

# Shifting the Centre to the Margin: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

**Dr. M. SUPRIYA**

Associate Professor, Department of English  
Fatima Mata National College, Kollam, Kerala

## Abstract

*Immigration, the process of uprooting oneself from one's native land and getting transplanted in an alien soil, accords to the immigrant a marginal status in the adopted land. Occupying the space of the border in the new land – where roots are severed and centre is forfeited – the immigrant is forced into a new self-definition. Hence, it is only natural that when the immigrant writers articulate their experience, they tend to centralize the community to which they belonged in their homeland. This literary gesture is an act of seizing the centre from which they are dislodged in the new land. Writing thus becomes an act of affirmation for the immigrant writer wherein he tries to glorify his marginal position by centralizing his own story. In his literary debut Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories, Shyam Selvadurai, the Sri Lankan Canadian immigrant writer, centralizes the community to which he belonged before he migrated to Canada – the minority Tamil community in Sri Lanka. Marginality being a defining condition of his existence both in the migrated land and the homeland, the centre-margin equation figures prominently in his works. Funny Boy, set in Sri Lanka, traces the life story of a young boy, Arjie Chelvaratnam, who has to struggle with his growing homosexual tendencies amidst a political situation which is equally oppressive. Both at the political and personal levels, Arjie remains marginalized, in relation to a supposed centre. But in getting reconciled to his marginality, Arjie creates a new space for himself wherein he occupies the centre.*

**Keywords:** migration, marginality, immigrants, racism, homosexuality

Speaking of the immigrant's sense of rootlessness consequent to his migration, Salman Rushdie says "Roots are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places"(199). Immigration is the process of uprooting oneself from one's native land and getting transplanted in an alien soil. Having defied the roots, the immigrant loses the unifying centre, which he has occupied in the native land. In the new land, the migrant is given only a marginal status, forced to inhabit the interstitial space between two geographical entities. Occupying the space of the border in the new land – where roots are severed and centre is forfeited – the immigrant is forced into a new self-definition. In his *Locations of Culture*, Homi Bhabha approaches the question of identity from a migrant's point of view, and argues that life on the border leads to new ways of identity which go against the concept of national identity based on rootedness. The very label 'immigrant' which sticks onto them as long as they remain in the migrated land, indicates the resentment of the 'privileged centre' against the 'marginal'. Hence, it is only natural that when the immigrant writers articulate their experience, almost invariably the "homeward pull" finds its expression through

their works. And they centralize the community to which they belonged in their homeland. This literary gesture is an act of seizing the centre from which they are dislodged in the new land.

Self-representation through writing thus becomes one of the main concerns of the immigrant writer. Bhabha has stated that the migrant writer's perpetual inhabitation on the shifting boundaries provides him with the right perspective to oppose all notions of centrality. Through his writings, the immigrant writer attempts to create a new space where marginality becomes the criterion of definition and an identity not based on rootedness its peculiarity. All that is marginal is either silenced or sidelined in the mainstream writing. By articulating experiences that are exclusively his own, the immigrant writer tries to make his voice distinct and authentic. He refuses to write like the mainstream writers. Thus he creates a new space for himself characterized by the off-centric position he occupies in the adopted land. Writing thus becomes an act of affirmation for the immigrant writer wherein he tries to glorify his marginal position by centralizing his own story.

He centralizes the marginal characters and makes them assert their marginality.

In his much acclaimed literary debut *Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories*, Shyam Selvadurai, the Sri Lankan Canadian immigrant writer centralizes the community to which he belonged before he migrated to Canada – the minority Tamil community in Sri Lanka. Born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Selvadurai immigrated to Canada with his family at the age of 19, following the communal riots there. He explains, “It has been hard for us to leave Sri Lanka, hard to leave the place that has always been in our hearts, home”(Smith). Selvadurai who decided to pursue a writing career at the age of twenty-six observes:

Being in Canada has been good, however, in that it has given me a creative perspective, I might not have had otherwise. Like a lot of immigrant writers, I find that a homeward pull inhabits my creative mind. That it is capturing of the world I left behind that haunts my imagination. Yet, without that isolation from that world, without the act of migration, I wonder if *Funny Boy* would have ever been written. (Smith)

*Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories*, set in Sri Lanka, is a series of short stories that traces the life story of a young boy, Arjie Chelvaratnam, who has to struggle with his growing homosexual tendencies amidst a political situation which is equally oppressive for the minority Tamil community. Himself a Tamilian and gay, Selvadurai is believed to have modelled Arjie after himself. But Selvadurai disagrees, “I’m gay and both families left Sri Lanka, but that’s where it ends. Arjie’s first experience and acceptance of himself happened in Sri Lanka and mine happened in Canada (emory.ed. /Selva)”. Selvadurai belonged to a family which, unlike Arjie’s, was much more liberal. He explains, “My father is Sinhalese and my mother is Tamil which was a huge thing at the time of their marriage. So we were brought up differently from other kids. There was a lot of tolerance for difference”(emory.ed. /Selva).

As a Tamilian in Sri Lanka, Selvadurai could not enjoy the status of a mainstream citizen even in his homeland. Thus marginality being a defining condition of his existence both in the migrated land and the homeland, the centre-margin equation figures prominently in his works. The

problem of marginality experienced by Tamils is very intense, because they consider Sri Lanka to be their homeland. The ethnic conflict was part of Selvadurai’s life in Sri Lanka. After his immigration to Canada, Selvadurai found himself in an atmosphere which was equally hostile to his South Asian background. Marginalization thus becomes not merely a dreaded nightmare of the past, but a reality of the present. Selvadurai’s marginality was reinforced by his gay propensities, which once again decentralized him from a White homophobic community. Marginalization thus characterized his existence. Writing becomes a means of self-assertion for Selvadurai when he makes his characters bear the same cross of marginality. Both Arjie Chelvaratnam of *Funny Boy* and Balendran Navaratnam of Selvadurai’s second novel *Cinnamon Gardens*, who share the author’s own homosexual instincts, stand testimony to the author’s belief that it needs immense personal courage to live as marginals. By centering them in his writings, Selvadurai is trying to create a new history – the history of the “unhistoric acts” of people who “lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs”(Epigraph to *Cinnamon Gardens*).

When Arjie settled in Canada reminisces over his childhood days in Sri Lanka, there unfolds the personal drama of a boy’s emotional upheaval caused due to the initial stirrings of homosexuality within him, and the political drama of the escalating tension between the Sinhalese and Tamils, both projecting the trauma of being marginalized. The successive stories in the novel trace the graph of the escalating tension between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, which forces the former to migrate to the West. Parallel to this political agenda, is treated Arjie’s growth from childhood to adolescence. The trauma associated with this process of growing up is intensified because he has to struggle with his deviant sexual impulses.

The parallel development of the political and the personal in the text is an extension of what Selvadurai experienced in his own life. As he puts it:

From my earliest days, then, at some level of consciousness I was aware of the interaction between the personal and the political. How the intimate working of a family could represent or reflect a larger political context. This awareness of the ways in which

the personal and the political are intertwined intrigues me, that the capacities for racism, homophobia, sexism and other injustices and hatreds are present at all levels within a society. (emory.edu/ Selva)

The unnatural sexual impulses make the process of growing up very painful for Arjie. The seven-year old Arjie loves to inhabit the girl's territory and indulge in girlish pastimes. He finds himself drawn towards the girls' games since it has the "potential for the free play of fantasy"(*Funny Boy* 3). He always loves to be in the girls' territory and can never understand the pleasure enjoyed by the boys in playing cricket under the scorching sun. In the girls' games, Arjie is invariably selected the leader, because with the force of his imagination he can give some new twist even to the plot of a familiar tale. He loves to dress up as the 'bride' in their favourite game of 'bride-bride'. Reality does not intrude into this world of make-believe. He is for the first time made conscious of his marginality when one of his aunts finds him draped in a sari and veil and forcefully drags him to the presence of the elders. Amidst sneering comments from his uncles and aunts and the dismayed look in the face of his parents, Arjie hears someone calling him "funny". He feels the same sense of uneasiness he had when an aunt had earlier called him "a pansy", "a faggot", "a sissy". Though Arjie can never associate this with his aberrant gender behaviour, he realizes that the insults hurled at him had something to do with his association with girls.

