

Deconstructing ‘Funny’: An Analysis of the Rights and Conditions of the LGBTQ Communities in Sri Lanka with Special Reference to Shyam Selvadurai’s Novel *Funny Boy*

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Abstract—Leslie Feinberg, a famous transgender activist and author, very famously said, “Like racism and all forms of prejudice, bigotry against transgender people is a deadly carcinogen”. However, the fact is that, the members of the LGBTQ community are still victims of this discriminating carcinogen in every sphere of their lives. Different countries have straightway negated rights and sexual freedom to the LGBTQ people. In spite of the fact that to prevent the LGBTQs from enjoying a life of free choice is an out and out violation of human rights, not many countries have come forward for the rescue of this discriminated section of the people. Sri Lanka is one such country which still criminalizes homosexuality. This chapter looks into the condition of the LGBTQ communities in Sri Lanka with special reference to their representation in Shyam Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy*.

Index Terms—LGBTQ Rights, Rainbow Movement, Race, Ethnicity, Identity.

Asian countries have always been admired and looked up to because of their cultural vibrancy, harmonious co-existence with nature and the feeling of universal fraternity among different races, religions and sections of the people. However, as far as sexuality is concerned, many Asian countries prove to be very hostile and conservative lands with their age-old dogmatic perspectives as well as rigid religious outlooks. Majority of the Asian countries still consider homosexuality as criminal offence. Countries like Japan, India etc. have recently decriminalized homosexual activities and vowed to respect the individuality of the Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender, Queers (LGBTQ) and everyone who does not fit into the category of the heterosexuals. However, the scene is very much grim in most of the Asian countries till now.

Sri Lanka is one of such countries which still consider homosexuality as a criminal offence. In Sri Lanka, any form of homosexual activity is illegal and considered morally disgraceful. Article 365 & 365 (A) of the Sri Lankan penal code criminalizes same sex activities. The LGBTQ community in Sri Lanka has to face several social challenges and legal actions. There have been several protests against such laws and various individuals and groups have now come forward in support of the LGBTQs. A revolution (although in a very small scale) is now gripping the minds of the Sri Lankan people in support of the sexually ‘subaltern’ sections. Companion on a Journey (COJ) is one of such LGBTQ support groups, which was founded in 1995 with an aim to fight for the rights of the LGBTQ communities. This group challenges laws and other constitutional provisions which not only criminalizes homosexuality but also indirectly teaches people to consider homosexuality as a social and moral stigma. They have also been very much vocal about the recognition of individual and collective identities of the LGBTQs so that the LGBTQ community members can get emotional support from our society.

Apart from such support groups and pressure groups, there are some academicians, scholars and writers etc. in Sri Lanka, who have taken up the issue of social and legal discrimination of the LGBTQs because of their unique sexual orientation. Shyam Selvadurai is one of such writers whose novel *Funny Boy* (1994) describes the plight of a homosexual boy during the time of ethnic conflict and Sri Lankan civil war. *Funny Boy* demonstrates the racial-ethnic violence that broke out in Sri Lanka from 1980s to the late 1990s. However, it has been showcased with a parallel pattern with the growth of the protagonist Arjun Chelvaratnam and his growing sense of his 'unique and queer' sexuality. Arjun Chelvaratnam or simply Arjie is born into a wealthy Tamil family in a primarily Sinhalese dominated Sri Lanka. From the very beginning of the novel, we find Arjie as a 'sensitive but different child', quite different from his brother and cousins. He always dwells in places where, generally male children do not like to roam about. He distastes himself from the game of cricket, a game which demands physical strength and vitality. On the contrary, Arjie loves to dress up as a bride in 'Bride Bride' game of the female cousins. Arjie is also fond of looking at the females, especially when his mother and Radha Aunty dress up with saris and other jewelries.

However, Arjie's uniqueness in his sexuality is soon detected when Tanuja or Her Fatness's mother, one of Arjie's aunt notices Arjie, a boy dressing up as a bride with other female cousins. She then drags Arjie to the drawing room so that everyone can have a look at his new 'avatar'. Immediately, one of Arjie's uncles makes fun of both Arjie and his father. This uncle comments that Mr. Chelvaratnam, Arjie's father has got quite a funny son. Soon after this incident, Arjie's mother Mrs. Chelvaratnam restricted him from playing the 'Bride-Bride' game and did not allow him to be near her at the time of dressing up. When Arjie demanded reason behind such tough restrictions, she came up with an ambiguous statement that "...the sky is so high and Pigs can't fly" (Selvadurai, 24). Pigs can't fly, a phrase from which the first chapter has got its title represents the mindsets of everyone who forcefully wanted to imprison Arjie and everyone like him into the cage of stereotypes.

