

## Ambivalence at the Site of Authority: Desire and Difference in *Funny Boy*

In a discussion of Sri Lankan writers whose dabbling in constructions of national identity “are located in an amorphous and transient cultural space,” Prakrti observes that Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, in particular,

stands apart as the work of the future not only because it hits at the very core of the normative heterosexual middle class system immersed in a patriarchy of its own making that we live our quotidian life by, but also because it challenges this normative code to such an extent that it begs a redefinition of the gendered ethno-cultural parameters of the modern post-postcolonial nation state in crisis. (Prakrti)

Prakrti’s contention is that Selvadurai’s writing on Sri Lanka, like Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* and Romesh Gunasekera’s *Reef*, poses profound social challenges to a changing country, intensifying its interrelated disputes concerning ethnic belonging, religious ties, and sanctioned national cultures. That Sri Lanka is “post-postcolonial” proposes that the country has moved from colonialism to post-colonial sovereignty, and now to self-assertion (despite the various violent ruptures and internal disagreements about the state of the nation).

Within this beyond post-colonial situation, Selvadurai delineates the country’s “normative code,” revealing how the nation’s political rift is similar to its social upheavals. Significantly, Prakrti gestures toward the idea that violent masculinist ideas underpinning viable nationalisms are fundamental to understanding the (il)logic of Tamil/Sinhalese Sri Lankan strife. New

nations, especially those either adapting to or throwing off the vestiges of colonialism, often reference conservative ideas about male prerogatives (closely wedded to masculinity) and heterosexuality that might result in a strong and procreative country, not only in racial strength but in the social strata. With *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai “very subtly critiques the value charged, hierarchical masculine-feminine gender equation. . . . This aspect is all the more ground-breaking in that the text subverts the existing patriarchy by highlighting the oppression experienced by males at the hands of patriarchy through the constructed norms of masculinity” (Prakrti). Arjie, Selvadurai’s protagonist (and thinly-veiled autobiographical self), is apparently both foil to and member of the (economically) privileged male class and comes to embody the tensions in these post-postcolonial struggles.

But does Arjie, in any comprehensive, sense queer<sup>1</sup> what the Sri Lankan majority might conceptualize as viable nationhood, especially as it, though disturbed, carries on hybridizing its former colonizer’s concepts of Western congruity, contiguity and coherence, all of which are underscored by the imperatives of heteronormative masculinity? In assessing the ways in which one might view Arjie’s challenge to the status quo, Daniel Coleman states that “[h]is is not a single choice between gay and straight, Tamil and Sinhalese, upward and downward mobility, or colonial subject and post-colonial agent. It is an action that impinges on all these axes of difference at once” (10). Although Coleman is certainly correct in outlining how *Funny Boy*’s various machinations push the very limits (as Prakrti has suggested) of citizenry and belonging, Selvadurai’s examination of these various convergences reveals that the Sri Lanka national narrative (concerned with how to constitute, politically and socially, the national body) is exacerbated by facets of society that refuse marginalization.

Arjie is accorded a measure of agency: his self-liberating forms of disobedience (especially in the penultimate chapter) flow from a sense of personal injury. I find, however, that Arjie evinces disinterest regarding affairs beyond the immediate; in his attitude of childlike stasis he holds on to things as he wishes they might be. His engagement with transgressive difference—that is, his gender and sexual “disobedience”—is mostly congruent with an expression of male prerogatives that can deliver a measure of power.

There is a tension, then, between Selvadurai’s critique of the masculinist discourse which informs his protagonist’s subject position, and Arjie’s ability to be at once “inside” the masculinist discourse to which he biologically defaults as male, but also outside it, as (self-) estranged funny boy.

Ultimately, though Arjie appears excluded from the nation's embattled yet governing discourses of heterosexual masculinity, and though he resists efforts to enlist him in taking sides in the national debate, he succumbs to paralysis.

