

# WRITING TO PROTEST AND TO RECONCILE

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## Abstract

While protest is the main thrust in Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*, his project after the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict ended was to bring about understanding among the various communities through his 'Write to Reconcile' programme. *Funny Boy*, a 'victim-of-society' novel, demonstrates how individuals and groups are victimised for their 'unorthodox' sexual orientation, for attempting to effect inter-communal marriages, for exposing the ill treatment of a minority community by the State, and for refusing to conform to obsolescent educational practices. Arjie, the main protagonist, is the only individual to successfully challenge orthodoxy by having a clandestine same-sex relationship with a classmate and by deliberately distorting the lines he is forced to recite in public on Prize Day thus effectively defeating his headmaster's mission to maintain Victoria Academy's colonial heritage. The novel ends on a somber note with the 1983 pogrom against the Tamil community forcing Arjie's family to emigrate to Canada. The cessation of the war twelve years after *Funny Boy* was published, however, enables Selvadurai to change course to use creative writing to bring all communities together, rather than to protest against victimisation.

**Keywords:** Sri Lankan fiction, victimisation, protest, neo-colonial education, ethnic tensions, homosexuality, reconciliation through writing

## Prologue

Shyam Selvadurai spent a considerable part of 2013 and 2014 in Sri Lanka on a project called Write to Reconcile which he explains thusly: 'Write to Reconcile is a creative writing project born out of my belief that literature can contribute towards healing wounds and facilitating dialogue in post-war Sri Lanka (Selvadurai 2013: 5). 'Healing wounds and facilitating dialogue,' however, were perhaps unthinkable when he wrote *Funny Boy*. Not only does the novel concern itself with the pogrom against the Tamils in 1983 which had prompted Selvadurai and his family to leave the island just eleven years before but also the conflict between the LTTE and the Government forces was at its height when the book was published, a situation which called for protest rather than reconciliation. This paper examines *Funny Boy* as a novel of protest and then ties it up with Shehan Selvadurai's most recent concerns.

## Poetics of Protest

In *The Poetics of Protest: Literary Form and Political Implication in the Victim of Society Novel* (1985), George Goodin defines 'the victim of society' novel:

It identifies a protagonist, a subject matter, and a basic action: victim, social injustice and suffering ... I shall take the term to refer to a group formed by the intersection of social protest novels and novels of victimage. Thus, in addition to excluding all novels which are neither, it excludes all social protest novels in which the protagonist is not a victim in any significant sense. (Goodin 1985: 4)

While these victims are 'subjected to injustice and suffer more than they deserve' (Goodin 1985: 13) their suffering, according to Goodin, must necessarily be accompanied by the recognition that their lot can be changed for 'only if we see something which injustice has not created or some capacity to struggle against it are we likely to see a limit to its power and thus a reason to hope for effective action (Goodin 1985: 14).

Goodin's paradigm is useful in reading *Funny Boy*. Even a cursory reading establishes that Selvadurai foregrounds the theme of victimisation unlike, say, Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef* which was published in the same year where this motif is merely a point-of-departure. It would not be too sweeping a generalisation to state, in fact, that this theme entered the Sri Lankan novel only recently. Novels written before Sri Lankan independence were either satires which contrasted local values unfavourably with those of the West, or romantic potboilers which focussed on the life of the sheltered middle class. The fiction that emerged after 1948 was similar in many ways, but some concessions were made to accommodate the social transition that began after independence. Writers, like Punyakante Wijenaikē, showed how the positions of the propertied, 'aristocratic,' 'respectable' families were threatened by the more enterprising 'lower classes,' and James Goonewardene depicted a neo-romantic scenario in which city dwellers, disillusioned by life in the metropolis, sought a haven in the village. Sarachchandra's *Curfew and the Full Moon* which concentrated on the 1971 insurgency was perhaps the first novel to give prominence to the theme of victimisation. But it is only in the recent past that writers have begun to consistently give attention to this theme and to demonstrate the manner in which the oppressed challenge their antagonists. Shyamali, in Punyakante Wijenaikē's *Amulet*, for instance, is affected by 'madness' and 'hysteria' because of her husband's malevolence; nonetheless, she employs subtle strategies of resistance that eventually drive him to distraction so much so that he admits at the end that '[s]he has escaped my authority, into silence' (Wijenaikē 1994: 167); in Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*, Jean and Barry Mundy are initially enervated by the racial prejudice that they encounter in their adopted country, Australia. Jean, however, is unwilling to succumb to such pressures without resistance; as a consequence, she retaliates by exposing the formidable Ron Blackstone's racism in public. To some critics even Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree*, though set up as a novel 'in which women were expected to submit meekly to the dictates of a male-dominated society' (Ranasinha 1995: 18), ultimately demonstrates that, '[f]ar from playing a marginal role, the female protagonists emerge as vocal, assertive initiators of action' (Ranasinha 1995: 20).

