

Reading Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* in Post-War Sri Lanka

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Abstract

In the post-war era there is dire need for addressing the grievances of those who suffered in the ethnic issue that prevailed in Sri Lanka over the last three decades. Shyam Selvadurai in his novel *Funny Boy* narrates the story of a young boy coming in to terms with his sexuality and budding into adolescence in a country that is hostile towards his ethnicity in the early 1980's. Selvadurai specifically focuses on the socio-political events leading to 1983 July riots in Sri Lanka and the reasons for many families to migrate the island they lived for generations that fateful year. Interestingly, *Funny Boy* gives a glimpse to the insight of the minority group that suffered during the said riots in Sri Lanka. The novel focuses solely on one class of individuals who try to overcome the turmoil, the Tamil community in the Western province of the country. Critics therefore tend to believe that the novel in question does not transcend the geographical boundaries and as a result tend to restrain the author from observing a broader perspective. This study will focus on Selvadurai's reading of the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka and its beginning and how the observations he made in the novel are applicable to the post-war era with the civil war coming to an end in 2009. Furthermore the study will focus on the reconciliation process of Sri Lanka in the contemporary society in contrast to Selvadurai's notion of reconciliation presented through *Funny Boy*. Significant focus will be given to the observations made regarding the contemporary reconciliation efforts undertaken by the state and other Non-governmental organizations in the country to this day and the drawbacks of such attempts. Inter-textual references will be brought from the author's other work and the other literature written on post-war Sri Lanka.

Key words: Ethnic crisis, Identity, Post-war, Reconciliation

Introduction and Research problem/issue

It is highly unlikely that no one saw it coming. It was just a matter of when it will happen again. Over the years we, as Sri Lankans have had the unfortunate fate of spiraling back to violence every fifteen years or less. The recurrent violent in the formation of the country's history has made its way into the genre of literature to the extent that when we evaluate the subject of Sri Lankan English Literature we have work that highly focus on the violent events over the years. Similar emphasis is given in *Funny Boy* to the political situation of the country in the year 1983. Many Sri Lankan poets like Anne Ranasinghe, Jean Arsanayagam and Richard de Zoysa wrote poems based on the riots of 1983 that resulted in bloodshed of innocent civilians of the island. Similarly, Selvadurai in his study makes vivid reference to the precedent events in July 1983 through the eyes of a teenage boy living in the suburbs of Colombo. From the time Arjie was a child he is exposed to the communal strife in the country from his surroundings. Yet until the dawn of that gloomy day in mid-July he is unaware of the extent to which the individual minds can stoop to. Selvadurai questions the role played by the government in resolving the issue at hand and poignantly shares the details of the "the Black July" sans restrains. Similarly the reconciliation connotations that lie in the novel become significant as one read the novel in the post-war era in Sri Lanka. Certain policies undertaken by the state towards the path to reconciliation fails to repair the estranged relationships of the bygone

era. The process makes one question every stance they have taken with regard to the communal issues of the country.

Research Methodology

In this paper a significant focus will be given to the novel *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai while some references will be extracted from different texts of the same author and crossed analyzed with texts written in the post-war Sri Lanka like *Seasons of Trouble* by Rohini Mohan and *This Divided Island* by Samanth Subramanian. Primary data is collected during the research through means of discussions, observations and interviews. Every individual of the country seem to look at the ethnic issue in a black and white manner although it is a rather shallow reading of the conflict that existed in the island. Individuals belonging to both communities of Sinhala and Tamil were interviewed with the intention of extracting data that is authentic and deriving a conclusion that is unbiased in nature. Many criticisms faced by writers in Sri Lanka writing in the medium of English is that they seem to sympathize with one party of individuals that suffered during the conflict and tend to neglect the other party altogether merely due to the reason that their stories are unheard by the Sri Lankan English writers. In trying to overcome this criticism this study will focus on the drawbacks of Selvadurai's work in question as well.

Results and Findings

The novel focuses on the story of a premature adolescence in his early teen years coming to terms with his sexual identity and encountering the ethnic issue that exist in the country. Yet many readers seem to be of the perspective that Selvadurai limits his point of view to a specific stratification in the society, the suburb living Tamil community of the western province. Selvadurai writes from the first-hand experience of his childhood and therefore, restricts him from expressing the broader picture of the conflict. Yet he doesn't fail to give a glimpse into the harrowing events of the conflict. The novel written in six chapters focuses on different aspects of the ongoing ethnic friction in the society at the time. The chapter 'Pigs can't fly' mainly focuses on the stereotypical gender roles of the society vested upon individuals and how the societal expectations are common to men and women belonging to all communities. The second chapter 'Radha Aunty' is the first chapter that addresses the ethnic strife in the country for the first time. Radha Aunty is prohibited from talking to a Sinhalese guy due to the bad blood between the two ethnic communities making Arjie realize the depth of the communal conflict. When Radha Aunty is harassed during a train journey from Jaffna Arjie sees a realistic picture of the deep rooted hatred between the two ethnicities towards each other. Similarly in Rohini Mohan's book "The Seasons of Trouble" she portrays the character of Mugil who admits that by the time the war ended "having lived in the north, she had never met or talked to a Sinhalese civilian." 'See No Evil, Hear No Evil' is an important chapter that makes a progress in the plot with the introduction of the character, Daryl Uncle. His sudden demise and his body being found on the beach, suspected of being killed exposes Arjie to his first hand catastrophe in relation to the conflict. Jegan's character which the readers encounter in the chapter 'Small Choices' portrays an individual who used to be aligned with the LTTE. His inability to leave the past behind him and move on to future prospects reminds the readers of thousands of displaced Tamil civilians living in Sri Lanka in the post-war context. The chapter 'Best School of All' gives a realistic picture of the society where every individual belongs to one side in this context and how some parties suffer from the colonial mentality of a bygone era. The epilogue written in the form of diary entries draws a harrowing image of the communal struggle in 1983 and reminds readers of the time when the civil war in the

country came to an end. Although Selvadurai seems to suggest that inter-racial marriages may lead to a reconciled country, this is a shallow reading of the concept of reconciliation itself. Reconciliation in a broader sense refers not only to repairing estranged relationships. The modern meaning of reconciliation suggests repairing of relationships between two conflicting parties and uplifting them to a better a stage than they used to be.

Conclusions, Implications and Significance

Hence, we can derive the conclusion that *Funny Boy* gives a glimpse to the historical background of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka and its preliminary stages. The event of Arjie and his family move to another country as chronicled in the epilogue projects the predicament of many families who belong to the minority groups in Sri Lanka during the period of civil war and in the post-war period. The harassment some ethnicities suffered from on the hands of another lead to this situation of the country. This study will focus on such cases from the 1980's and then evaluate the situation in the first decade of the twentieth century.

References

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