



ODYSSEY OF SELF DISCOVERY: A READING INTO SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY* AND ARDASHIR VAKIL'S *BEACH BOY*

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Abstract:

"Bildungsroman" or "formation novel" is a genre that recounts literal or figurative voyages of discovery, the final destination of which is a sense of one's unique purpose. One of the most potent attributes of the genre is its ability to observe the human form and the effects of developmental reinforcement directly. The bildungsroman can be a morally combustive piece of literature, whether it is personal or social and of the many themes within the bildungsroman genre the most common theme is that life is not easy or clear, doubt about one's purpose or beliefs, a quest for freedom as much as self-expression.

The protagonists of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* are young boys trying to withstand the pressure to conform to the needs of the majority and go on a quest for identity and self-realization. In their odyssey towards self-realization both Arjie in *Funny Boy* and Cyrus in *Beach Boy* break away from the binding chains of social codes of conduct and carve a niche for themselves. The two young boys come to realise that growing up is never simple and your future is decided by the decisions you make and actions you take.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Conformity, Identity, Odyssey, Niche, Funny Boy, Beach Boy

"Bildungsroman" or "formation novel" recounts literal or figurative voyages of discovery, the final destination of which is a sense of one's unique purpose. Typically, a bildungsroman will involve a trial, a life-altering question, and sometimes a resolution. Themes within the bildungsroman change with shifting social mores, but they all include at least a few of the following: a David-and-Goliath situation in which a child faces a monumental challenge, often without adult aid, a stepchild, orphan, or outcast; the sense that domestic or parental affection is not enough; the discovery that life is not easy or clear; doubt about one's purpose or beliefs; and a quest for freedom, self-expression, and horizon-expanding love. One of the most powerful attributes of the genre is its ability to observe the human form and the effects of its developmental reinforcement directly. As a result, the bildungsroman can be a morally combustive piece of literature, whether it is personal or social.

The paradigm of bildungsromans has transformed over the last few decades, shifting towards post-colonial narratives with an emphasis on minority voices. Post colonialism as a discourse elucidates the development of a new self-awareness, critique, and celebration among the subjects of erstwhile colonized states. With this self-awareness comes self-expression. This trend enlarges the traditional bildungsroman, into a genre evincing hybridity and subsuming the hybridity of cultures, in an attempt to understand true experience from a postcolonial perspective. From experience comes moral education as people use experience to reinforce or denounce moral beliefs and obligations. Fiction being subjective and evocative helps to convey this self-awareness and self-expression. Many factors contribute to a protagonist's moral development, including culture, religion and philosophies. Considering the integral nature of the post-colonial bildungsroman, human experience remains the only true facet for legitimate 'bildung' style writing. The literary critics and scholars all over the world have unanimously understood the capabilities of a bildungsroman to prioritize human experience over idealization.

In this paper two South Asian novels Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* are analysed through the lens of bildungsroman to narrate the adolescent identity-in-crisis. Special attention is given to the journey of growth of the main characters Arji and Cyrus respectively. As the protagonists struggle with their respective closets, these two novels signal a larger crisis of postcolonial definition of modernity, which refuses to be subsumed under Western classification of modern/non-modern binary, and simultaneously documents the difficulty of articulating queer subjectivity in the multiply-severed contexts of language, regional, class, religion and ethnic identity,

Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer has authored novels such as *Funny Boy*, *Cinnamon Gardens* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. He has edited the anthology, *Story-Wallah!* His fourth novel *The Hungry Ghosts* has been shortlisted for Canada's prestigious Governor General's Award for fiction. His latest work *Many through Paradise* is a comprehensive anthology of Sri Lankan Literature. Shyam Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* won the Books in Canada First Novel Award. It is a collection of six poignant

stories which are chronologically interconnected, but they are slightly autonomous. The characters in each story can be classified as subaltern in terms of race, sexuality or gender. In it, the first and last stories are about Arjie; the second story is about Radha aunty who returns from America; the third story is about the Burgher Daryl Brohier; the fourth one is about Jegan who has links with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; and the fifth story deals with Soya or Shehan, who takes Arjie into homosexuality.

Selvadurai's novels have the background of the struggle of the spirit against oppression – of class, gender and sexual orientation, capturing the nuances of the Sri Lankan society steeped in ethnic riots, political tensions and cultural and social rigidity. The characters in his novels are spread in a sprawling narrative where they find love and friendship, struggling through conflicts with family members, social mores and their own repressed desires. Selvadurai's works are informed by meticulous research and a haunting evocation of Sri-Lanka, which remain vital in his imagination despite his having lived in Canada for so many years. He clearly has a deep engagement with his country of birth and its troubled history, but he is also aware of how impossible it would be for him to live there due to the country's anti-homophobic attitude towards homosexual relationships. Homophobia or repugnance for homosexual or homosexual bonding is not a mere by-product of the ignorance and prejudice of a segment of the population, but an aspect of the way power is organised and deployed throughout society.

Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* is a coming-of-age novel that speaks about the growing up of a gay boy quietly confounding the expectations of love, family and country. Subtitled "A Novel in Six Stories" *Funny Boy* is about the experiences of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a Tamil boy growing up in an affluent and extended Colombo family and, as in so many novels of childhood, discovering himself and the world around him. Arjie's most important discovery concerns his sexuality. He realizes that he is a 'funny boy'; a different boy. He also comes to realize that the heteronormative postcolonial setting in his country does not allow the idea of a fluid nature of gender and places it into two rigid categories of 'male' and 'female', The fact that Arjie is different and does not belong to the gendered spaces is central to his different and 'Othered' identity.

Selvadurai's debut novel is one of the popular gay novels. The novel has won the Lambda Literary Award for gay male fiction. The protagonist Arjun Chelvaratnam also known as Arjie to his friends and family is a prepubescent boy of seven years old who grows into a teenager. This novel explores the protagonist Arjie's struggle to establish his identity when he comes to understand that he is gay.

The novel focuses on Arjie's queer identity. Of course, there is no mention of 'gay' or 'homosexual' anywhere in the novel. However, his queer identity is exposed when he mingles with his female cousins and plays games with girls while other boys of his same age are interested in playing cricket. He dresses up in a saree and plays the role of bride in 'bride-bride' game. The girls like him very much because he is an expert in playing the part of the bride. When his parents see him dressed up in a saree, they get embarrassed and concerned. One of his uncles calls him "a funny one." Arjie reflects upon this incident: "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 as leader" (3). To begin with he does not understand his attraction towards girls- but later when he has had a sexual encounter with Shehan, he is aware of his queer identity. Thus, the novel *Funny Boy* deals with the ambiguity of sexual identity and ethnic difference. The novel also reflects the intense pain and inexplicable passion and consequent pleasures of a homosexual boy. The contrariness of feelings and conflict of emotions that perturb and disturb the innocent mind of the homosexual boy, his inner joy and social ridicule and derision, unsympathetic and inhuman mockery, jeering and sneering, teasing and taunts that hurt and tear his adolescent mind because of his explicit homosexual behaviour and attitude invest the story with a 'queer' perceptiveness.

Subjectivity according to Sigmund Freud is neither innate nor determined. It is constituted by gender identities and sexual identifications that is forged from childhood itself particularly in one's own family. The novel apart from being a realistic narrative of horrible ethnic conflict, hatred, mutual hostility, aversion and animosity is a moving story, a 'gay' boy's bitter experience in a hostile society. His house is a conventional space where roles are assigned and desires were restrained and behaviours policed. Arjie is trying to break the conformity being forced on him. He tries to show signs of deviance and argues with his Amma the voice of authority but his mother is adamant and orders him to play with the boys.

Why can't I play with the girls?' I replied. 'You can't, that's all'. But why?' She shifted uneasily. 'You're a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys. 'That's stupid'. 'It does not matter,' she said, 'the world is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them. (20)

When Arjie questions her she says "Because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly, that's why." (19)

The novel conforms to many of the characteristics of the bildungsroman literary tradition, in particular the one stipulating that the author mirrors some parts of his autobiography throughout the novel. In the world of his large family, affluent Tamils living in Colombo, Arjie just like his author Shyam Selvadurai, is an oddity, a 'funny boy' who prefers dressing as a girl to playing cricket with his brother He is ridiculed and given a nickname "girlie-boy" (25). In this novel Selvadurai reminisces his childhood days in Sri Lanka through his protagonist. The author remembers the 'innocence of childhood' which is now coloured in the hues of the twilight sky. It is a picture "made even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them. By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada. (5)"

In *Funny Boy* we follow the life of the family through Arjie's eyes, as he comes to terms both with his own homosexuality and with the racism of the society in which he lives. When Arjie was scolded and forced to stop his girlish games, he strikes back at the punishments meted out to him and asks, "It's not fair! Why should I be punished?" (37). In the north of Sri Lanka there is a war going on between the army and the Tamil Tigers, and gradually it begins to encroach on the family's comfortable life. Arjie recollects:

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. (5)

After this exile and Arjie's family's migration to Canada he realises that growing up is never simple and that the decisions and the actions that one takes, determines your future.

Ardashir Vakil is a postcolonial writer whose award-winning debut novel *Beach Boy* is an autobiographical novel centring on the growth of a Parsi boy based in Bombay. This novel is often compared to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. *Beach Boy* a poignant work of fiction, centres upon Cyrus Readymoney, a privileged Parsi boy, and his formative years at a strict Jesuit school during a period of family turmoil and crisis.

