QUEER AS THE OTHER
A READING OF SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FICTION

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submitted by
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CERTIFICATE

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This dissertation titled **"QUEER AS THE OTHER: A READING OF SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FICTION"** submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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My room-mate Surya.

And that *special someone* in my life whose *absent presence* always guides and motivates me ...

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Introduction

Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue.

Oscar Wilde

Shyam Selvadurai is perhaps not that known a literary name. I first came across the name when I picked up his novel *Funny Boy* in a book store in Connaught Place, New Delhi. I may also add that my picking up and flipping through and ultimately buying of that novel was a result of the curiosity the title generated in me. Thus, the first novel of Shyam Selvadurai that I read was his first one – *Funny Boy*, followed by his third, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, and then, his second, *Cinnamon Gardens*. When I read the novels, I never thought that one day I would do an academic work on them. I was reading them simply because of my love for reading (of course the fact that I liked Selvadurai is obvious from my reading of *all* three of his novels). However, when I decided that it would be Selvadurai I would work on, I thought about the issues that constitute his literary oeuvre. There are plenty actually. Selvadurai's is a very interesting position: he was born in Sri Lanka and emigrated to Canada in 1983. He comes from the minority Tamil community in Sri Lanka. And yes, he is gay. Thus diaspora, race/ethnicity, and sexuality inform his situation as an individual as well as an author.

Before moving on to the issues that his works deal with, let us have a look at Shyam Selvadurai – the person. Shyam Selvadurai was born in Colombo in 1965 of mixed Tamil-Sinhalese parentage. His mother, Christine Selvadurai, a doctor, was Sinhalese, and his father, David Selvadurai, a tennis-coach, was Tamil. Interestingly, his parents instilled in all the four Selvadurai children this belief that they are special because of the mixed blood in them. Selvadurai says – "For us four children, growing up in a mixed marriage was interesting. From the start our parents instilled in us the belief that the mixing of races only leads to stronger, more beautiful, more intelligent children."[1] The Selvadurai family had to emigrate to Canada in 1983 – one of the most notorious years in the history of Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka in which anti-Tamil violence witnessed unprecedented measures. In Canada, Selvadurai studied creative writing and theatre, and had a Bachelor of Fine Arts

[1] Shyam Selvadurai on Shyam Selvadurai, http:/www.interlog.com/~funnyboy/index.htm, personal website of Shyam Selvadurai

degree from York University, Toronto. He wrote his first novel *Funny Boy* in 1994 which won the W.H. Smith/Books First Novel Award in Canada. In the US, it won the Lambda Literary Award for Best Work of Gay Fiction, and was named a Notable Book by the American Library Association. His second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* was published in 1998. It was shortlisted for the Trilium Award in Canada, the Aloa Literary Award in Denmark and the Premio Internazionale Riccardo Bacchelli in Italy. Selvadurai's third novel *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* was published in 2005. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* won the Lambda Literary Award in Children and Youth Literature Category. In 2005, Selvadurai edited an anthology of short stories entitled *Story-wallah! A Celebration of South Asian Fiction.* Currently Selvadurai lives in Toronto with his partner Andrew Champion.

In the area of South Asian-Canadian literature, Michael Ondaatje (*Running in the Family, Anil's Ghost*), M.G. Vassanji (*The Gunny Sack, The Book of Secrets*), Rohinton Mistry (*Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance*), Neil Bissoondath (*A Casual Brutality, The Worlds Within Her*), Anita Rau Badami (*Tamarind Mem, Hero's Walk*) are some noted names. In all of them, issues of displacement, of longing for home, of nostalgia, of generational conflicts and differences, issues borne out of the British colonial past, of post-independence ethnic and racial conflict etc. have been explored in one way or the other. Their fictional worlds have been enriched by these thematic preoccupations. Selvadurai too is no exception in this regard. However, what is distinctive about his novels, and what perhaps sets him apart from the above list, is his interweaving of issues of sexuality with the narrative of South Asian cultural dislocation and distance. In Selvadurai, homosexuality is a major issue. As mentioned above, issues borne out of diaspora, of race/ethnicity, and of homosexuality are dealt with in the fictional works of Selvadurai. However, for my studies, I have decided to focus on only one aspect of Selvadurai's writing, and that is *homosexuality*. The reason of my decision lies in the fact that the other issues *in general* have been discussed so much that there is a sort of *ennui* associated with them. Having said that, I am aware of the significance of these issues, and I am not negating them in any way. But in my understanding, reading Selvadurai's works focussing on only one aspect of his writing, *i.e.* homosexuality, really seems to be an interesting project. It is not that I will be overlooking the other issues altogether. I will be making occasional comments on them but my chief focus will be on the way homosexuality has been dealt with in his works.

Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* can be read as a *Bildungsroman.* It is the story of a young boy's formation and integration set against the backdrop of his country's disintegration. The boy, Arjun "Arjie" Chelvaratnam, is the second son of a privileged middle-class Tamil family. In the midst of mounting waves of Sinhala-Tamil violence, Arjie's understanding and subsequent coming to terms with his homosexuality takes place in the novel. The racial tension within Sri Lanka occupies most of Arjie's time and attention in the novel. In fact, Arjie's awakening sexuality serves as an undercurrent throughout the book's five sections and an epilogue, though it is really only the core theme of one, "The Best School of All". That is the section in which Arjie's father sends him to The Queen Victoria Academy, a terribly cruel English style school.

The Queen Victoria Academy serves as a symbol for colonial, aristocratic and middle class privilege – male privilege. This is the tradition Arjie is expected to be a part of. To be gay would, for Arjie, mean failing in the eyes of his father and the larger world of middle class Tamil patriarchy in which he lives. Indeed, Arjie's father tells him that the academy "will force [him] to become a man,"[2] clearly indicating that the school is to indoctrinate Arjie in the ways of middle class male privilege. Arjie's elder brother warns him that their father suspects and fears his homosexuality. His move to the Academy is clearly meant to *cure* him of (what his father sees as) the homosexual *affliction.* Within this context, it is extremely ironic that the Academy is the very place in which Arjie meets Shehan Soyza, a Sinhalese classmate whom he falls for and carries on a sexual relationship with.

The five sections of the novel and its epilogue can each be read as lengthy short stories in their own right (in fact, Selvadurai includes "Pigs Can't Fly" in his edited anthology of short stories, *Story-wallah!*). "Pigs Can't Fly" examines Arjie's early childhood and his gravitation towards the imaginative games his female cousins play as opposed to his male cousins' beloved game of cricket. The section deals with cultural constructions of gender, and the societal criticism incurred by one who falls outside of the said constructions. The "... complex system of prohibition, punishment and compulsion that governs and structures gender differentiation"[3] is laid out in the chapter. The second story "Radha Aunty" is the tale of Arjie's Aunt Radha, and her doomed affair with a Sinhalese man. The seven year old

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[2] Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1994) 210

[3] Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion", *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 143

protagonist learns the gravity of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict through this relationship. In the third chapter "See No Evil, Hear No Evil" Arjie plays an important role in his mother's extra-marital affair with a childhood sweetheart. This is his introduction into the world of concealed or secretive relationships between adults, and the prices anyone may pay for loving the *wrong* kind of person. The chapter gives hints of Arjie's growing homoeroticism. The next chapter "Small Choices" chronicles one of Arjie's first crushes and his growing understanding of the Sinhala-Tamil issue, as it is through the young man on whom Arjie has a crush, that the issue enters the Chelvaratnam household. The fifth chapter "The Best School of All" explicitly deals with Arjie's awakened homosexuality, and the conflicting emotions he goes through. The novel's epilogue "Riot Journal" is Arjie's frightening firsthand account of the anti-Tamil violence which precipitated the Chelvaratnam family's departure to Canada as well as the poignant denouement of his relationship with Shehan.

The narrative composition of *Funny Boy* is quite eye-catching, structured as it is as "a novel in six stories." It is a first person narrative with the narrator Arjie's growth from seven to fourteen years. Perhaps the fractured narrative of *Funny Boy* is appropriate given the fact that the novel deals with fracturing of many kinds – racial, familial, and sexual. Selvadurai acknowledges – "Structurally, *Funny Boy* is based on Alice Monroe's *The Lives of Girls and Women*, only the stories [in *Funny Boy*] are more closely linked."[4]

Selvadurai's second novel *Cinnamon Gardens* captures the Sri Lanka of the 1920s when Sri Lanka was still Ceylon. The ruling British government has set up the Donoughmore Commission to examine the possibility of transferring limited self-rule to the Ceylonese people. The Donoughmore Commission sparked debates among the wealthy Tamils of Colombo residing in the affluent suburb of Cinnamon Gardens – debates concerning what form this self-rule should take, and to whom exactly the voting franchise should be extended. Selvadurai positions two stories of self-discovery – one is Annalukshmi Kandiah's and the other Balendran Navaratnam's – against this historical backdrop in his second novel.

Cinnamon Gardens is massive in scope, ideas and size. A distinct retreat in form is noticeable in this novel which Selvadurai fashioned more along the lines of 19th century British fiction. In fact, in some ways, I cannot help comparing this novel to *Middlemarch: A Study of*

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[4] Jim Marks, "The Personal is Political", *Lambda Book Report*, Vol 5 Issue 2 (August 1996).

Provincial Life by George Eliot. In reality, a citation from *Middlemarch* is used by Selvadurai as the epigraph to the novel, and we get to see Annalukshmi, Selvadurai's heroine, reading *Silas Marner* at one point of time. Annalukshmi, an intelligent and independent young woman, has scandalised her family by qualifying for teacher's certificate and by advocating radical views on women's suffrage. She is very much a Dorothea Brooke-figure. Both these characters are externally public-spirited and politically progressive, working on behalf of others (Dorothea through housing, Annalukshmi through education); and both characters are deeply conflicted internally – unable to resolve the competing pulls of head and heart. Annalukshmi's immediate quandary is to do with her family's desire for her to marry, a move that, in proper Ceylonese society of the time, would compel her to give up her teaching career. In fact, much of Annalukshmi's story is taken up with a *kind of* comic parading of potential suitors before her, all of whom fall impossibly short of her high standards. Annalukshmi, however, avoids making a match as disastrous as that between Dorothea and Edward Casaubon partly through her own strength of will and partly through circumstances, but, on the other hand, by the end of the novel, neither has she found her Will Ladislaw.

The other protagonist of the novel, Balendran Navaratnam can likewise be compared with Eliot's Edward Casaubon. Both of them have lived mostly unfulfilled lives, caught between thought and action, passion and rationalisation. Edward Casaubon is involved in a book called *The Key to All Mythologies*, and so is Balendran about a book on Jaffna culture. However, the fact of greater consequence is that for the last twenty years, Balendran has submerged his homosexual desires underneath a façade of familial and societal propriety. Balendran fell in love with an English man called Richard Howland, while being a student in England. However he abandoned his lover and returned to Colombo to marry his cousin when his domineering father discovered the true nature of their relationship. Two decades later, Howland comes to Colombo to watch over the proceedings of the Donoughmore Commission thus forcing Balendran to confront both his past and present duplicity.

As mentioned, *Cinnamon Gardens* is written in the style of the English fiction of the 19th century. In fact, in its intricate plot construction, casting of a large number of characters, and with all sorts of secrets revealed, and long-lost relatives united, it is very, very Dickensian. S.W. Perera, however, says of *Cinnamon Gardens* – "Selvadurai takes on too many themes

from too many angles. Not only do these themes impinge on one another but they affect his artistic focus."[5] The multiplicity of themes in *Cinnamon Gardens* is definitely undeniable given the novel's concurrent dealing with issues such as homosexuality, politics, family scandals, emancipation etc. I would agree with the statement of Perera as the thematic plurality of *Cinnamon Gardens*, in my reading, brings in an element of *difficulty* in the reader's perception. *Funny Boy* too has the plurality of themes, but the episodic structure of the novel negates, in my reading, that element. Moreover, the use of the child narrator in *Funny Boy* lends a certain naiveté to the narrative as well.

Selvadurai's third novel *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* centres on the realisation of and coming to terms of its protagonist with his homosexual orientation. The novel describes the Colombo of the year 1980. The protagonist, the fourteen year old, Amrith De Alwis, is approaching an uneventful, dull summer holiday in the affluent household of Aunty Bundle and Uncle Lucky in which he is being raised. Amrith, an orphan, is always shrouded in deep melancholia not only because of his dead beloved mother but also for a sense of distance that he feels from the Manuel-Pillai family in spite of their love and support for him. He is trying to prepare himself for a monotonous holiday when his cousin, Niresh, arrives from Canada. The union with his sixteen year old cousin proves remarkable for Amrith as he realises that his feelings for his cousin go beyond usual brotherly emotions. He perceives that he loves his cousin "the way a boy loves a girl, or a girl loves a boy"[6]. Amrith attempts to murder Mala, Aunty Bundle's daughter, because she too has fallen in love with Niresh. The novel concludes with Amrith's self-acceptance of his homosexuality, and realisation of the genuineness of the love of the Manuel-Pillai family.

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea differs both from *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* in its narrative technique. The novel was targeted for a Young Adult readership, and this has resulted in *structuring* the novel in short chapters with titles to all of them. The novel deals with a focussed period of time as befits Young Adult readers. The novel borrows its thematic background of jealousy from *Othello*. In that sense, this novel has a *Shakespearean backdrop* unlike the first two, where two important episodes of Sri Lankan history – one pre-colonial and the other post-colonial – have been contextualised.

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[5] S.W. Perera "In Pursuit of Political Correctness: Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*", *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, 24-25, 1-2 (1998-99) 108

[6] Shyam Selvadurai, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005) 181

As I have mentioned above, among all the issues that Selvadurai deals with, the one I will *predominantly* focus on in my work is *homosexuality*. I will be reading his novels through an *amalgamation* of gay and lesbian criticism, and queer theory. Queer theory is less text-oriented and more theoretical than gay and lesbian criticism. My approach would be *text-oriented* in the three major chapters as well as *less theoretical*. I will be drawing concepts of fluidity of sexuality from queer theory. Moreover, in the exploration of topics such as cross-dressing and bisexuality, I will be following tenets of queer theory. In the chapters, I will be doing a close textual reading of the three novels of Selvadurai with an *emphasis* on the homosexuality of the protagonists. Below I am giving a brief account of gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory in general. I will be beginning with a quote by Alan Sinfield –

> The ultimate question is this: is homosexuality intolerable? One answer is that actually lesbians and gay men are pretty much like other people, in which case it just needs a few more of us to come out, so that the nervous among our compatriots can see we aren't really so dreadful, and then everyone will live and let live; sexuality will become unimportant. The other answer is that homosexuality in fact constitutes a profound challenge to the prevailing values and structures in our kinds of society – in which case the bigots have a point of view and are not acting unreasonably. We cannot expect to settle this question, but the hypothesis we adopt will affect decisively our strategic options.[7]

In other words, is homosexuality to be understood as nothing more than a variant sexuality, affecting only those individuals or groups who label themselves as gay or lesbian, or is homosexuality to be understood as a *phenomenon* with effects across the entire range of human sexualities – and, beyond that, across the entire range of human culture? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, calls these two views the *minoritizing* view and the *universalizing* view. The minoritizing view, as the name suggests, sees homosexuality as of interest only to "a small, distinct, relatively fixed minority" – consisting of those people for whom it is an identity. The universalizing view, on the other hand, sees issues of homosexuality, or same-sex desire, as "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities".[8]

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[7] Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, (London: Cassell, 1994) 177

[8] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) 1

This is a crucial distinction. As Sinfield points out, to take the universalizing view is to see homosexuality as a threat to society as a whole and to consider that homophobia is in some sense understandable. It is, however, not a simple question of either/or: either minoritizing *or* universalizing. Sedgwick argues that *both* are at work in our society at any one time.

As is well known by now, the word 'homosexual' was coined around 1869. According to Michel Foucault, the 'homosexual' did not exist before this date. By this he means that the concept of the 'homosexual' names a personality type, a body type, a psychology that was till then unnamed. Further, in that naming, a recognisable type of person is invented. The 'homosexual' as a category of human being is invented, or discursively constructed: an identity is formed. From homosexuality as a sin that anyone might commit or a sickness that might afflict anyone, we move to the homosexual as a criminal and a psychologically abnormal individual, with recognisable psychological and physiological characteristics.

This turning point from homosexuality as a behaviour to the homosexual as a *type* or *species* is in a way the start of the minoritizing view of homosexuality. It becomes regarded as being of importance only to a small number of people – those who fall within that bracket. The concept of homosexuality comes to apply, or is applied, only to those individuals named that way, or who name themselves so. But this turning point is also the start of the universalizing view, because at the same time 'the homosexual' is being labeled and constructed in opposition to 'the heterosexual', that discursive figure enters discourse in a very wide manner. Significantly, the word 'heterosexual' was coined in 1878.

As a discipline of studies, gay and lesbian criticism emerged in the mid-1980s. Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) is a pioneering text which analyses relationships between men, between male characters in literary works. In this book, Sedgwick "demonstrates that although society makes a point of emphatically drawing clear distinction between the homosocial and the homosexual, nevertheless, the two categories are too unstable and too close to resist not only overlapping but even collapsing into each other".[9] Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* is another key text of gay and lesbian studies.

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[9] Chris Murray ed., *Encyclopedia of Literary Critics and Criticism*, Vol. 1, (Fitzroy Deraborn Publishers: London, 1999) 434

In gay and lesbian studies, there are two distinct trends of thought. One believes in the essentialist notion, and the other in the constructionist notion of gender and sexuality. The essentialists believe that homosexuals and heterosexuals are *essentially* different by nature. On the other hand, the constructionists are of the opinion that gender and sexuality are culturally/socially constructed. Both, however, advocate the *fixity* of sexuality.