After this incident, Arjie's life becomes a struggle against the outside society to establish his rights, individuality as well as identity. He is fighting an invisible war against the conservative Sri Lankan society which is as intense and severe as the ethnic violence going on in Sri Lanka. Here, Arjie is a representative of all the LGBTQ members who are fighting on their own for their space and rights in the society. Arjie is a lone ranger; he is brave but confused; he is honest but without any help from others. Here Shyam Selvadurai insists that Arjie is not only an individual; rather he is a type, standing for all the victimized LGBTQs who are craving for their own space, rights and identity in their own societies and countries.

Arjie and all the LGBTQ members, whom *Funny Boy* has so dedicatedly but with a scathing tragic intensity represented, fight their own wars to establish their individuality on three different scales. First of all, they are trying to come to terms and understand their own 'uniqueness' of sexuality in comparison to heterosexuality which is considered as 'normal and natural'. Besides, they have also to embark on wars with their families as well as their societies. It is displayed in *Funny Boy* that, Arjie's family members put extra stress on Arjie's psychology. At the same time, Sri Lankan society had also harshly handled Arjie's difference in sexual orientation. In his own home Arjie had become a laughing stock, even in front of his own family members. No one tried to understand Arjie's psychological state of mind or his sexual difference; rather they all were keen on turning Arjie into a 'normal and masculine' boy. Mr. Chelvaratnam even enrolled Arjie into Victoria Academy, a school with an authoritarian and strict principal with an intention to emasculate an effeminate Arjie.

Arjie's plight as an LGBTQ member (basically he is a gay) is demonstrated in his home (as a child) and in his school (as an adolescent). In his home, he is hardly aware of his sexuality as he was then a small child. He may not have become sexually conscious about his uniqueness and difference. However, he did come to this realization that he was, of course, different from his brother and cousins. He escaped from the game of cricket with cleverness; but he always wanted to be the bride in the game of bride-bride which his female cousins were so fond of playing. He loved to wear the sari which his mother wore. He even decorated himself with jewelries of his mother and Radha Aunty. When Radha Aunty returned to Colombo from America, he would stay glued to her so that she would polish Arjie's nails with her beautiful nail polish colour. However, after Tanuja's mother had made fun of Arjie and his parents before everyone, Arjie's freedom to wear anything he had desired, decorate himself with jewelries and a strong impulsion to play the game he had wanted, was strictly restricted. Here, Shyam Selvadurai is making a sad but strong

statement with such situations in Arjie's life. Arjie had to compromise with his desire and happiness because of his 'different and non-straight' sexuality even when he was still a small child with hardly any notions of sexuality.

In his family, Arjie got support and companionship only from two people, i.e., Radha Aunty and Daryl Uncle. However, both of them are different and alien not only to the Chelvaratnam family but in a sense to entire Sri Lanka. For instance, Radha Aunty was brought up and educated in America. From the time of her arrival, she has been presented as a character who is closer to the American and the Western cultures than to the culture of her native Sri Lanka, she wears jeans (instead of traditional sari), performs in the play *The King and I* and maintains a progressive idea. She is a Tamil and going by the conservative pattern of their family she should have accepted the marriage proposal of Rajan Nagendra, another Tamil guy. But she develops her romantic interest in Anil Jayasinghe, a Sinhalese co-actor in her play. Similarly, Daryl Uncle is a burgher and he has hardly any emotional connection with Sri Lankan culture and people. People from the native land, i.e., Sri Lanka with proper native sentiments seldom cared for Arjie's emotional trauma.

In his school, Arjie experiences some nightmarish and horrible incidents which changes the course of his entire life. In Victoria Academy, Arjie's new school, he met two persons who had lasting impressions on his personality and sexuality. They are -the principal of the school, nicknamed Black Tie and Arjie's new friend Shehan Soyza. Black Tie was a strict authoritarian principal who had governed Victoria Academy with his iron hand. However, like Sri Lanka, Victoria Academy was also divided into two factions- one, who was in support of the Tamil principal, Black Tie and the other group who wanted Sinhalese Vice Principal, Mr. Lokubandara to take over as the new principal of the institute. Ethnically speaking, Arjie should have naturally preferred to be with Tamil Black Tie. However, for Arjie, the choice was not that much easier. He hated Black Tie as the latter had severely punished him on more than one occasions. Besides, Mr. Lokubandara was popular among the students. So, When Black Tie ordered Arjie to recite two poems on the school function- a gesture he thought would help him continue as the principal, Arjie deliberately recited them with lots of mistakes. Here also the author points out at the fact that the LGBTQs are not left with a clear-cut choice. Besides, Shyam Selvadurai also indicates that their way of protest is different and peculiar from others.

