

THE THEME OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN SHYAM SELVARDURAI'S *FUNNY BOY* AND *THE HUNGRY GHOSTS*

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Abstract

Homosexuality is a term that refers to the sexual attraction to one's own sex. In the 21st century homosexuality is widely acknowledged and, in many countries and states, gay and lesbian marriages are now legal. However, young men and women who start realising that their sexual interests do not correspond to the common model in society can face serious opposition from a homophobic element in society.

Even though gays did find experiences given a space in literature, the gays in reality did not usually emerge victoriously from their problems. Literature is an area in which homosexuality has not historically been a taboo topic. The novels on this genre were generally referred to as "problem novel". Gay literature flourished and throughout the latter two decades of the 20th century and into the 21st century, and has its unique place in the current trend.

Shyam Selvadurai, being a homosexual himself, vividly brings out the problems and difficulties of being a homosexual in a hetero-normative and a homophobic society. Selvadurai takes seriously both the effects his books may have on other young gay Sri Lankans and his position as a role model for other gay Asians in North America. His novels are revealing stories of young and middle-aged gays coming to terms with their homosexuality tied with the theme of high-society morality and double standards. He brings out the elements of homosexuality and queer theory in his two pioneering novels, *Funny Boy* and *The Hungry Ghost*, which will be analysed in this study.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Gay/Lesbian, Gay Literature, Hetero-normative, Homophobic

Homosexuality is a term that refers to the sexual attraction to one's own sex. It is of two distinct phenomena, male attraction to male and female attraction to female. It was a term created by 19th century theorists to describe a sexual and emotional interest in members of one's own sex. Homosexuals are mostly known as gays and lesbians.

In the present world scenario, even though the gay/lesbian marriages have been legalised, the homophobic judgement and criticism against them continues to exist. However, literature always acts as a confessional ground for the community to voice out their feelings and emotions. Early gay novels reflect the anguish of the homosexuals in the society, who were often lonely and pathetic. The civil rights movement of the 1960s gave voice to gays,

liberalising social attitudes and paving the way for critical acceptance of gay literature. Gay literature flourished throughout the latter two decades of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Gay novels also help gays feel a sense of belonging. After the American Psychiatric Association changed its classification of homosexuality as a mental 10 disorder in 1973, homophobic references in literature gradually faded. Mosca's *All-American Boys*, Holland's *Man without a Face*, Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You and Happy Endings Are All Alike*, Rees's *Out of the Winter Gardens*, and Ron Koertge's *The Arizona Kid* are notable works for their inclusion of a gay community.

In general, gay literature comprises three categories of male sexual desire: homoerotic, homosexual and gay. Homoeroticism indicates desire without outright homosexual behavior. Homosexuality connotes a conscious awareness of male-male sexual desire. Gay indicates a self-conscious awareness of desire for other men as well as acceptance of a gay identity. Men could regularly take part in homosexual behavior without espousing a gay identity.

Shyam Selvadurai, being gay himself, deals with the issue in many of his novels. While dealing with the political theme of ethnic conflict as a major element in his novels, he also includes the personal theme of sexuality. He cleverly illustrates the dilemmas of being homosexual which is considered to be unconventional in a conventional land. His protagonists face the risks associated with being non-conformists in a country with persistently traditional and conformist norms about sexuality. Therefore, this study attempts at discussing and analyzing, the theme of homosexuality with reference to his two pioneering novels *Funny Boy* and *The Hungry Ghosts*.

Selvadurai's work insists on criticism which directly confronts the systems of power and ways of knowing that discriminate against non-mainstream sexualities. At the same time that it raises questions about constructions of sexuality, Selvadurai's writing also calls for criticism which attends to voices which are "othered" in Canada because of ethnic and racial differences. (Corr 3)

In his interview titled "Shyam Selvadurai: Funny Man" with Afdhel Aziz, Selvadurai explains how he thinks it is a major strength of *Funny Boy* that suffering is shared between characters who experience exclusion for vast different reasons. Selvadurai describes how he works to convey that "whether you're marginalised as a Tamil, a gay person, a woman or a person of lower caste, you all suffer the same way".