The emergence of queer theory happened in the 1990s with the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. However, the credit for the coinage of the term 'queer' goes to Teresa de Lauretis when she edited the feminist journal *differences* and entitled it "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities". Its difference from gay and lesbian studies lies in the fact that unlike gay and lesbian studies which focus largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expands its realm of investigation. Homosexuality, bisexuality, transsexuality, transvestitism, cross-dressing – all find place under queer. However, the term was originally a term of abuse. That element of abuse is converted into one of pride by the adaptation of the word itself. Queer appropriates an earlier, generally offensive, description of gay life and turns it to advantage. At its heart, queer is an anti-discriminatory view of gender as unfixed, and certainly more complex than what our binary distinctions suggest. Queer theorists adopt the deconstructive mode of dismantling the key binary oppositions, such as, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and natural/ unnatural, by which a range of diverse things are forced into only two categories, and in which the first category is assigned power, privilege, and centrality, while the second is derogated, subordinated, and marginalised. Queer emphasises the *constructedness*, *plurality* and *ambivalence* of sexual identities.

Queer theorists maintain that gender is a social construct – that is, masculinity and femininity are *constructed* patterns of behaviour ad are *not* natural or innate. They further contend that sexuality is also socially constructed. The binary opposition heterosexuality/homosexuality is as much a product of culture and its institutions as the opposition masculinity/femininity. Queer theory approaches literature and culture with the assumption that sexual identities are *fluid* and *not fixed*, and it critiques gender and sexuality as they are commonly conceived. The fluidity of sexual identity in queer theory is read as a constant switching among a range of different roles and positions. Queer theorists are wary of *identity politics* as they believe that categorization on the basis of a single characteristic is inappropriate.

In this connection Jackson and Scott's words are noteworthy –

> Queer sought to destabilise the binary oppositions between men and women and straight and gay. Such identities were not to be seen as authentic properties of individual subjects, but as fluid and shifting, to be adopted and discarded, played with and subverted, strategically deployed in differing contexts ... Politically the aim of Queer theory is to demonstrate that gender and sexual categories are not given realities but are 'regulatory fictions', products of discourse.[10]

Returning to Selvadurai and my work proper, the first chapter of this work "Pigs *with* Wings: A Reading of *Funny Boy*" discusses the first novel of Selvadurai focussing on the homosexuality of the adolescent protagonist. With the help of textual evidences, the chapter delineates the *funniness* of Arjie. Arjie's realisation and subsequent acceptance of his sexual orientation is brought out in this chapter with the help of textual illustrations. In *Funny Boy*, the thematic importance of the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic strife is definitely undeniable. The chapter explores this issue as well. However, the chief focus is on Arjie's sexual awareness. The *queerness* of the protagonist as exhibited through his homosexuality and cross-dressing is brought into the foreground in this chapter.

The second chapter "*Bi Now, Gay Later* or *Gay Now, Bi Later*: A Reading of *Cinnamon Gardens*" similarly attempts to show the bisexuality of the protagonist assigning him at the same time a stronger affiliation towards homosexuality. The fluidity of sexual behaviour of the protagonist is discussed here. In this chapter, I also use the information or the insight which I have received from my interviews with some gay men. In fact, this novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*, raised in my mind the highest number of queries regarding various issues related to the *gay psyche*. This chapter positions the responses I have gathered from the gay guys I met in relation to various thematic junctures of the novel.

The third chapter of this work "*Different* and/or *Queer*: A Reading of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*" shows the process of self-understanding of the adolescent protagonist with textual illustrations. This chapter also uses some insights I gained from the gay guys. Homosexuality and cross-dressing are the *queer* aspects of the protagonist Amrith in

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[10] Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) 15

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea. How these themes, particularly that of cross-dressing, differ from the depiction of the same in Selvadurai's earlier novel *Funny Boy* is also probed into in this chapter.

As I have mentioned above, the fictional world of Selvadurai is enriched by a number of very meaningful and loaded issues. Ethnicity, race, diaspora are particularly issues of supreme importance in Selvadurai. However, for my studies, I have decided to focus on only one aspect of his writing which is in no way less important or meaningful than the other issues. Homosexuality informs each of his texts, and the similarity of the treatment of this issue in *Funny Boy* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* at one level notwithstanding, the significance stays. And my following work is indeed a humble endeavour to situate that significance, to situate how Selvadurai deals with the myriad forms of 'othering' that the 'queer' faces in different walks of life.

What's the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man?

Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*

Shyam Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* deals with issues of race, ethnicity, home, migration, and sexuality. In a certain way all these issues can be said to be inter-connected or, at least, connection or connections can be made amongst them. However, the novel can also be read as a *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist grows up to comprehend and to accept his homosexuality. This happens in the backdrop of ethnic conflict as the Sinhala-Tamil divergence takes place in a very violent way in the Sri Lanka narrated in the novel. The protagonist Arjun "Arjie" Chelvaratnam realises his same-sex desire in this war-like situation, and comes to terms with it. The novel, narrated in six inter-connected stories through the first person narratorial voice of Arjie, basically traces this comprehension and acceptance of the protagonist.

In *Funny Boy* ethnicity and ethnic strife are persistently present, and they play a significant role in the life of the characters. Therefore, familiarising oneself with the context becomes necessary in order to comprehend the novel fully.

Sri Lanka is a country with many ethnic groups that can be "distinguished from one another on ethnic, religious and linguistic grounds."[1] However, there are two larger groups: the Sinhalese and the Tamil. Even though there were some minor conflicts between them during the 10th and the 14th centuries, they "subsisted ... as best as they could without a conflict"[2]. It was not until the British came and divided the country that the Tamils started to feel unjustly marginalised. After the British departure, in 1948, the communal conflict took off. In 1956 the Official Language Bill was enacted which became the starting point for the first real communal struggle. The Bill decided that Sri Lanka's official language would be Sinhalese which really infuriated the Tamils. The riots that followed, in Colombo and the Eastern Province, led to many Tamils being killed by the Sinhalese mob.

[1] Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Ethnic Unrest in Modern Sri Lanka: An Account of Tamil-Sinhalese Race Relations*, (New Delhi: M D Publications, 1994) 51

[2] *Ibid.*, 51

In spite of the Bill, Tamil was still a regional language, and it was not until 1972 that the Sri Lankan Government rewrote its constitution and declared that "Buddhism [was to be] the State religion and Sinhalese the only official language"[3]. However, the Tamils argued that the rewritten constitution "confirmed their second class status as citizens of their country"[4]. The Tamil minority's idea about a separate Tamil state, Eelam, started to gain momentum from this time. In 1974, the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) was formed which began to violently assert their separatist sentiments. The TNT was the parent organization of the LTTE. Decades of violence ensued, "fuelled variously by linguistic, educational, and political nationalisms"[5]

In 1981, Sinhalese mobs increased their violent assaults against the Tamil militants. They had been given orders to go to Jaffna and crush the Tamil movement so they could not get independence and found the Eelam. Jaffna became a militant and occupied area. Villages that helped and hid Tamils were attacked, women were abused, and thousands of Tamils "took refuge in Christian Missionary Convents to escape the attacks"[6]. Thus, the Tamils were exiled in their own country. In March 1982, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was enacted as a law which gave the government the power to arrest anyone under suspicion of being a militant. The year that followed, 1983, was "a tragic one in the history of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka"[7] . The Tamils looked upon Eelam as their only chance for a better future, which, of course, the Sinhalese government was opposed to. Riots and violence escalated, and on July 23rd, TNT activists ambushed a couple of government vehicles in Jaffna which led to the killing of thirteen soldiers. The people of Colombo heard the news the next day, and on that day itself, unprecedented violence rocked Colombo. The violent and raging Sinhalese soldiers "went on a rampage, looting, pillaging, and killing in the Tamil areas of Colombo"[8].

In 2002, both the Tamils and the Sinhalese agreed on ceasefire. While the LTTE abandoned their previously uncompromising demand for a separate Tamil homeland, political negotiations within the Government were likely to lead to a "political self-determination to a north-eastern Tamil Province or State within the Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka"[9]. In the

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[3] *Ibid.*, 57
[4] *Ibid.*, 57
[5] Tariq Jazeel, "Because Pigs Can Fly: Sexuality, race and the geographies of difference in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*", Gender, Place and Culture, 12:2 (2005), 232
[6] Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.* 64
[7] *Ibid.*, 66
[8] *Ibid.*, 68
[9] Jazeel, *op. cit.* 233

following year, 2003, the Tigers withdrew from the peace talk, and during the next three years, violence increased again. In the beginning of 2006, all participants agreed to talk again with the goal to renew their 2002 agreement of ceasefire. However, in April the same year, the conflict resumed and the attacks continued for the rest of 2006 and 2007. On 2nd January, 2008, the government finally decided to "abolish the six year old ceasefire agreement" they had with the Tigers. [10] The fighting has probably come to an end with the annihilation of LTTE camps towards the beginning of 2009, but one cannot say that the ethnic strife is over.

It is against this background of violence, ethnic conflict, oppression and exile that the novel *Funny Boy* is written with homosexuality being an important issue.

The novel *Funny Boy* comprises six stories, *viz.* "Pigs Can't Fly", "Radha Aunty", "See No Evil, Hear No Evil", "Small Choices", "The Best School of All", and "Riot Journal: An Epilogue". The principal issues in these six chapters can be enlisted as follows –

1. Arjie's cross-dressing as a bride,
2. Sinhala-Tamil conflict,
3. Extra-marital relationship wrapped in Sinhala-Tamil difference,
4. Arjie's growing homoerotic tendencies along with Sinhala-Tamil issues,
5. Arjie's awakened homosexuality as well as Sinhala-Tamil clash, and
6. Sinhala-Tamil divergence.

Among all these issues, the ones that will come under the rubric of queer theory are cross-dressing and homosexuality, and though these two issues are not explored in all the chapters, their undertone pervades all of them in one way or the other.

The first chapter of the novel, "Pigs Can't Fly", brings forth the first sign of *queerness* in the protagonist, Arjie, in the form of his cross-dressing. The seven year old little boy dressed himself as a "bride" in the game called "bride-bride" in his grandparents' house on "spend-the-days" – those Sundays when all the parents, i.e. Arjie's parents and all the other siblings of Arjie's father, dropped their children at their parents' home. Interestingly, the game "bride-bride" was played only by the female cousins of Arjie, and Arjie was the sole male presence in it. The children, fifteen in total and left to their own, developed a system of minimizing

[10] Nagesh Narayana & Rob Dawson, "Timeline: Collapse of Sri Lanka's troubled ceasefire", Reuters, 8 January, 2008. 20 March 2009 www.reuters.com. Path: news; international; Timeline: collapse of Sri Lanka's troubled ceasefire.

any kind of interference from either Ammachi, the grandmother, or Janaki, the house-maid. "Territoriality" and "leadership" formed the framework of the system. The first territory was for the boys which consisted of the front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house. The second territory was for the girls which consisted of the back garden and the kitchen porch. The seven year old boy-protagonist Arjie found himself drawing as well as belonging to the territory of the girls. In his own words –

> The second territory was called "the girls", included in which, however, was myself a boy. It was to this territory of "the girls" ... that I seemed to have gravitated naturally ... The pleasure the boys had standing for hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun, watching the batsmen run from crease to crease, was incomprehensible to me. (*Funny Boy* p.3)[11]

This *natural* gravitation of Arjie towards the girls' world is significant as he found the all-male game of cricket irritating. It was the "free play of fantasy" which was the primary attraction of the girls' territory for him. So potent was the force of Arjie's imagination that he was selected as the leader of the girls. Not only that, Arjie always got to play the main part in the fantasy: "If it was cooking-cooking we were playing, I was the chef; if it was Cinderella or Thumbelina, I was the much-beleaguered heroine of these tales."(*FB* p.4) Among all the fanciful games that the girls and Arjie played, "bride-bride" was the unanimous favourite. Needless to say, it was Arjie who played the role of the bride in this day-long affair. In Arjie's words –

> For me the culmination of this game, and my ultimate moment of joy, was when I put on the clothes of the bride ... From my sling-bag I would bring out my most prized possession, an old white sari, slightly yellow with age, its border torn and missing most of its sequins. The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki's cracked full-length mirror – 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, represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palu, seemed to revolve. (*FB* pp.4-5, italics mine)

[11] Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1994). Subsequent references will be cited as *FB* and provided in parentheses immediately after the quote.

This "more brilliant", "more beautiful" self which Arjie found himself in, in that impoverished as well as improvised paraphernalia of the bride, is a noteworthy queer aspect of the protagonist. Cross-dressing gave Arjie the satisfaction, the pleasure which he could not think of getting playing cricket with his boy cousins under the sizzling sun. Arjie's cross-dressing, however, distances itself from fetishistic transvestitism, where one cross-dresses for sexual arousal, as he (as well as his female cousins) was yet to be aware of sexuality and gender roles. The game allowed him the freedom of being himself which he could not be in the boys' world – characterised by the typically *masculine* (at least in the Sri Lanka of that time) game of cricket. He felt like an "icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested."(*FB* p.5) This is important in that Arjie as a cross-dresser realises his happiness in the adoring eyes of his girl cousins. This *spectatorial* aspect of Arjie's cross-dressing situates him differently from those who cross-dress in private. Moreover it is to be noted that in this chapter there is no reference to Arjie's homosexuality. There are hints at his 'effeminacy' but this chapter does not give us any textual clue as to his same-sex orientation. Goldie comments –

> A number of studies have shown that the young homosexual boy is more likely to engage in cross-dressing than the young heterosexual. However, this apparently has no effect on adult behaviour. The majority of homosexuals do not engage in cross-dressing as adults. It is tempting to think of many explanations for this, but a reasonable possibility might be that at this stage, which Freudians have claimed is pre-sexual, the distinction between gender and sexual orientation is unclear. This would certainly suit Arjie's obsession with brides. At this time, when the guiding stories of the hegemonic culture have enoromous power, desire for a male object can be understood only in terms of being a female subject.[12]

The distinction between *sex* and *gender* and between *normal* and *abnormal* behaviour were introduced to that apparently innocent world of Arjie and his girl cousins by their abroad-returned cousin, Tanuja, whom they quickly renamed "'Her Fatness' in that cruelly direct way children have."(*FB* p.5) Lesk makes an interesting observation on the irony of that nickname as Tanuja, who would challenge and take away Arjie's role as the leader of the girls, slowly "... [becomes] from 'Her Fatness', to perhaps, 'Her Highness'"[13]. Tanuja questioned Arjie's occupation of the role of the bride by positing the issue of gender roles very overtly –

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[12] Terry Goldie, "The Funniness of the *Funny Boy*", *Pink Snow: Homotextual Possibilities in Canadian Fiction*, (Peterborough, Ont. : Broadview Press, 2003) 187

[13] Andrew Lesk, "Ambivalence at the Site of Authority: Desire and Difference in *Funny Boy*", Canadian Literature 190 (2006): 38

> "But [Arjie is] not even a girl" Her Fatness said ... "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." (*FB* p.11)

This logic made Arjie and his cousins "defenceless", though they recovered themselves by telling Her Fatness to go away – a very common childish ploy. Her Fatness reacted thus –

> Her Fatness looked at all of us for a moment and then her gaze rested on me.
> "You're a pansy," she said, her lips curling in disgust.
> We looked at her blankly.
> "A faggot," she said, her voice rising against our uncomprehending stares.
> "A sissy!" she shouted in desperation. (*FB* p.11)

These words of Tanuja not only show that she "has learned powerful, accusatory terms, foreign, literally and figuratively to young Sri Lankans"[14], but also bring forth the issues of effeminacy and homosexuality. "Pansy", "faggot", "sissy" are words with a definite and unambiguous undercurrent of same-sex desire. She herself being a child might have used the words without realising their homosexual overtones, but her usage of them clearly shows her exposure to Western education and society. Nevertheless, the intervention of the adults took place because of this rift between Her Fatness and the others which further problematised Arjie's position in the girl's world – paving his way out of it, in fact.

As a practice, cross-dressing destabilizes the system of binary oppositions: the cross-dresser, after all, falls between the poles of male/female, masculine/feminine, cultural/natural, conformist/ unconventional. However, Arjie cross-dressed without even realising the full implications of his act. It was only when he was paraded before the adults in his bridal attire, as a result of his quarrel with Her Fatness that he saw the *abnormality* associated with it. In his words –

> As we entered the drawing room, Kanthi Aunty cried out, her voice brimming with laughter, "See what I found!"
> The other aunts and uncles looked up ... They gazed at me in amazement as if I had suddenly made myself visible, like a spirit. I glanced at them and then at Amma's face. Seeing her expression, I felt my dread deepen. I lowered my eyes. The sari suddenly felt suffocating around my body, and the hairpins, which held the veils in place, pricked at my scalp. (*FB* p.13)

[14] *Ibid.*, 38

Arjie's ascension into a "more brilliant", "more beautiful" self as he was dressed as the bride materialises in the admiration, in the applause that he received from his female cousins. Such was their admiration that for them "Arjie [was] the bestest bride of all."(*FB* p.10) That is to say, in front of his female cousins, Arjie's cross-dressing was not cross-dressing at all, in that they (the cousins) were not conforming to the societal rules and regulations regarding *normative* patterns of behaviour. An element of acceptability marked the way they looked at *Arjie, the bride*. For them, his dressing up as the bride was not to be associated with *abnormality*. However, that *spectatorial* aspect of Arjie's cross-dressing took a different turn in front of the adults. It was in front of them that Arjie's cross-dressing truly became *cross-dressing* as they interpreted it with the strict definitions of normative behavioural pattern –

> Then the silence was broken by the booming laugh of Cyril Uncle, Kanthi Aunty's husband ... The other aunts and uncles began to laugh too, and I watched as Amma looked from one to the other like a trapped animal. Her gaze finally came to rest on my father, and for the first time I noticed that he was the only one not laughing. Seeing the way he kept his eyes fixed on his paper, I felt the heaviness in my stomach begin to push its way up my throat.
>
> "Ey, Chelva," Cyril Uncle cried out jovially to my father, "looks like you have a funny one here." (*FB* p.13-p.14)

The response of Arjie's parents is quite understandable as unlike the other adults, it was *their* son who was behaving *abnormally*: instead of playing the *male* game of cricket with his boy cousins, he was attired in bridal belongings. The shame, humiliation felt by Arjie's parents is nothing but a manifestation of the element of *unacceptability* associated with Arjie's act. The other adults' reaction of unsuppressed derisive laughter was in conformity to the rules and regulations of *normative behaviour*: since Arjie was a boy, he *had to* play cricket with his boy cousins, instead of draping the sari around him. Their response was to safeguard hetero-normative patterns of masculinity; it was in accordance with hetero-normative masculinity.