This paralysis, however, is contrary to what Gayatri Gopinath sees as Arjie's active and mobile challenge to "modern epistemologies of visibility, revelation, and sexual subjectivity" (267). Gopinath, in her incisive analysis of *Funny Boy* and diaspora, argues against understanding Arjie's presumed homosexuality through largely imported Western categories of sexuality, though such markers may indeed be present in Sri Lankan society. Instead, Arjie's narrative journeys possess "radically different and distinct significations. It is through a particular deployment of South Asian popular culture that this defamiliarization of conventional markers of homosexuality take place, and that alternative strategies for signifying non-heteronormative desire are subsequently produced" (267).<sup>2</sup> The resultant reconfigurations of sexuality parallel the categories of nation, gender, and class, and the result, Gopinath argues, displaces heteronormativity "from the realm of natural law . . . [that] instead launches its critique of hegemonic constructions of both nation and diaspora from the vantage point of an 'impossible' subject" (275).

From this vantage, Arjie's eventual expulsion from Sri Lanka might be seen as a failure to reconcile an impossible subject with the more welcoming "possible citizen." Gopinath's theoretical perspective is viable, certainly, but it does not adequately reflect Arjie's lived experience. The queerness that Arjie symbolizes may well be mobilized as an intellectual insurgency by which to reconceptualize (sexual) citizenry and national belonging. Arjie does not, however, act upon the radical nature of his experiences. Though he is, as a youth, relatively disempowered, he does behave, up until the time of his expulsion, with an eye to how he can consolidate his prerogatives and maintain at least personal agency.

I contest Coleman's and Prakrti's arguments for an Arjie who demystifies with his queer attitude and empowerment the complex engines of masculine power and its concomitant interests in post-postcolonial Sri Lanka, and I examine how it might be otherwise: that Arjie's contrempts actually mirror but do not devalue the upheavals to which he is witness. Arjie's attempts at queer insurrection unwittingly mimic the repressive urges of (emerging) nation states. These states embrace an emboldening masculinity based on biological and essentialist notions of distinct gendered social roles—and in this simplified equation Arjie, unwittingly perhaps, acquiesces.

That Arjie is eventually forced to leave the country might suggest an inability to understand how the warring factions in the embattled Sri Lankan state are nevertheless agreed in their reading of how queerness, including homosexuality,<sup>3</sup> is inimical to the national project. What is perceived as a “feminine” (read: disempowering, weak) form of citizenship is either repressed or expelled. William Spurlin calls this rendering of “the imperial imprint of homosexuality” a ploy that any nation, in suppressing its own inability to totally vanquish incertitude and equivocation in the political body, will use as a dissimulating weapon:

The nation-state’s fantasy of itself as masculine similarly points to and extends the ambivalence at the site of authority. . . . [T]he nation-state . . . both *projects and masks difference* through strategies of repetition and displacement, asserting mastery of the Other through its discourse. (197, my emphasis)

Masculine mastery is achieved by constantly playing subordinate entities—women, queers, the economically disadvantaged—off one another in order that they will lack the energy to rally and challenge the dominant regime. Although it appears that national statesmanship consolidates power, it actually manoeuvres rhetorical impulses. No *real* substance forms the core of masculinity, Spurlin implies; rather, its dominion, especially as federated authority, becomes constituted by and through what it is able to suppress.

Arjie—both within and outside the dominant system as visibly male and homosexually conflicted—enjoins privilege. But can he in any way serve as a template upon which to redraw the emerging nation-state? Does Selvadurai suggest that the queerness Arjie also embraces could provide an alternate direction for Sri Lanka? As a nascent queer and (initially, at least) a gender misarranger, he appears to undermine the hallmark of his biological maleness: prerogative. At once empowered and disempowered, he is both a boon and a threat to the system that constitutes him as a post-postcolonial citizen,<sup>4</sup> underscoring the national paradox that reveals itself as Spurlin’s “ambivalence at the site of authority.” Masculinity is ambivalent because it incorporates aspects of that which it externally banishes: femininity. The bonds between the men who may colour the nation-state’s constitution with their masculinist fantasies share this contingency and inconclusiveness because such bonds are created through both the courting and discounting of women. Women are necessary, but only insofar as they may acknowledge and support male hegemony.

