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[ijirset@gmail.com](mailto:ijirset@gmail.com)

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# Writing the Home Writing the Nation: A Reading of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

Dr. Kakali Dutta<sup>1</sup>

Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Nalbari College, Nalbari, Assam, India<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** In post colonial studies the border becomes an important site from which “culture can be located”. These studies have challenged fixed views of cultural activity and essentialist representational practices. Theories of hybridity have challenged essentialist notions of selfhood and nationhood by demonstrating the fluidity of borders and boundaries. Spatial categorization of the inside and the outside no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by the present world. Thus, it becomes necessary for the postcolonial writer to stretch beyond the limitations of conventional boundaries rather than reinforcing it. This comprehends new shapes and contours of identity where the concepts of home and nation transgress the limitations. Sri Lankan literature in English has been marked by competing nationalisms of civil war and of contestory constructions of home and belonging. Writing the home and nation for an expatriate Sri Lankan writer intersects with the discourse of the national space and the experience of displacements generated by political violence. This paper is presented from Selvadurai's position as a political exile who transgresses borders and boundaries. The confluence of writing the home along with the nation in “*Funny Boy*” shows the inevitability of the two spaces. Home and the nation intersect with one another as the private space of the home is destroyed by the ethnic conflict of the nation. The paper will show how Selvadurai tries to transgress the contest for territorial control within the nation through the mobility of his central character, Arjie, who moves across clearly defined spaces. It will go on to show how the realization of his private self is inextricably related with his consciousness of the ethnic conflict of the nation that unfolds before him from different incidents in the novel.

## LINTRODUCTION

In post colonial studies the border becomes an important site from which “culture can be located”. These studies have challenged fixed views of cultural activity and essentialist representational practices. Theories of hybridity have challenged essentialist notions of selfhood and nationhood by demonstrating the fluidity of borders and boundaries. The spatial categorization of boundaries and borders developed an “interstitial intimacy of the private and public, the home and the nation and the psyche and the social and these intimacies question the colonial binarism of borders (Bhabha: 19). Spatial categorization of the inside and the outside no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by the present world. Thus, it becomes necessary for the postcolonial writer to stretch beyond the limitations of conventional boundaries rather than reinforcing it. This comprehends new shapes and contours of identity where the concepts of home and nation transgress the limitations. As such, discourses of home in postcolonial fictions are sometimes offset by the actual condition of homelessness that confronts political refugees( Lal and Kumar intod).Studies of migration, diasporas and transnational citizens and citizenship critique the bounded and static categories of nation, ethnicity, home and community. Sri Lankan literature in English has been marked by competing nationalisms of civil war and of contestory constructions of home and belonging. Writing the home and nation for an expatriate Sri Lankan writer intersects with the discourse of the national space and the experience of displacements generated by political violence. After the civil war, the territorial control of the island which resulted in competing constructions of the Tamil need for an independent homeland, Eelam, had been countered by the state assertion of the need to preserve ‘the unity and territorial integrity’ of the island. For these writers who occupy a borderland identity, their works transgress the territorial discourses of spatial configurations.

In this context I would like to place Shyam Selvadurai, the Sri Lankan writer who was politically exiled and had to immigrate to Canada during the wake of the Sri Lankan race riots of 1983.Selvadurai's relationship to his former homeland Sri Lanka is mediated by his experience of expulsion from it. His experience of exile places him in a convenient position to narrate the past and his former homeland. Salman Rusdie points out in essay “Imaginary Homelands” that the position of a migrant writer is a crucial one as he writes from “a double perspective”, “he is at once insider and outsider in

society”(Rushdie:19). He explains that at times he “straddles between two cultures” at other times he falls between two stools; his position is at once “plural and partial” (Rushdie 15). Displaced from his own homeland, in the wake of the race riots, Selvadurai presents the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict at the backdrop in his novel *Funny Boy*. Selvadurai, in *Funny Boy* correlates Arjie’s awareness of his sexuality, with his awareness of how Tamil ethnicity disrupts the possibility of belonging within the prevailing discourse of national identity. Arjie’s desiring self which crosses over racialized and gendered terrains is determined by Selvadurai’s migrant position. The spatial configuration in the novel parallels the conflict of the Tamils and the Sinhalese over territoriality in the Sri Lankan nation. Selvadurai’s continuous emphasis on these structured space and his subsequent transgression shows both his affiliation and contestation of fixed identities from his migrant standpoint. Arjie’s transgression of essentialized spaces focuses on the fluidity of physical boundaries thus rendering the uncertainty of fixed spaces. Arjie’s queer self puts him in a liminal space which can transcend the spatial configurations of ethnic identity. Thus, “Writing the Home and the Nation” in this paper is presented from Selvadurai’s position as a political exile who transgresses borders and boundaries. The confluence of writing the home along with the nation in “*Funny Boy*” shows the inevitability of the two spaces. Home and the nation intersect with one another as the private space of the home is destroyed by the ethnic conflict of the nation. *Funny Boy* show the intersecting of the home and the nation in Arjie’s realization of his self through different incidents in the novel.