After the highly loaded words used by Her Fatness ("pansy", "faggot", "sissy") connoting a powerful insinuation at homosexuality, the word "funny" mouthed by Cyril Uncle, further strengthened the overtone. Moreover, Arjie's father's blaming his wife that "if he [Arjie] turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing-stock of Colombo, it will be [her] fault," (*FB* p.14), exhibits the same association. However, Arjie could not understand the word "funny" with that implication –

> The word "funny" as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, "that's funny." 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. (*FB* p.17)

Goldie comments in "The Funniness of the *Funny Boy*" – "Arjie presents another classic portrait of a young homosexual. He is fascinated with his mother."[15] Though the first chapter does not provide us with any information about Arjie's homosexuality *per se*, the relationship he shared with his mother brims with possibilities to be interpreted from that perspective. Arjie was closer to his mother than both his siblings – his elder brother Varun (Diggy) and younger sister, Sonali. In Arjie's words –

> Of the three of us, I alone was allowed to enter Amma's bedroom and watch her get dressed for special occasions. It was an experience I considered almost religious, for, even though I adored the goddesses of the local cinema, Amma was the final statement in female beauty for me ... Entering that room was, for me, a greater boon than that granted by any god to a mortal. There were two reasons for this. The first was the jewellery box which lay open on the dressing table. With a joy akin to ecstasy, I would lean over and gaze inside... The second was the pleasure of watching Amma drape her sari... (*FB* p.15)

According to Sharanya Jayawickrama, the back garden, the kitchen porch, the mother's bedroom – spaces where Arjie moved *freely* – are "spaces which permit and enable the performing of an ideal female identity ... Each of these spaces is a site where ... a specific idea of gender is enacted."[16] Judith Butler's conception of the performativity of gender as a set of parodic practices that disrupt categories of the body, gender and sexuality in order to "occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame"[17] is relevant here. In the words of Jayawickrana – "Arjie's subversive potential lies in his ability to 'trouble' (Butler's term) the categories that gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality are dependent on."[18]

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[15] Goldie, *op. cit.* 183

[16] Sharanya Jayawickrama, "At Home in the Nation? Negotiating Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy", in Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar ed., *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, (London: Pearson Longman, 2007) 49-50

[17] Judith Butler, 'Preface', *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990)

[18] Jayawickrama, *op.cit.* 50

However, the free movement of Arjie in these *typically* feminised spaces was soon prohibited by his parents after the *shameful* discovery of Arjie dressed as a bride had taken place. His mother did not allow him to enter her room the next time she was getting dressed to go out, thereby altering their relationship forever – "I realized that something had changed forever between us." (*FB* p.17) Exiling him from this feminised space, his parents try to control his *funny* behaviour. In the words of Jazeel – "By prohibiting his access to this ... feminised space, they hope the correct gender behaviours and sexual desires can be imposed on him, inscribed onto his body."[19] Furthermore, on the next spend-the-day, Arjie was told – ordered, rather – to play cricket with his brother Diggy and his boy cousins by his mother. Arjie, of course, did protest –

> "Why?" I asked ... "Why do I have to play with the boys?"
>
> "Why?" Amma said. "Because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly, that's why." (*FB* p.19)

This answer by Arjie's mother, apparently childish, has graver implications. Gopinath states that through this answer, Arjie's mother "attempts to grant to the fixity of gender roles the status of universally recognised natural law and to root it in common sense."[20] Amma's words that "... big boys must play with other boys" (*FB* p.20) are her effort to create a similar universal law. She did not know how to explain the issue of gender to her seven year old young son, and therefore, she put it philosophically – "Life is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them." (*FB* p.20)

Gopinath talks about Arjie's entry into the boys' world as an "entry into proper gender identification [which] is figured in terms of geography and spatialization, of leaving one carefully inscribed space of gender play and entering one of gender conformity."[21] She argues that the novel's gendered sites iterate "nationalist framings of space" which talks about an "inner" space as a site of "spirituality and tradition" and personified as a woman, and an "outer" space which is a space of masculinity, "politics, materiality, and modernity"[22]. *Funny Boy* shows clear and distinct differences between what Gopinath refers to as "inner" and "outer" space. The "inner" space is where the girls' territory is, and where the women rule and the "outer" space is where the boys' territory is, a territory of the game of cricket. However, Arjie was not prepared to leave his "inner" space and join the "outer" one. The

[19] Jazeel, *op.cit.* 238

[20] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 172

[21] Gopinath, *op.cit.* 170

[22] *Ibid.*, 170

thought of Her Fatness taking over as the leader of the girls, of "claiming for herself the rituals [he] had so carefully invented and planned" was "terrible" (*FB* p.21) for Arjie. He decided to use his old, worn-out white sari, which they used as the bridal wear, to get back into the game. After skillfully manipulating his brother into making him flee from the cricket field, Arjie went to the girls at the back thus "... forever clos[ing] any possibility of entering the boys' world again." (*FB* p.28) However, there he was met with Her Fatness' newly-founded imposition of *gender* onto that feminised space. "Boys are not allowed here" (*FB* p.29) was her utterance on seeing Arjie, and that was indeed an endeavour on her part to bring in elements of stricture to make the space *exclusively feminine*. However, ultimately Arjie was allowed to play the game provided he agreed to play the role of the groom. Earlier Arjie had informed us –

> In the hierarchy of bride-bride, the person with the least importance, less even than the priest and the page boys, was the groom. It was a role we considered stiff and boring, that held no attraction for any of us. Indeed, if we could have dispensed with the role altogether we would have, but alas it was an unfortunate feature of the marriage ceremony. (*FB* p.6)

Nevertheless, Arjie accepted the *insignificant* role of the groom – "so great was [his] longing to be part of the girls' world again." (*FB* p.31) The sari begins to play its role now. According to Lesk, the game now is about the "questions around ownership of the sari; not that he ever wears it again, but that he *has* it."[23] Ultimately a tussle ensued between Arjie and Her Fatness, and "[w]ith a rasping sound, the sari began to tear ... and [it] tore all the way down." (*FB* p.35) Out of anger, Arjie ripped Her Fatness' sleeve and then the world of the adults again intervened in the form of Ammachi, their grandmother. Arjie, angered by the tearing of the sari, called his grandmother "old fatty" who was about to punish him for his treatment of his cousin. Arjie fled to the beach across the road, and sat there by himself. In Arjie's words –

> ... I knew that I would never enter the girls' world again. Never stand in front of Janaki's mirror, watching a transformation take place before my eyes. No more would I step out of that room and make my way down the porch steps to the altar, a creature beautiful and adored, the personification of all that was good and perfect in the world ... And then there would be the loneliness. *I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either.* (*FB* p.39, italics mine)

That is the final realisation of Arjie in the first chapter "Pigs Can't Fly".

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[23] Lesk, *op. cit.* 39

An interesting figure in the first chapter is Arjie's female cousin Meena. She used to play cricket with her male cousins in the boys' territory. In fact, her presence in that territory was quite powerful as she was the leader of one of the cricket teams – the other led by Diggy, Arjie's brother. She has been given very little narrative space by Selvadurai (in fact, she appears only in the first chapter – that too very briefly). However, a concise description of Meena helps us in seeing her as a foil to Arjie – "Meena was standing on top of the garden wall, her legs apart, her hands on her hips, her panties already dirty underneath her short dress. The boy cousins were on the wall on either side of her." (*FB* p.23) A definite tomboy emerges from this description of Meena. However, in the words of Jayawickrama, "[H]er identity is never explored or problematized by considering what experiences she might have in the boys' domain."[24] A possible reason for this lack of problematising can be linked to Penelope Eckert's and Sally McConnell-Ginet's theory[25] that it is easier for girls to get away with playing with boy toys than the other way around. The same idea is expressed by Judith Halberstam – "tomboyism is quite common for girls and does not generally give rise to parental fears. Because comparable cross-identification behaviors in boys do often give rise to quite hysterical responses, we tend to believe that female gender deviance is much more tolerated than male gender deviance."[26] Meena's apparent unopposed presence in the boys' domain can be thus explained. Goldie comments, "the cousin [Meena] can explore male power, but the family can assume that once she is exposed to female spectacle, all will change. Arjie is placed in the opposite position, as he is the height of female spectacle but unable to engage in male power."[27] Nevertheless, though unexplored, the *queerness* of Meena is noticeable.

The second chapter is entitled "Radha Aunty". This chapter explores the Sinhala-Tamil conflict through the characters of Radha Aunty – Arjie's aunt – and Anil Jayasinghe, her Sinhalese lover. Conflicts arose in both the families because of the race difference (the Chelvaratnams were Tamils). At large also, the divergence increased as that was the time the formation of the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) took place demanding a separate Tamil state. Arjie also fully comprehended the seriousness of the issue, though he still was a seven year old boy. However, this chapter does not deal with Arjie's homosexuality or his *queerness* very explicitly though his 'effeminacy' gets further established. This chapter is not altogether

[24] Jayawickrama, *op.cit.* 50

[25] In *Language and Gender*, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet discuss the relation between gender and language use where they put forward this notion.

[26] Judith Halberstam, "Female Masculinity", in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan ed., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004) 938

[27] Goldie, *op.cit.* 188

devoid of cross-dressing though it is not cross-dressing proper. What Arjie does here is to put make up on his face – thanks to Radha Aunty:

> She [Radha Aunty] painted my eyelids with her blue shadow, put rouge on my cheeks, and even darkened a birthmark above my lip ... For the rest of the afternoon, Radha Aunty allowed me to play with her make-up and jewellery ... I donned several of her chains and bangles and studied the effect in the mirror. Then I decided to paint my nails. I opened the bottle of nail polish and paused for a moment to breathe in its heady smell before I drew the brush out. (*FB* pp.49-50)

Radha Aunty's stand on the issue of gender and gender role was different from the other adults as she not only let Arjie play with and use her make-up and jewellery, she considered it "all in good fun" (*FB* p.50). Unlike the other adults, who adopted strict, *conventional* approaches regarding *masculinity* and the *masculine pattern of behaviour*, Radha Aunty saw things as they *were*, not as they *should be*. That situated her differently from the rest of the adults, and made her Arjie's "favourite aunt." (*FB* p.52)

Arjie's 'effeminate' physical feature is clearly established in the second chapter. After Arjie had finished putting on all the make-up, Radha Aunty commented, "Gosh ... You would have made a beautiful girl." (*FB* p.50) Aunty Doris, the director of the play Arjie and Radha Aunty were a part of, further strengthened this matter with her comment on Arjie's looks: "What a lovely boy ... Should have been a girl with those eyelashes." (FB p.55) The 'effeminacy' of Arjie is an important issue in that it can be connected with his emerging homosexuality, though of course, not all homosexual men are effeminate. Arjie was still a seven year old boy in the second chapter, yet we see instances when his latent homosexuality spoke out – in an *asexual* manner. In Arjie's words –

> He [Anil] didn't fit *my idea* of what a lover looked like. He was fairly tall and, though not thin, his body was angular and a little awkward. With his large eyes, full lips, and thick, curly hair, which hung almost to his shoulders, he looked like someone too young to be a lover. (*FB* p.68, italics mine)

Anil did not fit into Arjie's idea of a lover. What was Arjie's idea of that then? The fact that Arjie, a seven year old young boy, had an idea what a *male* lover should look like, is significant in the light of his imminent homosexuality.

Another textual instance is "He had a tall, powerful physique and strong features, and I could see why Mala Aunty had described him as charming." (*FB* p.98) This description is of Rajan Nagendra, the Tamil suitor of Radha Aunty with whom she eventually got married. Here as well, homosexual overtones are perceivable. Significantly, Arjie could see *why* Mala Aunty found Rajan Nagendra charming with his seven-year-old eyes. The latency of his homosexuality is at work here.

The third chapter "See No Evil, Hear No Evil" deals with Sinhala-Tamil issues wrapped around the extra-marital relationship of Arjie's mother. In fact, the issue of Sinhala-Tamil conflict is explored in each chapter with growing intensity which ultimately reaches its *crescendo* in the final chapter. The same can be said about the issue of Arjie's homosexuality. With a gradual increase in realisation, it progresses, ultimately resulting in Arjie's self-acceptance. In this chapter as well, Arjie's growing homoeroticism finds its manifestation. Now, Arjie is twelve, and hence an element of *physicality* has come into his observations on the men around him – their earlier *asexuality* being robbed off by his emerging adolescence.

In this chapter, a lover of Arjie's mother from her past, Daryl Brohier, a Burgher Sri Lankan, springs up. He worked in Australia as a journalist, and came to Sri Lanka for a two-month vacation. In the absence of Arjie's father, a secret relationship between Arjie's mother and Daryl Uncle ensues. Arjie unknowingly becomes the accomplice of his mother in her secret affair. In the previous chapter also, Arjie was taken into confidence by Radha Aunty in her relationship with Anil. Jayawickrama comments – "the key factor in Arjie's sense of affiliation with certain women is their ability, like him, to transgress social norms."[28] Conversely, it can be said that transgressing women – Radha Aunty's relationship with the Sinhalese Anil, and Amma's affair out of her marriage are *transgressions* – feel a certain kind of affiliation towards Arjie, who with his sense of *funniness*, becomes *confidant-material* for them. More than the women involved, it – the fact that he was *made* an accomplice by them – situates Arjie very significantly in the light of his homosexuality.

We get to see Arjie the reader in this chapter. He really enjoyed reading Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and "longed to read the sequels." (*FB* p.104) However, that book was declared unfit for boys by Arjie's father. "[He] declared it to be a book for girls, a book that boys

[28] Jayawickrama, *op.cit.* 50

should not be reading, especially a boy of twelve." (*FB* p.104) A homophobic note is discernible here on Arjie's father's part. Interestingly, those books were later gifted to Arjie by Daryl Uncle whose *masculinity* had been emphasised from the very beginning – "The stranger [Daryl Uncle] was tall and powerfully built, and he had a beard and moustache." (*FB* p.105) Moreover, *Little Women* used to be "one of [his] favourite books". (*FB* p.109) That a *masculine* man like Daryl Uncle liked reading *Little Women* and a *not-so-masculine* man like Arjie's father regarded it to be *unfit* for boys, problematizes the concepts of *masculinity* and *gender role*. Goldie comments somewhat sarcastically, "Given that Daryl Uncle quite clearly has heterosexual interests, perhaps gender and desire are not as simple as the father claims. Daryl Uncle is happy to bring Arjie the books. Apparently Burghers, Australians, and strange white lovers of Tamil mothers are much more open-minded than fathers."[29]

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, on their study on gender, discuss how it is the father who is more likely to use "differential language patterns to boys and girls", to "reward [the child] for gender-appropriate toys"[30], and that this is more directed towards sons than daughters. They also point out that activities and toys associated with boys have more value, and that boys are often discouraged from having anything to do with activities and toys connected with girls. This is because a girl can get away for acting "like a boy" getting the label "tomboy" (Meena, who played cricket with her boy cousins, has been discussed in this light). However, the same cannot be said about a boy preferring to play with girl toys, or in this case, reading a book *meant* for girls. Arjie's father's admonition of Arjie seems to have emanated from this.

Arjie described Daryl Uncle in the following manner –

> I found myself observing his (Daryl Uncle's) high cheekbones and the glints of gold in his brown beard, his thighs and the way they changed colour at the edge of his shorts, and his gentle, courteous manner ... I couldn't help comparing him to my father, who, with his balding head, thin legs, slight paunch, and abrupt way of talking to Amma, cut a poor figure next to him. (*FB* p.116)

This description not only situates the difference between Daryl Uncle and Arjie's father (as seen through Arjie's eyes), but also, most importantly, it shows the element of *physicality* in Arjie's description of Daryl Uncle thereby *sexualising* his vision. Arjie moreover said, "For

[29] Goldie, *op. cit.* 192

[30] Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 20

my part, my feelings about Daryl Uncle were clear. I liked him, and not merely because he had offered to buy me those books." (*FB* p.111) If it was "not merely" because of the books, for what other reason did Arjie like Daryl Uncle? And, in what way? Arjie had not given answers to these, but homosexual overtones are quite noticeable here. The *absence* of those answers speaks for themselves. Arjie's alliance with Daryl Uncle brings out an early homosexual attraction in him that foreshadows a later attraction to other men.

The fourth chapter "Small Choices" further highlights Arjie's growing homosexuality. The Sinhala-Tamil issue is also dealt with here as we get to see the intrusion of this conflict into the Chelvaratnam household through the character of Jegan Parameswaran – the son of Arjie's father's childhood friend. Arjie is thirteen in this chapter, and the awareness is gradually dawning on him that he looks at men *differently*. In Arjie's words –

> 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. Sometimes these men were present in my dreams. I felt the reason for this sudden admiration of men had to do with my distress over the recent changes in my own body ... I had grown long and awkward and my voice sometimes slid embarrassingly into a high pitch. Also, I had started to notice a wetness on my sarong in the morning ... I longed to pass this awkward phase, to become as physically attractive and graceful as the men I saw around me. (*FB* p.161)

This is not a *usual* description of distress felt by adolescents in this very meaningful as well as problematic phase in one's life. No doubt, Arjie was concerned about his rapidly changing physical features, but simultaneously, the understanding that he looked at men with a *unique* revelation, was beginning to work upon him.