Arjie’s own homosocial impulses,<sup>5</sup> however, are largely shaped by his apparently homosexual disposition, one that might be thought, in Sri Lankan

majority discourse, to resemble a feminized and colonized subject. Therefore, while he may display the *right to agency*, he inadvertently, perhaps, demonstrates the inefficacy of his compromised and paradoxical state. His personal trauma indeed reflects (and reflects upon) the national struggle, but his position as a Sri Lankan citizen of the future is comprehensively untenable. Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler observe that when “a practitioner of ‘homosexual acts,’ or a body that carries any of many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces—nation, region, metro-pole, neighborhood, or even culture, gender, religion, disease—intricate realignments of identity, politics, and desire take place” (3). Nothing in Sri Lankan national discourses allows Arjie to rehearse his “realigning” identity, inasmuch as there is little space for those who might practice sexual acts arising from supposedly transgressive desires. Sri Lanka, as in the novel, is too busy fighting the presumably unrelated battles of establishing national boundaries.

Of this particularly traumatic period in Sri Lanka history, Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta writes that *Funny Boy*'s interrelated, cumulative stories are organized so that they seem “almost to follow a curriculum for sociology: gender, compulsory heterosexuality, racism, the national security state and terrorism” (225).<sup>6</sup> More specifically, the novel shows “people confused and torn, forced to deal with identities so recently constructed that we’ve never had to examine them before in such searing light” (226). Arjie’s sexual identity, which earns him the ascription “funny,” is doubly conflicted in that he not only does not have the language to access what his desires might mean, but he does not appear to have a local model of “the homosexual” upon which to draw.<sup>7</sup>

Selvadurai suggests, in his use of Canada, the country that both bookends Arjie’s stories and serves as a diasporic reference, that the ability to possess mobile sexualities and gender shadings denotes the luxury of living in a nation where such identities might be freely established and contested. Sri Lanka, despite its cultural Westernization, does not favour the liberating sexual alternates. Arjie, as the novel’s queer, witnesses subjugation not only of Tamils to the majority Sinhalese but of various other groups, notably homosexuals, who barely register except as a joke to *Funny Boy*'s adults, and women, who despite advancement in Sri Lankan society, are still largely subordinate to men.<sup>8</sup>

Given that these three dominated groups, as well as the largely, rural economic underclass, are disadvantaged, it may seem natural to want to link

their oppressions. R. Raj Rao, in his recent reading of the book, endeavours to “show that a subaltern identification exists between minorities in the three groups, who constitute the ‘other’ of the male fanatical self” (117), whereby such a male is the “self as empowered, the other as disempowered” (117-18). Rao’s aim is to map “sexuality rather than nationality, race, or gender as the determinants of identity, so that if a writer is gay it does not matter that he comes from the developed or developing world, or is white or black” (118).

Perhaps it is accidental that Rao uses “he” to refer to the genderless antecedent of “a writer,” or it may be that Rao is referring to Selvadurai. Yet if either is the case, the female or lesbian writer is still implicitly excluded. Though I do not believe that Selvadurai (or even Rao) means to exclude women, Arjie, in his aspirations to be able to make concrete choices which might benefit him, inadvertently does so. His own map is drawn from that very “male fanatical self,” those male predecessors who by passive or active example help him to locate himself, specifically, as a man.

Arguably, the women in Arjie’s life might be more influential; indeed, the novel begins with Arjie’s fascination with female habiliments and ritual. But as the novel progresses, Arjie shifts from gender play and the romantic fascination with Rhada Aunty’s nuptials, to a more abiding (libidinal) interest in men and their domain. Liberation for him is not envisioned through self-exposure as a homosexual or alliance with dominated minority groupings in Sri Lanka. He realizes that securing his world has more to do with a deft manipulation of his male prerogatives than anything else.

