

The Unnamed Space: A Study on Suppressed Queer Desires in Shyam

Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

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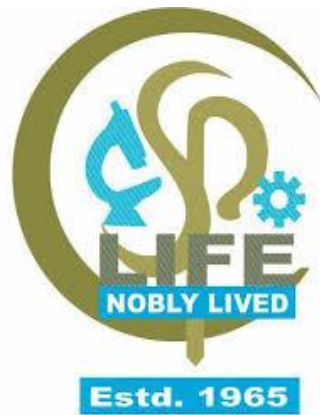
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Declaration

I do hereby declare that the project “The Unnamed Space: A Study on Suppressed Queer Desires in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*” is the record of genuine research work done by me under the guidance of Ms. Rosy Milna, Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Paul’s College, Kalamassery.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the project work “The Unnamed Space: A Study on Suppressed Queer Desires in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*” is a record of the original work carried out by Aparna M.S under the supervision and guidance of Ms. Rosy Milna, Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Paul’s College, Kalamassery.

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Introduction

Nature of human behaviour is a matter of discussion in current scenario; the way they think, feel, act constitute their nature. Well, in a way, all these behavioural patterns are programmed. The basic dispositions and traits which are considered natural are clearly a part of socialization. Exactly like language which has been evolved from people to people. Hence, it is bit difficult to trace the true human nature. That is, it is evident that, in today's social status, all those natural or normal behavioural tendencies and moods are simply created and are followed as norms.

People are busy in leading a 'normal' life. In dressing, talking, thinking and even in case of sexuality and emotions there happens a search of being 'normal'. Talking about sexuality or sexual identity of an individual, male and female which are conventional, and also transgender are nowadays accepted. But there are people who are different from these entire fixed perspectives; Gay, lesbian and bisexual. They are in chains, being unable to express their emotions.

Queer or strange is how these people are defined nowadays. According to Merriam Webster dictionary; queer means differing in some way from what is usual or normal. This means something odd or strange. And thus, this LGBTQ category had become an equivalent for strangeness. That is people consider all those things outside their expectations as weird. And this happens in a typical patriarchal society, a society in which only typicality matters, a society that does not have an entrance for something different; normally different.

The major complication is in the attitude of people. As every single male or female, individuals who are homosexual or bisexual are also normal and natural. Usually people are blind towards this fact and are more curious to follow the majority. What most have is right, what most says is truth and what most follows is the fact. Well, these kinds of attitudes, as

per scientific studies, cause mental troubles like depression on LGBTQ individuals. Questions arise on their identity and are not even regarded as individuals. They are even neglected by their families. It is only towards the twenty first century that a talk on LGBTQ arises. And a mass number of literary contributions had laid the base stone of LGBTQ literature.

Shyam Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan-Canadian writer and *Funny Boy* (1994) is his debut novel. What makes Selvadurai different from other diasporic writers is that most of Selvadurai's work including *Funny Boy*, *Cinnamon Garden's* (1998) and *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) the protagonists are given a gay identity. And as he says in an interview titled "Shyam Selvadurai on his new book *The Hungry Ghosts*" that, his rule is, he will never make a gay character forcibly but, if it is possible he will let them be and if it is not then he won't make them gay. As he says, being gay is not just nothing it comes with a set of baggage, if you write a gay character you have to have inevitable coming out(0:30-0:40). *Funny boy* was primarily published as six fragmented stories, yet adhered together, by McClelland and Stewart in September 1994. It won the First Novel Award, Canada and the Lambda Award for Best Gay Men's Fiction, 1997 and also shortlisted for the Giller Prize, 1994. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005) is another work of Selvadurai. In addition to his novels, he edited the anthology, *Story-Wallah: A Celebration of South Asian Fiction* (2004).

Born in 1965 to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamilian father during the tense political climate of Sri Lanka, Shyam Selvadurai has incorporated many of his own experiences in his novel *Funny Boy*. Shyam Selvadurai migrated to Canada at the age of nineteen, with his family, following the political tensions at the time. As the contemporary novelist Peter Dickinson advocates, "Like much recent South Asian diasporic fiction, the novels of Shyam Selvadurai share several thematic preoccupations: with the inherited legacy of British colonial past; with the more recent strife caused by post-independence ethnic and religious

divisions; with journeys of migration and return; generational conflicts, duties compelled, and traditions neglected”.

This paper thrust upon the protagonist Arjie (Arjun) of the novel *Funny Boy* who is a gay. It also mentions about the lover of Arjie, Shehan, who is also a gay. The paper scrutinizes the life of Arjie, as young boy identifying his sexual identity, the different attitudes towards it and what makes it ‘funny’. The story is set in a typical Tamil middle class family in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1970’s and 1980’s, the time when there exist a raging violence between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. The novel deals with the struggles Arjie confronts during his childhood, when he not even understands what is happening with him and how others, including his own family fails to learn him. The mentality of human race towards homosexuality is well defined in this novel.

