

**Intersecting Sexuality and Nationalism: Reading Queerness in *Funny Boy*****Rittika Dasgupta<sup>1</sup> and Rohit K Dasgupta<sup>2</sup>**

This paper shall interrogate the interplay between sexuality and gender in the novel, *Funny Boy*. The work of Selvadurai allows readers to rethink the nation outside a patriarchal heteronormative paradigm and recognise a model of queer South Asian Nationalism. Contemporary sexual identities in South Asia are constructed out of the effects and perceptions of tradition and modernity and colonisation and globalisation (Bose and Bhattacharya, 2007). Arjun Chelvaratnam's (Arjie's) queer body and gender play in the novel dislocates the neat identity categories imposed upon the citizen by the nation. The nation state thus becomes a site of anxiety and negotiation for the dissident sexual subject. By tracing and conflating the national with the sexual, this paper shall take an intersectional focus (Dasgupta and Gokulsing, 2014, Dasgupta, 2014) and seek to locate the politics of sexualities in a specific South Asian nationalist (Dasgupta, 2007) context.

Contextualising gender play

Selvadurai's 1994 novel, *Funny Boy* is made up of six discrete episodes tracing the childhood of an upper middle class Sri Lankan in Colombo against the backdrop of the ethno-cultural conflicts between the Dravidian Tamil's and Aryan Sinhalese. These conflicts are a direct allusion to the riots of 1983. There have been numerous studies (Dasgupta, 2006; Salgado, 2004) which have traced the postcolonial dynamics of nation building, migration and the diaspora, however have often failed to address the queer body which implicitly and explicitly frames the discourse of nation and nationhood in this novel.

In the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist Arjie recalls 'the remembered innocence of childhood are now coloured in the hues of the twilight sky. It is a picture made even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them.' (5) Such a phrase coming in the very beginning of the novel signals what Gopinath (2005:165) argues is a

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vantage feature of exile literature, 'one that evokes from the vantage point of exile an idyllic, coherent pre exilic past shattered by war and displacement'. This exile is not just on the physical realm but as I shall argue also one that is catalysed by dissonant sexual/gendered identity. Selvadurai begins the novel by introducing the readers to a game of 'bride-ride' where Arjie is rudely disciplined for wanting to play the part of a 'bride'. This childhood indulgence of gender transgression is first identified and chastised by his cousin, Tanuja (Her Fatness), who even at a young age is made aware of gender roles within Sri Lankan society. She says, "The groom cannot help with the cooking... Because grooms don't do that." Connell (1996) in her study on masculinity and gender construction in schools has argued that from a very early age practices such as curriculum division, sports and the disciplining system within the aegis of an educational establishment reinforces a gender dichotomy which Tanuja recognises and uses to chastise Arjie.

But, he's not even girl... A bride is a girl not a boy. She looked around at the other cousins and then at me. A boy cannot be a bride, she said with deep conviction. A girl must be the bride (11).

The pleasure Arjie takes in playing the bride is a matter of grave consternation for his parents and the adults. Arjie's uncle Cyril recognises this and warns his parents 'looks like you have a funny one here' (14) His father is likewise worried that 'If he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing stock of Colombo' (ibid) it would be their fault for failing to check his gender non conformity. Similarly Arjie is also banned from watching his mother dress in her room, a source of great pleasure for him and thus in turn exiled from this carefully inscribed space of gender play and being forced to enter a much more rigid world of gender conformity. Arjie says "And then there would be loneliness. I would be caught between the boy's and the girl's worlds, not belonging or wanted in either." (39)

Gopinath (2005: 170) argues:

The gendered specialisation of the domestic sphere in the story mirrors and reiterates nationalist framings of space that posit the 'inner' as an atavistic space of spirituality and tradition, embodied by the figure of the woman, as

opposed to the outer male sphere of progress, politics, materiality and modernity.