Despite some significant touches, however, none of these texts which are contemporaneous with *Funny Boy* are victim-of-society novels *per se*. Selvadurai's novel, on the other hand, privileges the theme of victimage more substantially and in a manner that lends itself to the kind of analysis suggested by Goodin. What is more, as Maryse Jayasuriya enunciates, it foregrounds 'opposition to all varieties of oppression' (Jayasuriya 2012: 112). The Chelvaratnams, Selvadurai's major protagonists, are victimised because they are Tamils,<sup>2</sup> and Arjie is, in addition, marginalised for his behaviour which is at variance with accepted social norms. Radha, Daryl, and Jegan are three others who are wronged by society for a cluster of reasons. Although most of the characters succumb to these oppressive forces, Arjie and a few others defy them with varying degrees of success. The object of this essay is to examine the dynamics between the

antagonists and the victims and to assess the extent to which these strategies of resistance and subversion are successful.

## Victimage as Experienced by Radha, Mrs Chelvaratnam, and Jegan

Although Arjie is the main character, there are others who also play significant roles. To Radha who has just returned from overseas and is unused to Sri Lankan mores '[i]f two people loved each other, the rest is unimportant' (Selvadurai 1994: 78). Consequently, she is ready to defy her mother's admonition that it is unwise to be seen 'gallivanting around with an unknown Sinhala boy' (Selvadurai 1994: 58) and Anil's father's warning that '[w]e Sinhalese are losing patience with you Tamils and your arrogance' (Selvadurai 1994: 66) and marry Anil for love. In contemplating this move, Radha challenges both the racial enmity between Tamils and Sinhalese, and the institution of the family, as portrayed by Selvadurai, which valorises arranged marriages. Her principles cannot withstand the racial polarisation that increases after she is attacked and injured by a Sinhalese mob, however. Although her feelings for Anil are not totally destroyed, she dumbly allows her family to contract a marriage for her with the Nagendras. A lesser artist would have allowed this sequence to lapse into sentimentality, not so Shyam Selvadurai. The break up between Radha and Anil is suggested not dramatised. It is left for Arjie to observe 'a seriousness in her face that was new, a harshness that ... [he] had never seen before' (Selvadurai 1994: 93) and to realise that, although the wedding he had fantasised about for so long would come to pass, 'there would be something important missing' (Selvadurai 1994: 99).

Arjie's mother had likewise split with Daryl (a Burgher) and married a Tamil when their friendship threatened the *status quo*. While her subsequent, extramarital affair with Daryl, which is conducted in the haven of the hill country, demonstrates that such relationships can prosper when not incommoded by the parochial demands of race, the sequence is more important for depicting Mrs. Chelvaratnam's vain attempts to identify Daryl's killers and to bring them to justice.<sup>3</sup> Selvadurai's account of her mission to discover the truth, despite a system that thwarts her every move, is rendered with unsettling realism. Not only do the police torture Daryl's servant who was perhaps a witness to what had transpired and tap the Chelvaratnams' telephone, but the Assistant Superintendent of Police even threatens Mrs Chelvaratnam with blackmail when he says with veiled malice that the 'servant boy was a real jobless character. He knew all the comings and goings of your friend.... My regards to your husband ... I'm sure he will be fascinated by all that's happened in his absence' (Selvadurai 1994: 134). Mrs Chelvaratnam perseveres in her quest because she is convinced that 'People can't get away with these things. This is a democracy, for God's sake' (Selvadurai 1994: 137). She even ignores the warning of her family friend, Appadurai, a famous civil rights lawyer, who informs her that the quest for justice is futile and precarious in the volatile socio-political climate of the 1980s: 'These days one must be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil ... Let it rest, child' (Selvadurai 1994: 141). It is only when her attempt to trace Somaratne's whereabouts in his village results in abuse and stones being hurled at her and Arjie by the innocent victims of this tragic event that she decides to desist:

After a while she pulled the car up by the side of the road, then she got out and slammed the door. I watched her stand there, her back to me, and even though I was sorry to see her cry I was also glad of it. I hoped with all my heart it meant that she finally realised that things had gone too far. (Selvadurai 1994: 149)

In a novel that is punctuated with tragedies, the calamity which strikes her is particularly poignant because her heroic efforts result in total defeat. She is so wounded and enervated by the entire episode that she suppresses the truth when one of Daryl's Australian colleagues arrives in Sri Lanka to undertake the kind of mission that she had just abandoned. What makes her plight even more harrowing is that she has no alternative but to return to her role as 'pattern wife' to an patriarchal husband once more.