The paper will show how Selvadurai tries to transgress the contest for territorial control within the nation through the mobility of his central character, Arjie, who moves across clearly defined spaces. It will go on to show how the realization of his private self is inextricably related with his consciousness of the ethnic conflict of the nation that unfolds before him from different incidents in the novel. At the end, the paper will attempt to show that the concept of the secured space of home is destroyed and Arjie moves to a world beyond the narrowly defined cultural frontiers. His experience of losing his home and his expulsion from Sri Lanka question the fixities that surround the concepts of the home. Arjie’s queer identity and his cross dressing serves to contest fixed identity. Thus, from the position of a migrant writer, writing the home and the nation follow a different terrain in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*. It is not merely that Selvadurai shows the home space intersecting with the nation space but it moves to a terrain where he transcends the limits of these spaces. As Jayawickrama points out, “private and public history becomes traumatically bound as the interstitial points of their domains exceeded and ruptured their connections, rendering identity and home deeply uncertain”(Jayawickrama:48).

As the novel presents the Tamil and the Sinhalese conflict at the backdrop, I will first throw light on the demographic structure of Sri Lanka. “The Sri Lankan population consists of four major communities, the Sinhalese (74 per cent), Lankan Tamils (12.6 per cent). Tamils of Indian origin (5.6 per cent) and Muslims (7.1 per cent). The Sinhalese and Lankan Tamils have lived in the country for over two thousand years; the Tamils of Indian origin were brought to the island in the nineteenth century primarily as indentured workers in the mainly British-owned plantations.” The Tamil- Sinhalese conflicts led to the emergence of the race riots in 1983. Newspaper reports on July 24, 1983 says “this island ‘paradise’ for the tourists turned into a veritable hell for its Tamil inhabitants with fire and smoke breaking out in the heart of the capital city of Colombo. Within days rioting spread all over the island, a wave of mass murder, assault, arson and looting directed against Tamils engulfing almost all the township in the country and the plantation areas.”(Economic and Political Weekly: Oct1, 1983).

As a migrant writer, narrating his homeland, from outside, Selvadurai is careful to position his central character Arjie as a bystander who is politically naïve to understand the complex nature of the conflict. As a child Arjie’s restricted world view does not permit him to understand the conflict torn society and Selvadurai with his narrative skill places the conflict almost outside the narrative frame. The racial hatred between the Tamils and the Sinhalese does not quite interfere with Arjie’s life at the beginning of the novel. In his essay on Ceylon’s “Time of Trouble” Howard Wriggins comments that amongst the western elites there had been close association between the Tamils and the Sinhalese as he points out, “Certain rural districts (as well as in Colombo and Kandy) Sinhalese and Tamils live side by side, tolerating one another but without being intimate. Only among the Western- educated has there been close association between Tamils and Sinhalese.”(Wriggins:33). Arjie belongs to an urban, prosperous, middle class Tamil family that seeks a quiet, peaceful accommodation with the majority Sinhalese in Colombo. He speaks Sinhalese, he knows no Tamil and is admitted in a Sinhalese school. Appa (his father) runs a hotel business with uncle Sena, a Sinhalese. Freshly returned from study in America, his aunt, Radha has a progressive view of inter-ethnic relations. “If two people love each other, the rest is unimportant,” she tells her sister Mala (76).