Another point we would like to pick up is that whilst Tanuja, the cousin is described as large and booming with masculine traits her masculinity is not chastised, rather it is Arjie's effeminacy which becomes a point of contention. Nationalism is implicitly connected to dominance and power (Dasgupta, 2016a; Dasgupta, 2016b) which in turn is characterised through hegemonic masculinity. The patriarchal order demands masculine privilege and masculine power (Gill, 1997), thus the female body of Tanuja (with its masculine features) is relatively unproblematic within this discourse.

Moments of Arjie's cross dressing as well as his pleasure in watching his Amma dress up in her sari, a specific idea of gender performativity is introduced (Butler, 1990). According to Butler this performativity is a set of parodic practices that disrupt categories of the body, gender and sexuality. Selvadurai's gender play is transformative and whilst Arjie's queerness disrupts that gender hierarchy, Selvadurai also introduces several other facets of information to reiterate how the gender politics works within the postcolony. Arjie's Amma (mother) for instance is described only through her motherhood, the fact that she has an agency of her own is not explored by Arjie until he meets Daryl, his mother's former lover. It is only through this introduction that he realises the engendered nature of Sri Lankan society.

It is also interesting to point out that queerness alone does not disrupt some of the gender machinations of identity. In fact recent debate (Dutta, 2012; Dasgupta and Gokulsing, 2014; Pacoe, 2011) has shown that homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) has perpetuated racial, class and gender discrimination. There is systematic discrimination against effeminate subject positions (femmephobia). Lisa Duggan (2002: 179) writing about homonormativity suggests that it is 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption'. Shehan articulates this when he says to Arjie 'Don't be a Girl' (249) to imply Arjie's weakness, drawing a stereotype to attributes of the female identity when Arjie is forced 'to become a man' (210) and is sent to Queen Victoria Academy 'The Best School of All.'

Whilst the female/cross dressing/queer space is conflated within the perimeters of this novel we would argue that this space of transgression and gender performance is also acutely saturated with the discourse of homonormativity, an area which needs further exploration. The space of gender play also allows for Arjie's queer desires to be articulated and express. Desire here is literally transformative in the imagination of an accepted social space and a way in which Arjie can reclaim his 'home'. Arjie ponders, "I knew something had changed. But how, I didn't altogether know." (39)

### Home: Between borders

Sayantan Dasgupta (2006) has argued that the travel motif in the novel implies the potential of transgression of boundaries as defined by discourses of nationhood and nationalism. Borrowing Beckett's (2004) argument of heterosexuality as a border, my argument would be that any transgression of sexual and gender codes as appropriated by social norms would then be a point of entry to examine and understand how borders are maintained within the joint purview of the national and the sexual. Arjie's childhood provides the first instance of entering this 'border crossing'. Transgression however is not just on the level of the sexual alone. As sociologist Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) pointed out, issues of race and gender need to be addressed within a composite framework. Dasgupta and Gokulsing (2014) have argued that the complexity of sexuality in interplay with other social categorisations and power differentials such as ethnicity, class and race make it a potent site for interrogating the boundaries of nationalism. Arjie's first transgression is his gender (and later sexual) identity then his second is falling in love with a Sinhalese. This cross ethnic transgression is also present in the narrative of Aunty Doris whose family have emigrated leaving her alone for marrying a Tamil (when she is a Burgher) and Radha Aunty who later falls in love with Anil who too later falls in love with Anil who is a Sinhalese. Through this narrative, Selvadurai further builds up a dialogue on how the state and society deals with transgressive and unsanctioned relationships. This exile or travel from the space of sexuality and gender shadows the other various exiles that Arjie faces in each of the other chapters when he comes to understand the constraints imposed by gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. This project of mapping spaces of impossibility within multiple discourses necessitates an engagement with particular cultural forms and practices that are considered legitimate sites of resistance and enquiry. Gopinath (2005:199) citing Appadurai and Breckenridge says public culture is a

‘zone of cultural debate... tensions and contradictions between national sites and transnational cultural processes play out.’