As the island state exists in the flux of post-colonial self-determination, it wars constantly between “the integration of tradition, an already existing viable alternative to imperialism, and the liberation of modernity, in which a person can be who he or she is, including homosexual” (Goldie 192). The latter sense of Western modernity and its attendant emancipatory trappings, is, of the three groups Rao identifies, most underdeveloped, and so it remains difficult to imagine how subaltern cross-identifications might work. While parallels may exist, correspondence does not.

Clearly such sympathetic relationships, in re-forming an existing post-colonial body politic, would be welcome—if the expression of homosexuality as *homosexuality* could even exist publicly in 1980s Sri Lanka as a recent identity construction. As Goldie notes, kinship plays an important role in a culture “in which a default assumption of heterosexuality shapes all paradigms possible in that culture. ‘Same kind’ is inevitably a statement of

ethnicity: there is no possibility of even thinking gender in that apparently wise aphorism” (190). Or sexuality.

Arjie is not without his sympathies. His stories of Radha Aunty’s inability to marry a man of another race and of Jegan’s association with combative Tamils are strikingly insightful. Selvadurai implicitly draws a parallel between the disempowered—women, the Tamil race/nation, homosexuality—when Arjie, in pondering his feelings for the Sinhalese Shehan, wonders,

For how could loving Shehan be bad? 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. How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? (267)

But in the next sentence, Arjie reveals the cause: “It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn’t” (267). While it may be that Arjie understands that if exposed he risks censure, he knows too that silence and compliance will allow him, an economically privileged male, latitudes unavailable to others. And though Arjie appears to be detached from his observation about power, he goes on to prove that he is not beyond using the machinations of power that male privilege accords him.

Selvadurai is careful not to form alliances where none can exist. In writing about a land where homosexuality rarely registers publicly, Selvadurai cautions that although inequalities there are rampant, it is important first to describe how such inequalities play out in relation of one identity to another. There may be affinities among subordinate classes, 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.

These disparate groups play out against Arjie’s “male fanatical self.” The novel begins with a smaller territory within the nation, Arjie’s grandparents’ yard. Arjie, eager to be in charge, is a very young boy playing at being a bride. The boys and girls in Arjie’s familial circle are each assigned their own gendered spaces, though Arjie and his female cousin Meena, transgress these boundaries by playing with the opposite sex. Arjie describes his youthful but certain understanding of how the children’s world reflects and is influenced by adult notions of governance: “Two things formed the framework of this

system: territoriality and leadership” (3). He says that he “gravitated naturally” (3) to the back garden world of girls, since that is where his earliest memories found the most comfortable belonging.

For Arjie, the girl’s territory is attractive not in that it is female but that it affords him the greatest scope and sovereignty: “For me, the primary attraction of the girls’ territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagination, I was selected as leader” (4). He defines the seduction of the games he plays there, particularly his role of “bride-bride” (4), as concomitant with his ability “to leave the constraints of my self and ascend into another, more beautiful self. . . . It was a self magnified” (5). Being among girls is enabling, perhaps, in that he is easily able to take advantage of their social demarcated passivity; and he says he does not like the boys’ games of cricket because of the discomforts involved. Yet Arjie’s concern with claim to creation is central. In the regimented world of male athletics, he can neither lead nor play; his rejection of sports expresses its lack of creative margins.