The novel goes on to focus on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood in which the character of Cyrus changes from being an eight-year-old to a ten-year-old boy. He belongs to rich elite class of Parsi family and whenever his parents are absent or on business tours, he stays with his friends, eats and sleeps with them at their houses because he knows that his presence would not be missed by his family. His pure enthusiasm and relentless curiosity to understand everything around him gets him

many friends. He keeps himself busy by visiting his neighbours and close friends, the Krishnans, the Varmas, the Maharani.

Like Joyce's modernist classic and its protagonist Stephen, Vakil's Cyrus, a typical bildungsroman deals with his sexual awakening, religion and cultural alienation. Life in all its forms is revealed to Cyrus the beach boy or the itinerant narrator who wanders in a city where he is variously seduced and repulsed by the sacred and the profane, faith and food.

Set in the early 1970s, the novel was described by John Updike as reminiscent of Nabokov's Russia in terms of its reflective portrait of India. Cyrus says that he lived in a neighbourhood where people practiced different religion and hailed from different parts of the world:

There were the Krishnans from Kerala, the Varmas from Delhi, The Hussains from Agra, the Ericssons from Sweden, the Maharani from Bharatnagar, the film star from Poona, the sausage dogs from Germany, the one-eyed cockatoos from Australia, the red-plumed parrots from Africa, and us, the Parsi Bawas from Bombay (17)

Eight-year old Cyrus who is the son of wealthy parents, voluntarily lives like a vagabond, roaming the streets of Bombay and inviting himself into the homes and lives of the neighbours. The precocious boy is obsessed with the sensual delights of food and colourful Hindi films. With his growing sexual awareness, Cyrus lives from day to day on the margins of the adult world - treating it as a playground for his boyish enthusiasm. He, in a straightforward manner confesses; "I have been bunking off school to go to the movies. I have stolen money; I have sold things (10)". He does not hesitate to say that "I have been into the bathroom with my brother's friend, Darab(10)."

Beach Boy is a bildungsroman or coming-of-age story of protagonist Cyrus Readymoney, who grows all alone in his sea facing house on Juhu beach as his parents are always away on tours and business. He's a big movie buff and throngs to Bombay's theatres to watch movies on his own. He talks about his love of watching movies in dark theatres amidst so many people all coming from several parts of the city. He describes the snacks and meals served in the theatre. He's a big foodie and describes each and every dish that he has had with immaculate precision. Ardashir Vakil paints a kaleidoscopic picture of the growth of a young boy on a vast canvas like Bombay.

He values his family time a lot, whenever he gets to share it with his parents and four other siblings named Behroz, Adi, Nasli and Shenaz. He tells us how he misses their company and how much the family vacations mean to him. At the same time the neglect of his wealthy parents towards him and his childhood presents him with many opportunities to discover his life.

Towards the end of the novel Cyrus realizes the importance of life and is not the same individual as he was at the beginning of the story. His sobered adolescence comes from his father's death and his reflections on life and death while he was at the fire temple attending to his dad's funeral ceremonies. The emotions in him have changed and he now starts viewing himself as a responsible person, he starts experiencing the loss which earlier didn't bother him much, he now knows what it means to have a family and how much parents contribute to a child's development. Cyrus is made to acknowledge the futility of human endeavour. His close friend Maharani tries to console him and lead him away from despondent thoughts. She asks him to ignore it as these things always happen. "Never mind Cyrus, you will survive." (211)

The two novels studied here are modelled along the literary genre called bildungsroman as the two main characters - Arjie, Cyrus -are on an odyssey of self-discovery wherein they are trying to emerge from the cocoon formed by their respective societies. The emphasis on adolescent subjects in the novels studied here highlights the importance of such subjects as they are often erased from the more traditional narratives. Past discourses about sexual identities were less defined and almost absent. Oblique gestures, sexual desires, relationships and practices were half understood and half expressed or veiled in silence as unusual sexual behaviour. In societies all over the world heterosexuality was the norm and homosexuality were a perversion that needed to be censored or given medical treatment.

Louis Althusser theorised that subjectivity is a result of power laden practices and emphasised that subject is a social construct. The pressure to conform to the needs of the majority has a profound impact on the identity of an individual. This often results in conflict. The effects of forced conformity damage the identity of an individual.

Foucault believes that power produces the procedures by which we observe, understand and conduct ourselves. Accordingly, in their odyssey towards self-realization both Arjie and Cyrus try to break away from the binding chains of social codes of conduct and carve a niche for themselves. The two young boys come to realise that growing up is never simple and your future is decided by the decisions you make and the actions you take.

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