Borrowing Anderson’s (1991) work on the imagined community, we must remember that a community only exists because it forcefully creates a ‘mythic commonality’ through the use of national symbols and artefacts to relate a common story even at the cost of silencing the subaltern voice (Spivak, 1988). In a recent conversation, Spivak and Butler (2010: 4-5) writing about the ‘state’ contends:

If a state is what binds, it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly if not powerfully then it also unbinds, release, expels, banishes.

Queer scholarship in recent years (Beemyn, 1997) has increasingly focused on the importance and specificity of space and place in shaping the lives of queer men and women. General histories have often assumed that people across South Asia have shared many experiences. Recent studies by scholars such as Dasgupta (2007) have problematised the disjunction and fractures of such a homogenous history. He argues, ‘The imperatives of nationalism in South Asia were also rendered more complex because of the diversity of population in this part of the world. The nation in Europe was built out of homogeneity... no such fusion can be discerned in the case of either India or Pakistan or Sri Lanka’ (xxiv). Beemyn (1997:2) also argues that community studies highlight the distinctions between the lives of queer people in different regions, cities and neighbourhoods. In the Sri Lankan context understanding the queer experience (or the lack of) would mean focusing on the micro level community history as well as the macro level history across the region.

The interaction between feminist and postcolonial critique has enabled us to understand some of the co-implications of gendering, sexuality and post colonial nation building. Anne McIntock (1997: 89) argues that nations are ‘are historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed... nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender difference.’ Selvadurai’s attention to alternative sexualities in contemporary Sri Lanka is directed statewise, as it were, at least to the non centrality of this cultural history in Sri Lankan scholarship and the pressing need for an alternative attention to its material history. With *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai brings non

heteronormative sexuality back into the boundaries of nation, home and family, by showing how ethnicity and sexuality are connected through anxieties about class (and community) that circulate within familial, ethnic and national spaces. The novel demonstrates how at moments of intense national self scrutiny, the private world of love is called upon to symbolize public, national values. Arjie's narrative illustrates in a microcosm the power negotiations of class, gender and sexuality that marked Sri Lanka (and consequently the whole of postcolonial South Asia) in the twentieth century. Within these struggle zones of sameness and difference, the self and the other are marked out. This aspect is highlighted especially in Arjie's new school Queen Victoria Academy.

Throughout the novel Selvadurai presents identity through various spatial constructs- the children's gender marked spaces of play, Arjie's mother's dressing room and so on. Selvadurai's conceptualisation of space is both a gender and racialised terrain which mimics the territoriality of the larger space of the Sri Lankan nation state (Jayawickrama, 2005: 124).

As Bhabha (1990) has articulated in his thesis on nationalism, the boundaries of modernity are enacted within the ambivalent temporalities of the nation space. Citing Gellner he argues that homogeneity, literacy and anonymity are the key traits. Arjie's disorientation stemming from the realm of the unhomely (Bhabha, *ibid*) is intensified due to the hybrid nature of the nation state as well as the disjuncture caused by Arjie's own queerness. The queer figure in South Asia remains illegible and an estranged figure from the constructs of the home, family and nation. The precariousness of this border excludes and denies his existence. Whilst Arjie's constantly battles and contests the borders imposed on him, the reclamation of the queer space within Selvadurai's novel operates on some level at a loss.

Henderson (2013) states that 'recognition takes many forms, though some categories of social difference like sexuality have been more amenable to a positive politics of recognition' (71). Selvadurai explores the challenges through Arjie's own family. His older brother Diggy's apparent homophobia and recognition of Arjie's queer leanings through his friendship with Shehan.

Diggy: I can't wait for Appa to meet Soyza. Then he'll definitely know that you're..." He stopped himself but I knew he was talking about what my father seemed to fear was wrong with me.

You're talking through your hat. I said in a dismissive tone. Amma and Appa will like Shehan. Everybody likes Shehan. You know I do. Very much.

The statement had the desired effect on Diggy. He looked at me intently. What do you mean you like Shehan very much?