One wonders, though, what might have happened if other assertive boys had been at play in the girls’ territory. Would Arjie have so easily ascended to the lead role? He knows that his hold on power is conditional upon easy acquiescence. The girls, he senses, know their formative roles as supplicants to aggression, and it is Arjie who so nimbly adopts a coercive male attitude in order to get his way. His displacement from a leading role is enacted by his equally intimidating cousin, Tanuja, who has recently returned from abroad. She is, in the narrative, referred to most often as “Her Fatness,” a pitiless salute which Arjie acknowledges belongs to that “cruelly direct way children have” (6). The irony in this tag, though, lies in Tanuja’s pending challenge to Arjie’s leadership, moving from “Her Fatness” to, perhaps, Her Highness. Her contest with Arjie, Selvadurai suggests, derives from her extended Western education in which she has learned powerful, accusatory terms foreign, literally and figuratively, to young Sri Lankans.

Versed as she apparently is in adult matters, she conceives of Arjie’s play at being female as an unstated or not fully formed idea of transgression. Unable to seduce her playmates with dolls, Tanuja reverts to dressing up as male, a ploy which Arjie tacitly acknowledges to be a threat to his play as female. Tanuja subsequently usurps Arjie’s role by an appeal to an essentialist logic which leaves him “defenseless” (11). But when that ploy also fails, Tanuja rests a forceful gaze on Arjie, and calls him, by turn, “pansy,” “faggot,” and “sissy” (11), insults that Arjie neither comprehends nor, in his

retrospective account, explains. And when this tactic also fails to dislodge Arjie, Tanuja brings out her mother, who immediately recognizes Arjie's transgression and hauls him before the other adults, one of whom says to his father, "looks like you have a funny one here" (14).

Selvadurai never reveals that Arjie might understand what it means to be "funny." Such absence is fitting in that Arjie's conception of his homosexuality does not develop until he is older. The separation of gender from sexuality allows Selvadurai to reveal how the adept, persuasive attitudes of male progeny are more than child's play. To achieve leadership, Arjie's "natural" gravitation towards the girls' territory comes to be more a rhetorical guise whereby Arjie can assert hegemony. Thus, he learns at an early age that it is male control, not cross-gender affiliation or alliance, that will allow him the freedom he so desires.

Gopinath argues that Arjie's performance in bride-ride "radically reconfigures hegemonic nationalist and diasporic logic, which depends on the figure of the 'woman' as a stable signifier of 'tradition'" (269). But Arjie is not attempting a reterritorialization of female space. As a boy, and as a future man, Arjie already enjoins the privilege of transcending territory. True, the adults will perceive his play as insubordination, yet this limitation will not lead to the state of exile with which Arjie mistakenly comes to identify. Indeed, Arjie will eventually disavow his earlier gender play, since its promise has run its course.

Arjie's frustration with Tanuja's plans to usurp him inevitably leads to realization: "I saw Her Fatness seizing my place as leader of the girls, claiming for herself the rituals I had so carefully invented and planned" (21). That he has not yet perhaps realized that such prerogatives might be understood (unfairly or otherwise) as male is understandable. Yet even at this age, when he is hauled before his parents, he knows that something is wrong and feels "dread" (13). His persistence, however, in circumventing his mother's decree that he play with the boys, is nevertheless undaunted: apparently Arjie understands that his desire to transgress matches his cunning and his ability to own the symbols which would ensure his place as leader, and that he must be more visibly male. The game of bride-ride shifts from mere role-playing to questions around ownership of the sari; not that he ever wears it again, but that he *has* it: "Without me and my sari she [Tanuja] would not be able to play bride-ride properly" (21).

In trying to insinuate his presence once again among the girls, Arjie assumes the role of groom, and like Tanuja before him, uses his wiles to

disrupt the proceedings. The game quickly falls away when the true battle shifts to possession of the sari. The symbolic weight of the sari increases when its rending results in a “stunned silence” and a subsequent attack on Tanuja (35). Arjie’s aspirations to leadership are undone. He rips Tanuja’s sleeve, and at this point the adult world intrudes. His grandmother dismisses the sari’s destruction—she sees the dress as merely a plaything—and is angered instead by the ripped sleeve. Arjie, then, transfers his anger at Tanuja—Her Fatness—to his grandmother, an undeniable figure of authority, crying out, “I hate you, you old fatty” (37).