As a gay himself, Shyam Selvadurai’s experiences give a base to *Funny Boy*. The novel is written not as a protest to society. Instead, it presents all the conflicts including social, political and emotional struggles through the vision of a young gay boy. As the title of the novel suggests, there are many funny things which are not so funny, but needs some attention. Even in this so-called modern world people makes fun of others emotions. They are least bothered about the feelings and emotions of others and when it’s about ‘matured’ people thinking like that, who else could shut them. This paper emphasis on, looking at the life of a gay and attitude of the society towards them, with reference to the protagonist of Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*.

Chapter 1

Understanding Queerness

Queer theory had been emerged out as a result of struggles against women discrimination and gender studies during 1990's. It is not easy to point out the origin of the term 'queer theory' as it was an outcome of several critical movements. However, Teresa de Lauretis, an Italian author and an established Professor, is a pioneer in employing the term in her 1991 journal *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. Queer was not an alternative for gay/ lesbian. It was totally against the essentialist ideas existed. It denoted primarily, something that is out of the conventional ideas, breaking all the binaries and so-called normal concepts. The very aim of queer theory is to crack the unethical thoughts and social constructs on distinguishing the roots of sexuality in the society. In theories it is very transparent but when it comes to social usage, becomes very complicated.

The term queer literally means strange or odd. But it had become a generic term for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBTQ). And, thus, knowingly or unknowingly it characterizes sexual minorities as strange. This shows the nineteenth century society's uneasiness towards human beings who have sexual relationship with same sex. Thus, queer theory opposes the philosophy of essentialism, which proposes that things have a set of properties and characteristics which make them what they are. It breaks the concept of seeking binaries in everything. By birth a man, doesn't mean he should carry the norms of masculinity. He, as an individual and a different person could have his own emotions and feelings.

The Queer theory has been evolved through the hands of philosophers like Michel Foucault. He was a French philosopher and a theorist. He always possessed a continuous hatred for the bourgeoisies and sympathy for the marginalised and, hence, had solid influence

in the realm of gay and lesbian studies or queer studies. His major works are *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Order of Things* (1966), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84). *The History of Sexuality* could be considered as an outlook on the appearance of modern sexuality in the nineteenth century. He explains how sodomy was a forbidden act and how homosexuality became an individual's personality. He states:

The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature (Foucault, 43).

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault tries to reveal how an individual's perceptions and acknowledgement are technically modified by the repressive powers of the society. He questions the way of looking at homosexuality as unnatural. In the second volume Foucault points out how the nineteenth century texts portrayed homosexuality. He delineates the stereotypical portrait of the homosexual in the nineteenth century texts:

In the nineteenth century texts there is a stereotypical portrait of the homosexual or invert: not only his mannerisms, his bearing, the way he gets dolled up, his coquetry, but also his facial expressions, his anatomy, the feminine morphology of his whole body, are regularly included in this

disparaging description. The image alludes both to the theme of role reversal and to the principle of a natural stigma attached to this offense against nature.

It was as if "nature herself had become an accessory to sexual mendacity"

(18).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was an American author, who had relentless interest in the field of queer theory. She was a pioneer and the most influential queer theorists. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) is her notable works. Through her works she questions the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality. She emphasize on the importance of understanding the relationship between same genders and also the practicability of sexual relations between them.

Epistemology of Closet is the most notable work of Sedgwick. In Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* he talked about the nineteenth century concepts of homosexuality, where as in *Epistemology of Closets* Sedgwick discusses the knowledge of twentieth century Western Culture on the endemic crisis of hetero/ homosexuality definition, indicatively gay. In the first chapter he narrates the incident of a school teacher, Acanfora, who lost his job because of his sexual identity. It happens in Montgomery County, Maryland, in 1973. Acanfora was an eighth grade teacher. He got transferred to the position of a non-teaching staff by the Board of Education when they find out he was a gay. Even the court supported the Board of Education. The accusation against him was that, he failed to note in his original application form that he, in his college, was an officer of a student homophile organisation- a notion that would have prevented him ever being hired. Here, Sedgwick observes that neither evens the disclosure nor the concealment matters. If one remains closed he should be beware of being found out and if he dares to open up marginalization is his fate. Even the judicial systems are programmed in such a way to oppress the gay or homosexual identities.

Judith Butler is an American author and a gender theorist whose work had a strong significance in the fields of feminist, queer and literary theory. She is recognised for her works *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1995). She looks gender as performative. In an interview titled “Judith Butler: Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender” she says that, gender to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. It is different from saying gender is performed. When gender is performed, a role playing takes place which is crucial to the gender we are and the gender we present to the world. To be performative she claims that nobody really is a gender from the start. She is of the view that gender is culturally formed but it is also a domain of gender of agency or freedom. She opines that it is most important to resist the violence that is imposed by ideal gender norms, especially against those who are gender different (0:11-2:52).

In her *Gender Trouble* Butler propose the question that “how and when gender construction takes place?” And if it is constructed “could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?” (Butler, 11). Most of the theorists emphasise that identities are not constant; they are changeable and this change could happen within an individual at any time.