However, although the conflict is placed outside the narrative framework in the first book, Selvadurai mimics the

conflicts over territoriality in the larger space of the Sri Lankan nation- state from the beginning. Selvadurai's conceptualization of space as a racialized terrain and his persistent conflation of the personal and the national allows us to read these spaces as parallels to the state of the nation (Jayawickrama:46). Jayawickrama points out that the partitions between the two gendered spaces act as a metaphor for contested territorial control (Jayawickrama:46). The title of the first book "Pigs Can't Fly," affirms that no logic can explain the inevitability of these structured spaces. While describing the two distinct spaces of boys and girls play, Selvadurai brings in the concepts of territoriality and leadership : "Territoriality the area around my grandparents' house was divided into two. The front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys, although included in their group was my female cousin Meena. In this territory , two factions struggled for power, one led by Meena and the other by my brother, Varuna, who because of a prevailing habit, had been renamed Diggy....."(3)

Selvadurai disrupts the fixity of these essentialised spaces of ethnic divide by making his narrator intrude into the girls' space. Arjie is able to move with relative freedom between the spaces. Arjie's 'funny' identity makes him move freely into the girls' territory. The word funny as he is identified by his relatives when Kanthy Aunty exposes his 'funny ' identity shows that he does not fall within the structured gendered spaces. His parents are very much disturbed at his 'funny identity' and Amma tries to force his entry into the boys' territory. Selvadurai wants to present that these essentialised ethnic divides have been deeply ingrained in the Sri Lankan nation. Selvadurai's immigration to Canada after the race riots of 1983 places him outside the spatial limits of national identity. Selvadurai's putting Arjie in this liminal space shows his resistance to the essential notion of gendered and racialized identity. He takes sufficient care to show the pleasures Arjie enjoys in these liminal moments represented in his cross-dressing or observing Amma wearing the sari. The tropes of cross-dressing are devised in order to imagine a space for transgression. Arjie finds a distinct pleasure in trespassing to the girls' territory- "I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another more beautiful self"(4). His free sojourn into the girls' territory shows how as a child he is unable to concede the spatialization of the world which unfolds before him.

Selvadurai's depiction of Arjie's emergent queerness in his cross dressing and his gravitating into the "girls' territory " reaches its final stage when he falls in love with a Sinhalese boy, Shehan Soysa. In this relationship with Shehan, Arjee discovers his queer self. In his act of love, he feels himself separated from his family as he reflects: I looked around at my family and I saw that I had committed a terrible crime against them, against the trust and love they had given me. I glanced at Amma and imagined what her reaction would have been had she discovered us, the profound expression of hurt that would have come over her face(262) Arjie's realization of his queer subjectivity makes him transgress the established notions of masculinity. Arjie's desire for Shehan puts him in a different space which goes against the discourse of masculinity being taught in the Victorian Academy. Emphasizing on Arjie's process of self identity Minoli Salgado points out that "the queerness of Arjie place him as a model of a decentred queer identity. She comments that "the queerness of identity Arjie as a "funny Boy" is mediated through Selvadurai's position as an outsider, a migrant(Salgado:12).

As a migrant writer, speaking out from an outside space, Selvadurai foregrounds Arjie's neutral position in narrating the conflict. Arjie's political naivety does not allow him to fathom the ethnic conflict of the nation; the conflict remains peripheral to him. It is only when the conflict reaches home that Arjie comes face to face with it (Choudhury:102). Slowly in the episodes that follow Arjie becomes aware of the violence in Jaffna through the attack on Radha Aunty, the abduction and murder of Daryl, and the final explosion of violence in Colombo in which Arjie's grandparents are killed. There are three specific situations where Arjie faces the conflict: the first relates to the marriage of Radha Aunty, the second concerns the accidental death of Daryl Brohier and the third, which is climatic in its impact, involves the rioting and the subsequent dispersal of Arjie's family to a world beyond Sri Lanka(Choudhury:102). In these three situations, Arjie's experience in the familial and domestic sphere collides with the exercise of politics in the public realm. The experience from these incidents makes him conscious about the political world around him. Arjie first becomes conscious of how ethnic politics impinge on affectional relationships when his aunt Radha begins dating a Sinhalese man named Anil. Ammachi accuses Radha Aunty for having an affair with Anil, who was a Sinhalese. Here for the first time Arjie's curiousness about being a Sinhalese is awakened. Through the narrative Selvadurai takes care to present how Arjie slowly begins to make sense of the ethnic divide that unfolds before him. Arjie's surprise at ethnic intolerance is repeatedly foregrounded before him as when he comes to know of Ammachi's hatred for the Sinhalese he "I wondered why Anil's being Sinhalese upset her so much? I was in Sinhalese class at school and my friends were Sinhalese. My parents' best friends were too. Even our servant was Sinhalese. So what did it matter if Anil was Sinhalese or not"(59). For the first time,