Arjie’s rebelling at authority leaves him, he thinks, “caught between the boys’ and the girls’ worlds, not belonging or wanted in either” (39). Yet it is, rather, his temporary disempowerment that he mourns; he *will* belong to the boys’ world, whether he likes it or not.<sup>9</sup> John C. Hawley, in his study of the role of sexuality in the novel, says of Arjie’s exile that Arjie has been “effectively sidelined, rendered a clownish cipher in his society; categorized as something *less* than a man, he is not one from whom a serious role in the building up of the nations would be expected” (121). Arjie’s imaginings, however, come from a sense (and it may be retrospectively endowed, at that) that he is *at that time* disempowered. An emboldening manliness, as Hawley argues, is vaunted in the construction of nationhood, and so Arjie is a somewhat in-between citizen. Yet having learned this lesson, in the rest of the novel Arjie gives no suggestion that he openly engages in female dress-up or in evident behaviours that would again marginalize him. Selvadurai continues to project Arjie in his role as a more careful male.

Arjie continues to transgress in courting the favour of his Rhada Aunty, but not because she is oppressed by racism and is herself marginalized, but because Arjie finds that he “had never imagined that I would actually have a hand in deciding what the bridal party would look like” (51). He goes from “bride-bride” to wedding planner, now brushing aside Tanuja’s commandeering of bride-bride: “I had better things to worry about than her silly game.” (52) Arjie shifts from mere child’s play to the real thing; he wishes no longer to be the gender-confused master and mistress of the game but, rather, leader of the pageant. And despite Arjie’s sympathy for Rhada, in that she loves the Sinhalese Anil, whom she cannot have, he worries that this illicit relationship might doom his own plans. Arjie does not care about race—he cares more about ceremony.

Whether Rhada marries a Tamil or a Sinhalese, she will invariably marry a man, and Arjie never doubts the propriety of this. Arjie sadly realizes,

upon Rhada's marriage to the Tamil Rajan, that marriage, so often imbued with romantic love, sometimes involves practical arrangements. His education in adult ceremony arises from a sympathy with Rhada; but such resistance to romance is invariable and normal. However, Rao argues that Arjie turns away from the wedding ceremony because "his identification with Rhada is complete" (120). Rao suggests, in his reading of this relation, that Selvadurai builds an alliance between marginalized (homo) sexuality and (female) gender.

This allegiance furthermore revolves around Rao's curious attributing to Arjie the desire to marry. He writes that, "Ironically, Arjie would later find happiness if this"—that "people marry their own kind"—"were a universal truth" (120), implying that Arjie is like Radha because neither she nor he can (or could) marry whom they truly wished. But this development is not a part of the novel: we never know what Arjie plans to do about marrying. Rao, to consolidate his argument, conflates marginal race (being Tamil) with marginal sexual orientation (being homosexual), but this equation is quite arguable. Rhada does marry her own kind, that is, another Tamil, though this person is not, figuratively perhaps, the right kind of person for her. Arjie cannot marry his own kind, to be sure, but this reality has no play in the novel, especially since Arjie is not at this point self-identifying as homosexual. While certain cross-gender identifications come into play that might imply homosexual predilection, such as Arjie's veneration of *Little Women*, his awareness of his queer nature is a later development. At any rate, Arjie's sadness is that the wedding is not "magical" and that "if two people loved each other everything was possible" (96-97). He appears to embrace Radha's unhappiness, yet hers is clearly an experience from which he is meant to derive edification.

Certainly the marriage of Sinhalese and Tamil is possible—as evinced by Arjie's parents—though the societal proscription against such unions is powerful. Therefore, Arjie comes to understand the social overlay as the force to be reckoned with: in order to make his way in the world, he must relinquish mere fantasy. In the end, his sympathy for Radha has little to do with women being often disempowered in Sri Lankan society. In the same way that Arjie abandons the girl's territory, he abandons Rhada and the promises of Janaki's love comics because they do not feed his quest for (self) creation.