Queerness could be said to have entered literature from the very beginning, before it out broke as a social protest. Gay literature is a collective term for literature produced on the LGBTQ community. Many writers brought the theme and concept of homosexuality in their works irrespective of the social stigma prevailed. Writers dared to open their pen towards an unknown world in the midst of a period of protest, which ultimately gave birth to countless emotions and feelings. Around the world, started the beginning of an advanced era, where new authors, new characters, new relationships and untold stories began to develop.

Considering the writings in the field of gay literature, Shakespeare could be identified as a prominent figure. He is said to be a gay and his works, mainly his sonnets, also gives this idea too. He had written one hundred and fifty four sonnets. Among them the first group, that is, one hundred and twenty six addresses a young man who is portrayed as fair youth. During Shakespeare's time this was considered a deep friendship between the speaker and the man addressed. His most popular fair youth sonnets are Sonnet 1, Sonnet 18, Sonnet 29, Sonnet 73 and Sonnet 116. James Baldwin is another author. James Baldwin's work seems to present the theme of homosexuality. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), first novel of Baldwin presents the life of the protagonist, John Grimes, who gets attracted by his teacher Elisha. The novel portrays how Grime suffers in his difficulties on his search for his own identity. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) pens the homosexual relationship between David and Giovanni. David realizes his identity when his fiancée goes for a holiday. He develops friendship with Giovanni and their bond become stronger. *Another Country* (1962), *Tell Me How long The Train Been Gone* (1968) and *Just Above My Head* (1979) are some other works of Baldwin that carries the theme. His way of portrayal is very natural as a controversial for heterosexual narration. He challenges the forced heterosexuality which prevailed in America.

Calamus is one such work by Walt Whitman, the most celebrated poet of America, which portrays the love between men. Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982) also mentions the theme of homosexuality. But Walker's presenting the same sex love or lesbian love is different. She places the love between two women on the basis of care and understanding more than satisfying sexual desires. Oscar Wilde, the Irish poet got arrested because of his homosexual identity, as in England homosexuality was considered a crime. His *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) could present a reader many gay readings. Virginia Woolf's contribution to this field is her most famous work *Orlando* (1928) which is dedicated

to her friend and lover Vita Sackville – West. The book begins with a man, who by the end becomes a woman. E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (1971) is another best known work which presents the story of Maurice, who falls in love with his classmate Clive. But the love story never completes as Clive leaves Maurice. But, later, Maurice falls for another man, Alex Scudder, who lives together later. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) is the initial work of Jeanette Winterson, narrates the complicated story of a lesbian girl and the conflict which existed between religion and the LGBTQ category during the period. *City of lights* is a 1953 novel by John Rechy an American novelist. The novel narrates the story of a gay hustler. The story delineates queer life in mid-century America.

A matter of discussion is necessary on how religions affect the life of homosexual individuals. It is not necessary that an individual by birth a man should possess men like qualities. Conventional society looks up on homosexuality as a health issue which is very embarrassing according to them. And they even believe that religion could help to overcome homosexuality. There is some religion which even shows homosexuality as a sin. Religion had a very great influence on the perspectives of society. The deities worship in most of the religion are either male or female, who perfectly possess masculine and feminine qualities. Most of the mythical characters in holy books seem to develop a social taboo on what a man and a woman should do.

Until the nineteenth century, there existed laws which prohibited the same sex relationships. There were countries like who where against the law were severely punished, even executed. Same sex intimacy was criminalized during the period. Nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of identity struggles in literature. By twentieth century onwards a number of movements and organizations emerged. In United States, Harry Hay began the first male organization- Mattachine Society, in Los Angeles, in 1950-51. Also a national gay periodical, *One*, got published. Changes were also visible in the laws. In Britain, the

Parliament in the Sexual Offences Act decriminalized the sexual relation between men of age 21 or older. By the end of the twentieth century consent for entering the political sphere was given and many gay government officials arose from the country like Jerry De Griebek and Nancy Wechsler. Tammy Baldwin, from Wisconsin, became the first openly gay politician to be elected to both the U.S. House of Representatives (1998) and the U.S. Senate (2012). In 2009 Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became prime minister of Iceland—the world's first openly gay head of government (Levy, *Gay Rights*, 2019). Ban for the gay population in many fields including military were removed and they began to get equal opportunities in all fields. The 2013 judgment of the Supreme Court of India abolished the section 377 of the Indian constitution. Section 377 considered same sex as 'unnatural offence' which threatened imprisonment. Outside struggles are noted in the history of nations, but, the conflicts inside the mind of the society still proceeded.

Chapter 2

Through Funny Boy

Funny Boy (1994) is the combination of six fragmented stories. It is Arjie, the protagonist, who connects the six stories together. The novel explores the theme of identity crisis. It discusses the Tamil – Sinhalese conflict which ultimately leads to a civil war; loss of many lives and desires and portrays the story of a growing boy Arjie (Arjun), who is a gay. The novel is narrated by Arjie, whose journey from his childhood to adulthood unfolds the secrets, the injustices, and sometimes delightful memories in many different lives, including his own as a gay child. Hence, both ethnic and sexual identity crisis could be discovered in the novel.