Jegan, more than Daryl Uncle, brought out the homoerotic tendencies in Arjie very forcefully. In Arjie's words –

> I went to sit down in a corner of the verandah where I could observe Jegan without him being aware of it. When I had served him the drink, I had got a closer look at him. What had stuck me was the strength of his body. The muscles of his arms and neck, which would have been visible on a fairer person, were hidden by the darkness of his skin. It was only when I was close to him that I had noticed them. Now I admired how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers. (*FB* pp.160-61)

The *physicality* which I have mentioned above has received a distinct and unmistakable *sexualisation* in this description. In this connection, Jayawickrama's statement that Arjie "becomes actuely conscious of the desire he [Jegan] excites within him"[31] cannot be more apt. In the case of Arjie's alliance with Daryl Uncle, his homoerotic feelings were not *that clearly* uttered, but his feelings for Jegan were more pronounced and *sexually charged.*

Jegan later on moved into the Chelvaratnam family. Jayawickrama states, "As personal space becomes an increasingly fraught site for Arjie, the performance of gender, which transforms space, modulates into the transfigurative enacting of desire ... Selvadurai expresses the effect and power of desire in terms of the transformation of space ..."[32] With Jegan's moving in with them, Arjie experiences this transformation of space. He says –

> The thought of Jegan moving into our house, of my being constant contact with him, filled me with an unaccountable joy. I felt that his presence would invest this commonplace, familiar environment with something extraordinary. (*FB* p.162)

Interestingly, the way Jegan treated Arjie was more homosocial than homosexual; or rather, it was entirely homosocial. Jegan, who was twelve years elder than Arjie, was earlier involved in the Gandhiyam Movement – an organisation assisting Tamil refugees affected by the 1977 or 1981 riots. Goldie comments, "The ultimate homosocial character is Jegan, who devotes a large ego to the welfare of Tamil homosocilaity."[33] The interest Jegan showed in Arjie can be a manifestation of this homosociality. Arjie's father, who was always worried about Arjie's "tendencies" (*FB* p.166), was visibly pleased with the growing intimacy between Arjie and Jegan. Significantly, Jegan did not think anything was "wrong" with Arjie. Arjie says –

> For as long as I could remember, my father had alluded to this "tendency" in me without ever giving it a name. Jegan was the first one ever to defend me, and for this I grew even more devoted to him. (*FB* p.166)

The *hypocrisy* of Arjie's father regarding the "tendency" – homosexuality – becomes apparent when it comes to serving his hotel business. Jegan noticed that young boys were being sold to foreigners on the beach in front of Arjie's father's hotel. Arjie's father made a very crude and opportunistic remark in this regard – "It's not just our luscious beaches that keep the tourist industry going, you know. We have other natural resources as well." (*FB* p.171)

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[31] Jayawickrama, *op.cit.* 50
[32] *Ibid,*. 50
[33] Goldie, *op.cit.* 194

Yuval-Davis discusses the industry of sex tourism – an industry which has become one of the largest sources of "economic survival" in many postcolonial countries. This industry allows foreigners to materialise "dreams of inexhaustible pools of sexual pleasures and [to enjoy] 'exotic' sexual objects."[34] The "other natural resources" referred to by Arjie's father are nothing but *commodities* of that industry: young boys, in this case. The fact that this industry uses homosexuality to flourish and grow means nothing to Arjie's father but when it comes to the prospect of his son turning out *funny* or showing certain *tendencies*, he immediately becomes oppressive. Very fittingly, Jayawickrama comments – "While Arjie's sexuality is a threat to norms of masculinity, sex between men for sale is an aspect of the economy that allows Appa [Arjie's father] to survive as a hotelier."[35]

The fifth and penultimate chapter of the novel "The Best School of All" deals with Arjie's awakened homosexuality explicitly. The Sinhala-Tamil issue takes a different dimension in the chapter as it is explored in the backdrop of the new school Arjie attended. The homophobia of Arjie's father ultimately makes him enrol Arjie in The Queen Victoria Academy – a school which would "force [Arjie] to become a man." (*FB* p.210) His brother, a student of that school already, too warns Arjie – "Once you come to The Queen Victoria Academy you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other boys will look down on you." (*FB* p.211) John Beynon writes about the Victorian Public School that it was nothing but a "factory of gentlemen". It was a site supported on "intimidation and violence" in order to "facilitate the development in boys of both the mental and physical toughness which were the hallmarks of Victorian masculinity."[36] The Queen Victoria Academy was a school governed by such ideals.

The Academy makes clear-cut divisions between Tamil and Sinhala students having separate classes for the two. Arjie, though in the previous chapters, had been witnessing the Sinhala-Tamil division in its different forms, in The Queen Victoria Academy, he witnessed it at a firsthand level. Needless to mention, it was the Tamils who were contending with embedded and unsolicited racism. On his first day in The Queen Victoria Academy, Arjie was told to go to the Tamil class by the head boy of the Sinhalese stream. Moreover, Arjie witnessed a beating administered by Sinhalese students to a Tamil student in the toilet. It was in this backdrop that Arjie met Shehan Soyza –a Sinhalese classmate – with whom he fell in love and carried a sexual relationship with.

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[34] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, (London: Sage, 1997) 52
[35] Jayawickrama, *op.cit.* 52
[36] John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture*, (Buckingham: Open UP, 2002) 41

Tariq Jazeel talks about the "double marginaliation"[37] that Arjie faces in the Academy. The first one is because of his ethnicity – a Tamil in a Sinhala dominated school – and the second is because of his sexuality – a homosexual in a school strictly advocating heterosexual *principles*. Arjie found an ally in Shehan – at least in one of these marginalised worlds. From the very beginning, Arjie was sensing that *something* was *different* about Shehan as well –

> ... Soyza had a certain power which gave him immunity from bullies like Salgado. Where this came from I didn't understand. It was certainly not his physical strength. His long eyelashes and prominent cheekbones gave his face a fragility that looked like it could be easily shattered. Yet there was a confidence about him, an understanding of his own power. He was also daring, for, unlike any of the other boys, he wore his hair long. It fell almost to his shoulders. I noticed that whenever he went out into the corridor between the classes or to the toilet, he always reached into his desk for his black hair clips and pinned his hair up so deftly it looked like he had short hair. (*FB* p.217)

That difference paved the way for the Arjie-Shehan alliance which was a crucial turning point in Arjie's journey towards adulthood and understanding his homosexuality. Shehan informed Arjie about the political conflicts in the school between the Principal, Mr. Abeysinghe (who was known as Black Tie), and the Vice-Principal, Mr. Lokubandara. It was a conflict over "whether neo-colonial, multicultural pluralism should survive in the Academy, or whether populist, grassroots Sinhala absolutism should succeed."[38] Black Tie "wanted the school to be for all races and religions" (*FB* 220) whereas Lokubandara desired to transform the school into a Buddhist school thereby closing doors for the Tamils because all Buddhists were Sinhalese. "[T]he teachers, clerks, prefects, a few older students who were in the know, and even the canteen aunties were divided into two factions: supporters of Black Tie and supporters of Lokubandara." (*FB* 220) However, Lokubandara, being a "political appointee" (*FB* p.212), was in a more powerful position than Black Tie was.

Because of the quality of his voice, Arjie was selected by Black Tie to recite two poems – "The Best School of All" and "Vitae Lampada" both by Sir Henry Newbolt – in the prize-giving ceremony. Black Tie's ploy was to impress the chief guest, a cabinet minister and an alumnus of the school:

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[37] Jazeel, *op.cit.* 241
[38] Jazeel, *op.cit.* 241-242

> "Vitae Lampada" and "The Best School of All" were two poems that the minister liked and knew very well because he had won the All Island Poetry Recital Contest with them. Black Tie would be creating his speech around those poems and he would appeal to the minister and the other old boys to prevent the school from altering. It was hoped that the poems would remind the minister of his schooldays and he would take some action. (*FB* p.246)

Ideally, Arjie's affiliation should have lain with Black Tie, but Arjie saw things differently –

> I was not sure that as a Tamil, my loyalties lay with Black Tie. I thought of Mr. Lokubandara and the way Salgado and his friends had assaulted that Tamil boy. I thought of the way Black Tie had beaten both Shehan and me. Was one better than the other? I didn't think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandara stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better. (*FB* p.247)

This stand of Arjie is significant as ultimately in the prize distribution ceremony, Arjie mangled the poems "reducing them to disjointed nonsense" (*FB* p.281), thereby rendering Black Tie's carefully-crafted speech meaningless. He did so in order to save Shehan, who was being cruelly punished daily by Black Tie for wearing his hair long. Arjie's long-term plan was that the rendering of Black Tie's speech meaningless would pave his (Black Tie's) way out of the school thus rescuing Shehan from his cruelty. It is interesting to note that Arjie did not consider the consequent arrival of Mr. Lokubandara as the Principal of the school resulting in all the Tamil students' potential expulsion from the Academy.

As mentioned above, Arjie comprehended his homosexuality through his relationship with Shehan. Their friendship started with the sharing of their mutual contempt for the values that the Academy embodied. Together they made fun of the school and "it was a relief [for them] to be able to hold up for ridicule all that was considered sacred by The Queen Victoria Academy." (*FB* p.240) However, soon that relationship was *sexualised* starting with a dream of Arjie's –

> That night I dreamed of Shehan. We were in the Otter's Club Pool, swimming and joking around ... He (Shehan) swam away from me and I chased after him until finally I caught him in the deep end. I wound my legs around him so that he couldn't escape ... I was very aware of the feel of his legs against mine and of the occasional moments when, in trying to prevent him from going away, my chest would rub against his.
>
> The next morning I noticed the familiar wetness on my sarong. (*FB* pp. 242-43)

Arjie began to realise the implications of that dream when one day Shehan suddenly kissed him. Arjie, initially uncomprehending, later on realised that "(he) had not only liked that kiss but [he] was also eager to experience it again in all its detail and sensation." (*FB* p.251) It also made Arjie realise the actual *nature* of his friendship with Shehan –

> The difference within me that I 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 ... I now knew that the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along (*FB* p.256)

However, Arjie was still in the process of understanding his sexuality fully. It was yet to be physically materialised, and after his first sexual encounter with Shehan, which happened in the garage in Arjie's home in a game of hide-and-seek, Arjie began to feel guilt and disgust:

> [Shehan] kissed me again and I was aware of the heat of his body against mine as he pressed me against the wall ... It was soon over for me, however ... and I felt myself being pulled back to reality ... I now became conscious of my naked backside pressed hard against the rough wall, bruising every time Shehan pushed up against me, of the squelching sound of Shehan's body against my now wet stomach, ... his hands on my hips in a painful grip ... I wanted him to stop what he was doing, but before I could say anything, his hold on my hips tightened and he began to thrust even harder against me ... All at once he sighed deeply and became still, and I felt a wetness against my thighs. I stood motionless, helplessly angry, the wetness a violation. (*FB* pp.259-60)

Tariq Jazeel draws attention to the importance of the fact that Arjie's first sexual encounter had taken place in a garage, a place detached from home, in a game of hide-and-seek – "Arjie hides not only his 'abnormal' sexual and bodily desires, but also his first homosexual encounter in this game of hide and seek. The garage, the very alveoli of domestic non-space, is the only place in the house where Arjie can explore his as yet latent same sex desire."[39] However, it was when Arjie faced his family on the lunch table afterwards that he began to feel pangs of guilt –

> 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 looked down at my plate, feeling my heart clench painfully at the contrast between the innocence of [Amma's] smile and the dreadful act I had just committed. (*FB* p.262)

[39] Jazeel, *op.cit.* 239

This sense of guilt shows his initial struggle to come to terms with and to accept his homosexuality. (Interestingly, it was *Arjie* who made the advance in the garage). However, desire soon returned to Arjie replacing the sense of guilt, and he found himself in a quandary – "torn between [his] desire for Shehan and disgust at that desire." (*FB* p.266) This desire and disgust at that desire simultaneously experienced by Arjie, according to Jazeel, are products of "the impossible demands that patriarchy and gender expectations make of Arjie."[40]

However, that internal struggle and conflict were resolved the very next day as Shehan was being taken away by Black Tie for punishment –

> In that moment my conflicting feelings for Shehan disappeared and all my anger at him dissolved in the face of this new horror that had descended upon him. The only thing I was concerned about now was Shehan's welfare. ... With the terrible regret of a realization come too late, I saw that I had misjudged what we had done in the garage. Shehan had not debased me or degraded me, but rather had offered me his love. And I had scorned it. (*FB* pp.268-69)

From thinking that sex with Shehan in the garage was "revolting" (*FB* p.265) to giving it the name of "love" was the ultimate step of Arjie in comprehending his homosexuality. The earlier pangs of guilt were removed, and Arjie had accepted his *difference*, his *funniness*. In accepting his homosexuality, Arjie also raised issues of power and authority –

> Right and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were ... How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't. If you were powerful like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. If you were like Shehan or me you had no choice but to follow what they had said. But did we always have to obey? Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? (*FB* pp.273-274)

With this understanding, Arjie formulated a "diabolical plan" (*FB* p.277) to undermine or to contest the *power* exercised by Black Tie. As stated above, according to the plan, Arjie mangled the poems in his recitation in the prize distribution ceremony. The subject-object equation thus gets subverted by publicly ridiculing school-space and all it stands for. Arjie has altered the equations of power by utilising "the subversive potential inherent in his subordinated position" [41]

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[40] *Ibid.*, 240
[41] Jayawickrama, *op.cit.* 54

The chapter "The Best School of All" – in which Arjie's understanding of his sexuality takes place comprehensively – ends with a sense of exile on Arjie's part: an exile from his mother and his family, at large. In Arjie's words –

> What had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with her [Arjie's mother] forever. I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me. (*FB* pp.284-85)

The manifestation of that exile takes a different shape in the concluding chapter of the novel, "Riot Journal: An Epilogue". The chapter is written in the form of diary entries by Arjie describing the events of July 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29, and August 2, 25 and 27, of the year 1983 – eight fateful days for the Chelvaratnam family. The chapter describes the burning of the Chelvaratnam house by the Sinhalese mob, and the hiding of the Chelvaratnams in the storeroom of their next door neighbour, the Pereras. (At a thematic as well as at a *structural* level, this chapter inevitably reminds the reader of *The Diary of a Young Girl*[42]). The subsequent exile of the Chelvaratnam family then takes place as they are forced to leave their country and to "forge a new home for [themselves] in Canada." (*FB* p.5) As mentioned earlier, 1983 was a year in Sri Lankan history when the Sinhala-Tamil conflict reached an unprecedented level. The whole of Colombo was rocked by ethnic violence aimed at the destruction of the lives and properties of the Tamils in the capital. In this chapter, the pogrom of 1983 is delineated through the *fictional* voice of Arjie.

Above I have italicised the word 'fictional' in order to make the point clear that though there are similarities between Arjie and Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* is *not* autobiographical. That point has been made by Selvadurai himself in an interview with Ray Deonandan –

> I'm gay, the character in the book is gay. I am Sri Lankan Tamil, the character in the book is Sri Lankan Tamil. We came to Canada – they came to Canada. Therein ends the parallels. [43]

Selvadurai made the same point in his interview with Jim Marks as well.[44]

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[42] *The Diary of a Young Girl* is a book based on the writings from a diary by Anne Frank while she was in hiding for two years with her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

[43] Ray Deonandan, "The Human Condition Explored", *India Currents Magazine* (April 1996). Posted online as "An Interview with Shyam Selvadurai" on 3 August, 2002.

[44] Jim Marks, "The Personal is Political", *Lambda Book Report*, Vol 5 Issue 2 (August 1996).

However, Arjie's understanding of his sexuality clearly established in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses more on the ethnic conflict and the consequent loss of home than the Arjie-Shehan relationship. Earlier, home was that place for Arjie where he was struggling with himself and his homosexual feelings, ultimately coming to terms with it. It was a sheltered, protected place then. According to Jazeel, "In oppressive and discriminatory regimes the home often becomes a space of comfort, warmth and shelter, even a site of resistance."[45] But that shelter, that sense of protection has been shattered for Arjie –

> By the time I had turned onto our road, I could already feel a few drops of rain on my arms. The road was deserted. From the top of it, I could see our house, its black walls and beams visible above the other houses. When I reached it, I pushed open the gate. Something was different from the last time I saw it. The house looked even more bare, even more desolate than before ... Everything that was not burned had been stolen ... How naked the house appeared without its doors and windows, how hollow and barren with only scraps of paper and other debris in its rooms. I felt hot, angry tears begin to well up in me as I saw this final violation. Then, for the first time, I began to cry for our house. I sat on the verandah steps and wept for the loss of my home, for the loss of everything that I held to be precious. (*FB* pp.310-11)

In this last chapter of the novel, the ethnicity of Shehan – that he is Sinhalese – is made clear. According to Jazeel, "it simply does not matter"[46] as it was their sexuality which brought Arjie and Shehan together. In Arjie's words –

> He [Shehan] was trying to cheer me up, and as I listened to him talk, something occurred to me that I had never really been conscious of before – Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not. This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him. (*FB* p.302)

In this chapter, with various textual illustrations, I have attempted to situate the *funniness* of Arjie. In the concluding chapter of this work, I will discuss the issue of othering as well as the *fluidity/fixity* of Arjie's sexuality.

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[45] Jazeel, *op.cit.* 237
[46] Jazeel, *op.cit.* 244

In *Funny Boy*, the queer aspects of the protagonist are his cross-dressing and his same-sex orientation. However, it is interesting to note that Selvadurai has neither used the word 'homosexual' nor 'gay' for Arjie anywhere in the novel. Instead, he uses the word "funny". This word is unmistakably close to the word 'queer'. Arjie's mother's logic at forcibly putting Arjie in the boys' world that "... the sky is so high and pigs can't fly ..." (*FB* p.19) however connotes a sense of queerness. That is to say, pigs' flying is an activity which breaks the *rule*, the *norm*. It is non-normative; it is queer. And in being homosexual, in being queer, Arjie is a flying pig – a pig *with* wings!

Being bisexual doubles your chance of a date on Saturday night.

Woody Allen[1]

Shyam Selvadurai's 1998 historical novel *Cinnamon Gardens* is rooted in 1927 Ceylon – the name Sri Lanka went by until 1972. Its locus is the elite Ceylonese Tamil community, who reside in the affluent, fashionable Cinnamon Gardens suburb of Colombo. The novel juxtaposes two stories of self-discovery. One story is of Annalukshmi Kandiah, and the other Balendran Navaratnam's. The novel encompasses one year of the characters' lives – starting from the birthday of the Mudaliyar Navaratnam, Balendran's father, in 1927, and ending at the same in 1928. As a historical period, the 1920s is significant as the British colonial rule in Sri Lanka was beginning to wane around that time. Debates surrounding independence, universal franchise, and the future of the island colony were pervading the political scenario as the Donoughmore Commission[2] arrived in Colombo to decide on these issues. Having this historical moment as its backdrop, the novel explores the main characters' struggle for independence and freedom to step across lines set by traditions.