Arjie had even more traumatic experiences in connection to his friendship with another gay student, Shehan Soyza, in Victoria Academy. It has been clearly implied that Shehan Soyza is equally a victim in this society like Arjie. He was looked down upon by his classmates and other students of the Victoria Academy. Diggy, Arjie's elder brother had clearly warned Arjie not to befriend Shehan. However, Arjie feels fascinated by Shehan's looks; Arjie also appreciates Shehan's simplicity and sympathizes with the latter's conditions. Gradually they strike up a very strong bond between them. One day, Shehan kisses Arjie on the lips and from then on, Arjie becomes aware about his sexual uniqueness. Finally, Arjie and Shehan enter into a very brief but extremely passionate physical relationship in Arjie's family garage. Although Arjie was always fond of his relationship with Shehan, but his deep physical intimacy with Shehan had filled him with a sense of loss, hopelessness and an internal hollowness begins to haunt him now. Arjie was unable to express his inner thoughts to anybody just like he was unable to express his sexuality to anyone. Meanwhile, the civil war in Sri Lanka had also broken out on a large scale and it devastated the lives of Tamils and the Sinhalese. Here, Shyam Selvadurai does not want to relegate the importance of the ethnic violence and the ongoing civil war that has palsied the lives of the common masses to the backdrop of the novel. However, the sensitive author does come up with the question that while paying attention to the violence outside, who would care to look for the trauma that Arjie was undergoing, the fight he was fighting alone.

If we scrutinize the character of Arjie, he appears to be a tragic one. He is a tragic character with no hamartia; a lone ranger fighting against all the odds of the society without any success. However, the irony of the situation is that others look at him as a 'funny boy'. In this novel, Shyam Selvadurai is not representing one Arjie from Sri Lanka; rather he is referring to all the members of the rainbow clubs, i.e., LGBTQs. To ignore Arjie's psychic traumas as funny and laughter provoking is as depressing as to deny his very existence as an individual. We often tend to discuss about the legal provisions offered in the constitutions of different countries regarding the rights of the LGBTQs. But Shyam Selvadurai indirectly suggests that unless the common people change their approach and attitude towards the LGBTQs, then no legal provision of any country or constitution can bring about a paradigm shift among people and provide true social justice to the LGBTQs.

The word ‘funny’ may have been stressed only in the beginning part of the novel; but the idea of being a funny character hovers around Arjie throughout the novel. Just because Arjie is different from others, can he really be disgraced as a funny character? The author repeatedly disturbs the minds of the readers with this thought-provoking rhetorical question. Shyam Selvadurai restrains himself from providing a direct answer; rather he plays with the minds of the readers by portraying other significant characters of the novel equally as ‘funny’ in their own situations. If Arjie is funny just because he does not follow the prescribed (sexual) archetypes of the society, other characters including Radha Aunty, Daryl Uncle, Mrs. Chelvaratnam all are funny too. Radha Aunty did not want to marry Tamil Rajan Nagendra; instead of that she developed an intimacy with Sinhalese Anil Jayasinghe. Similarly, Daryl Uncle and Mrs. Chelvaratnam have been indulged in an extramarital affair. All of them have been violating certain rules and decorum of the society based on social ethics, morality or sanctity of marriage.

In this way, almost all the major characters are deviating from their path of morality, holiness and loyalty. However, the society and the common people have maintained double standard in their categorization of the so called ‘normal and straight’ people and the LGBTQ community people. Arjie, an alien in his own home, school and society is disgraced and compelled to compromise with his rights, sense of individuality as well as emotional liberty.

Funny Boy is a novel based on Sri Lanka and Arjun Chelvaratnam represents all those Sri Lankan LGBTQ members who are dismantled by heterosexual norms of the society. In the conclusion of the novel, Arjie moves on to Canada, a comparatively progressive western country where Arjie hopes to enjoy his emotional solace and sexual liberty. But Arjie leaves behind a lot of questions to be answered by the society. Arjie’s conditions may have changed with his escape from Sri Lanka but what about the condition of all the other LGBTQ members who are still in Sri Lanka or other conservative countries. Will the Rainbow Movement, as the LGBTQ community loves to call it, ever flourish in the sky of liberty and fraternity? The answer depends on all of us, whether we still diminish LGBTQ community members as ‘funny’ or whether we embrace everyone as acute individuals under the protective umbrella of humanity.

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