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Treatment of the Themes of Sexuality, Identity and Politics in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*: An Analysis

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Abstract:

*Set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's turbulent socio-political landscape, the novel *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai tells the poignant story of Arjie, as he navigates the complexities of growing up gay in a conservative society. Selvadurai masterfully intertwines personal and political narratives, shedding light on the intersections of individual identity and broader societal forces. This novel explores the intricate interplay of sexuality, identity, and politics. Through Arjie's journey, the novel delves into the challenges of self-acceptance and the societal pressures that shape and often suppress sexual identity. By situating Arjie's story within the larger context of Sri Lankan politics, Selvadurai underscores the interconnectedness of personal and political struggles. The novel's portrayal of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict serves as a backdrop to Arjie's personal growth, illustrating how political turmoil exacerbates the marginalization of already vulnerable groups, including the gay community. Selvadurai's nuanced narrative invites readers to reflect on the ways in which personal and political realms intersect, influencing and shaping individual experiences and identities. This study examines how Selvadurai portrays the tension between personal desires and societal expectations, highlighting the pervasive influence of heteronormativity and cultural norms on the formation of sexual identity.*

Key words: Sexuality, Identity, politics, ethnic conflict, societal norms, personal growth

Introduction

Shyam Selvadurai was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1965 to a Tamil father and a Sinhalese mother. This bicultural background profoundly shaped his writing, offering a layered perspective on identity and belonging. Selvadurai's experiences as a gay man in a traditional society also influence the novel's examination of sexuality and acceptance. *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai is a pivotal work that weaves together themes of sexuality, identity, and politics against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's civil war. This novel not only tells the personal journey of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a young Tamil boy coming to terms with his homosexuality, but also presents a broader view of the socio-political upheaval in Sri Lanka. *Funny Boy* is divided into six linked stories, each portraying different stages of Arjie's life. The narrative begins with Arjie's childhood interest in feminine activities, moves through his teenage years marked by his developing sexuality, and ends with his family's involvement in the political

chaos of the civil war. The novel poignantly captures the intersections of personal growth and political conflict. This paper aims to explore how Selvadurai intricately weaves these themes, highlighting the significant impact of societal norms and political conflict on personal identities.

Historical and Political Context of Sri Lanka

The novel is set during the 1970s and 1980s, a time of increasing ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, which eventually led to the Sri Lankan civil war. Understanding this historical context is essential for grasping the novel's exploration of personal and political struggles. Shyam Selvadurai, born in Sri Lanka and later moving to Canada, draws from his personal experiences and the socio-political landscape of his homeland. The novel offers a poignant commentary on the intersection of personal and political struggles, reflecting Selvadurai's own journey as a gay Tamil man.

Sexuality

Arjie's sexual awakening and his path toward self-acceptance are central to the narrative. From a young age, he is drawn to feminine activities, setting him apart from other boys and leading to confusion and conflict within his family. In the opening story, "Pigs Can't Fly," Arjie prefers playing bride-ride in his mother's sari rather than engaging in typically masculine games. Arjie says, "The funny thing about being in a sari was that people's reactions made me aware of the extent to which I was no longer a boy." This early expression of his gender non-conformity leads to a significant family confrontation. Arjie's journey is marked by societal condemnation and internal conflict, reflecting broader issues of acceptance and identity. He writes, "The realization hit me that in the world I lived in, such a love was not only forbidden but would also never be understood."

As Arjie grows older, the pressure to conform intensifies. The family's desire to suppress any signs of non-heteronormative behaviour is evident in various incidents throughout the novel. One significant moment is when Arjie's father insists that he plays cricket with the other boys instead of participating in the girls' games. This forced engagement with traditionally masculine activities is a microcosm of the broader societal effort to enforce binary gender roles and heterosexual norms.

Arjie's interactions with his extended family further highlight the societal constraints imposed on individual expressions of sexuality. Characters like his grandmother and aunt embody traditional values, often reinforcing the notion that deviation from accepted norms is unacceptable. These familial expectations are mirrored by societal attitudes in Sri Lanka at the time, where homosexuality is not only stigmatized but also criminalized.

Arjie's relationships with Shehan sheds light on how the protagonist's realization of his sexuality was complicated further. Their bond evolves into a romantic relationship, providing Arjie with a sense of understanding and acceptance he does not find elsewhere. In "The Best School of All," Arjie and Shehan share intimate moments, despite the oppressive environment of their school and society. His relationship with Shehan Soyza, a fellow student, marks a significant moment of self-discovery and acceptance. "In the softness of Shehan's skin, I found the comfort and understanding I had been seeking all my life."