If the episode with Daryl is an indictment of a political regime which employed the police to get rid of 'dissidents,' the sequences which involve Jegan, while reflecting the chauvinism that compelled several capable Tamils to leave the country during the 80s, also critique the open economy and the 'business' mentality it engenders. Chelvaratnam immediately takes to his late friend's son because of his striking resemblance to his sire and because he recognises Jegan's talents as an accountant. Their rapport is threatened, however, by their different approaches to life. Although Jegan had joined the Tigers when a close friend who had worked with him in the Gandhiam movement was tortured by the forces, the Tigers, too, become anathema to him, eventually. Consequently, he ponders on the limited options open to Tamils in Sri Lanka, thus:

If you become a Tiger you cannot question anything they do. Recently they killed a social worker who disagreed with their opinions.... On the other hand, what is the alternative? We cannot live like this under constant threat from the Sinhalese, always second-class citizens in our own country. As my father used to say, 'It's small choices of rotten apples.' (Selvadurai 1994: 176)

Despite these dilemmas, Jegan remains idealistic and determined to succeed in the commercial world of the South. But he discovers that he can neither live down his past as a Tiger nor receive fair treatment from his bosses, colleagues, subordinates, or the general public. Jegan is interrogated after he is seen talking to two of his former Tiger associates. Although he is cleared of any suspicion, this information is conveyed to a newspaper which promptly refers to him as a 'key Tiger suspect' living with 'a well-known Tamil hotelier' (Selvadurai 1994: 183) in its columns. This report exposes Chelvaratnam to 'hate mail' and to abusive telephone calls which jeopardise his philosophy that 'As a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game. Play it right and you can do very well for yourself. The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous. Go around quietly, make your money, and don't step on anybody's toes' (Selvadurai 1994: 173).

While Jegan can ignore the jealousy of his colleagues and accept with less composure his boss' order that a Tamil cannot directly reprimand a subordinate, he refuses to adopt a posture that would deny him any self-respect or allow profit to affect his sense of values. On his first visit to the hotel, he reacts angrily to Chelvaratnam's callous observation that the prostitution of young village boys was both an inevitable and even necessary consequence of the tourist industry, 'if I tried to stop them, they'd simply go to another hotel on the front ... It's not just our luscious beaches that keep the tourist industry going, you know, 'We have other natural resources as well' (Selvadurai 1994: 171). Given his subordinate position in the company, Jegan can do little more than wear a 'stern expression on his face' (Selvadurai 1994: 171) at this comment. But he seems to be biding his time for a more positive response when subsequent events prevent him from taking any corrective measures. When Chelvaratnam had subtly suggested a holiday in Jaffna after the newspaper 'revelations' had embarrassed him, Jegan had refused the offer, yet he cannot maintain this posture when the 'Death to all Tamil pariahs' sign is drawn on the hotel wall. All the major players know that Jegan will have to be sacked because, as Sena says, '[t]hings can't continue this way, 'if they do the whole business will fall apart' (Selvadurai 1994: 203). Spurning the alternative offer of a sinecure in the Middle East, Jegan leaves for Jaffna, presumably to rejoin the Tigers.

Selvadurai's social criticism in the Jegan episodes is two-fold. That Chelvaratnam, a responsible parent, and one who had shown such sensitivity in signing a pledge to look after Buddy and his family could nonchalantly refer to teenaged male prostitutes<sup>4</sup> as 'natural resources' is indicative of the cynicism that entered the country with the tourist boom and the open economy introduced to the country by the 1978 government of J.R. Jayawardena. Such policies also led to an overdeveloped sense of competition which capitalised on communal tensions; witness Banduratne Mudalali's method of eliminating powerful commercial rivals. In this environment, intelligent, industrious Tamils who refuse to indulge in the sycophancy associated with Chelvaratnam can do no more than return to a precarious existence in Jaffna.