That Arjie does not understand, yet, what words like "pansy" and "funny" might mean in reference to sexual orientation is not explored until

the penultimate chapter. Arjie's encounters with Daryl Uncle and Jegan are suggestive in that both men appeal to him because they take an unfettered interest in him and come to his defense. Significantly, both men want to expose the government's oppression of the Tamil minority, and Arjie becomes versed in this struggle. He seemingly rejects his father's values, that it is important to cozy up to the Sinhalese in order to prosper, at least financially.<sup>10</sup> Yet he remains indifferent. And although his most important transgressions will extend to the political arena in the chapter concerning his transfer to the Victoria Academy and his budding relationship with Shehan, he will nevertheless end up reflecting on how he might come through the turmoil without losing his much-vaunted ability to choose.

At the end Arjie, seemingly under the auspices of self-liberation, most formidably engages the machinations and distortions of male power. He determines to disorder the world of Black Tie, the school principal, since this man has unjustly caused Shehan much pain. As S.W. Perera notes, Arjie is sent to the Academy to "become a man" (read: heterosexual) but ends up affirming his status as "funny boy" (81). Yet for this statement to be ironic, as Perera says it is, the terms must be incongruent. While certainly "becoming a man" is understood by Arjie's father as "being heterosexual," Arjie nevertheless becomes "funny." But he does not stop being a boy, despite his "tendencies."

Is it Arjie's love of Shehan that parallels injustices suffered by Rhada and Jegan? Arjie wonders, "Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too?" (268). Perera writes that "Arjie engineers matters in such a way that the embattled principal is dependent on him for his own survival—rather like the Empire relying on the colonies for support in the great wars" (83). To that end, Arjie garbles his recitation of British poems, suggesting that they have always been incoherent and have no place in modern Sri Lanka. Arjie does, again, find a way to power that is concrete and not merely symbolic, like a sari so easily torn. But what does he really achieve? Black Tie, as an emblem, is truly outdated, yet he supports a secular educational atmosphere, unlike his opponent, Lokubandara, who wants to turn the Academy into a Buddhist institution that would exclude people like Arjie.

Furthermore, he is not freer than before to demonstrate his affection for Shehan; and indeed, he abandons Shehan, when he both observes that Shehan is Sinhalese and realizes that he (Arjie) must emigrate. Arjie's true sadness is in having to leave behind the house that has burned down; he sees

a beggar woman and wonders if “this would be our plight in Canada” (302). His concerns with class and status, though perhaps understandable when he is under siege, suggest more the maintaining of male transcendence than the transgressing of boundaries concerning gender or sexual orientation, of being a “bride-bride” or a “girlie-boy” (25). He has done little, in the end, to change the political state of things through what are seen to be sexual transgressions. Selvadurai, in having Arjie flee Sri Lanka because he is not wanted there as a Tamil, implies that the self-assertion of queerness contradicts the masculine task of negotiating and contesting the nationhood of Sri Lanka. It is not that homosexuals should not have a say or stake in Sri Lanka’s public debates; it is just simply a fact that they, as openly homosexual, cannot.

Minoli Salgado sees this exclusion as Selvadurai’s presenting emerging homosexuality through Arjie’s sexual desires, which criss-cross clearly demarcated territories. He writes that Selvadurai positions desire as “an unpredictable force-field which threatens to disrupt the established order of an ethnically divided society while simultaneously offering it its only means of redemption” (8). This unwitting promotion of queer desire as healthy insurgency does not result in contesting ethnic identities but in revealing “the emergence of the decentered, ‘queer’ subjectivity of his central character” (11). In other words, Arjie’s failure to use homosexuality as an ethnic category by which to establish a beachhead is subordinate to his interest in the male prerogatives that might give him greater means to transcendence.