Funny Boy revolves around the protagonist Arjun Chelavartnam aka Arjie. It deals with his personal growth and traces his life from childhood to adolescence. Out of the six chapters of the novel, "Pigs Can't Fly", "Small Choices" and "The Best School of All" traces Arjie's sensual sexuality and its impact on his life in detailed description. It is interesting to note that, though the novel is predominately centered on homosexuality, the word doesn't appear even once in the entire novel. Since the novel captures Arjie's development and growth from a child to an adult it also can be considered as bildungsroman genre.

"Pigs Can't Fly" records the "spend-the-day" of Arjie's childhood. He is fond of the game "bride-bride" in which he dresses like a women. Instead of playing with the boys, he is keen on playing with girls. He admires himself

when dressed as a woman. Thus, though the game is based on the very ceremony which culturally formalises and celebrates heteronormative logic, the sex of the children playing the ceremony is not a determining principle in the allotment of roles. Even though Arjie is a boy, he always “naturally” fills the definitive female role.

In his portrayal of Arjie's dressing-up ritual, Selvadurai strikes a delicate balance between the perceived wholeness and stability of gender identities and the performance which constitutes those identities. Though Arjie's feminine-identification clearly resonates for him on a deep inner level, the level of his “self,” Selvadurai's language emphasizes the process of identification as Arjie assumes a glamorous feminine appearance. (Corr 21)

When Arjie sees his mother dress up, he fantasises himself being in that place and enjoys it. His father blames his mother for Arjie's cross dressing by saying “You are one who allows him to come in here while you're dressing and play with your jewellery” (15).

When Tanuja comes into his life, all his fantasies and desires are shattered, because she snatches the prestigious “bride” position from him. Kanthi Aunty exposes his cross-dressing to the other family members who mock him, eventually leading to the anger of his father and mother. He is referred as being “funny one” (14). Arjie's father takes this as a personal insult and restricts the boundaries of Arjie's play area. In this way the child's desires are crushed by the adults.

Arjie's father represents the heteronormative society which expects a particular behaviour from both the sexes. Butler argues this idea in her *Gender Trouble*,

“there is an emphasis on gender as a marker of stable, essential, inner self. Gender, in the heteronormative schema, is a supposedly natural representation of biological sex, whereby males are and can only be masculine, while females are and can only be feminine. In the tidy heteronormative system, both males and females are expected to have heterosexual inclinations, thus encouraging reproduction and ensuring cultural survival” (17).

In fact the heteronormative ideology is imposed on or injected into children. In this way, children are expected to perform gender roles at an early stage when they are still immature. The play area which is divided into “the girls” and “the boys” and how kids are expected to divide themselves accordingly is an example of the division. The exception would be Meena and Arjie who swapped places. Arjie's attraction to the girls' side reveals his inner self. He says, “For me, the primary attraction to the girls' territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy” (3).

In “Small Choices” Arjie develops a subtle attraction to Jegan. Selvadurai employs the tool of detailed physical description as the beginning point of sexual attraction. “When I served him a drink, I got a closer look at him. What struck me was the strength of his body. The muscles of his arms and neck.. it was only when I was close

to him that I had noticed them. Now I admired how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers” (160).

“The Best School of All” takes Arjie’s sexuality to a practical stance. The enrollment of Arjie in Victoria Academy is an initiative by his father because “The Academy will force you to become a man” (210). Here he meets Snehan, who becomes his secret sexual partner. He is treated by the other classmates as a marginalised child, because of being a homosexual. He is sexually exploited by the head prefect and the others in the school. “He has sex with the head prefect. He lets the head prefect do all kinds of things on him” (232). This is an evidence of how homosexuals are treated in society when their identity is discovered. Diggy tells Arjie, “if you remain Soyza’s friend, people will think you’re like him and you’ll become the laughing- stock of the whole school” (232). Only in this stage Arjie is exposed to homosexuality and he begins to get aware of it: “At fourteen, I was aware of what sex act between a man and a woman entailed. But between two boys?” (233)