### Arjie as Role Player, Observer, and 'Subversive'

Arjie's part in all these acts of resistance is crucial. He functions as Radha's chaperon during her dalliance with Anil, his mother's partner in trying to discover the truth of Daryl's death, and Jegan's confidante during his stay in the Chelvaratnam household. This exposure to events and actions which illustrate the iniquities, the parochialism, and the basic injustice prevailing in Sri Lanka reinforces Arjie's inborn desire to be different from and to challenge the 'normal' world. What his apprenticeship in these 'political' engagements has taught him, moreover, is the value of subtlety over direct confrontation when one is faced with a stronger opponent. The first chapter perhaps too obviously introduces Arjie's 'exile from the world' (Selvadurai 1994: 4). 'Exile,' here, refers not merely to his departure to Canada after the riots, but also to his subsequent discovery that he is gay – an awareness that allows him to occupy a world that is stimulating, satisfying, but fraught with hazards. Arjie's childhood fantasies are given substance through games like 'bride bride' in which he plays the role of the bride. While his participation is welcomed by the girls whose games are enriched by his creative imagination, the boys, too, are glad of an arrangement which ensures that their macho sports are not encumbered by a 'weakling.' This happy state is halted, however, when Tanuja arrives from abroad and insists that Arjie is a 'faggot' (Selvadurai 1994: 11) for playing female roles. When her efforts to take over Arjie's world are met with resistance, she marshals the support of the adults, an action which results in Arjie being forbidden to participate in these 'effeminate' pastimes. Although Arjie rebels against these constraints, he temporarily yields to the dictates of the adult world and lives 'between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either' (Selvadurai 1994: 39). Selvadurai largely suppresses this implied gay theme in the next three chapters,<sup>5</sup> but he presents it forcefully in the last two. Committed as they are to the values of a patriarchal world and given their latent homophobia, Chelvaratnam and his 'normal' son, Diggy, find Arjie's flirtations with cross-dressing both embarrassing and threatening; consequently, they combine forces to prevent him from 'turning out funny or anything like that' (Selvadurai 1994: 210). Chelvaratnam's solution is to send Arjie to a school that will 'force ... [him] to become a man' (Selvadurai 1994: 210). To a person who had resisted conforming to 'male' ideals from his youngest days, joining an institution which purports to reinforce such ideals is wounding indeed, especially when these macho ideals are presented as the only reality.

Barbara Harlow enunciates, in *Resistance Literature*, that '[t]he connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to historical narratives' (Harlow 1987: 116). Although *Funny Boy* deals with recent Sri Lankan history, it is not a historical narrative *per se*; still, Black Tie's clash with Lokubandara, which is really a conflict between neo-colonialism and rabid nationalism, demonstrates why institutions of knowledge are so important to 'the interests of power.' Lokubandara's position is not rendered in depth, but Black Tie's politics are plain. He tries to maintain control by perpetuating decadent, Public School values and by resisting

the indigenisation of the Victoria Academy.<sup>6</sup> Arjie's response is emphatically subversive and postcolonial. By embarking on a clandestine homosexual relationship with Shehan, he strikes a subtle blow against the macho order represented by his father, his brother, and Black Tie. Their 'intercommunal' friendship, furthermore, undermines the positions held by Lokubandara and Salgado, and endorses Howard McNaughton's point that '*Réalisation* through role-breaking asserts the power of the oppressed' (McNaughton 1994: 228). The 'role-breaking' that is begun with Arjie's clandestine relationship with a Sinhalese is taken a step further when he deliberately mis/reads Henry Newbolt's 'The Best School of All' on Prize Day before the politician whose support the principal needs so badly. In doing so, Arjie takes a positive step towards having this anachronistic, colonial college dismantled.