Six stories become six chapters in *Funny Boy*. Hence, each chapter is complete in itself. Each chapter narrates an account of different lives through Arjie, the young narrator. First chapter of the novel is “Pigs Can’t Fly”, which has its setting at Arjie’s grandparents’ (Ammachi and Appachi) house. It discusses on Arjie’s certain interests like bride-ride game, saris, jewellery etc. The chapter follows Arjie’s childhood days, where he narrates his experiences during the “spend-the-days” (Selvadurai, 1), when his whole family will be having a together time. It describes how Arjie turns out a “funny one” (14) in his family and how the spend-the-days, his most favourite, became an uncomfortable and embarrassing space for Arjie. Characters like his Ammachi, Amma and Appa (parents), his elder brother Varuna who had been renamed as Diggy-nose and his sister Sonali; Kanthi Aunty (the fourth oldest in his father’s family), Cyril Uncle, and their daughter Tanuja who came from abroad and was quickly renamed as ‘Her Fatness’, his cousin Lakshmi and his another cousin Meena, the only girl who play with the boys are introduced in the first chapter. Also he mentions the names of other siblings of his father, Ravi Uncle, Mala Aunty, Babu Uncle,

Seelan Uncle and Radha Aunty. As the title “Pigs Can’t Fly” suggests, in this chapter Arjie realizes that the world that surrounds him has limitations.

The second chapter is “Radha Aunty”. The chapter introduces the character Radha Aunty, the youngest in Arjie’s father’s family. It narrates how Radha loses her love due to the prevailed Tamil – Sinhalese conflicts. Arjie is the only child who is always with Radha and hence, he clearly observes the instances that surrounds them; the way the elders talk, their matters of discussion and everything. It is in this chapter Arjie speaks about the dispute between Tamils and the Sinhalese and how Radha loses her love, Anil, due to this dispute. It also shows Radha’s attitude to Arjie, how different her reactions are when compared to other members of the family.

Arjie’s first exposure to his identity happens in the chapter “See No Evil, Hear No Evil” where he talks about Daryl Uncle, who he believed to have a past with his Amma and who is a journalist. He is a journalist who is a Sri Lankan by nationality. He came from Australia to look for evidence of torture and disappearances by the police during the prevailed political milieu and he found dead in the chapter. In this chapter Arjie is having a glimpse of his inner emotions and feeling though he not clearly understands what. This chapter describes the days Daryl spends with Arjie’s family during their fathers’ absence and how Arjie discovers the truths about his Amma and Daryl Uncle’s lost love and how they tries to find Daryl’s killer.

“Small Choices” is the next chapter in which Arjie talks about Jegan, son of Mr. Chelvaratnam’s (Arjie’s Appa) friend. He is introduced as a twenty-five year old qualified accountant who came seeking a job. Jegan maintained a very good relation with Arjie’s family and he was a part of it. He was a Tamil Tiger member before joining Arjie’s family. Later, it is found that, he gets arrested by the police for an assassination attempt Arjie had a

strong bond with Jegan. A poster with a note of ‘Death to all Tamil Pariah’ founds on Jegan’s door at the hotel. Later, as Appa’s pressure to choose between his family and Jegan grows, he eventually fires Jegan from the business. Arjie seems to have a strong bond with Jegan and he got stunned by his realization of how much he adores and notices a man. He found himself falling for Jegan. Arjie finds Jegan attractive and also admires Jegan’s quality of understanding things.

The fifth chapter of *Funny Boy* is “The Best School of All” in which Arjie gets admitted to a new school, The Queen Victoria Academy, a strict and traditional British colonial school. His Appa wanted to transform Arjie to a man and he believed the academy could force him to be a man. As in the previous chapters, this chapter also introduces a new character, Shehan Soyza, about whom Arjie talks very deeply. Arjie’s realisation on his identity as a gay properly happens in this chapter and it is Shehan who became responsible for it. Arjie meets Shehan in the Academy. Shehan could be identified as equal as Arjie, but a boy having a carefree nature. The principle of the academy, Black Tie, caught Shehan for having long hair and continued to punish him daily. Shehan towards the end seems to be tired of these punishments. The Drama teacher, Mr.Sunderalingam, who got impressed by Arjie’s poem recitation, recommends him to Black Tie for reciting the poem on a prize giving ceremony. The Tamil – Sinhalese conflict and divisions were present within the teachers also. Even the whole school was divided in to two on this. Mr. Lokubandara, the vice principle wants to turn the academy into a Sinhala school. If Arjie failed to recite the poem, based on which Black Tie’s speech for the programme is written, properly Black Tie will lose his principle post and it will be transferred to Mr. Lokubandara. Towards the end of the chapter it seems that Arjie recite the poem irregularly in order to save Shehan from Black Tie’s Punishment.