He shook his head and stood up. You don't. He crossed to the door but before he went out he said. You just be careful. (Selvadurai, 256)

Diggy's discomfort is made apparent when Arjie registers his queer desire for Shehan by declaring he liked Shehan very much. When further provoked, Arjie wasn't exactly sure how to articulate this strange liking he had for Shehan. But Diggy's dismissal of this queer desire (You don't) and subsequent warning to Arjie is responsive of the narrative of loss and disillusionment (de lauretis, 1991) that Selvadurai plays with throughout the novel.

Jayawickrama (2005: 127) argues that Arjie's disorienting vision provides the clearest perspective and his sense of relationship with others provides more viable connections than those offered by those around him and the nation at large. We agree with Jayawickrama's thesis, however we would like to extend it further by claiming that Selvadurai was acknowledging the violence of identity politics (religious, ethnic and gender) and through the figure of Arjie was critiquing these identity politics. The queer as Butler (1993) has contended is less an identity and more of a critique of identity. She argues that the term will be dispelled, revised and ultimately rendered obsolete yielding to the demands and resisting the exclusions through which it is mobilised. This is the ambivalent reassurance that Arjie's character creates within the postcolonial modernity of the nation.

### Policing Desire

The text is saturated with the narrative of desire. This desire is both heterosexual and segregated (Amma and Daryl; Radha and Anil), an intimacy of friendship and support (Jegan's defence of Arjie) and one of queer attachment (Shehan and Arjie). Arjie is attracted to Shehan almost instantaneously. Whilst this is physical, he is also fascinated by his rebelliousness and defiance of power and authority (he wore his hair long).

That night I dreamt of Shehan. We were in Otter's Club pool, swimming and joking around. He was in a very mischievous mood, and every time I spoke to him he answered in Tamil, knowing that I did not understand. He swam away from me and I chased him until finally I caught him in the deep end. I wound my legs around his so that he couldn't escape. He splashed water in my face and tickled me, but I would not let him go. I was very aware of the feel of his legs against mine and of the occasional moments when, in trying to prevent him from getting away, my chest would rub against his. (242)

Arjie's father took an instant dislike to him. Arjie at one point wonders if his father had sensed Shehan's 'difference' (262). Rao (1997) argues that Appa's dislike for homosexuality is unacceptable to his maleness. Homosexuality threatens to destroy his patriarchy and posed a threat to his masculinity. This is demonstrated when he forces Arjie to join the Victoris Academy where 'the Academy would force [him] to become a man' (210). However this has an opposite effect on Arjie who discovers and becomes aware of the older boys at the school 'who swagger along the railway lines or on the beach, their arms around one another' (Rao, 1997:124).

However what is also interesting to note is Arjie's own development and sense of identity. When Shehan first seduces Arjie in a garage behind his house, he feels violated although Shehan had already kissed him once before. He cannot come to terms with his sexual desire and feels repulsed by what has just happened, but as the narrative progresses Arjie realises that Shehan's act was not to degrade him but was rather his act of offering his love:

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 was amazed that a normal thing like my friendship with Shehan- could have such a powerful and hidden possibilities (256)

However Arjie is also quick to reflect that this desire was something queer and needed to be hidden from the policing eyes of his family and the society at large:

Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble. I thought of how unfair this was and I was reminded of things I had seen happen to other people, like Jegan or even Radha Aunty, who in their own way had experienced injustice. (274)

This section of the novel clearly articulates the intersectional focus of Selvadurai's queer politics. After all the queer figure ruptures traditional models not just of sexuality and gender but rather dominant systems of race, class and ethnicity. By its very nature the queer figure has an unfixed site of contestation and engagement, challenging normative structures and discourses (Butler, 1993; Dasgupta and Gokulsing, 2014)

The novel challenges the idea of belonging and the nature of queer exile that queerness brings with it. Arjie is aware that his family would not understand the nature of his relationship with Shehan and more largely his queerness. At this point he also realised unlike Radha who ultimately gave in to the family, he could never belong to it in the same way. His queerness marked his difference both from his mother (family) and to the larger ethnic/national registers.