The historical context of the novel goes as follows. Headed by Lord Donoughmore, the Donoughmore Commission was constituted by Dr. Drummond Shiels and Frances Butler. The Commission was sent to Sri Lanka to investigate the shortcomings of the 1924 Manning Constitution of Ceylon and to suggest constitutional reforms. Earlier "the Manning Reforms ... abolished group representation and introduced territorial representation. This gave rise to vociferous protests from Tamils and other minorities ...".[3] The Donoughmore Commission conducted a survey in Ceylon, paying attention to the arguments of various groups and sides. The groups that the Commission met were the Ceylon National Congress, formed in 1919,

[1] "Humorous quotes attributed to Woody Allen," at: http:/www.geocities.com/

[2] In Shyam Selvadurai's own words – "The novel is set against the backdrop of the arrival of the Donoughmore Commission from England. The purpose of the commission is to grant more power to Sri Lankans and to put in place a constitution through which this power can be exercised. The jockeying for power by the various ethnic, cultural, caste and religious groups reveals immediately the multifaceted, multi-cultural nature of Sri Lankan society. This period also marks the first serious rift between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Sinhalese demanding a centralized government, the Tamils and other minorities asking for a more federated system." Shyam Selvadurai, *Speech to the Canadian Bookseller's Association*, http:/www.interlog.com/~funnyboy/index.htm, personal website of Shyam Selvadurai

[3] Sayantan Dasgupta, *Shyam Selvadurai: Texts and Contexts*, (New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2005) 82

and the Women's Franchise Union, formed in 1927. After all the discussions and surveys and talks, the Commission had recommended "universal franchise, making Ceylon the first Asian country to receive it." (*Cinnamon Gardens* p.379)[4] The Commission moreover devised a system of executive committees that would control all government departments. The committees would be formed of people from all ethnic groups. Thus "the system ... was the Commissioner's recognition of the multi-faceted nature of Ceylonese society." (*CG* p.378) It, very importantly, rejected the principle of communal representation. It is at this politically charged, remarkable backdrop in Sri Lankan colonial history that Shyam Selvadurai situated his second novel *Cinnamon Gardens*. At various levels, involvement of the principal characters with this political ambience – either direct or indirect – takes place in the novel which, in the words of Selvadurai, is "a Colonial Novel for a Post-post colonial age."[5]

The novel revolves around two protagonists – the young school teacher Annalukshmi Kandiah and her middle-aged uncle, Balendran "Bala" Navaratnam. Vera Alexander rightly points out that "the dual shape of the narrative ... forces readers to continually shift attention from one protagonist to the other."[6] However for my studies, it is the character of Balendran who holds relatively more importance as it is through this character that Selvadurai addresses the issue of homosexuality. Nevertheless, I would also attribute a certain sort of *queerness* to the character of Annalukshmi. Though heterosexual, this character shows some *tendencies* not in tune with the traditions of her time which, in my reading of the character, makes her *queer* to a certain extent. I will embark on the discussion of this character first and then move on to Balendran Navaratnam.

Annalukshmi Kandiah was the eldest daughter of Murugasu Kandiah and Louisa Barnett. A teacher by profession at a time when it was supposed that "a career as a teacher was reserved for those girls who were too poor or too ugly to ever catch a husband" (*CG* pp.3-4), Annalukshmi was a rebel as she refused to adhere to the rules and regulations supposedly to be obeyed by women. "Annalukshmi was not going to let herself be stopped by the ridiculous conventions of society." (*CG* p.9)

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[4] Shyam Selvadurai, *Cinnamon Gardens*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998). Subsequent references will be cited as *CG* and provided in parentheses immediately after the quote.

[5] Shyam Selvadurai, *Speech to the Canadian Bookseller's Association*, http:/www.interlog.com/~funnyboy/index.htm, personal website of Shyam Selvadurai

[6] Vera Alexander, "Investigating the Motif of Crime as Transcultural Border Crossing: *Cinnamon Gardens* and *The Sandglass*", in Christine Matzake and Susanne Muehleisen ed., *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) 154

In the first chapter, I have discussed the issue of tomboyishness with reference to Meena – Arjie's cricket-playing cousin. In the case of Annalukshmi as well, an element of tomboyishness is perceivable. But of course, there is a significant difference between Meena and Annalukshmi. Meena's *transgression* into the world of the boys was not questioned or objected to. A reason or explanation for this can be given with the help of the words of Judith Halberstam – "We could say that tomboyism is tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl."[7] Meena's playing cricket was thus not disturbed by adult intervention. However, in Annalukshmi, we are not confronting a girl-child, but a woman of twenty-two in the Ceylon of the 1920s. The context is entirely different, though it is undeniable that a detection of tomboyishness is possible in Annalukshmi as well. The text says –

> Louisa placed the blame for her eldest daughter's nature squarely on her husband's shoulders. In the absence of a son – there were three daughters in the family – he had raised Annalukshmi *as if she were a boy*. He was responsible for her reckless nature, a disposition that would have been admissible, even charming in a boy, but in a girl was surely a catastrophe. (*CG* p.4, italics mine)

This perhaps justifies Annalukshmi's *disposition* (a very *Austenesque* word which is used quite liberally in the novel). In her times, a woman riding a bicycle was considered unfeminine and objectionable. But that was precisely what Annalukshmi did. She lived at a time when it was believed – as a character had put it – "Only manly women get involved in men's affairs. Normal women think of their husbands and of their homes and nothing else." (*CG* p.117) Annalukshmi chose to go beyond the typical *female* activities and in that *transgression*, she shows signs of queerness.

As mentioned, about Annalukshmi's sexual orientation, the text does not leave any doubt that she is heterosexual. A textual example –

> In that instant, Annalukshmi saw all she needed to. His handsome face and nice teeth when he smiled, the straps of his suit slightly awry over his smooth chest, the shape of his crotch clearly outlined in the bathing suit. *She felt the heat release itself from somewhere in her lower back and spread down her legs.* (*CG* pp.93-94, italics mine)

Annalukshmi's heterosexuality is clearly established in this description.

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[7] Judith Halberstam, "Female Masculinity", in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan ed., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004) 938

So if Annalukshmi is heterosexual, from where does queerness come in her? In being progressive for her time, in being ahead of her time, in my reading, she emerges a queer figure. In defying societal norms and rules, in trying to be independent in a world of patriarchs, Annalukshmi is unusual. She is queer. In stark contrast to Annalukshmi, stands her younger sister Kumudini who, obeying the rules and regulations of society, gets married without ever questioning her share of the world. She is content with her plight and she does not question its propriety or justness. But Annalukshmi does not do that. She refuses to get married and wants to live her life on her own terms – not by the ones laid by someone else. This trait, in my reading of Annalukshmi, makes her a queer heroine though I stress the fact again that she is undoubtedly heterosexual.

Through the character of Balendran Navaratnam, Selvadurai explores the issue of homosexuality in *Cinnamon Gardens*. Balendran, a forty year old man,. kept his homosexuality under wraps. Married to his half-English cousin Sonia with a son studying in London, Balendran lived in a world of his own due to his clandestine homosexuality. While studying in London twenty years earlier, Balendran had fallen in love with an Englishman named Richard Howland. Balendran's domineering father discovered the relationship and disrupted it. In deference to the wishes of his father, Balendran got married but was forced to re-apprise himself in the wake of the arrival of the Donoughmore Commission as Richard Howland, his lover from the past, was coming with this Commission. Re-ignition of love took place, and Balendran found himself in a quandary. In a fit of rage, Balendran broke his relationship with Richard asking him to leave Sri Lanka. However, by the end of the novel, he realised the importance of Richard in his life as the one who truly understood him, and tried for reconciliation by sending him a letter asking him for his friendship.

We get to see the intensity of Balendran's feelings for Richard as his father, the Mudaliyar Navaratnam informed him of the impending arrival of his past lover. Even after twenty years of separation, the name of Richard could bring out a very powerful reaction in Balendran –

> Balendran felt light-headed, felt the need to put his head between his legs, to have the blood enter his head again. But, at the same time, he had an equally strong need to maintain his dignity, his calm, in order not to betray in his father's presence the impact that name still had on him after all these years, the combination of regret and dismay that arose in him. (*CG* p.31)

The text gives some meaningful information about the Balendran-Richard relationship in London. Their first meeting holds special significance in my understanding –

> ... the first time he had seen Richard, [he was] coming across the lawn of Lincoln's Inn, his gown flapping out behind him. It had been a fine autumn day and he, Balendran, had been leaning on the balustrade, too lazy to go into the library and study. He had watched Richard come up the step and Richard, looking up, had seen him too. "Hello," Richard said, as if they had met before.
>
> "Hello," Balendran had replied shyly.
>
> "Care for a tea or coffee?"
>
> Balendran had nodded.
>
> Balendran wondered, even to this day, *how Richard had simply glanced at him and saw his desire*. He, who was so very careful not to be detected watching men. (*CG* p.112 italics mine)

This first meeting of Balendran and Richard is significant in that without any sexual sort of exchange between the two, it had *sexualised* their acquaintance. There was just an exchange of glance between them. And that itself was enough to take it to a *different* level. We get to see that *difference* being presumably materialised in their next meeting –

> ... Richard [was] standing by the piano, his face flushed with drink and the effort of singing, a lock of his blond hair fallen over his forehead, his hand around Balendran's waist. As the evening progressed and their inhibitions fell away, Richard's hand would invariably slip under Balendran's spine until Balendran had to lean against the back of the piano so that the other patrons would not notice his arousal. (*CG* p.36)

As part of my studies, I have met some gay men in Delhi, and one of the questions that I asked them was – "How do you know that the person standing next to you is gay without talking?" All of them replied – "We *just* know. At times, there is a slight wiggle in the walk, at times, the way he looks at you etc." There was a time in New York, when a handkerchief was used as a symbol in gay cruising areas. If a person kept his handkerchief in the left pocket of his trousers, he is a "top" – that is, one who would be the *penetrator*, who would take the active role in sexual intercourse – while, if he kept his handkerchief in the right pocket, he is a "bottom" – that is, one who would be the *penetratee*, who would take the passive role in sexual intercourse. Significantly, in the first meeting of Balendran and Richard, no such symbols were used, no gestures made. It is noteworthy that their relationship started without any initial exchange of *signs*.

Secondly, the Balendran-Richard relationship had been a monogamous one. They were faithful towards each other. Richard declares – "Their relationship ... had been the only one that had met his criterion of fidelity. They had refused, unlike other couples, to seek gratification outside their alliance." (*CG* p.113) This speaks a lot about Balendran and Richard's commitment towards each other. The text indeed uses the word *love* many a time to describe their feelings.

Some of the gay men that I have met wanted a committed, monogamous relationship. They did not believe that a homosexual relationship cannot be faithful. They were not looking for mere sex or one night stands as such. Some others were only looking for sex-dates; they were not eager to confine themselves within the boundaries of a relationship. In fact, they showed a kind of reluctance to steady relationships. They were happy with multiple sex partners.

After meeting Balendran and Sonia in Colombo, Richard was under the impression that Balendran met Sonia while he and Richard were together in London. This really disturbed Richard. He thought that "all the while, Balendran had been unfaithful, and with a *woman* at that." (*CG* p.113)

This italicised *woman* is significant in my reading. Richard would have tolerated had Balendran cheated on him with a *man*. But it was a woman for whom Balendran was unfaithful which was all the more insulting to their relationship. To say that an element of misogyny is at work here would perhaps be wrong. Richard is not a misogynist, he simply is jealous. But interestingly, the degree of jealousy varies depending on with whom his lover is unfaithful towards him – a woman would make him *more* envious than a man.

I have posited the same question to the gay men I have met – "If your partner cheats on you, when will you be more hurt – if he falls for a man, or for a woman?" Interestingly, majority of them said woman; a few said man; and a very few said it does not make any difference – the fact that he has cheated him for *anyone* will be hurting enough.

Coming back to the text, however, subsequent revelations convey to us that Balendran was never unfaithful towards Richard: he met Sonia only after Richard had been forcefully moved out of his life.

In the text, Balendran is gay, straight, gay – alternately (though the straight *manifestations* of his character have never been explored explicitly). But can he be termed bisexual? Sex researchers have always found it difficult to put forward a clear-cut definition of bisexuality. It has always been looked at with doubt and apprehension. It has been described as "a form of infantilism or immaturity, a transitional phase, a self-delusion or a state of confusion, a personal or political cop-out ... even a lie".[8] According to Marjorie Garber, "bisexuality unsettles certainties: straight, gay, lesbian. It has affinities with all of these, and is delimited by none. It is ... an identity that is also not an identity, a sign of the certainty of ambiguity, the stability of instability, a category that defies and defeats categorization."[9] However, *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*[10] defines bisexuality as "the capacity to be romantically and/or sexually attracted to individuals of more than one sex." If we consider this simplistic definition as *the* definition of bisexuality for our convenience, then Balendran would perhaps not fit into the bill of bisexuality *proper* by itself. The text makes it clear that Balendran does not feel any romantic involvement with his wife. In fact, he has always felt a distance, a remoteness from her. Things however changed between them after the birth of their son, Lukshman, bringing them close in a *certain* way. But that *certain* way had nothing to do way with romance as such. It was more a parental bonding, the common ground of which was the love for their son. The text makes very clear mention of Balendran's sense of alienation from his wife –

> How often ... [Balendran tried] to comfort himself for the *anguish* he had felt, the *suffocation*, lying next to his wife, Sonia, at night, unable to sleep. His *suffering* had been intensified by knowing that she despaired along with him, felt his *alienation*, almost hatred towards her, without knowing its cause. (*CG* pp.38-39 italics mine)

Moreover, the text does not provide us with any scene of sexual intimacy between Sonia and Balendran. At times, there is holding of hands but it has an element of *asexuality* in them (the novel even does not have any kissing between Sonia and Balendran whereas there are two instances of Balendran-Richard kiss). In fact, Balendran tried to distance himself from Sonia as much as possible by keeping, rather insisting "that they maintain separate bedrooms." (*CG* p.80) A very significant phrase regarding Balendran and Sonia's sexual relationship is "his

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[8] Steven Angelides, "Introducing Bisexuality", *A History of Bisexuality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 1

[9] Marjorie Garber, "Extracts from *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (1995)", in Merl Storr ed. *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 137

[10] From *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*, Bonnie Zimmerman and George E. Haggerty ed., (New York and London: Garland, 2000)

formality even in their lovemaking."(*CG* p.80 italics mine) The word *formality* is to be noted here. When can one be *formal* in lovemaking? In an act which *demands* an element of passion, of desire? Where there is every possibility to be wild, passionate, and *informal*? It is possible *only* when that passion, that desire is missing. This phrase throws very definitive, very meaningful light on the Balendran-Sonia sexual relationship, or rather, on Balendran's *heterosexuality.* Balendran's insistence on having separate bedrooms, his formality in lovemaking, are nothing but attempts to *desexualise* his relationship with Sonia as much as possible.

Alfred Kinsey[11] devised a seven point scale which *measures* sexual orientation on a scale of 0 to 6, with people who are considered "more heterosexual" leaning towards the lower end of the scale and people who are considered "more homosexual" leaning towards the higher end. Thus, an unwavering "utterly straight" person would be a "0" on the Kinsey scale whereas a person who has never been anything but homosexual in his/her entire life would end up as a "6". A "perfect" bisexual would be a Kinsey "3", since 3 is the median point between 0 and 6. How far applicable or accurate this scale is, is a different matter altogether, but if I endeavour to situate Balendran on this scale, I would give him a rating of 5. That is to say, in my reading of the character, Balendran is more *into* the homosexual side of his orientation than the heterosexual one. That is to say, he is bisexual with homosexuality being more *potent* in him than his heterosexuality. That potency makes him formal in his forced heterosexual lovemaking. He does not *feel* as *wildly* about Sonia as he does about Richard. One cannot help but ask the question whether Balendran would have ever married Sonia or anyone for that matter had his father not compelled him to. Is it *enforced bisexuality* we are dealing with in Balendran? Would he have turned out to be a *proper* homosexual had the parental enforcement not been there? These are hypothetical situations, but in my reading of the character, it appears that Balendran's heterosexuality (in whatever *quantity* it was there) would have never been manifest had his father not intervened in his life and forced him to get married, and thus, so would not have his bisexuality.

Let us look at Balendran's homosexual encounter with Ranjan, "the one he always went with ... a private in the army" (*CG* p.81) –

[11] Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) was an American biologist. His research on human sexuality is considered foundational to the modern field of sexology. In his most famous book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), Kinsey developed the seven point scale to measure sexual orientation.

> They were a sufficient distance away from the wall now and they scrambled down the rocks to the beach, Ranjan taking Balendran's hand and helping him. Amongst the rocks, they found a fairly private place ... A silence fell between them. After a while, Ranjan put his hand on Balendran's crotch and began to gently massage it. He undid the buttons on Balendran's trousers, and Balendran lifted himself slightly, so Ranjan could slide his trousers down his thighs. Ranjan bent over him and, at the feel of Ranjan's breath on his arousal, Balendran sighed and lay back on the rock. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked up at the night sky.
>
> Balendran liked to take his time with Ranjan, to prolong *his bliss* as long as possible. (*CG* p.82 italics mine)

The key-word in the above citation in my opinion is *bliss*. As mentioned elsewhere, there is not a single scene of sexual intimacy between Sonia and Balendran in the text. In fact the novel talks about Balendran's alienation in lying next to his wife, and his subsequent "insistence" that they would have separate bedrooms. Contrary to that, with Ranjan, Balendran enjoys *bliss* – an ecstasy which he likes to prolong as much as possible. It clearly shows Balendran's stronger *affiliation* towards homosexuality.