The final chapter, “Riot Journal: An Epilogue” is very different as it is written as a journal which narrates the days from 1983 July 25 in his life when the civil war rose. As the title suggests it portrays the days of riots. It is written that, all the Tamil houses were burned by the mob including Arjie’s house. He and his family witnessed his grandparents being burned alive in a car. Meanwhile, during a break in the curfew Shehan visit Arjie. His visit made Arjie happy because then he “wanted more than anything else to hold him” (301). Arjie, then, realises that he is a Tamil and Shehan is a Sinhalese. But as he says “This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him” (302). He understood that they could no longer be together, as he, along with his family, is going to leave Sri Lanka and migrate to Canada.

Funny Boy could be misunderstood as an autobiographical piece of writing as the protagonist Arjie and the author shares some similarities. But it’s an entirely different story. The novel throws light on Arjie’s struggles of identifying and establishing his sexual identity and his racial identity. It is an incredible narrative on the uneasiness of gender non-conformity. It delineates the views of a patriarchal society towards a queer identity and explains how they rules over others choices and crushes the transgressive desires. Queer theory in literature focuses on those identities and behaviours which are out of the mainstream norms. It comprises the reading of queerness in texts. The reading of non-conformity gender, sexuality and identity is what it is focused on. Hence, queer theory could be applied in the novel. Next chapter deals with the analysis of *Funny Boy* on the basis of queer theory. It focuses on deriving queer aspects in the work.

Chapter 3

Hurdles of being Funny

This chapter focuses on the struggles faced by a young gay boy for being strange, in Shyam Selvadurai's 1994 novel *Funny Boy*, and phases of realization of his sexual identity. Selvadurai's novels had the background of oppressions on class, gender and colour as he was from a Tamil-Sinhalese family in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Selvadurai remarks that, "I remembered how it was for me feeling there was no one out there who was a role model of any sort. When I decided to be out in public, I was really thinking of that version of me in Sri Lanka who would read my book and feel relieved to not be alone. If I decided not to be out, I would be sending a message to that young person that I was still afraid and ashamed" (Hunn, 2).

Identity crisis, that is, difficulty in establishing one's own identity is the major problem faced by a person. And, eventually, they are tagged as queer in the society as well as in one's own family. Likewise, in the novel *Funny Boy*, Arjie turns to be funny. The way he finds out his own identity and reaction of people on him being funny is detailed in the novel. The funniness of Arjie is well narrated mostly through two chapters; "Pigs Can't Fly" and "The Best School of All" even though the theme could be seen all through the novel.

Arjie is a young boy, through whom the whole novel is narrated. Arjie belongs to a Tamil family. The first chapter begins in Arjie's grandparent's house where he along with his cousins had their spend-the-days, for which Arjie is very excited as he could play with his cousins their fairy tale games. Arjie is more interested to play with his girl cousins. Arjie was made the leader of the group for his imagination. As the leader of the group he was always given the main part of the play "...I was the much-beleaguered heroine of these tales" (Selvadurai, 4). He was so much fantasized for playing the central characters (mostly

heroines) of the play. He was very fascinated by the game bride-ride. His ultimate moment of joy is when he wears the cloths of the bride. He played the game with full on dedication.

—by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes- I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world..... seemed to revolve. It was a self magnified, like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema, larger than life; and like them, I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested (4).

Arjie's cross dressing contributes to Judith Butler's idea that gender is performative. She opines that the way one act and talk and walk consolidate his or her impression as a man or a woman. But in funny boy the gender roles do not have any space until the elders makes fun of Arjie. Even, neither Arjie himself nor his playmates found anything wrong in his interest. He enjoyed every moment in the play. But with the arrival of his cousin Tanuja, who they call "Her Fatness" (5), Arjie loses his position as the bride. Arjie, as an innocent boy, by being a bride enjoys his more beautiful self. When he wraps the sari he never sees a bride as particularly a female or even as a woman. He never places any gender roles to the bridal icon. He realizes the notion of bride as a female when Tanuja argues with him. R.W.Connell, an Australian sociologist, in her research on masculinity and gender strategies for schools states that though some practices reduces gender differences, certain practices in the educational system such as curriculum division, discipline systems and sports reinforces the gender dichotomy. This is evident in Tanuja's argument with Arjie. "But he's not even a girl.....A bride is a girl, not a boy. She looked around at the other cousins and then at me. A boy cannot be the bride, she said with deep conviction. A girl must be the bride" (11).

He was caught by Tanuja's mother, who introduces Arjie, in his bridal costume, in front of the whole family. This was the first moment when Arjie was embarrassed for his funniness, though he does not realise why. The whole family makes fun of him. As a patriarchal family, they expect a boy to possess masculinity. A society which forces conventions is portrayed through his family. Even though he is a child, the whole family mocks at him. The contentment Arjie finds in playing the bride game is a dreadful headache for his parents and the adults. His uncle Cyril also gives his father a warning comment "looks like you have a funny one here" (14). Following this his father blames his mother for letting him play with her jewellery. So, it is evident from their attitude that they are aware of a homosexual identity. But the way they perceive it is illogical. They understand a gay/homosexual identity as dangerously embarrassing, and unnatural. And his father is afraid if he turns out like the "Rankotwera boy" or "the laughing stock of Colombo" (14).