Later, the chapter explores, in an overt scene, the love-making between Arjie and Snehan. After Snehan kisses him for the first time, Arjie is able to expand and enjoy his sexual identity. “As I lay there, looking up at the mosquito net above me, I realized I had not only liked that kiss but I was also eager to experience it again in all its detail and sensation” (251). At the same time, he is confused about his desires and is unable to arrive at a clear understanding of homosexuality and heterosexuality. He is “torn between [his] desire for Snehan and Disgust at that desire” (266), foregrounding his conflict. This idea is repeated when the both make love in a hidden area in Arjie’s house and he feels terribly guilty about it. “I looked down at my place, feeling my heart clench painfully at the contrast between the innocence of her smile and the dreadful act I had just committed” (262).

“Riot Journal: An Epilogue” records the last moments of Arjie and Snehan. It portrays the emotional attachment between the two and the support Snehan extends to Arjie during the time of the riots. Till the end he doesn’t reveal his relationship with Snehan to the world. He keeps it as a secret. Diggy seems to suspect their relationship, but he doesn’t arrive at a conclusion.

The Hungry Ghosts (2013) is a detailed tale of homosexuality in which the author has interwoven the natural desire of being gay, the homophobic mentality of the society and its gradual acceptance by his mother. The novel captures the protagonists’ relationship with three men: Ronald, Mili and Michael.

In the first part of the novel, homosexuality first figures in the seventh chapter when Shivan reads a magazine on a gay actor, Clift. This is the instance where he realises that he himself is gay. But at the same time, he fears that exposing his desire may not be accepted. Even though he is overcome by hesitation and anxiety regarding his sexuality, he is unable to control and suppress its desires and feelings. By using the technique of clear and detailed physical description, Selvadurai introduces the readers to the realm of homosexuality. It also indicates the beginning stage of the arousal of homosexuality in an individual.

At school, now, I allowed myself to contemplate how beautiful boys' necks were when they were thrown back in a laugh, the aching, vulnerable knob of their Adam's apples; the way beads of sweat trembled in the indentation between their noses and lips, the way thin white cotton trousers pulled tight across thighs when they sat. That easy contact with them caused a constant spilling over the warmth within me – brushing against a classmate's hips when entering a class, the boy with whom I was sharing a textbook unconsciously pressing his leg against mine, his heady smell of sweat and Lifebuoy soap. (56)

Shivan feels attracted his schoolmate, Mili Jayasinghe. Since Shivan moves to Canada within a few days due to the unrest and insecure political situation in Sri Lanka, he is unable to establish a full - fledged relationship with Mili. However, their relationship develops in the later chapters. Also, Shivan lacks the courage to acknowledge his feelings to Mili due to his age, maturity level and the homophobic Sri Lanka.

After Shivan moves to Canada, in part two of the novel, his sexuality witnesses a different stand. His college life becomes a period in which he advances both in studies and sexuality. It can be paralleled with the Selvadurai's own life. In an interview with Greg Quill he says, "I am absolutely comfortable here now," ... "I am aware, of course, that I'm part of a minority culture and that I'm gay, but there is absolutely no anxiety about that. And it was always my intention to go to the West for my education, which young (East Asian) people are able to do now. Things have changed considerably in 30 years".

As Peter Dickinson points out in "Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada", "In the emerging narrative surrounding the canonization of Canadian literature ... the discourse of (homo)sexuality, and its role (or non-role) in the formation and organization of a literary tradition in this country, is virtually non-existent" (Corr 3). In fact it is literature that gives Arjie the initial urge to come to terms with his feelings. "...it asked in bold white letters, "Are you Gay?" Just the word gay, out there in the open, sent a frizzle of coldness through me" (Selvadurai 91). The conditioned privileging of heterosexuality over homosexuality prevents Shivan from 'coming out': "I am gay... it felt so strange, those words coming out of my mouth, and the next moment I was crying" (98). He then meets Ronald and has a sexual relationship with him. The chapter explicitly deals about the first experience of gay sex.