Arjie, basking in the world of 'girlish fantasies' receives a great shock when the centre represented by his father dictates norms for him to follow. Thus he is strictly forbidden to play with girls and denied the privilege of watching his mother (whom he considers to be the paragon of beauty) getting dressed up for special occasions – his favourite pastime. Only then the full thrust of the word 'funny' strikes him. "The word 'funny' as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, 'that's funny'. Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone"(*Funny Boy* 17). His parents forcefully thrust him into the company of boys.

This feeling of marginality is reinforced when Arjie is made aware of the fact that he belongs to the minority

group of Tamils who are being persecuted by the majority Sinhalese. The political and the personal get interlinked in the story "Radha Aunty", which at once marks the beginning of Arjie's withdrawal from the world of fantasy, and also his initiation into the world of the adults. Arjie is ostracized from the girls' world by the intervention of the adults who resent his 'unnatural' behaviour. Unable to exist without a female touch in his life, Arjie eagerly seeks the company of Radha Aunty who has returned from London. Her proposed marriage with Rajan Nagendra lends beauty and colour to his fertile imagination. The prospect of becoming a bride's maid at her wedding, makes the fictional world of 'bride-bride' a reality for him. Radha Aunty fulfils his great dream when she dresses him up as a girl, pressing a *pottu* on his forehead, putting eye shadows, rouge on his cheeks and darkening a birthmark above his lips. Arjie, who becomes Radha Aunty's confidante in her affair with Anil Jayasinghe, realizes that his grandmother objects to this relation because Anil is a Sinhalese. Their affair creates great commotion in the family which initiates Arjie into the history of the ethnic conflict that tears the island nation apart. Arjie realizes that the hostility is not one-sided when Anil's father blurts out to Radha Aunty, "We Sinhalese are losing patience with you Tamils and your arrogance"(*Funny Boy* 66). With his seven year-old sensibility, all that he can comprehend is that, "There is a group in Jaffna called the Tamil Tigers. They want a separate country and the Sinhalese are very angry about this"(*Funny Boy* 61). Now his grandmother's dream of an "Eelam" and his father's prediction of Sinhalese as the real language of the future make some sense to him. He further comes to know of the brutal murder of his grandfather at the hands of the Sinhalese because along with several other Tamils, his grandfather had objected to making Sinhalese the national language.

At school, Arjie is once again made conscious of his marginality when the Sinhala students do not permit him to sit in a Sinhala class. "We don't want you here. Go to the Tamil class." But Arjie reasons it out with them, "My parents put me in a Sinhala class from grade one because they wanted me to learn Sinhalese"(*Funny Boy* 215). But they openly declare that they do not want him to be there. Arjie who does not even know how to speak Tamil is confronted

with the reality that he is a Tamilian – a lesser citizen in the land of the Sinhalese. Thus if the word ‘funny’ opens up nuances of meaning unfamiliar to him, the word ‘racism’ added to his vocabulary presents before him the picture of a land dissected into two by deep rooted communal rivalry.

The story “Small Choices” marks a turning point both in the political and the personal drama. Arjie has come a long way from the world of ‘bride-bride’. But the effeminate impulses stirring within him make him behave unnaturally with other men. The arrival of Jegan, an employee in his father’s hotel, rakes up his latent sexual urges. He begins noticing a ‘man’ for the first time, but it is the sort of attraction one feels towards the opposite sex. He admires the strength of his body and his well-built physique. But Arjie becomes conscious of his ‘difference’ when he is shifted to a Boys’ school by his father. His instinctive attraction towards Soyza Shehan at school, was the same he once felt towards Jegan. He can perceive a strange feeling surging up within him at the sight of Shehan. This feeling gets reinforced when in an unexpected moment Shehan grabs him and kisses him on the lips. That night it dawns upon Arjie that “I had not only liked that kiss, but I was also eager to experience it again in all its detail and sensation” (*Funny Boy* 251).