Arjie adored his mother over any actresses. He watched Amma getting ready for special occasions; "Amma was the final statement in female beauty for me" (15). But later on after the incident at his grandparent's house Amma's dressing room shut before him permanently. After that it becomes more transparent to him that he had done something wrong. Arjie tries to figure out the meaning of being funny. He understands the word funny as "either humorous or strange, as in the expression, that's funny" (17). He knows that the way his father had used it, it had a completely different meaning "Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone" (17).

Even though everyone made fun of Arjie, he never wanted to stop his bride-ride game. But his mother soon wanted to put a full stop to his game. He was strictly prohibited by her to not to play with the girls again, and instead, play with the boys. She wanted him to play with his brother, which Arjie is seldom interested. Hence, he questions Amma why he

should play with the boys and not with the girls. Then she immediately states that “Because the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly” (19). Here the expression ‘pigs can’t fly’ is used, which underlines that there are limits for what one could do or something to happen. The laws and rules of the society, which decides the ‘boys things’ and ‘girls things’, are indirectly mentioned over here. Sandra Bern, an American psychologist, introduced the gender schema theory, in 1981, as a cognitive theory, which states that from the very beginning of development children adjust their behaviour in accordance with the gender norms of a culture they surrounded with. Through the introduction of her theory she asserts that male roles and female roles in children develop through the respective cultural influences. Hence, it is clear that gender roles are merely constructed for the sake of patriarchal minds. Boys are expected to do or possess certain behaviours and general interests based on masculinity. And they can’t go out of those conventional ideas. Meena, another cousin of Arjie, play with the boys. But in Arjie’s family questions are raised on Arjie’s effeminacy not on Meena’s masculinity. Through both Arjie and Meena’s likes, or interest, or their behaviour, it is not possible to define their gender. Through them Selvadurai explains how individuals are gendered in society.

Arjie began to realise that some changes had started to happen in his life. Arjie knew that he would never enter the girl’s world again. Familiar things in his life became strange and unknown for him. An unfamiliar world began to surround him. He saw the rising wall of loneliness around him. “I would be caught between the boys’ and the girls’ worlds, not belonging or wanted in either” (39). Later on, his grandmother warned him not to play the bride game anymore. She also assigns him manual work in order to develop masculinity in him.

The favourite aunt of Arjie was Radha Aunty. She was the youngest. As she saw him polishing the lamp she asked why he is not playing with others. Arjie hides the truth from

Radha aunty as he does not want her to laugh at him like other adults had done. She allowed him to play with her make-up and jewellery. Thus, a new door opened for Arjie. She was not like other members of the family that she never made fun of Arjie.

Arjie used to read certain books like Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which is one of his favourite. When Daryl Uncle, whom Arjie seems to have a past with his mother, asked him what he was reading, he hesitated to hold out the book to him because his father never appreciated such books. His father called it a girl's book and "a book that twelve year old boys should not be reading" (109). Arjie expected Daryl Uncle would behave like his father when he showed the books, but instead he showed his affinity to those books and also brought Arjie the sequels. This made them closer together. Through Arjie, Selvadurai delineates the problems a young growing boy would face on his exposure to his sexual identity. Arjie's feeling for Daryl Uncle could be identified as the first time he realizes his identity. Arjie makes it clear that he liked Daryl Uncle not merely because he brought those books to him. When Daryl Uncle brought those books he felt delightful and wanted to hug him. But he finds it inappropriate to do so. Arjie understands his feelings as improper but what he felt was clear for him. Though he says he liked Daryl Uncle he never noticed any changes happening within him. He started realizing that how much he observes a man when Jegan arrives. Arjie found himself closely examining a man in detail. Selvadurai evidently describes the distress a gay boy has when he enters his teens.

Lately, I had 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.....I felt the reason for this sudden changes in my own body, changes I had witnessed in Diggy a few years ago when he, too, was thirteen. I had grown long and awkward and my voice sometimes slid embarrassingly into a high pitch (161).

Arjie was a boy who was more interested in the way women dresses and got ready. But suddenly he started observing men and their gestures and movements. When Jegan decided to move to their house and the thought of Arjie being in constant contact with him excited him. Over a drink with Jegan, Arjie's father discussed about "certain tendencies" (166) Arjie possessed from the time when he was small and he wanted Jegan to help Arjie overcome this. This discussion made Arjie furious because his father always kept saying 'tendency' without even giving it a name. But Jegan defended Arjie which made him more devoted towards Jegan. Arjie develops a strong friendship with Jegan and he became aware of the pull towards him. Selvadurai details the affections and feelings of Arjie as a growing gay boy. He emphasize on how slowly Arjie's desires become stronger through his minute actions. "What had struck me was the strength of his body. The muscles of his arms and neck.....now I admired how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers" (160). Such kinds of funniness which are portrayed as gestures, that are gentle and weak become tenacious and strong when he meets his new-school friend Shehan.

