first. Robert Chelvanayagam, Arjie's father reacts strongly to it and blames his wife saying, "If he [Arjie] turns out funny like that Rankotweraboy, if he turns out to be the laughing-stock of Colombo, it'll be your fault" (14). Arjie finds a sense of disgust and uneasiness when his father utters the word "funny".

The women characters in the novel are the staunch followers of patriarchal norms and values. Arjie always enjoys watching his mother dressing up for special occasions. After the incident at his grandparents' house, Arjie's mother refuses to permit him inside her dressing room. Arjie questions her why he could not

watch her dress and play with the girls, she replies, "Because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly" (23). Feeling embarrassed and outraged, Arjie starts to withdraw himself from the normal world. He recognizes that he belongs to the other world, "I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted either" (39).

Arjie is excited to hear Aunty Doris praising him, "What a lovely boy, Should have been a girl with those eyelashes" (55). Arjie feels a kind of transformation in him after meeting the son of his father's friend, Jegan Parameshvaran. He finds a fascination with his body and admires him. He later confesses, "Lately, I found that I looked at men, at the way they were built, the grace with which they carried themselves, the strength of their gestures and movements. Sometimes these men were present in my dreams" (161).

The chapter "The Best School of All" presents Arjie's gender conflicts in detail. In order to cure Arjie's funny behaviour his father sends him to the Victoria Academy, an English style boy's school. It is here that Arjie meets Shehan Soyza. Shehan defends Arjie from Salgado's racist criticism about Tamils. In spite of his brother Diggy's warning that Shehan is a homosexual; Arjie continues his friendship with him. He admires Shehan's delicately built body and finds him attractive. As the boys' intimacy grows, Arjie is shocked and bewildered after having a physical relationship with Shehan at the garage when they played hide and seek in Arjie's house. From this moment on, Arjie suffers from guilt and queerness and feels that he is forever alienated from his family and society, "I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me" (282). This shows his inability to fit into a conventional sexual identity.

Here Selvadurai brings in the queerness and vulnerability of children who are caught up in the normative forces of society. Queerness includes all identities that are at odds with normal social setup. "Queer theory challenges the constructed nature of sexual acts and sexual identities" (Aute 2). Selvadurai has not given a label to Arjie's sexual or gender identity but through him he has presented the voice of the subaltern group the "other". While describing this queerness, Peter Barry says:

... here is the distinction between the naturally-given, normative 'self' of heterosexuality and the rejected 'other' of homosexuality.... As basic psychology shows, what is identified as the external 'other' is usually part of the self which is rejected and hence projected outwards. (140)

Works Cited

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