Raj Rao in a pioneering study of *Funny Boy* claims that some institutions are 'extension[s] of repressive centralised structures, like the State ... Hence there is a need to subvert them.'<sup>7</sup> Sharanya Jayawickrama takes the argument a step further when she states:

Selvadurai's pervasive conceptualization of space as both a gendered and racialised terrain and particularly his persistent conflation of personal and national levels allow us to read these spaces as parallel to the state of the nation. As the meaning of space is heavily allegorised, the relationships between people—particularly inter-racial relationships—that take place within its various configurations are invested with potentially oppositional significance. (Jayawickrama 2005: 124)

What I would add is that Selvadurai's subversions are convincing because he maintains a sense of balance. He is neither triumphalistic in his sexual assertion nor insistent on placing homosexual love and heterosexual love in binary opposition; there is, after all, sufficient evidence to suggest that some heterosexual relationships would have succeeded had 'family and social values [not] take[n] precedence over love between two people' (Abeyesekera 1994: 20). From Shehan's first kiss which leaves Arjie wanting to 'experience it again in all its detail' (Selvadurai 1994: 251) through their first sexual encounter in the garage to their last engagement which is 'almost passionless, uncoordinated and tentative, lacking synchronisation' (Selvadurai 1994: 310), their relationship is drawn with a poise, sensitivity, and honesty that eschews any sensationalism. The text does not articulate the Arnoldian concept that a 'true' relationship can succeed amidst turbulence from without; on the contrary, Arjie and Shehan 'withdraw' from each other knowing that their friendship has been shattered by the riots. Their relationship is valuable, however, for its subversive potential and for implying, albeit diffidently, that, racial harmony can be achieved among the marginalised; this suggests, furthermore, that comparable bonds could be established in the world 'out there' under certain conditions.

## Subverting Neo-Colonial Education

Although Selvadurai's courage in writing a gay novel situated in Sri Lanka is a *donée*, his undermining the inherited form of neocolonial education is an even greater achievement. To the editors of *The Writer as Historical Witness* 'postcolonials ... identify, recognise, interrogate, challenge and subdue the distorting dominant history that had subverted and marginalised them ...' (Thumboo and Kandiah 1995: xviii). Arjie undertakes such a project in 'The Best School of All.' While schools founded by imperialists benefitted the colonies in some ways, they did much to legitimise the colonial enterprise. The 'values' they imparted, though not too problematic when taken in isolation, become pernicious when coupled with the notion of loyalty to queen/king and country. By forcing schoolboys to commit Newbolt's verses to memory, Black Tie perpetuates colonial values even after Independence.<sup>8</sup> These verses, after all, insist

on total obedience to 'the rule we knew' and foreground the 'ethics' of a chauvinistic private school. That Arjie abhors these values is seen in his conversation with Shehan at the British Council during which they mockingly speculate on the poet's spectacular school career, and 'hold up for ridicule all that was considered sacred by the Queen Victoria Academy' (Selvadurai 1994: 240). What Arjie finds ironic is that these 'values' are never actually practised:

It said that through playing cricket one learned to be honest and brave and patriotic. This was not true at the Victoria Academy. Cricket, here, consisted of trying to make it on the first-eleven team by any means, often by cheating or by fawning over the cricket master. (Selvadurai 1994: 233).

Selvadurai's portrayal of Black Tie sometimes borders on caricature, but it is convincing on the whole. This man who dons 'a sola topee, that white domed hat I had only seen in photographs from the time the British ruled Sri Lanka' (Selvadurai 1994: 214) shares the brutal, sadistic tendencies of his antecedents in British public schools. As Diggy informs Argie, 'Once, he slapped a boy and broke some of his teeth. Another boy got caned so severely his trousers tore. Then he made the boy kneel in the sun until he fainted' (Selvadurai 1994: 211).

That Diggy was not exaggerating Black Tie's severity is confirmed when both Arjie and Shehan are subjected to his cruel punishments for flimsy reasons. In such a world, Argie realises, '[r]ight and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were' (Selvadurai 1994: 273). He enunciates:

How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It has 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 said. But did we always have to obey? Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? I thought about this, but no answer presented itself to me. (Selvadurai 1994: 274)

Such private criticism achieves little, however. To be truly revisionist Arjie must discover a way of subverting the system. In Nigel Thomas' *Spirits in the Dark*,<sup>9</sup> a cane-cutter father ensures that his daughter is never birched again by giving the teacher, Miss Anderson, a lacerating verbal lashing which he ends thus: 'You don' ever put yo' fucking hands on she again. If yo' do, so help me God, I will knock every teeth outta yo head!' (Thomas 1994: 9). Arjie cannot expect similar protection from his father to whom, no doubt, beatings were part of the 'learning' process; consequently, he has to devise his own kind of resistance. Unlike his mother, who had confronted the system directly and failed, and Jerome in Thomas' novel who 'succeeds after realising that conformity and acquiescence (rather than non-conformity and challenge) is the rewarded strategy' (Macleod 1995: 17), Arjie pretends to join the system and then subverts it from within. Although he balks at the idea of reciting Newbolt's offensive verses on Prize Day, he later realises that he could use the language of the oppressor to defeat the oppressor:

The plan was simple. Instead of trying to get out of writing the poems, I would do them. But I would do them wrong. Confuse them, jumble lines, take entire stanzas and place them in the other until the poems were rendered senseless. Black Tie who Sunderalingam said would write a speech based on these poems, would be forced to make a speech that made no sense. His attempt to win the cabinet minister to his side would fail, he would lose the battle to Lokubandara, be forced to resign ... (Selvadurai 1994: 277)

Arjie's strategy works, as Black Tie leaves the hall 'tired and defeated' (Selvadurai 1994: 283) and in disgrace and subject to public ridicule. While largely agreeing with a previous article on *Funny Boy* (Perera 1997), Rafia Mariam Murtuza says 'Perera ... omits that while sabotaging his principal, Arjie simultaneously sabotages himself as a Tamil' (Murtuza 2010: 243-244). My foci in that article were neo-colonial education in three novels based in Kenya, Barbados and Sri Lanka, not the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka hence the 'omission.' But there is no gainsaying that Arjie is placed in an unenviable situation. This could be gleaned from Arjie's reaction to his 'success.' There is neither triumph nor exultation but sadness. His drama teacher, the kind Mr. Sundaralingam, has given him the background to Black Tie's project and he is also aware that his parents are present to witness a performance that will bring credit to his family and to Arjie; furthermore, as Catherine Bell suggests, 'Black Tie's use of nostalgia here is not simply regressive; his secular ideas are important' (Bell 258) because if Lokubandara were to prevail over Black Tie, the Victoria academy would no longer be an institution that welcomed those from all communities and faiths. Tamils would not be able to come together with those from the majority community as Diggy and Arjie had done in this institution. While his sense of injustice at the inhuman punishments meted out to his fellow victim Shehan was the main motivating factor, his growing resentment at the manner in which those in authority took upon themselves the role of deciding what was right and wrong also prompted him to perpetrate this act of subversion. Bell concludes:

Black Tie's desire to force a perfect poem out of his difficult pupil, the desire of Arjie's grandmother to 'master what she considered to be [his] devil's temperament' (43), his father's wish that the Victoria Academy 'force [Arjie] to become a man' (210) - all respond to a stubborn persistence of a sort of 'childishness' these adults see in Arjie, which is coeval with a resistance to discipline. *Funny Boy* is an interlocking critique of neocolonialism and patriarchy, and Selvadurai problematises the hyper-vigilance that arises in the face of colonial insecurity by outlining, with disturbing clarity how excessively paternal and colonial authority must be enforced and what is at stake with this excess (Bell 2002: 267).

The stakes involved are such that Arjie feels compelled to make a larger statement *vis-à-vis* the forces aligned against and not be selfish in only safeguarding his position as a Tamil.

### **Some Critical Approaches to *Funny Boy***

*Funny Boy* is an intriguing novel because many Sri Lankan critics who generally hold contradictory views on Sri Lankan writing in English are united in commending it. Rajiva Wijesinha is correct in saying that the novel enunciates 'the importance of asserting individual feelings and relationships in defiance of the dictates of authority (Wijesinha 1996: 82).' Minoli Salgado for her part claims 'It seems that Selvadurai positions desire as an unpredictable force-field which threatens both to disrupt the established order of an ethnically divided society while simultaneously offering it its only field of redemption' (Salgado 2007: 119). While one understands why critics would give a positive slant to the novel, Arjie's acts of defiance and assertion should be placed in their proper perspective. There can be no doubt that it is Arjie's love for Shehan and his anger at the system which victimises his friend that spurs him to plot and execute a plan that eventually enables him to 'triumph' over Black Tie and all that the headmaster represents. However, this constitutes just a modest blow against patriarchy and chauvinism. To say that Arjie 'come[s] out' (Gray 1995: 3) audaciously against orthodoxy, therefore, is inaccurate and misleading. Since his homosexuality is never made public, his



oppositional stance, like the gestures of resistance made by women against a world dominated by patriarchal values in Punyakante Wijenaike's and Muller's recent novels, only succeeds at a *personal* level. The overly positive readings rendered by some critics sound convincing only because they gloss over the last pages in which Tamils are killed, their houses burnt, and the survivors practically forced into exile. As Andrew Lesk concludes,