Arjie's Appa (father) moves Arjie to Queen Victoria Academy, where his brother Diggy studies. His intention was to develop the so-called masculine qualities in Arjie as he says that the academy will force Arjie to become a man. He found sympathetic alert in his Amma, sister and aunt's face. Even though Arjie did not understood what was happening he noticed something peculiar in everyone's behaviour. As he cornered Diggy, and questioned him Diggy straightened up that Appa do not want Arjie turning out funny or anything like that. None of his family members, even his father and brother, talked to him straightforward. They always used terms like funny, tendencies etc. Even they themselves do not want to accept the fact that their child is a gay. As a father Chelvaratnam (Arjie's father) know that his son is a gay. But he wants his son to carry all the masculine features that the society demands.

The Tamil- Sinhala conflict is even present in schools also. Diggy explains to Arjie, once someone is admitted to Queen Victoria academy he is a man “Either you take it like a man or the boys will look down on you” (211). Diggy had explained him that he should be alert about their principle Black Tie, who severely punishes children for minor gestures like winking eyes and licking lips. Arjie was admitted in a Sinhalese class and this was questioned by a Sinhala boy Salgado. It is Shehan, his classmate, who helps Arjie to come out of that struggle. Arjie was pleased by his action and he found himself looking at Shehan often during the classes. He found Shehan attractive. He also noticed that Shehan had some sort of power to protect himself from students like Salgado. He understood that Shehan is a confident boy who is aware of his own powers.

A strong bond developed between Shehan and Arjie. It is through Shehan that Arjie identifies and accepts his own identity as a gay. He not only accepted but also started respecting whatever he felt, unlike his childhood. He found a divinity in his and Shehan’s relationship. When Shehan kissed Arjie, he understood that there is something that he shares with Shehan. He states that “The difference within me that sometimes felt I had, that had brought me so much confusion, whatever this difference, it was shared by Shehan. I felt amazed that a normal thing – like my friendship with Shehan – could have such powerful and hidden possibilities” (256). He began to have a transparency to what Diggy and his father had told him of being ‘funny’. Diggy also warns him to stay away from Shehan and asks him if he is a funny one or not. Arjie gets baffled when Shehan kisses him and he was unable to stop himself from thinking about it. He knows that the kiss was somehow connected with what they had in common. Later, Arjie had his first sexual encounter with Shehan in his parent’s garage. This made him feel disgusted for his actions and also he sensed it as disrespect towards his family’s trust and love.

Arjie suffered as if he had committed an embarrassing crime towards his family. He was ashamed for his actions and dumps his anger on Shehan. He shouted at Shehan that he is the laughing stock of the academy. Shehan became upset and stated that “At least I know what I want and I’m not ashamed of it” (265). This awakes in Arjie a self realization about his sexual identity. He recognizes what was that ‘funniness’ his father was bothered about, the ‘tendencies’ he always worried about and the meaning of a ‘funny one’ Cyril Uncle addressed him of. Arjie feels so bad when he saw a broken Shehan who was tired of all the punishments from the academy. He found the injustice that had happened in his life all through. He discovered that the right and wrong, fair and unfair things has no place in one’s life. He perceived the truth that there was nothing wrong what that had happened between him and Shehan in the garage and he was bewildered with the question that “how could loving Shehan be bad?” (274). He finds a number of complicated interrogations in his mind.

How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust?if you were like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. It you were like Shehan or me you had no choice but to follow what they said.....Was it possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? (274)

But he finds these questions unanswered. Black Tie had given Arjie a duty of reciting a poem for the prize giving ceremony before Black Tie’s speech. The poem was important because it was the chief guest’s favourite poem. If the programme flopped, Black Tie will be overruled by the vice-principle. Without Arjie’s poem his speech will fail and he will probably loss his position. So, Arjie understood that he is Black Tie’s need and hence, the power had moved to his hands. He wanted to save Shehan from Black Tie’s punishments and for that Black Tie should loss his positions. But Arjie could not refuse to recite the poem. Hence, he pretended to be sick and interchanged the lines of the poem which made it

meaningless during the ceremony. So that no one will doubt him. Black Tie's speech which was based on the lines of the poem became utter flop.

Arjie wanted to save his love and he did what was in his hand. He then gazed at his family, his Amma and realized the fact that he is no longer part of his family. And the world he now inhabits with Shehan is so far from their reach. The world they will never understand. Arjie narrates the rest of his story as riots journal. As the Tamil- Sinhalese riots were at its peak Arjie and his family were forced to leave the country as he is a Tamil. As Shehan is a Sinhalese he never had any threat. Thus other than family, the political milieu also becomes a hurdle in following his desire.