The text stresses the fact that Balendran is not very *masculine*. He is not 'effeminate' as such but he is not *manliness personified* either. The physical description of Balendran goes as follows: "Balendran had ... small but well-proportioned frame and fine features, his long eyelashes and aquiline nose, his mouth with its thin upper lip and full lower one." (*CG* p.28) Let us now have a look at the description of the Mudaliyar Navaratnam, his father –

> The Mudaliyar ... was ... healthy and robust. He was tall and strongly built and had stately features – a long nose that flared out at the nostrils, a high forehead, slightly hooded eyes, and neatly curled moustache. He was an imposing and handsome figure ... (*CG* p.28)

A comparison between these two descriptions would clearly situate Balendran as the less *manly* of the two – of course, strictly in physical terms. The text does not give us any information about Balendran's earlier homosexual encounters, *if any*. We are told about his lack of interest in games particularly cricket, and his preference of *quiet* activities like reading, stamp collecting, etc. – activities considered "effeminate" (*CG* p.232) by Balendran's brother Arulanandan. In fact, Balendran's brother Arul had been portrayed as a foil to Balendran. Arul's *male* activities – his love for cricket, his interest in hunting – have been emphasised. That is to say, from whatever little information the text offers about

Balendran's early life, one can gather that Balendran had never been overtly *masculine*. In case of Arjie as well, we saw a similar sort of temperament. Does it mean that love for reading and such other activities imply homosexuality? Queer theory however destabilises all such assumptions and ideas. It does not connect biological sex to gender. A *man* has to be *masculine*, and a *woman* has to be *feminine* – queer theory does not support this premise. In fact, queer theory debunks the concept of classifying every individual by gender.

A remarkable reference in the text is to Edward Carpenter[12]. He was the author of *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) which was a foundational text for the LGBT movements in the 20th century. Balendran had reportedly read this book and learnt that "inversion had already been studied by scientific men who did not view it as pathological, indeed men who questioned the whole notion that regeneration was the sole object of sex." (*CG* p.58) Selvadurai even fictionalises a visit of Balendran and Richard to Edward Carpenter and his partner George Merrill in Millthrope. The text says –

> When Richard and he had met Carpenter and his companion, George Merrill, Balendran had been amazed and then intrigued by the way they lived, the comradely manner in which they existed, the way they had carved a life out for themselves, despite such strong societal censure. (*CG* p.59)

The trip to Millthrope instilled in Balendran and Richard a belief that for them too, a life of togetherness was possible, that they would also live like this one day. "The visit had given Richard and him such faith in the future of their own love." (*CG* p.59) However that was not to be, as one month later their relationship was disrupted by Balendran's father thereby closing any possibility of a life shared between him and Richard.

The Richard Howland-James "Alli" Alliston relationship is also a layered one as far as the issue of homosexuality is concerned. There is a significant age gap of fourteen years between the two: Richard is forty-one, Alli twenty-seven. The age gap notwithstanding, they have been together for seven years. It is interesting to note that at one point of time, in London, Richard, along with Balendran, used to "make fun of those middle-aged men with their pretty young things." (*CG*. p.105) However, the Richard-Alli relationship is an *open relationship* in which both of them had the *liberty* to have sexual relationship with other partners. Richard had some qualms about it though

[12] Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) was a poet, socialist philosopher, and early gay activist. At a time when the political ambience of England was hysterical about alternative sexualities generated by the Oscar Wilde trial of 1895, Carpenter started to live together with his partner, George Merrill, in Millthrope. They stayed together from 1898 to 1928, the year Merrill died. E. M. Forster's novel *Maurice* was partially based on the Carpenter-Merrill relationship.

> Richard glanced at Alli and felt, as always, a sense of failure at Alli's constant need to seek gratification outside their relationship. *Alli sought young, rough, well-built working men.* All that Richard was not. Richard preferred what Alli and their set called "tootsie trade." Men like himself and Alli, not overly masculine. Unfortunately, those men most often sought their opposite. (*CG* p.113 italics mine)

The preference of Alli for *young, rough, well-built working men* to have sex with outside his alliance with Richard seems significant in light of the fact that Alli himself was not "overly masculine". Does his not being "overly masculine" have anything to do with his preference?

In my meeting with gay men, I asked them this question – "What type of men do you prefer – effeminate men or manly men?" In this case, opinion varied from person to person depending on their preferred role in sexual intercourse. Most of the *tops* – the active role-players, the *penetrators* – said they would prefer effeminate men. However, some tops said they would only prefer manly, muscular men to have sex with. Their logic was - "If you want to have sex with men, then have it with *real* men, why go for *girlish* boys? Better go for girls then." However, another set of the tops said that they would like to be *penetrated* by manly men. In fact, the word they used for themselves was *versatile – compatible* both as *top* and *bottom*. Interestingly, all the *bottoms* – the passive role-players, the *penetratees* – said they would only prefer *manly, muscular, well-built* men. Some of them even acknowledged their preference for *hairy* men. I may also add that none of the bottoms that I talked to were *overly masculine*; some of them were in fact too 'effeminate'. Though, since the text does not make Alli's preferred role in sexual intercourse explicit, in my reading, we cannot really make a connection *per se* between his not being *overly masculine* and his penchant for *young, rough, well-built working men.*

Another question that I asked the gay men was - "If you are to be in a relationship, would you like it to happen with a man older/younger than you or of the same age as yours?" This question evoked a mixed set of a response. Most of them said that they would prefer a companion of their own age. Few of them preferred older partners, and a very few of them would not mind having a younger man as their partner.

Returning to the text, until Balendran's final acceptance of himself as he was, he had shown very ambivalent attitude towards homosexuality. In fact, to say that Balendran had been hypocrite about his sexual orientation, will be more accurate. It was for him "... something

he had learnt to live with, a daily *impediment* ... a *badly set fracture.*" (CG p.38 italics mine) The emphasised words clearly exhibit Balendran's *negative* attitude towards homosexuality. After Sonia and Balendran had met Richard and Alli, Sonia comprehended the kind of friendship these two were in. That they were "Friends of Oscar" was discernible to her. Balendran said about Sonia's remark, "Don't be crass Sonia. What a *terrible* thing to say about someone you claim to like." (*CG* p.111 italics mine) This statement of Balendran says it all about his outlook towards homosexuality. It is *terrible*; one cannot like someone *with* it. Homosexuality was, for Balendran, "[a] thing ... beyond the pale of refined society, beyond the understanding of decent women." (*CG* p.111)

The question *why* emerges from there onwards. Why was Balendran hypocritical about his homosexuality? The context is important here. It is Ceylon of the 1920s we are confronted with – Ceylon where the laws against homosexuality were quite strong. In fact, the readers are reminded that "it hadn't been that long since the Wilde trial" (*CG* p.141) when Balendran's father appeared unexpectedly in Balendran and Richard's London flat, and threatened to get Richard arrested for sodomy. Vera Alexander says, "if homosexuality is banned in England, it certainly was a dark secret worth keeping in Ceylonese society."[13] And in trying to keep his homosexuality a secret, Balendran had taken a stand of hypocrisy. He had submerged his desires underneath a façade of familial, societal propriety.

However, Balendran finally saw himself as he was, and that understanding took place through his estranged elder brother, Arul. Arul was banished to India by the Mudaliyar Navaratnam because of his affair with a low-caste servant woman called Pakkiam twenty-eight years ago. Arul, in his death-bed in India, made Balendran realise that the norms he had been living by were not followed by anyone but him. "Balendran experiences his brother Arul's death as a moment of enlightenment, of being shocked into an awareness of injustices and double standards in the society and, more precisely, the very family he is a member of."[14] The rules, norms laid out by their extremely authoritarian father were not adhered to by the man himself and Balendran gets to know of his father's sexual exploitation of Pakkiam's mother. This awareness made Balendran see his own hypocrisy – "I, too, am a hypocrite." (*CG* p.279) The realisation of the double standards of his father made Balendran perceive his own duplicity, and he realised the significance of Richard in his life.

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[13] Alexander, *op.cit.* 156
[14] *Ibid.*, 154

The text mentions Balendran's feeling of loneliness, of estrangement, many a time. Emotionally, Balendran is a drained kind of a character. There was always the problem of communication with his wife, and on the other hand, there was no one in his life who would understand him as he was – with his *disposition.* He always felt *lonely in the crowd* –

> [Balendran] thought to himself, They don't know me. None of these people have any idea who I really am. Then Balendran was overcome by the loneliness of an outsider who finds himself at a gathering of close friends and family. (*CG* p.167)

The most decisive moment for Balendran regarding his sexuality came when he confronted his father "with his true nature, unashamed, assured" (*CG* p.367). By doing so, Balendran shed the mask he was wearing; he was not a hypocrite any more. The confrontation took place thus –

> "Why didn't you leave me in London? I was content then."
>
> "I saved you from that ... degradation. Look at what you have now. What would you have been in London? Nothing."
>
> "Yes, Appa," Balendran said with gathering strength, "but I might have been truly happy." He took a deep breath. "I loved Richard. That would have been enough."
>
> "Stop," the Mudaliyar cried ... "I forbid you to speak such filth in my house. Apologize immediately."
>
> "No, Appa. I cannot, for this is how things are with me. And there isn't a day that goes by that I don't live with the pain of knowing this and not being able to do anything about it." (*CG* p.367)

This confrontation not only destroyed the *shield* of hypocrisy that Balendran was wearing, but also enabled him to gain his freedom. It enabled him to write a letter to Richard asking for his friendship. Significantly, Balendran did not decide to come out: he decided to stay in the closet as he considered "it would be wrong to hold [his] own desires paramount above those of [his] wife, [his] son. Such an act would be grossly selfish." (*CG* p.385) However this act of Balendran was not borne out of hypocrisy; rather it was an act of his self-realisation and subsequent acceptance of himself. He no longer viewed his sexuality as an *impediment.*

In this chapter, I have attempted to situate the bisexuality of the protagonist with a range of textual instances. However, I have assigned him a stronger attachment towards homosexuality. In the concluding chapter, I will discuss how the othering of Balendran has been manifested in the text. The issue of self-othering will also be discussed in that chapter.

There is a glib saying in gay culture – "Bi now, gay later." This saying expresses the *belief* or the *suspicion* in the homosexual community that a self-described bisexual is merely a homosexual in the initial stage of questioning his/her presumed heterosexuality, who will eventually accept that he is homosexual. A different version of this saying can perhaps be applied to Balendran – "Gay now, bi later." In both ways, the fluidity of sexuality as advocated by the queer theorists is at work here. Balendran is bisexual with a stronger affiliation towards homosexuality. Whether he is "gay now, bi later" or "bi now, gay later", he displays sexual fluidity and that makes him truly a queer figure.

Resolve to be thyself ... he who finds himself loses his misery.

Matthew Arnold

Shyam Selvadurai's third novel *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005) is a coming-of-age tale. It deals with the adolescent protagonist's realisation and subsequent acceptance of his homosexual tendencies. This novel bears similarity with Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* in that both the novels explore their protagonists' initial apprehension and gradual recognition of their sexuality. However, *Funny Boy* is much more loaded in its simultaneous exploration of issues of race, ethnicity, migration, home etc., the Sinhala-Tamil conflict occupying a major part in that novel. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, however, does not have any reference to that ethnic divergence but, it deals with issues of home, migration and race in some oblique ways. The central focus is, of course, on the mental development of the protagonist regarding his sexual orientation.

The novel is set in August, 1980 in Colombo. The fourteen year old protagonist Amrith is an orphan adopted by the Manuel-Pillai family. Disowned by relatives on both his father's and mother's side after their death in an accident, because of their unapproved marriage, Amrith was brought into the Manuel-Pillai family when he was six years old. The family consists of Aunty Bundle, his mother's best friend, Uncle Lucky, her husband, and their two daughters – sixteen year old Selvi and fourteen year old Mala. Amrith was treated with nothing but kindness and love by all of them making him fill the place of the absent son and brother in the family. However, Amrith feels a sense of not belonging to the family. He silently held Aunty Bundle responsible for his mother's death as she was the one who took him away with the hope that in his absence, her friend, Amrith's mother, could bring in some change in her drunkard husband's ways. That was not to be as both of them died in a motorcycle accident.

As the novel begins, Amrith was approaching his six week long summer holidays with a sort of gloominess and a lack of enthusiasm with which generally holidays are not expected. Uncle Lucky arranged for Amrith to learn typing in his office so that he could utilise his time fruitfully and productively during the vacation. Apart from that, Amrith also had rehearsals for the play *Othello*, the last scene of which would be his school's participation in that year's

Inter-School Shakespeare Competition. However, what brought the utmost change in Amrith's life was the arrival of Niresh, his mother's brother Mervin's son from Canada. The two boys quickly formed a friendship which was a first for Amrith, as he never had any friends. Niresh, who was sixteen, came to spend some days with the Manuel-Pillai family, and began to feel a kind of attraction towards Mala who also reciprocated in a similar fashion. By then, Amrith had become too possessive about Niresh, and he watched the teen-age romance between his cousin and his adoptive sister with extreme jealousy. His jealousy finally got the better of him and he tried to drown Mala in a fit of rage. In a storm-centered climax, Amrith realised the true nature of his feelings for his cousin. He came to terms with his sexuality after some initial feelings of revulsion. The cousins parted as friends; Niresh told Amrith the truth about his life in Canada, and Amrith told him about his mother and past life. Aunt Wilhelmina, Aunty Bundle's aunt, rescued Sanasuma, Amrith's family's former mountain retreat, for him using her wealth. After coming to terms with his homosexuality, Amrith silently reconciled with Aunty Bundle, realising the genuineness of her generosity and affection.

In a nutshell, this is the plot of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. This novel is an important departure from Selvadurai's earlier narrative techniques. In his first novel, *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai used a broken up narrative device by placing six inter-connected stories together. In *Cinnamon Gardens*, Selvadurai somewhat retreated in form as he used a realist mode. Selvadurai's third novel *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* was written for a target audience which comprises Young Adult (YA) readers. This fact is important as in *structuring* the novel, Selvadurai shows a different kind of approach. Perry Nodelman rightly says –

> A comparison of Canadian author Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* ... reconfirms the durability of the conventions of literature for young people. While the two books are about two different but nevertheless similar characters, young Sri Lankan boys first becoming aware of and acknowledging that they are gay, the first, more episodic novel was published as literary fiction for adults, while the second, marketed as a YA book and shortlisted for the 2005 Governor General's Award for Children's literature (text), more clearly follows the fable-like structure typical of YA fiction: it focuses only on the events that allow its protagonist to arrive at self-understanding. [1]

[1] Perry Nodleman, "Sneaking Past the Border Guards", *CCL/LCJ: Canadian Children's Literature / Littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse* 34.1 (2008)

The novel has twenty-one short chapters with a title to all of them. One reviewer rightly says, "Selvadurai artfully retains some of the short story feeling ... by having chapter titles, a useful device for those readers who ... need a helping hand through longer fiction."[2]

I have given a somewhat detailed account of the plot of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* so as to situate Amrith, the protagonist, in context. Unlike Selvadurai's first two novels, this novel does not have a historical background *as such*. In *Funny Boy*, the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict, and in *Cinnamon Gardens*, the arrival of the Donoughmore Commission served as the backdrop in which the homosexuality of the protagonists was explored, as has been discussed already. The above reviewer again fittingly says – "the political issues that are front and centre in adult works are muted and minor here, as befits teenage solipsism." In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, it is a more *isolated* story that we are dealing with. In my opinion, this *isolation* was inevitable as the target audience of the novel was the young adult reader. Perhaps, in giving a detailed description of the plot, I myself am adopting a stand of a young adult reader (though I am in my twenties now)!

The central issue of the novel is the sexual awakening of its protagonist. I have mentioned earlier that this novel obliquely touches the issues of race, migration, home etc. I will not embark on a comprehensive analysis of these issues in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* as my chief focus is on the issue of homosexuality explored through the protagonist. In any case, these issues are *peripherally* dealt with in the text. Unlike *Funny Boy*, where the Sinhala-Tamil cleavage occupied a major part of the narrative – in fact, in *Funny Boy* even the love-story of the protagonist was tinged with this issue as Arjie's lover Shehan was Sinhalese – here that issue is totally absent. In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, we see racism of a different kind – that of the west towards the east. This racism is manifested in the novel through the character of Niresh, Amrith's cousin. Niresh initially gave a very rosy sort of a picture of his life in Canada –

> 'Canada is great. As long as you're not some freak or nerd in school.' [Niresh] glanced quickly at Amrith and his chest expanded slightly. 'My close buddies – I've got three, Tommy, Dave, and Matt – we're on the football team and we're really tight.' (*Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* p.92)[3]

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[2] Sarah Ellis, Review of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, *Quill and Quire*, August, 2005

[3] Shyam Selvadurai, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005). Subsequent references will be cited as *SMS* and provided in parentheses immediately after the quote.

However, this picture is thwarted by Niresh himself as he later on told Amrith about his *real* life in Canada in order to bridge the gulf that opened up between them because of Niresh and Mala's growing fondness for each other and Amrith's consequent jealousy. The text says –

> 'All that stuff I told you about Canada, it was a lie. I don't belong on the football team. And those guys who are supposedly my best friends,' he made a contemptuous sound, 'they would have nothing to do with me.' ... 'In my school, I am nothing but a freak. A freak and a Paki.'... 'You want to know a popular joke in my school?' Niresh's mouth twisted bitterly as he spoke. 'How do you break a Paki's neck while he is drinking? Slam down the toilet seat.' (*SMS* pp.186-87)

Selvadurai thus addresses the issue of race in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. In my opinion, though dealt with peripherally and though not having too much narrative importance *as such*, it is significant enough to make us pause and brood over. The issues of home, of belonging, of identity are dealt with through the character of Niresh – again in a very marginal, peripheral manner. Niresh, who was born and brought up in Canada, speaks English with a Canadian accent which is a source of amusement for Selvi and Mala and their friends. Niresh, however, takes it differently: "'It's just that when people comment on my accent, it makes me aware that I'm not Sri Lankan. I mean, I'm not Canadian and then, over here, I'm not Sri Lankan. *I don't belong anywhere.*'" (*SMS* pp.134-35 italics mine) This is the only statement in the text which raises the issue of home, of belonging explicitly. It is a very loaded, heavy statement which clearly expresses the problems of belonging for the expatriate population.