The educational setting in *Funny Boy* plays a crucial role in shaping Arjie's understanding of his sexuality. At school, he faces bullying and ostracism due to his perceived effeminacy. These experiences highlight the pervasive nature of homophobia in institutional environments. The school serves as a microcosm of the larger society, where rigid norms and prejudices are enforced through peer pressure and authority figures.

A pivotal character in Arjie's school life is his principal, Mr. Lokubandara, who represents the authoritative voice of societal norms. His attempts to discipline Arjie and steer him towards more 'acceptable' behaviour reflect the broader societal effort to suppress any form of sexual and gender non-conformity. This institutional oppression is a significant barrier to Arjie's journey of self-acceptance, illustrating the difficulties faced by those who do not fit into prescribed societal molds.

Identity

The novel delves into various facets of identity, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and personal growth, against the backdrop of political turmoil and cultural conservatism. From a young age, Arjie exhibits behaviors that deviate from traditional gender norms. His preference for dressing up as a bride during family gatherings is a significant early indication of his exploration of identity. This innocent play is met with varying degrees of acceptance and disapproval from his family, reflecting the broader societal discomfort with non-conformity. His father's insistence on engaging in activities deemed appropriate for boys, such as playing cricket, highlights the external forces that seek to shape and restrict individual identity. He writes, "My father's disapproval was a constant reminder that my love for dressing in saris was something shameful." Arjie's father plays a pivotal role in shaping his understanding of identity. His attempts to mold Arjie into a 'normal' boy are driven by a combination of love and societal pressure. This dynamic creates significant tension, as Arjie strives for his father's acceptance while also seeking to understand and embrace his true self. The conflict between parental expectations and personal identity is a recurring theme in the novel, illustrating the challenges faced by individuals who do not fit into prescribed societal molds. Arjie's initial foray into understanding his identity is marked by a sense of curiosity and innocence, which is gradually overshadowed by the realization of societal expectations. Arjie's sense of otherness is compounded by his family's expectations and societal pressures to conform to traditional Tamil values and norms. "I realized that there were many ways in which I was different, and I began to discover that there were also many ways in which I was the same," Arjie says.

Arjie's relationships with other characters in the novel are instrumental in his journey of self-discovery. His bond with Shehan, a fellow student, marks a significant turning point in his understanding and acceptance of his sexuality. Through Shehan, Arjie experiences romantic and sexual attraction, which, despite the fear and secrecy surrounding it, provides him with a sense of identity and belonging. Their relationship is both a source of joy and anxiety for Arjie, as he grapples with his feelings in a society that condemns such expressions of love. This duality underscores the internal conflict faced by many individuals as they navigate their sexual identities within hostile environments.

The exploration of identity in *Funny Boy* is intricately linked with the ethnic tensions between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities in Sri Lanka. Selvadurai juxtaposes Arjie's personal struggles with his sexual identity against the backdrop of increasing political violence and ethnic strife. This intersection adds layers of complexity to the narrative, illustrating how personal and political identities are often intertwined.

The ethnic conflict serves as a metaphor for the internal war that Arjie experiences regarding his identity. Just as the country is divided along ethnic lines, Arjie's sense of self is fractured by the conflicting demands of his desires and societal expectations. The violence and upheaval that characterize the ethnic tensions mirror the turmoil in Arjie's personal life, emphasizing the theme of displacement and the search for a place of belonging.

Arjie's identity is also influenced by the political tensions surrounding him. His family's experiences with ethnic violence and their involvement in the political conflict shape his understanding of who he is and where he belongs. The ethnic conflict and its impact on Arjie's

family are depicted in the story “Riot Journal: An Epilogue.” He writes, “Caught between two worlds, I felt the weight of my dual identity pressing down on me.”

Politics

The political background of the Sri Lankan civil war is crucial to the story, affecting the characters' lives and choices. The ethnic strife between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities adds another layer of intricacy to Arjie’s personal challenges. The political turmoil and aggression directly affect Arjie’s family, as demonstrated in the story “Small Choices,” where his family is compelled to face the reality of the ethnic conflict. Arjie states, “The violence that had been rumbling in the distance had finally come to our doorstep.”