*Funny Boy* is not an emancipatory project or a fantasy of cultural and political progress. It serves, if anything, as Selvadurai's cautioning that attempts to change greater structures without attendant heightened self-awareness of one's position simply leads to a perpetration of the existing regulatory political and social order – and the loss of home. (Lesk 2006: 44)

### Arjie's Form of Protest

Still, to regard *Funny Boy* as a novel of defeat would be equally incorrect because Selvadurai manages to resuscitate the novel even when Arjie's fortunes are at their nadir. Consider Arjie's reaction on seeing his gutted home after the riots:

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 ... for the loss of my home, for the loss of everything I held to be precious. I tried to muffle the sound of my weeping, but my voice cried out loudly as if it were the only weapon I had against those who had destroyed my life. (Selvadurai 1994: 311)

It is worthwhile fusing the careers of the writer and his protagonist here despite the hazards involved in undertaking an autobiographical approach.<sup>10</sup> If the power of the word had enabled Arjie to successfully speak back to his tormentor on Prize Day, Selvadurai writes back equally effectively to those who had destroyed the psyche of thousands of peace loving Tamils and banished them overseas. In his essay on *Funny Boy*, Raj Rao's asserts that 'Appa's view that if you are a minority, "the trick is not to make yourself conspicuous"' (Rao 1997: 173), is diametrically opposite to what Salman Rushdie recommends to marginalised people in his essay 'Outside the Whale,' in *Imaginary Homelands*: 'to shout as loudly as possible, to draw the maximum attention to one's condition ...' (Rushdie 1997: 122). Here one finds Selvadurai through Arjie employing the tactic advocated by Rushdie that his father had shunned. Selvadurai does not possess the tremendous optimism of a Hubert E. Weerasooriya who writing before the riots of 1983 could regard the communal tensions as a passing phase which would eventually be dispelled by love (Weerasooriya 1982) He has seen and experienced too much to indulge in what could only be described as fantasies at the time. Though he writes with anger, however, Selvadurai, unlike the Tigers, is not advocating violence in retaliation for the 'violation' because as Rafia Miriam Murtuza avers, 'Selvadurai depicts both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism as authoritarian and violent and, therefore, dangerous and untenable for Sri Lanka' (Murtuza 2015: 266). Instead, he uses the pen as a 'weapon' to write an engaging novel that sensitively portrays the victimisation of a people, while demanding some form of justice and reparation.

### Epilogue

When he published *Funny Boy* in 1994, Selvadurai would not have had even the remotest idea that the war which was raging in earnest then would get infinitely worse before it ended with

the government taking full control of the North and East in 2009. Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims who were non combatants were killed in an orgy of bloodletting through suicide bombers, collateral damage and other forms of destruction. The country became increasingly militarised and the 'development' projects set up in the island after the war ended could not compensate for the tragedies that had taken place and left many questions unanswered. At the beginning of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari*, the Mau Mau veteran by that name emerges from the jungle assuming the conflict is at an end, buries his AK 47 and dons the belt of peace. At the end of the novel, he rearms himself because he discovers that he was in error. Neo-colonial forces had joined hands with the former colonial masters to further deprive the poor and the marginalised of their birthright and of living in peace, harmony and prosperity in the land that the Mau Mau had sacrificed so much to secure. Realising that his time for battling the foe is over, Marigari hands over his weapons to his disciple Muriuki who is expected to continue the struggle. Selvadurai's project in writing *Funny Boy* and his current assignment *vis-à-vis* Write to Reconcile demonstrate fascinating parallels and contrasts with what happens in *Matigari*. If *Matigari* had fought the aggressor with his AK 47, the author, through Arjie, does something similar with the pen to inveigh against the many forms of victimisation Tamils had been subjected to especially in the above sequence in *Funny Boy*, a strategy calculated to make the world aware of the same. However, whereas *Matigari* tried a new strategy and then rearmed himself with the weapons of war and encouraged his disciple to follow his example, Selvadurai only modifies the way in which he used his skills as a writer. Lesk posits that:

There may be affinities among subordinate classes [in *Funny Boy*], yet the author hints that we need to understand how Arjie is pressed by competing ideologies which may all lay claim to him. We might then better understand the marginalization that one group may (inadvertently) impose upon others. Selvadurai uses Arjie to map this territory but does not suggest how disparate groups may come together to reform the nation (Lesk 2006: 37).