Through Arjie's experiences from his own family, Selvadurai tells how difficult it is to cope with one's own family when someone is a gay/ lesbian. Societal challenges are always there in an individual's life. But when one loses the connection and support from his/her family, it becomes burdensome for them. Moreover, Arjie confronts the conflict within him when he feels ashamed for attaining his desires and embarrassed with the unwanted thought of betraying his family. There are many young boys like Arjie in the society who faces such scuffles. Literature always explored and celebrated homosexuality even before the social protests began. Literature always provided a platform. But the fact is literary works with homosexual contents got accepted only because then the society considered such narrations as friendships based. Worldwide acceptance and understanding of intersexuality is having a great hike day by day. Laws and norms were modified by accepting intersexual relationships and marriage. They are, nowadays, getting more and more opportunities at all levels. Still, there are some nations and people who consider intersexual relationships as a crime and punishable offence of imprisonment. They consider such relationships as unnatural even in this modern world. It is ridiculous to live among such thoughts where one is not even given the value of a human being.

Conclusion

Queer theory emerged from feminist movements and gender studies. And the very fact is, queer theory do not define queer as a substitute for gay or lesbian; though the society do so. Queer theory enables the queer reading of literary texts; the non-conformed identities, sexuality and gender. Even before emerging in to the social discussion, queerness had entered in to literature. Homosexual themes were visible in novels, short stories and poems. William Shakespeare, James Baldwin, Walt Whitman, Alice Walker and Oscar Wilde are many such writers whose works proposed the themes of homosexuality. Literature celebrated all kinds of sexuality.

Funny Boy is also such a novel. An attitude of patriarchal society is what Arjie, the protagonist of *Funny Boy*, goes through. The author of the novel, Shyam Selvadurai, himself is a gay. And, hence, he clearly knew how a growing young gay boy's experiences are. And through Arjie he incredibly presents the coming of age of such a gay boy. Arjie introduces his most joyful world of childhood when he begins his story. He admired the beauty of his mother, the way she gets ready for functions. He placed her, above all the heroines and goddesses, the final statement of female beauty. His childhood was filled with the fantasy world of the bride- bride game. He loved being a bride, wrapping the sari just like his mother, and enjoyed the most beautiful self. These were the childhood attractions of Arjie. But when he was caught in his bride-bride costume by his Aunty and brought in front of the whole family, he was no more treated as a child. None of the adults tried to understand the childhood admirations of a boy. Instead, they commented him as a "funny one". And his father do not wanted him to turn out funny or the laughing stock of Colombo. He was the only child who got permission for watching his Amma getting ready. But after his father warned his Amma that she is responsible for Arjie doing such abnormal and funny things, she closed the door before him, because they wanted Arjie to be a man. They wanted Arjie to

possess masculinity; not sissy things. He slowly realises that something is different with him that upsets his family. He feels embarrassed when his father use the term funny, though he do not understand why. He was then restricted by Ammachi to play with the girls and occupied him with jobs to develop masculinity in him.

Arjie starts to recognize his feelings when he enters his puberty. Through interaction with characters like Daryl Uncle and Jegan, he finds himself examining and adoring their features. But the ultimate realization occurs when he meets Shehan. Shehan is also a gay. Arjie had his first sexual intercourse with Shehan. And Shehan is the laughing stock of his school as he is considered to have sex with other boys. But other than Arjie he could be identified as a confident young boy who is well aware of his identity and accept it. Arjie feels ashamed when he first recognizes about his identity, after having sexual intercourse with Shehan. He felt as if he had committed a huge mistake, but later he accepts his true self and learn to understand and respect it with all its purity. Though they get separated towards the end of the novel, Arjie believes that the love that they experienced between them will never change.

The main conflicts Arjie faces are from his family and within himself. His family want his notices his effeminacy and want him to behave more manly. His father even changes his school as he believes the academy would force him to be a man. The inner conflict he faces is the most challenging for him. At first he troubled by the unawareness of his identity. When he finally understands his identity, he becomes ashamed of it; though later he accepts and respects it.

Same-sex relationships had always been considered a trouble in society. People treated sodomy more than a sin; especially in a patriarchal social group. And they renamed it as queer or strange. That is, something out of their so-called normal life. Homosexual people

were isolated and abandoned by the entire world. Their opportunity in all fields including education and job were denied. Their dignity in society was always a question mark. In patriarchal societies, homosexuality was taken as some sort of disease which is most embarrassing and which could be cured through medicines and religious methods.

Looking in to the basic fundamental rights of homosexual individuals, it was denied for them. Most of the countries had laws and rules which regarded homosexual marriage and sodomy as punishable offences. *Funny Boy* is set in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, homosexual relationships were considered a punishable offence up to ten years of prison. It was found unnatural over there and the homophobic government had not yet legalized it. Around the world most of the countries, including India, had accepted homosexuality and same sex marriage as legal. In 2017, the cabinet members of Sri Lanka Government had agreed to update their Human Right Action Plan and decriminalise homosexual relationships. But up to 2019-20 records the decisions on decriminalising the same-sex relationships are ambiguous. *Funny Boy*, though does not deal with any legal contexts of Sri Lanka, evidently draws the attitude of a patriarchal family and society which forces individual to be gendered. It deals with the social, mental and physical hurdles faced by growing gay boy. Hence, a queer reading is possible in this work *Funny Boy*.

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