The interaction between Arjie’s personal identity and the broader political environment emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and political issues. In the concluding story, “Riot Journal: An Epilogue,” Arjie’s perception of his identity is significantly influenced by the political violence and the displacement of his family. “As I navigated my own journey of self-discovery, I realized that my identity was deeply entwined with the political landscape of my country.”

Arjie’s family, although privileged, cannot avoid the effects of the political unrest. Selvadurai examines how political tensions intensify personal challenges, with the civil war acting as a catalyst for Arjie’s ultimate understanding of his identity and place in society. The civil war impacts their lives profoundly, highlighting the overlap of personal and political struggles: “Our lives, once so secure, had been turned upside down by the violence and hatred around us.”

Selvadurai portrays the daily manifestations of ethnic bias and discrimination, showing how these attitudes infiltrate various aspects of life, from social interactions to educational and professional opportunities. The novel demonstrates the insidious nature of systemic racism and its impact on individuals, particularly the Tamil characters who are frequently subjected to suspicion, marginalization, and violence. Selvadurai also explores the impact of political conflict on family dynamics. Arjie’s family, like many others, is deeply affected by the political turmoil. The tension between maintaining personal safety and upholding one’s principles becomes a recurring theme. Arjie’s father, for instance, prioritizes the safety of his family and often adopts a pragmatic approach to the political situation, which sometimes leads to moral compromises. Conversely, Arjie’s mother and other family members exhibit a range of responses, from passive acceptance to active resistance. This variety of reactions within a single family underscores the complexities of navigating a politically charged environment and the difficult choices individuals must make.

The novel also underscores the role of education and social institutions in sustaining political ideologies. Arjie’s experiences at school reflect the broader societal tensions and prejudices. His interactions with teachers and peers reveal how educational settings can reinforce ethnic divisions and political biases. The school environment becomes a microcosm of the larger political landscape, where power dynamics and social hierarchies are played out in micro-interactions. This setting allows Selvadurai to critique the role of institutions in shaping and maintaining societal norms and political attitudes.

Selvadurai’s treatment of politics in *Funny Boy* is also characterized by a sense of loss and displacement. The political conflict forces many characters to confront the fragility of their sense of belonging and identity. The violence and upheaval lead to a sense of dislocation, both physical and emotional. An early example is the story of Daryl Uncle, a family friend and journalist. Daryl’s investigation into government-sanctioned violence against Tamils brings him into direct conflict with the authorities. His mysterious death, widely believed to be a

murder orchestrated by the government, serves as a grim foreshadowing of the dangers that lie ahead. This incident exposes the ruthless lengths to which the state is willing to go to suppress dissent and highlights the precariousness of speaking out against injustice. This theme is poignantly illustrated in the final chapters of the novel, where the family's decision to leave Sri Lanka reflects a broader narrative of exile and the search for a safe and accepting environment. This sense of displacement is a powerful commentary on the human cost of political conflict and the enduring impact of such experiences on individuals and communities.

Conclusion

Selvadurai masterfully intertwines the themes of sexuality, identity, and politics, demonstrating their interconnectedness. Arjie's personal growth is depicted against the backdrop of political upheaval, showing how external conflicts mirror internal ones. Key scenes, such as Arjie's realization of his sexuality and the violent political clashes, are interwoven to highlight the interplay between the personal and the political. This thematic analysis reveals how Selvadurai uses the novel to comment on broader societal issues. Selvadurai employs various literary devices to enhance the thematic depth of "Funny Boy." His narrative style is intimate and evocative, drawing readers into Arjie's world. Symbolism and motifs, such as the sea and traditional Tamil rituals, are used to reflect the characters' inner turmoil and cultural heritage. Selvadurai's use of language, blending Tamil and English, adds authenticity and emphasizes the cultural duality experienced by the characters.

The novel's enduring relevance and critical acclaim underscore its importance as a literary work that bridges personal narratives with broader socio-political themes. *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai is a profound exploration of sexuality, identity, and politics. Through Arjie's journey, Selvadurai sheds light on the intricate interplay between personal and societal struggles, offering a nuanced perspective on the impact of political turmoil on individual lives. The novel's enduring relevance and critical acclaim underscore its importance as a literary work that bridges personal narratives with broader socio-political themes, as evident in the words of Arjie: "In the chaos of war and the quest for acceptance, I found that my journey was not just about discovering my sexuality, but also about understanding my place in a fractured world."

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