As important as gender play has been to Arjie’s development, his eventual dismissal of his childhood symbols ironically serves to reaffirm (hetero-normative) maleness as the predominant factor in the governing of nations. Sri Lanka’s abandonment of Arjie is similar to Arjie’s forsaking of the possible queering of gender play, to the detriment of a greater understanding of the interrelated social constructions of gender and sexuality. His aspirations to self-actualization which have dispensed with such awareness cannot trump or in any way subvert the overriding national project of self-harmonization, even in its most violent formations. It is false to assume that Arjie’s sexual and gender transgressions either suggest or give rise to an energetic refashioning of the nation state, one that might be more inclusive and welcoming of contravention.

It may be that Arjie serves as a warning as to the limits of what can be accomplished in post-postcolonial Sri Lanka. Certainly, given Arjie’s social and ethnic context, not to mention his age, it is perhaps inevitable that his position at the end reinforces the perpetration of the current political order.

But *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.

NOTES

- 1 I am using the term queer to suggest both Arjie's (homo)sexual nature and its capacity to trouble heterosexuality's claims to nation building and the social strata.
- 2 For a brief but penetrating analysis of the international marketing of Westernized forms of queer logic and their mismatch with South Asian sexualities, see Gayatri Gopinath's essay "Funny Boys and Girls."
- 3 "Queer" and "homosexual" are often used interchangeably but I consider them quite distinct. While the queer draws upon sexual transgression that is homosexuality, its impetus is a politics of contravening sexual difference. Homosexuality, on the other hand, refers to how same-sex desires form the basis for social (and political) identities. Queer, however, outside its theoretical manifestations, often serves as shorthand for homosexuality.
- 4 Hema Chari says that sexual desire of men in colonies is indicative of "colonialist masculine erotics, which is simultaneously a promise and a threat," one that underscores how "discursive practices of deferred and displaced homoeroticism underwrite colonial rule, and in fact continue to dominate the politics of postcoloniality" (279).
- 5 I refer to Eve Sedgwick's familiar concept of homosociality. She writes that male homosociality is "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship" (2).
- 6 Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta sums up the island's recent past as the production and dissemination of racism among children and through the schools, the state-organized pogroms from 1977-83, disappearance, torture and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the 1982 Jayawardene referendum to thwart elections, and the dispersal of thousands of people across the globe. (224)
- 7 Selvadurai, in an interview with the *Lambda Book Review*, does note, however, that the Sri Lanka he knew (and the one in which he places Arjie) is not so distant from certain Western ideals and values. He says that the people in the novel "are in a place that has been colonized by Western powers for 400 years. A lot of Western ideas—bourgeois respectability, Victorian morality—have become incorporated into the society, and are very much part of the Sri Lankan society" (Marks, 7). Indeed, there is a Sri Lankan equivalent for homosexual—it is "ponnaya"—but Arjie, strangely, never uses the word. See also Selvadurai's introductory essay in (the collection he edits), *Story-wallah! A Celebration of South Asian Fiction*.
- 8 Malathi de Alwis argues that

[w]hile the formulation and content of many of these debates and discourses on the role of women may have differed significantly at various historical moments, and due to different political, economic, or social catalysts, . . . the primary premise of such debates and discourses have not changed; Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim, continue to be constructed as the reproducers, nurturers, and disseminators of "tradition," "culture," "community," and "nation." (675-76)

- 9 I do not wish to imply that Arjie, if considered queer, enjoys the same sense of subjectivity that other boys his age do. Yet certainly Arjie censures himself or is prevented and dissuaded from actively displaying a different subjectivity.
- 10 Arjie's father, in one of the novel's more telling moments, displays an awareness of homosexual goings-on in Sri Lankan society, but implies that these are good if they uphold commercial aims. Of men renting his hotel rooms to have sexual congress with Sri Lankan youths, he says, to Jegan: "It's not just our luscious beaches that keep the tourist industry going, you know. We have other natural resources as well" (166-67).

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