The 'Write to Reconcile' project shows a way forward not found in *Funny Boy* albeit in a modest way. Taking a group of children and young adults drawn from all communities who had presumably not known a country without an ethnic conflict until it ended in 2009 (and with the second version of Write to Reconcile including representatives of the expatriate community as well), Selvadurai shows how one could use dialogue and the pen to create a different kind of awareness which is the necessity to reconcile and achieve peace. The goals are modest because the numbers are limited. Also, because the stories are written in English, the programme would obviously exclude the really marginalised in the island. But a modest step is surely a necessary prelude for more effective action in the future.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> John Hawley is incorrect when he claims that, '[i]n the world of Selvadurai's novel, the child protagonist, Arjie, is oblivious to the larger historical backdrop against which his own narrative is enacted. He is a member of the Tamil community, descended from Hindu tea-plantation workers who were brought from India in the nineteenth century. His group is under increasing threat from the Buddhist Sinhalese, who outnumber the Tamils almost five to one' (Hawley 2011: 274). There is sufficient evidence to indicate that the Chelvaratnam's are Jaffna (or what used to be termed) Ceylon Tamils and not Indian

- Tamils. Radha being sent to Jaffna to visit relatives is one instance which would disprove Hawley's claim. Selvadurai's father is a Jaffna Tamil.
- <sup>3</sup> Daryl's career, and Mrs Chelvaratnam's efforts to discover the truth behind his death, seems to be modelled to some extent on Richard de Zoysa's mother's campaign for justice after her activist son was abducted from her home by the police and his body later found washed ashore in Moratuwa by some fishermen.
  - <sup>4</sup> He also discloses his hypocrisy in laughing at homosexuality involving minors in this fashion when he is so worried that his son would turn out to be 'funny.'
  - <sup>5</sup> Selvadurai maintains some interest in the theme, however, by showing how Arjie finds men attractive-*vide* p. 116 and pp.160-61.
  - <sup>6</sup> For a fuller account of the politics in education as articulated in the novel, read S.W. Perera 1998, 'Some responses to colonial/neocolonial education in *In the castle of my skin, Petals of blood, and Funny boy*,' *World Literature Written in English*, vol. nos. 37 1&2 (1998): 242-262. Also, Miriam Rafia Murtuza 2015, "'The best school of all'?: British-modelled education in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny boy*,' *Phoenix: Sri Lanka Journal of English in the Commonwealth*, vol. XII, pp.101-14.
  - <sup>7</sup> Rao made this point in 'Because Most People Marry Their Own Kind: A Reading of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*,' a paper read at the tenth ACLALS Triennial Conference held in Sri Lanka in 1995. The quotation is taken from the Abstract and not from the article published in 1997 referred to later in this essay which is based on the original paper but does not include these words.
  - <sup>8</sup> The Website of Royal College, Colombo indicates that the Victoria Academy is to some extent based on Selvadurai's old school <http://royalcollege.lk/pages/about-royal/history-and-traditions/a-brief-history/>. That the school in the novel is located by the sea and has a head teacher called 'Black Tie' makes it plain that Royal College's traditional rivals, St Thomas's College, Mt. Lavinia, is another source especially since it had a headmaster with the identical nickname who was known as a strict disciplinarian (see [http://www.stcg62group.org/PDF/Articles/93\\_An\\_Appreciation\\_JHS\\_Peiris\\_by\\_Ronnie\\_Peiris.pdf](http://www.stcg62group.org/PDF/Articles/93_An_Appreciation_JHS_Peiris_by_Ronnie_Peiris.pdf)). What Selvadurai was unaware of, and discovered only during a chance remark I made at a talk he gave at the University of Peradeniya which I chaired is that the Newbolt poem which is so crucial to the novel is the school song of Trinity College, Kandy, an institution that is as elitist as the other two. He had discovered the entire poem at the British Council Library in Colombo as described in the novel but had no idea that the poem was even more relevant to his purpose than he had envisaged.
  - <sup>9</sup> H. Nigel Thomas, *Spirits in the Dark* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994). This novel has some points of convergence with *Funny Boy*. Thomas is an expatriate living in Canada, like Selvadurai, and Jerome experiences homosexual desires, *à la* Arjie.
  - <sup>10</sup> See Selvadurai's interview with Afdhel Aziz, 'Growing up Gay in Sri Lanka,' *The Sunday Times* 29 January 1995 p17 for comments on the novel's autobiographical concerns.

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