But the fear of the centre – as represented by his father – makes him hesitant to assert himself. At school, the centre is held by the Principal who like his father, imposes himself on others, insensitive to their feelings and sentiments. The realization that in their marginality lies their strength gives the marginal a new courage. Thus though at first Arjie resists the advances of Shehan, he later realizes the infinite power it bestows on him – the power against authority as epitomized by his father, his principal and the society at large. When Arjie begins to enjoy the games with Shehan, there is a definite shift in his mental makeup. He is no longer the Arjie, who dreads his grandmother’s cane or his father’s accusations. This gives him the courage to defy his principal. In the Poetry recital session at the Annual School Day function, he deliberately jumbles up lines and mixes up stanzas before a crowded audience. This is his act of revenge against the Principal for unnecessarily punishing students like Shehan and himself branding them as “ills and burdens”. Now Arjie

wields power and with that power he proves true the relationship between himself and Shehan. Arjie thus sets forth to assert his marginality.

At the political level, the centre/margin equation is developed through the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamilians. The thwarted love affair between Radha aunty and Anil Jayasinghe, the mysterious death of Daryl uncle who went to Jaffna to enquire into the excesses committed by the police against the Tigers, the dismissal of Jegan who is pursued by the Sri Lankan police charging that he is a Tiger – all these events are precipitated by the encroachment of the centre into the lives of the marginal. The final story titled “Riot journal: An Epilogue” is in the form of diary entries, which marks the climax in the political drama. Arjie’s house is set on fire by the mob, and the family finally takes the decision to go to Canada as refugees.

Treatment of marginality assumes added significance in an immigrant writer, because it tends to be a metaphorical re-creation of his own marginal status in the adopted land. Pointing to ‘masculist centralism’ vs ‘feminine marginality’, Gayatri Spivak observes:

I have been attempting, not to win the centre for ourselves, but to point at the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations. That would not merely reverse but displace the distinction between the margin and the centre. The only way I can hope to suggest how the centre itself is marginal is by not remaining outside in the margin and point my accusing finger at the centre. I might do it rather by implicating myself in that centre and sensing what politics makes it marginal. (107)

This seems to be the mission of the immigrant writers. Like Spivak, they are implicating themselves in the centre, by centralizing their own story – the story of the marginal. Centering the story of the marginal necessitates a re-definition of the centre/margin binary. Confronting the binaries of a ‘mainstream centralism’ vs ‘immigrant marginality’, the immigrant writers refuse to write like the mainstream and thus win the centre.

What Himani Bannerji envisions for the non-white women writers in the Canadian context is as well applicable to all immigrant writers:

The enterprise is not simply representational in the sense of liberal politics, just to become central from having been marginal, or to seek representation or inclusivity within the existing realm of opportunities currently restricted to white middle-class women. The point is to shift the centre itself from the mainstream to the so-called margin. By understanding "representation" to mean re-presentation of our realities, from a foundationally critical/revolutionary perspective, there can emerge the possibility of making our very marginality itself the epicentre for change. (XVIII)

Making marginality his vantage point, the immigrant creates a new centre. When Selvadurai settled in Canada writes of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, it speaks of the irreducibility of margins in any definition of mainstream literature.

The resolution of the centre/margin polarity is worked out both at the political and personal levels in *Funny Boy*. The awareness of the growing homosexual instincts leave Arjie confused in the beginning. But having gained a new self-conviction, Arjie is able to accept and assert his 'difference'. Both at the political and personal levels, Arjie remains marginalized, in relation to a supposed centre, when he gets reconciled to the inevitable reality of being a Tamil in Sri Lanka and a gay in a homophobic community. In this realization lies his salvation. In thus getting reconciled to his marginality, Arjie creates a new space for himself, wherein he occupies the centre. Analysing the

relevance of *Funny Boy*, Sudipta Dutta observes, "The Sri Lankan civil war may have ended in 2009, but Selvadurai's universal story of love, loss and complex identities is still relevant"(4). But that element of 'universality' happens unwittingly, says Selvadurai, "My work is always addressed to a very small audience: Sri Lankan readers reading in English. And yet I know that by some strange alchemy, the more particular you are, the more universal you end up becoming"(Colvin).

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