What had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with her 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. (284-285)

The ambivalency of queerness within the South Asian Nation State has been explored by various scholars (Bose and Bhattacharya, 2007; Gopinath, 2005 etc). The compulsory heterosexuality of the South Asian Nation state determines that queerness when explored and acted upon could only be done under the veil of secrecy<sup>3</sup>. Shehan is aware of this and at one point chastises Arjie for his seeming difficulty in coming out to himself about his identity

I know your type. You and the head prefect and others like you. Pretend that you're normal or that you're doing it because you can't get a girl. But in the end you're no different from me. (265)

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<sup>3</sup> See laundebaazi (Katyal, 2011; Khanna, 2009). Also see Seabrook (1999)

Final Note: The issue at stake

Scholars such as Vanita and Kidwai (2000) have argued that queer identities dismantle the 'purity' of national identities by disorienting the idea of commonality that ties up citizens together within a mythic citizenship.

Contemporary Sri Lankan identities it may be said are constructed out of the peculiar, particular multiplicitious effects and perceptions of tradition, modernity, colonisation and globalisation that are more often than not in confrontation with each other. Sexuality is today at once the most personal and private, the most public and the most political of issues that engages us both intellectually and practically in everyday life.

Textual representations of queer identities in Sri Lanka and more largely South Asia hasn't had a linear development, it has changed over time due to societal and political change (Gopinath, 2005). Identities as Appadurai (1996) has argued exist and are contextualised within various scapes which individuals inhabit. These range from the home, nation to community. Anderson (1991) contends that a nation exists because people believe in them. Membership to this community is governed through a collective common origin, characteristics and interests. Thus the space of home, community and nation has at its foundation a shared commonality. Hall (1995:206) further argues that there are 'people who belong to more than one world, speak more than one language and inhabit more than one home'. This idea dislocates the notion of an homogenous nation with the heterogeneity of multiple identities. The idea of home (and visa a vis belonging) is in constant flux. This becomes more problematic when dissonant identities such as queer identities conflict with the national identity.

According to Vanita and Kidwai, the politically careless imputation of a schism between homosexuality and South Asian traditions only serves to nourish the hysterical and homophobic rhetoric of conservative lobbies at home, eager to perpetuate 'the myth that same sex love is a disease imported into India from the West' (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000: xxiv). The ongoing queer literary output from South Asia provides a compelling frame of cultural artefacts to construct a post liberalised, postcolonial Indian Queer history. By thrusting queer issues through the print/literary medium it has helped propel a greater queer consciousness and discourse. Literature works with the 'intersubjective areas and relations between public

representations, including those of the communications media, and the lived consciousness of individual subjects' (Pickering, 1997: 63-64). Queerness is a narrative within and yet against heterosexual discourses and tries to achieve the effect of typifying the queer. We agree with Arjun Appadurai's (2001) sentiment that lives are 'inextricably linked with representations' (63-64) we thus find it extremely vital to link the contribution and representation of queerness in South Asia, 'not only as technical adjuncts but as primary material with which to construct and interrogate our own representations'. (ibid.)

In constituting national identities, Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* places the queer firmly within the discourse of nationalism. The novel constructs a new postcolonial queer identity that is neither uncritically western nor an unimaginative regression to traditional practices. The queer space of home is ruptured in the novel and is a challenge to the dominant ideologies of community based on ethnicity, class and nationhood. The formulation of queerness and queer identities forces the home space to be remoulded and remade by queer desire and subjectivity in non-heteronormative ways. Negotiating between different genders and sexual identities is also about negotiating various positions of power (Dasgupta and Banerjee, 2016). The novel captures this process of destabilization of identity addressing the shifting boundaries of sex, sexuality, gender and power and in the process questioning the intensely precarious borderlines of heteronormative patriarchal stereotypes and nationhood itself.

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