As mentioned above, through the protagonist of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, Selvadurai addresses the issue of homosexuality. I will move on to a discussion of the protagonist now.

> A group of neighbourhood boys came out of a house, on their way to a field nearby. They were carrying cricket bats, wickets, fielding gloves, and a ball. Their voices were raised in *gruff* competition and two of them were *scuffling. Amrith hurried back inside, not wanting them to see him.* (*SMS*, pp.21-22 italics mine)

This textual instance is very significant. How will we read this *retreat* of Amrith when a bunch of boys of his age are approaching? Very interestingly, these boys are on their way to play cricket – a game which has gained a very meaningful place in all the three novels of Selvadurai as an embodiment of *the* masculine. Interestingly, all his protagonists – Arjie, or Balendran, or Amrith – have shown dislike for it whereas their foils are drawn towards this

game. Is this a retreat from cricket, or a retreat from masculinity? Or do both mean the same thing? As of now, we do not know anything about Amrith's homosexuality. Is this retreat and Amrith's homosexuality connected? Even if we read this retreat *asexually*, perhaps it can be read as a withdrawal from or retreat from *masculinity*. The description of the approaching boys is also impregnated with *masculinity* with a *scuffle* taking place, with their *gruff* voices. Does Amrith's hurrying back imply a lack of *manliness* – a lack which does not enable him to *face* boys of his own age? In any case, in my reading, this retreat seems really significant.

Another remarkable textual instance in my reading is that "Unlike with most men, Amrith felt that he could simply be himself around Lucien Lindamulagé." (*SMS* p59) This is an interesting statement in light of the fact that Lucien Lindamulagé is a homosexual man. Amrith's sense of ease, of *simply* being himself around this man thus draws attention. While with most other men, Amrith felt a distance, a sense of unease, did Amrith *unconsciously* relate to Lucien's homosexuality? Was it an unnamed, inexplicable *gay bonding*? Significantly, Amrith does not know about Lucien's homosexuality. What he knows is –

> There was something scandalous about Lucien Lindamulagé that Amrith did not understand. It had to do with his constant round of young male secretaries. Amrith had once overheard Uncle Lucky warning his wife that Lucien Lindamulagé should leave his secretaries at home when they went on business outstation; that what the old man did was illegal and he could end up getting arrested. (*SMS* p.59)

With regard to Amrith's unawareness of Lucien's homosexuality, thus, his sense of ease in his (Lucien's) presence draws consideration.

We also encounter Amrith, the adolescent. Adolescence is a very crucial part of one's life as one becomes aware of the changes taking place in one's body. Distress, sadness, and anxiety generally dictate this phase of one's life. In the case of Amrith as well, adolescent misery is perceivable:

> He felt that familiar inner blackness come in and sweep him out, like a current ... These black moods ... had started about a year ago, around the time he was thirteen. With his changing body, it seemed that a change had occurred within. When he thought of himself before he was thirteen, it was as a dashing-about child, with no thoughts distinct from the dictates and actions of his body. As he passed into his teenage years, his mind seemed to separate more and more from his body, causing him to see himself at a distance. And, this detachment, paradoxically, had brought a great flooding of emotions. (*SMS* p.27)

In Amrith's case, however, this sense of sadness, distress is not the sole product of adolescent changes. A sense of not belonging to the Manuel-Pillai family, of having no one whom he could call his own, also was a cause of distress for Amrith.

The exploration of the issue of cross-dressing is done in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* through the play competition in which all the schools in Colombo and a few in Candy participated. The competition was called Inter-School Shakespeare Competition in which each school performed a scene from a Shakespearean play. "Since none of the schools were coed, the female roles were usually played by juniors in the boys' schools, and the male roles played by seniors in the girls' schools." (*SMS* p.40) Amrith's school was performing the last scene of *Othello* that year in which Othello murders Desdemona, and subsequently kills himself after realising his irreparable mistake. Amrith was to play the role of Desdemona in that competition. Significantly, the year before, Amrith played the role of Juliet, and won the prize for the Best Female Portrayal from a Boys' School.

The way cross-dressing is dealt with in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is significant in several ways. Firstly, it is cross-dressing *in absentia.* We are not confronted with a cross-dressed Amrith as Desdemona. Secondly, it is a *performance* – in the literal sense of the term. And thirdly, it has got *societal approval.* Interestingly, in each of these *features*, cross-dressing in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* differs from that in *Funny Boy.* In the case of Arjie, we have witnessed the transformation. Arjie, *the bride*, was there in front of us – basking in the glory of becoming a bride, feeling extremely happy at the ascension of his self to a "more brilliant, more beautiful" one (*FB* p.5). We have seen that he was considered "the bestest bride of all" (*FB* p.10). However, we never get to see Amrith as Desdemona or Juliet. That absence leaves us wondering how Amrith would *be* as a Shakespearean heroine. The fact, however, which throws some light on it, is Amrith's winning the prize for the Best Female Portrayal from a Boys' School the year before. But, that, perhaps speaks more about Amrith's acting prowess than his transformation.

Amrith's cross-dressing is for a stage performance. It is a performance borne out of need, out of necessity. Amrith's was an all-boys' school, so a boy *had to* play the role of a female character. It was a compulsion, an obligation. In Arjie's case, it was a matter of *transgression* as in an all-girls' game of bride-bride, he was enacting a female role. Was Arjie's cross-dressing also not a performance? It was but there is an important difference between the two

performances. And that lies in the element of *spectatorship*. Arjie's spectators were his girl cousins who were *at the same time* performers in the game of bride-bride. However, in case of Amrith, there would be an audience *proper* presumably consisting of adult as well as child spectators. Moreover, Arjie's girl cousins were not following the *conformist* pattern of behaviour in allowing Arjie to be the bride. An element of childish innocence had been at work there. However, Amrith's audience would be *tolerant* of his *transgression* simply because it was a *performance*.

Arjie found appreciation and applause for his cross-dressing from an audience consisting of a group of girl children – an audience *oblivious* to the patterns of behaviour to be *obeyed*. However, his cross-dressing was interrupted, ridiculed, and ultimately stopped by adult intervention. That is to say, *gender* was imposed on his cross-dressing. Arjie had had the alternative to play cricket with his boy cousins which would have been in *conformity* with his *gender*. He did not do that and consequently faced adult interference in the form of imposition of gender rules and regulations. However, Amrith's cross-dressing would not be treated this way. His cross-dressing would not have to endure societal censure simply because of the element of *performativity* associated with it. That ways, it was approved by society.

We can refer to Judith Butler at this point. According to Butler, gender is not just a social construct, a core aspect of essential identity, but rather a kind of *performance*, a set of manipulated codes, and a *show* we put on, a set of *signs* we wear, as costume or disguise. In this sense cross-dressing and gender are closely related.

A brief look at the history of cross-dressing in the plays of Shakespeare will be useful here. The boy players who acted the parts of women at that time were attractive youths with pre-adolescent voices. However, they were not indisputably feminine without the addition of women's clothing, which connoted femininity on stage. The appeal of the boy actor was not his resemblance to a real woman (whatever that might be in Elizabethan society), but his ambiguous physical and sexual appeal, an appeal heightened by his seemingly androgynous status. Homosexuality was thus at play on the Elizabethan stage.

Interestingly, in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, unlike *Funny Boy*, we do not get to see any reference of Amrith being 'effeminate' – at least in physical terms.

I had asked the gay men I interviewed – "Did you ever cross-dress in your childhood? Or do you cross-dress in private now?" Interestingly, all the overtly 'effeminate' guys told me that they frequently cross-dressed in their childhood. It was a source of great pleasure for them. However, no *manly, top* guy told me that he ever cross-dressed. It perhaps shows that to draw connection between cross-dressing and homosexuality *all the time* is not correct.

The text does not leave any doubt about Niresh's heterosexuality. The following conversation took place between the cousins which, in my reading, not only shows Niresh's heterosexual orientation, but at the same time, a certain kind of naiveté on Amrith's part too –

> Niresh put his arm around his [Amrith's] shoulder. 'So are you a tits-man or an arse-man?'
>
> Amrith thought desperately – tits, arse, tits, arse – this could be important, like which sports team you supported.
>
> 'Um, arse.'
>
> 'Yeah! Alright! Me, too.' Niresh gave him a mighty whack on the shoulders.
>
> Despite the sting spreading through his shoulders, Amrith felt a great relief to have given the right answer. (*SMS* p.117)

The same naiveté we get to see in Amrith's understanding or lack of understanding with regard to Lucien Lindamulagé's homosexuality. Perhaps that naiveté is an outcome of Amrith's sheltered upbringing, his lack of friends and the kind of society he lives in.

The first instance of Amrith's homosexual tendency occurs thus –

> Niresh pulled his trunks down his thighs and let them fall to the floor. 'When we were coming in from the airport, we saw these women beating clothes on rocks.' He picked up his towel and pulled it back and forth between his thighs, his penis bouncing up and down. 'Does your woman do it that way?'
>
> 'Yes.' It was not so, but Amrith could not think any more. The blood was thudding through his head. He had not seen his cousin, nor, in fact, any man naked before.
>
> ... Amrith hurried into the bathroom ... After a moment, he placed his clothes over a rail and pulled down his trunks. *His penis sprang up. He looked down at it in dismay.*
>
> ... He closed his eyes and tried one of his remedies – reciting 'If' by Rudyard Kipling. When that failed he tried the prayer 'Hail Holy Queen.' Finally he got up and willed himself to urinate, the one thing he was certain would end this *embarrassment.* (*SMS* pp.128-29 italics mine)

The above citation is important in that it shows for the first time Amrith's reaction to, if not realisation of, his same-sex attraction, though the reaction is negative. Words like *dismay*, *embarrassment* – with strong undercurrents of negativity, disapproval – mark it. However, that very night, when Amrith and Niresh were sleeping together, the following happened –

> [Niresh] had fallen asleep again, his breathing regular. Amrith, however, was wide-awake. He could feel the rise and fall of Niresh's chest against his back, the heat of his thighs resting against the back of his own. *Amrith's penis had sprung up* and he was afraid that his cousin's hand would move down accidentally and brush against it. But Niresh loosened his grip on Amrith and rolled over on his back with a sigh.
>
> After a while, Amrith turned around, propped himself up on his elbow, and gazed at his cousin ... When he was sure that Niresh was sound asleep, *Amrith lay down on his back, as close to him as he dared.* He moved his leg until his thigh was resting against his cousin's. He turned his head to the side so he could gaze at Niresh. After a while, so much heat had spread through Amrith's body that he seemed to be burning up with fever. (*SMS* p.131 italics mine)

This action of Amrith is interesting as after feeling an *embarrassment* on getting an erection while seeing Niresh naked, Amrith *deliberately* tried to be as much physically intimate with him as possible. There is unmistakable, explicit mention of Amrith's erection also. But, significantly, Amrith does not feel any embarrassment any more. Rather, he was burning with desire, with passion. One can wonder why Amrith did this, why he tried to gain physical proximity of Niresh. The text is yet to make Amrith's realisation of his homosexual tendencies clear. Is Amrith's uncomprehended, unrealised homosexuality at work here?

A minor yet significant character in the novel is that of Mrs. Algama, the teacher who taught English Literature and Greek and Roman Civilization in Amrith's school and also ran the Drama Society, or Dramsoc as the students called it. Let us have a look at her description –

> Mrs. Algama, or Madam, was a plump, short woman with a brisk manner who wore a Kandyan sari, the pallu wrapped around her waist in a no-nonsense style. She was adored by her students and held in higher regard than any other teacher in their school. This was because, in a curious way, she was one of the boys ... She was the only teacher the boys dared tell suggestive jokes to ... Her husband was a well-known Sinhalese stage actor. They moved in the artistic, *bohemian* circles of Colombo. *There was very little that actually shocked Madam.* (*SMS* pp.44-45 italics mine)

The emphasised words above are significant in situating this character in my reading. We get to see that Madam is the one who had sensed Amrith's homosexuality long before Amrith was remotely aware of it. She saw his difference, his *queerness*. But having realised his difference, she did not react in a *conformist* kind of a manner. Her bohemian life style, the fact that there was very little that actually shocked her, perhaps is the reason for her accepting Amrith as he is. Reading her in conjunction with characters like Kanthi Aunty and Arjie's father from Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* – who exhibited a conformist, conventional kind of attitude towards gender in general – makes her really unique. Significantly, Amrith realises that Madam could see through him and could decipher things about him which he himself did not know existed –

> Amrith felt curiously uneasy around Madam. She had a way of looking at him, as if she saw right into his soul and understood something about him that he did not understand about himself. And what she saw made her more kind to him, more gentle. She never joked or teased him, or used her wit against him. And yet her gentleness made him all the more uncomfortable. (*SMS* p.45)

Madam Algama sensed Amrith's feelings for Niresh as well. She saw that Amrith's inability to perform properly in the rehearsals was an outcome of his distracted mind concerning his cousin. As Amrith introduced Madam to Niresh one day after rehearsals, she said to Amrith –

> 'Ah, De Alwis, is this the relative from abroad who's keeping you from learning your lines?' There was a touch of amusement in Madam's voice ... 'Well, yes, De Alwis, I can see why you have been distracted and haven't had time for our little play.' (*SMS* p.149)

Suraj Wanigasekara, who was playing Othello, too understood Amrith's feelings for Niresh. He teased Amrith about Niresh –

> 'Ah, Michael Cassio, waiting for your darling Iago to pick up?' (*SMS* p.173)

Madam's reaction as she heard the above comment is significant –

> 'Wanigasekara, I have friends in the theatre world who are *that* way inclined ... I don't like such things being ridiculed. Don't ever do that again.' (*SMS* p.173)

These textual illustrations are important as they lead Amrith to his realisation, to comprehend his homosexuality. The moment of realisation, of *epiphany* happens thus –

> A thought, a memory, began to come at [Amrith] from a distance, like an approaching train. It thundered closer and closer and suddenly it was there: that moment, this morning, when Suraj had called him Cassio and asked him if he was waiting for his darling Iago. At the time, Amrith had not paid him any attention, but now he felt a coldness spreading through him as he thought of what Suraj had insinuated. He was referring to Iago's story of how Cassio, in his sleep, took Iago's hand in his, held him tight, kissed him hard on his lips over and over again, and pressed his leg over Iago's thigh.
>
> With a will of its own, Amrith's mind slipped back to that night he had lain awake looking at Niresh, how he had rested his thigh against his, the way his body flamed with desire; and before that, the time he got an erection after seeing his cousin naked. Amrith felt a deep horror seep into him. He loved Niresh in the way a boy loves a girl, or a girl loves a boy. He had been jealous of Mala because of this love and not because Niresh was his cousin. Madam ... had understood the nature of this love ... and Suraj too. People who are '*that* way inclined' was how Madam had referred to this *unnatural defect* in him. (*SMS* pp.180-81 last italics mine)

This moment of realisation is important not only as Amrith's *epiphany* but also because of the element of negativity he shows regarding his homosexuality. He saw it as an *unnatural defect* – significantly. Is that a *natural* reaction on first comprehending one's homosexuality? All the gay men I have met and talked to indeed have told me to have shown a similar sort of reaction on first realising their homosexual inclination. They were initially skeptical about it, some of them even had thought of consulting a doctor for *curing* it. However, all of them ultimately came to terms with it. At least, none of the gay men I met showed any kind of negative feeling about their sexuality; they were in fact quite comfortable with it.

Coming back to Amrith, this response is perhaps inevitable considering the *heterosexist* culture and environment in which he has been raised. An element of self-loathing, of confusion, of shame was what Amrith felt initially which was a product of Amrith's own *heterosexism*. Amrith remembered the boys in his school making fun of Lucien Lindamulagé as a "'ponnaya' – a word whose precise meaning Amrith did not understand, though he knew *it disparaged the masculinity of another man, reducing him to the level of a woman.*" (*SMS* p.60 italics mine) Amrith expressed his feeling of anguish thus – "A ponnaya – that was what he was, a ponnaya. He did not know what to do about this thing in him, where to turn, who to appeal to for comfort. He felt the burden of his silence choking him." (*SMS* p.204)

The reconciliation with his homosexuality takes place sort of *surreally* in the novel. Amrith got a message in his dream from his mother and he visited his mother's grave the next day declaring his sexuality in front of his mother, *as it were*. Interestingly, he did not use the word 'ponnaya' for himself as he refused to utter that word for himself. Rather, he said – "I am ... different." (*SMS* p.205) By acknowledging his *difference*, Amrith achieved his peace of mind, a sense of relief. The text says –

> Just by saying it loud, just by admitting that it was so, Amrith felt the burden of his secret ease a little. It was all he could do for now. He would have to learn to live with this knowledge of himself. He would have to teach himself to be his own best friend, his own confidant and guide. The hope he held out to himself was that, one day, there would be somebody else he could share this secret with. (*SMS* p.205)

The play *Othello* plays a very significant part in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. This play has been read as having strong undercurrents of homosexuality. Not only is the supposed night spent together by Iago and Cassio heavy with homoeroticism, some critics also read Iago's feelings for Othello to have homosexual elements. It is interesting that this play provides the backdrop for Amrith's feelings for his cousin. The significance of the play *Othello* in the novel lies in the fact that it provides the necessary backdrop of jealousy to the events of the novel. Interestingly, in the play, Amrith was to play the role of Desdemona, but in real life, he variously plays the roles of Othello and Cassio, *as it were*. In being extremely jealous of Mala because of the mutual attraction between her and Niresh, consequently trying to drown her, he was Othello. During the night, when he and Niresh were sleeping together, and Amrith tried to be as physically intimate with Niresh as possible, he was enacting the part of Cassio. It is ironical that Amrith was ultimately assigned the role of Cassio to play as he was not doing the part of Desdemona properly – because of his distracted mind regarding Niresh.