he hears the word “rascist” which his father explains to him(60). Through the narrative Selvadurai piles in the sudden surprises in his moments of self realization as the historical facts of the nation unfolds before him. He comes to know of the race riots of the 1950s where his grandfather was killed. Until then, Arjie’s memories of his grandfather consisted of his photograph that hung at the centre of all the pictures in the corridor at his grandfather’s house. He finds it impossible to connect him with the dead man, Janaki, the maid, had described. This is how the history of the Tamil Sinhalese conflict opens up before him before him. He comes to know from his father about the cause of the riot of the 50s which killed his grandfather. Thus, he becomes aware of the language conflict the demand of the Sinhalese to make Sinhala, the only national language which was opposed by the Tamils. He is also informed about the Tamil Tigers residing in Jaffna. After this incident the political conflict of the nation becomes known to him as he says “From then on I began to listen carefully to the conversation of the adults to discover more about the quarrels between the Sinhalese and the Tamils”(61). With his knowledge many things become clear to him as he ponders, “Now I understand why they had quarreled so bitterly when I started school a year ago and my father had put me in a Sinhalese class.”

Daryl Brohier’s accidental death in Jaffna makes Arjie aware of the civil unrest in the Lankan social and political world. Brohier is a Burgher, a term used by the Lankans to designate people of mixed Dutch or Portuguese and Tamil or Sinhalese descent. Daryl had emigrated to Australia and became a journalist there, but he returns to Sri Lanka to investigate reports that the Sri Lankan government was indulging in torture and killing of the Tamils in the countryside. When she was young, Arjie’s mother wanted to marry him but the ethnic divide would not permit such relationships. His return to Sri Lanka is marked by his mother’s reviving her ties with him and on several occasions Arjie himself had been an onlooker in their secret meetings. Daryl’s disappearance and murder in Jaffna shows how the ethnic violence extends from the public realm directly into the intimacy of Amma’s domestic life. “We must do something,” she tells Arjie. “But where does one turn when the police and the government are the offenders?” (134). The disappearance and killing of Daryl shows the high handedness of the state while dealing with the minorities.

The relationships between Radha Aunty and Anil and Arjie’s mother’s and Daryl Brohier fail as the private world of love and desire is unable to resist the ideological conflicts. In all these incidents in the novel, Selvadurai shows how the private experience of desire is intervened by the outside world. At the end of Radha Aunty’s marriage, Arjie realizes that it was not as in the love comics, “Before I believed that if two people loved each other everything was possible. Now I knew that this was not so.” But none of these relationships can flourish in ethnicity-conscious Sri Lanka. As Mala tells her sister Radha, a Tamil-Sinhalese marriage can only go forward if both families agree to support it. The murder of their great-grandfather years earlier forecloses this possibility. “Ultimately, you have to live in the real world,” says Mala, “And without your family you are nothing (78). These relationships are further re-affirmed in Arjie’s relationship with Shehan. He is aware of the cultural difference from his friend, but this awareness did not change his feeling.

## II.CONCLUSION

The tensions of the ethnic conflict that are built in these different incidents in the novel culminates in the final event of the book which leads to Arjie loss of his home. Arjie’s family is forced to take shelter in the house of their Sinhalese friends Sena uncle and Chithra Aunty. In the destruction of the family home by rioting mob Arjie moves into a different plane where the house as a space of familial and personal life and his neighborhood are all totally defamiliarized by the incursions of violence. The home which had been a space of protection and shelter appears strange and unfamiliar to him. This defamiliarization of the family home to Arjie renders the spaces of home and belonging deeply uncertain. Arjie admit “I long to be out of this country. I don’t feel at home in Sri Lanka .any longer, will never feel safe again.”(304). Home is no more a secure place for him. Amma comments that “One doesn’t feel safe speaking Tamil these days.” Appa also confesses at the end, “It is very clear that we no longer belong in this country” (304). Selvadurai relocates the secured position of the home space from his experience of the 1983 race riots and his expulsion thereafter .When Arjie leaves the ruins of his home, he does not bother to close the gate of the house for as he says,” There was no reason to protect it against the outside world anymore.”(312). The novel ends with Arjie’s moving away from his home and when from the top of the road he turns back at the house for the last time, the house appears blurred to him.

All quotations from “Funny Boy” are from Shyam Selvadurai *Funny Boy*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994



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