When his mother reacts fanatically to the heterosexual love affair between Renu and Jaya, Shivan immediately foresees her reaction to his case and turns anxious. But, he admits it to Renu, who is a liberal minded literature student and she supports him. But, she too is worried about the reaction of her mother and the homophobic Sri Lankan society that considers homosexuality a deadly sin. She says, "Sri Lanka is a conservative society and it is not going to improve. We must be careful for Amma's sake. If people found out she had a gay son, it would ruin her position in the community" (117). Finally, Shivan gathers courage to acknowledge himself to his mother, "Amma, I am gay. Homosexual" (129). Eve Sedgwick calls this as 'coming out of the closet' which is to openly admit about one's own sexual identity. Her reaction testifies to the typical homophobic mentality of the society. "If I had known you would throw away your life, I would have aborted you. Yes.... I would have strangled you at birth"

(130). Kircher points out that “Heterosexism influence parents by dictating that the heterosexual child is the normal and desirable and that having an LGBT child is not. Upon finding out that their child is LGBT, parents feel guilty and view their child negatively based on societal stereotypes” (5).

Later on in part three, when Shivan visits Sri Lanka to meet his grandmother, he once again comes in contact with Mili. He then has a secret relationship with him. Mili’s attachment to Shivan could have happened due to his anger towards his father, who had a mistress and was thereby neglecting his mother. As a result, Mili could have developed hatred towards a female sexual partner. Freud “believed all human beings were innately bisexual, and that they become heterosexual or homosexual as a result of their experiences with parents and others” (Herek). This idea could have prompted or directed Mili’s desires towards men. Upon knowing this side of Shivan, his grandmother orders her thug Chandralal to warn Mili; Mili is kidnapped and taken into custody. Grandmother considers the relationship to be against norms and warns Shivan to break and get out of it. She says “Ah ! Puthey, nothing bad will come to that boy. I just wanted him given a good scare, to stop his corrupting you” (238). Here it is important to note how homosexuality is considered as a corruption and a crime.

According to Sri Lankan law, as in India a person who is a homosexual can be imprisoned up to ten years since homosexuality is illegal and considered a crime. Mili is then killed accidentally by the Chandralal’s men, leaving Shivan in an emotional turmoil. Mili’s death is manipulated and presented in the newspaper in a different way by hiding the truth. It is mentioned that his death was due to the “strong current at night” (244). The reaction and the humiliation that could be possible by the revelation of his sexuality are hidden and a twisted version is presented. This indicates the stereotypical hatred against homosexuality which is considered to be a shame.

Part Four of the novel explores Shivan’s new relationship with Michael in Vancouver. It also projects a change in his mother’s attitude to his sexuality, presenting how “Parents also accept their child as LGBT, although this is a process which may last three to five years” (Kircher 6). Earlier she had refused to accept him and had terribly upset him with rude words. But now, she accepts Shivan’s emotions and obliges to it. In chapter twenty five, Selvadurai presents the relationship between Michael and Shivan as between that of a husband and wife. At this point in the novel, even the readers adapt to the lifestyle of the homosexuals without thinking of it as strange. In this way, the conditioned heteronormative reading fades. It is notable on the fact how their relationship is presented. Moreover, the attitude of Michael’s parents is example of how homosexuality is treated in foreign and how it is understood as natural instinct.

The reaction of the readers hailing from a conservative society will probably be one of the unacceptance of homosexuality. Since they are conditioned to a particular heterosexual type of reading, the acceptance of homosexuality may be difficult. Therefore, it throws light on conditioned reading in a closed society on a subversive and unconventional sexuality. But Selvadurai’s novels try to negate the negativity associated with homosexuality and instill the idea that it is also “natural”. In an interview to the Lambada journal, Selvadurai speaks of the reaction to sexuality among the Sri Lankas. “The other reaction was to the sexuality. What it did was give people a way to

talk about sexuality. I opened up a discussion through the book and I think that was good” (6). In this way, homosexuality is presented in his novels and after reading it from the homosexual side, the conditioned ideology is altered.

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