Amrith used the word *different* for himself – to describe his homosexual orientation. This usage is very significant in my reading. In *Funny Boy*, there was a sort of reverberation of the word *funny*. Significantly, Arjie never used this word for himself though. However, both these words are unmistakably close to the word *queer*. I will discuss whether Amrith was bringing in an element of *self-othering* by using this word in the concluding chapter. As of now, taking into consideration his homosexuality, Amrith is *different*, Amrith is *queer*: Amrith is *different* and/or *queer*.

Conclusion

There's nowt so queer as folk.

Old Lancashire Saying

I have read the novels of Selvadurai in the previous three chapters analysing them as best as I could. I had some queries in mind as I set out to do this academic work. The first query was – "How queer are the protagonists of Selvadurai?" Before moving on to answering this query, I would like to mention the response this word – queer – generated from the gay men I interviewed. In my meetings, I asked them – "Are you familiar with a word called 'queer'?" Most of them replied in the negative. Only two persons knew that this term encompasses all sorts of non-normative sexual behaviours and practices, and that it is an all-inclusive term. I found this lack of knowledge of the word itself among these gay men very interesting. What does it show? Does it show a sort of failure of the term? However, I must admit that my meetings with these gay men and my *findings* from them cannot be taken as absolute or final. Basically, I met these gay guys with a view to gaining some insight into the *gay psyche*. As I was reading Selvadurai again with this academic work at the back of my mind – rather, at the *front* of my mind – I found myself confronted with some questions, and I decided to meet some gay men in order to clear up some issues. Going back to their not knowing the word 'queer' in the homosexual context, I probably have to add that all the guys I met were *fairly* well-educated. In fact, barring a very few, I conversed in English with most of them, if that throws *any* light on the kind of persons they were. So their not knowing this word strikes one. Perhaps relevant here is the fact that the gay men I met were more concerned with individual affairs like relationship building, emotional support, friendship, sex etc. than with confrontational gay politics.

Returning to the query regarding the *queerness* of Selvaduraian protagonists, all of them come across as queer because all of them are homosexual. One of them – Balendran – shows signs of bisexuality. However, the other two – Arjie and Amrith – are interestingly situated as both of them undergo a process of self-understanding and subsequent acceptance of their homosexual orientation.

My second query was – "How fluid are the sexual identities of his protagonists? Or are they fixed?" Significantly, only one protagonist of Selvadurai – Balendran – exhibits the *trait* of fluidity of sexual identity. Interestingly, he is the only adult protagonist of Selvadurai, the other two – Arjie and Amrith – are adolescents. In case of Balendran, the fluidity is perhaps an outcome of societal or familial intervention as I have discussed the role of his father in *turning* him into *heterosexual*. Whatever be the case, it is Balendran only who shows fluidity of sexual behaviour. Do Arjie and Amrith show a *fixed* sexual identity? It is a problematic proposition as both of them are adolescents having recently gone through the phase of self-acceptance regarding their homosexuality. One can ponder hypothetically whether Arjie and Amrith would also have to *endure* enforced bisexuality in their future lives. Going by the textual evidences, one perhaps would like to answer in the affirmative. The attitude of the Manuel-Pillai family, in which Amrith is raised, regarding homosexuality, is reflected in the way Uncle Lucky, the patriarch, looks at Lucien Lindamulagé – a homosexual man. It is a negative attitude in which heterosexism is clearly discernible. Under such circumstances, it seems really unlikely that the Manuel-Pillais would accept Amrith's homosexuality. Arjie's case is no better. The extremely homophobic father that he has, the prospect is very less – practically none – that Arjie would be allowed to live his life in his terms. No doubt, these two characters have accepted their homosexuality but, there is a big difference between self-acceptance and societal approval. However, these are hypothetical; conjectural situations, and one cannot draw a conclusion from them. Having said that, I, as a reader, will not be surprised *if* Selvadurai writes sequels to *Funny Boy* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, in which he explores the forced *heterosexual* aspects of Arjie and Amrith.

The third query that I was concerned with was – "How removed are the protagonists from Selvadurai's own homosexuality? Or how close?" Given that many queer writers focus on sexuality in their work, the *personal* is always thought to play an important role in their fiction. Indeed, when queer writers write about sexuality, there is an assumption that they are being autobiographical, in a way that heterosexual writers are not supposed to be. However, Selvadurai makes it clear that there is no autobiographical element involved in his work. Selvadurai said so in connection with his first novel *Funny Boy* which comes closest in terms of *fictional* and *non-fictional* similarities. Both Selvadurai and Arjie, the protagonist, are gay; they are both Sri Lankan Tamil; and both of them emigrate to Canada. However, therein ends the parallels, according to Selvadurai. "We led a very sheltered life, even more sheltered than

Arjie. For him, events intervene with much greater force than they entered into my life."[1] As regards *Cinnamon Gardens*, to draw autobiographical elements in it will perhaps be a bit far-fetched as Selvadurai portrays in this novel a world far removed from his immediate reality. However, the dedication in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is noticeable. It says – "This novel, though fictional, is filled with details from my happy childhood in Sri Lanka: as a way to enshrine that time, and to, perhaps, bid it good-bye." That is to say, Selvadurai uses "details" from his life in this novel but simultaneously stresses the fact that it is "fictional".

The next query that I was concerned with was – "How is the distinction between the *normative self* of heterosexuality and the *rejected other* of homosexuality encountered in Selvadurai?" The answer can be found in the query itself, as homosexuality faces rejection in the three novels of Selvadurai. Perhaps, that rejection is not as pronounced in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* as in *Funny Boy* and in *Cinnamon Gardens*. Amrith's homosexuality is not known to anyone, and as such, the othering does not take place in an overt manner. (Interestingly, the one who senses Amrith's same-sex orientation, Mrs. Algama, does not *other* him; rather, she accepts him as he is). Nevertheless, as I have mentioned above, there is a *hypothetical* possibility that Amrith *would be* othered because of his sexuality given the kind of *heterosexist* ambience and society he lives in. (We can recall here the textual information from *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* that the three of them – Selvi, Mala, and Amrith – would be allowed to *date* when they turn eighteen which was a source of jealousy for their friends, as they were not privileged with such liberty by their families. The *advanced-mindedness* of the Manuel-Pillai family notwithstanding, the fact still stays that they will allow their children to date a person of the *opposite sex*. The heterosexism persists.) However, Arjie's othering starts from his childhood itself when he himself is not aware of *gender*, *sexuality* and *normative patterns of behaviour*. Initially, it is his cross-dressing which is at the receiving end as not only the adult world but also the world of the children (in the guise of Her Fatness) question his *behaviour*. Both the worlds of the girls and the boys reject him for his 'effeminacy', his *funniness*. The adults try to impose proper gender behaviour on him by forcefully inducting him in the world of cricket, of boys. The othering gets thus manifested as Arjie realises that "[he] would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either." (*FB* p.39)

[1] Jim Marks, "The Personal is Political", *Lambda Book Report*, Vol 5 Issue 2 (August 1996).

Arjie's homosexuality is sensed by his father which he calls "tendencies" (*FB* p.166). The Queen Victoria Academy is an endeavour on his part to get his son back on track, to indoctrinate *sexual propriety* in him. Interestingly, Arjie does not tell us explicitly about the kind of othering he goes through in the Academy due to his homosexuality. He informs us about the racial othering that he undergoes starting from his first day in that school as he is told to go the Tamil class room. Significantly, Shehan – whose homosexuality is known to the boys – also is not othered by anyone. In fact, we are told that Shehan possesses a certain "power" (*FB* p.217) which makes him immune to the bullies of the class. It is an observable absence in my opinion as we have seen Arjie being ridiculed earlier by his boy cousins as "girlie-boy" (*FB* p.25) upon his imposed, enforced entry into the cricket field. Selvadurai's silence on the kind of othering Arjie goes through because of his *funniness* in the Queen Victoria Academy – a school strictly advocating heterosexist principles – is definitely noteworthy. However, on the whole, Arjie is subjected to familial or societal othering. Arjie's elder brother Varun (Diggy) is an interesting figure in this regard. Arjie informs many a time the way his brother humiliates him at the slightest chance he gets. There is no explicit or direct reference to the form of that humiliation but the fact becomes obvious that Diggy others his younger brother because of his funniness. Diggy has been portrayed as a foil to Arjie with a clear emphasis on his *male* activities. Playing cricket, shooting birds, working out in the gym etc., are his favourite activities as compared to Arjie's love of reading or listening to music. He, along with their father, senses Arjie's homosexuality, and a distinct element of homophobia works upon the father-son duo. Both Arjie's father and Diggy disapprove of Arjie's friendship with Shehan which is nothing but a product of their homophobic tendencies. Both these characters are extremely heterosexist. And in their hands, Arjie's othering receives the highest manifestation. Among the three Selvaduraian protagonists, the issue of self-othering is the least visible in the case of Arjie. No doubt, he feels a revulsion, a distaste after his first homosexual encounter with Shehan. But that was a creation of his ingrained heterosexism. However, he soon realises the significance of the act. He sees the way *love* was involved in the whole affair. And that realisation makes Arjie acknowledge himself as he is: without any element of self-othering.

In *Cinnamon Gardens*, the othering works at two levels – societal othering and self-othering. In fact, in *Cinnamon Gardens*, the societal othering manifests itself so strongly that it inculcates in the protagonist Balendran's mind a sort of apprehension and skepticism regarding homosexuality. He uses the word "impediment" (*CG* p.38) for it which has a

powerful insinuation at negativity. Balendran's domineering father, the Mudaliyar Navaratnam is responsible for this attitude of Balendran. However, the Mudaliyar has not been portrayed to be as homophobic as Arjie's father, and that is because he has had this sense of *relief* that he has *rescued* his son from "that degradation" by getting him married. But the futility of that sense of relief is to be seen in Balendran's dissatisfied marriage. His "formality" (*CG* p.80) in his lovemaking with his wife, his strict maintenance of distance from her, shows the potency of his homosexuality. The fact that Balendran takes occasional nocturnal walks along the rail station where he meets Ranjan, "the one he always went with" (*CG* p.81) is further proof of his stronger homosexual affiliation. That is to say, Balendran's father might have tried to *rescue* him from "that ... degradation" (*CG* p.367) but was not successful. Going back to the issue of othering, in Balendran, the sense of self-othering is more prominent (in spite of his nocturnal escapades which are perhaps results of his unfulfiled *desire*). We are told that he considers his same-sex attraction as a "daily impediment", as a "badly set fracture" (*CG* p.38). By considering his sexuality as such, Balendran is othering himself. Of course, it is undeniable that, this self-othering is an outcome of societal othering, as it has instilled in him a sense of *unacceptability* regarding homosexuality. It is Ceylon of 1920s we are confronted with. The context is of extreme importance here. Given the attitude towards homosexuality around that time (which is reflected in the Mudaliyar's stance), it seems a really courageous act on Balendran's part that he finally *comes out* to his father by declaring his love for Richard. By doing that, Balendran ends his self-othering as he accepts himself as he is. His ultimate step of asking Richard's friendship is a step borne out of this self-acceptance.

An aside – in literature, depicting father-son relationship is a very complex and loaded task. Dosteyvosky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* can be cited as instances having meaningful treatment of this relationship . In Selvadurai, this relationship receives a different element as the homosexuality of the son and the homophobia of the father further problematises the relationship. Particularly in *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens*, the manifestation of that problematic is there to be seen. The homophobia of the father tries to impose societal, sexual, gender *propriety* on the son which the homosexuality of the son resists. Consequently, conflict arises thereby giving the relationship between a homophobic father and a homosexual son a unique dimension.

As in *Funny Boy*, in *Cinnamon Gardens* too, we get to see an authoritarian elder brother. Arulanandan (Arul) is drawn as a foil to Balendran. Playing cricket, going for hunting with the Mudaliyar are the activities that draw his time and attention unlike Balendran's reading or stamp-collecting. The brothers are separated when Balendran was twelve because of Arul's affair with a low-caste servant woman, and his consequent banishment to India. Though Arul has been portrayed as the one dominating his younger brother in the past, it is significant that in his death-bed in India, when Balendran pays him a visit, Arul refuses to judge Balendran on the ground of his homosexuality. "I do not judge you." (*CG* p.275) – that is what Arul says to Balendran. That is to say, he has not othered Balendran. This is an important difference between Diggy's and Arul's treatment of homosexuality.

In *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, we do not exactly get to see othering *proper*. Amrith's homosexuality is not known to anyone. As I have mentioned above, Mrs. Algama perceives the homosexual tendency in Amrith but she takes it as it is because "there was very little that actually shocked [her]" (*SMS* p.45). No member of the Manuel-Pillai family knows about Amrith's homosexuality. I have, however, posited a *hypothetical possibility* of Amrith being othered by them once they get to know about his sexual orientation. In my reading of Amrith, an element of self-othering is detectable. Amrith declares his sexual orientation at his mother's grave thus – "I am ... different." (*SMS* p.205) It happens after the realisation of his same-sex attraction. Does the word "different" connote a sense of othering? Amrith is different because he is not heterosexual. He does not fall into the *norm*. Perhaps it is Amrith's *heterosexism* which is making him feel "different". We see the slight pause that Amrith takes before uttering the word as he does not know how to describe himself. The only word that he knows is "ponnaya" but he refuses to utter that word for himself. That word is derogatory, insulting but, in my reading, Amrith would not have othered himself had he used that word instead of "different". By situating him *differently*, Amrith others himself.

The next query that I was concerned with was – "How much cultural/social constructedness is there in Arjie, Balendran, and Amrith's sexuality? Or are we dealing with an *essential* sexuality in the three of them?" This seems to be the most problematic of all the questions. All three of them live in a society which tells them to be heterosexual and teaches them heterosexist principles. Arjie and Amrith are homosexual, and Balendran is bisexual. In my reading, Arjie, Amrith, and Balendran – are all *essentially homosexual*. Balendran's heterosexuality is *constructed* by society, by culture. The *hypothetical heterosexuality* of Arjie and Amrith that I have talked about above will also be a societal/cultural construct.

In this connection, I can mention the responses that I received from the gay men I met. I asked them – "What do you think of your sexuality? Is it inborn or is there some other reason for it?" I did not use the words cultural/social construction. All the overtly 'effeminate' guys told me that they thought that it is inborn, innate in them. As long as they could remember, they had been feeling sexual attraction only towards men. None of them told me that he felt any kind of sexual arousal in the presence of girls. However, the *manly*, *top* guys had different stories to tell. Some of them told me that in their childhood, they had been *used* by some older guy (in many cases, it is an older male cousin; in some cases, a senior school-mate; and in some cases, some other male relatives). The *usage* was not exactly *sexual* as such, but it instilled in them, in their opinion, the *germ* of homosexuality. Some others, however, thought that it had been there in them *naturally*.

Another question that I posited before the gay guys was – "Can you ever *turn* into a straight guy?" Interestingly, all the overtly 'effeminate' guys told me that they cannot and neither do they want. When I asked about the strong societal censure which they have to incur because of their sexuality, they told me that they care about their own happiness, not others'. Perhaps relevant here is to mention that during my meetings with these gay men, criminalisation of homosexuality was very much a part of the Indian Penal Code. Another fact of importance here is that all the 'effeminate' guys I met were *out*. That is to say, they were open about their sexuality. However, the question elicited a different set of responses from the *manly* guys. Some of them considered themselves bisexual, and hence felt that there was no need for them to *turn* straight *as such*. I should also mention that a majority of them were in the *closet* regarding their sexuality. In fact, I met only one guy whose sexuality is known to his parents as well as a close set of friends. Some other guys plan to stay in the closet throughout their lives without ever getting married. They are clear about it that they are gay, not bi.

I asked the closeted guys the following question, "Do you not feel a sense of suffocation hiding one of the most important aspects of your being?" They said that they did but were unable to do anything. Most of them accepted the situation as it was. However, some of them plan to come out some day to their families and friends. All these *manly* gay guys were of the opinion that stereotypes regarding homosexuality should change. The way effeminacy and homosexuality have been synonymised, according to them, should be put into question. They acknowledged the role of media in that. They advocated more movies in the like of *My Brother Nikhil* which can break stereotypical notions regarding homosexuality.

Returning to my work proper, the title of my work is "Queer as the Other: A Reading of Shyam Selvadurai's Fiction". However, in none of the novels the word *queer* is used. In *Funny Boy*, the word *funny* is used to connote homosexuality; in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, the word *different* shows that connotation. In *Cinnamon Gardens*, however, there is not just one word which expresses homosexuality. Sonia used the word *pervert* in one context; Balendran used the word *disposition* a few times to connote homosexuality. Neither the word "gay" nor "homosexual" is used in any of the novels. Why did I choose the word *queer* for the title of my dissertation then? I did so as two of Selvadurai's protagonists – Arjie and Amrith – indulge in cross-dressing, and the other one is bisexual. And queer is the term encompassing all sorts of 'other' sexual practices. Originally, the term was one of abuse. However, in its present usage, it connotes a sense of pride: a pride which makes the gays, the lesbians, the bisexuals, the transgenders, the transsexuals say, "Yes we are queer. So what?" Interestingly, none of Selvadurai's protagonists shows that *so what* attitude. Two of them – the two adolescents – accept it *silently* as a part of them, and the other adult protagonist, in his final step, sees it without his previous duplicity.

In the second chapter of *Funny Boy*, "Radha Aunty", Janaki, the house-maid, told Radha to go secretively to Anil's place to apologise for her mother's behaviour. Janaki told Radha, "[T]ake *that Arjie* with you."(*FB* p.63 italics mine) Here the word "that" is significant. What does it imply? It implies a sense of ridicule, of belittlement, of scorn in my reading. She could have said, "Take Arjie with you." Why didn't she say it that way? That is to say, it is an *othering* of a *significant* kind that we are witnessing. In fact, I would not have been surprised if *Cinnamon Gardens* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* too would have had expressions like *that Bala* or *that Amrith*, since the othering of the three queer Selvaduraian protagonists takes place in one way or the other in the three novels. And, hence, *queer* as the *other*!

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