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Anthony Scarborough  
*Parkland College*

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### **Romantic Hardships of Ethnic and Sexual Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy***

The novel *Funny Boy*, which is set in Sri Lanka during the events leading up to the country's civil war, tells the story of three romantic relationships, specifically between Radha Aunty and Anil, Amma and Daryl Uncle, and Arjie and Shehan. Author Shyam Selvadurai develops these narratives that display how the relationships all face similar adversities due to the identities of the partners involved and the societal divisions between people of those identities. In all three cases, important details of these relationships are kept secret from relatives, as they are often the ones who traditionally conform to the societal divisions that are the cause of all these relational difficulties, as well as from society at large. Yet the relationships continue despite these divisions due to the naivety on part of one of the partners as to how deeply embedded they are in society, and it is through a traumatic event through which they lose their naivety that each relationship ultimately ends. In addition, as a result of the influence these divisions have on their conscience, it is almost always this particular partner who, normally at the beginning of each relationship, tries to push the other away.

The first of these relationships is the one between Radha Aunty, Arjie's aunt, and a Sinhalese man named Anil in the second chapter of the novel, "Radha Aunty." Anil and Radha Aunty meet in the production of a play that they both star in, and when he first begins to pursue her she tells him time and time again that she is not interested in beginning a relationship with him and refuses to let him drive her home knowing that Ammachi, her mother, will not approve since he is Sinhalese (Selvadurai 54-55). Radha does eventually accept his rides and, as

expected, when Ammachi finds out, she does not approve (Selvadurai 56). At the time that Radha Aunty has the affair with Anil, ethnic tensions are rising between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, and they still remain bitterly divided in Sri Lankan society. Ammachi, having suffered the death of her father in the riots of 1958 (Selvadurai 58), strictly conforms to the division between the two ethnic groups. Therefore, over the course of their relationship, she does everything in her power to stop them from seeing each other, from warning Radha about Anil when she first starts accepting rides from him, to attempting to pull Radha out of the play she and Anil are starring in.

In the wake of being discovered with Anil, Radha Aunty tries once again to convince Anil not to be in a relationship with her, but to no avail. Having never had a traumatizing experience related to Tamil-Sinhalese ethnic strife like that of her mother, Radha Aunty does not necessarily think that Anil being Sinhalese is that significant, especially since the Sinhalese people in her life are indeed open minded and not at all prejudiced towards Tamils. This all changes when Radha Aunty's train is attacked by an anti-Tamil mob while she is returning from a trip to Jaffna (Selvadurai 83). As a result of this experience, she loses her naivety with regard to the true severity of ethnic discord between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and becomes much more distant. Due to the trauma that she suffers during the train attack, she is no longer able to bear the pain her relationship with Anil has brought her, and thus, she puts an end to it (Selvadurai 94).

Another relationship in the novel that is affected by the identities of the respective partners is the relationship between Amma, Arjie's mother, and her childhood friend Daryl Uncle in the third chapter, "See No Evil, Hear No Evil." These two friends resume their past romantic relationship while Arjie's father is away in Europe when Daryl Uncle returns to Sri

Lanka to investigate allegations of torture by the Sri Lankan government. Not wanting to be disloyal to her husband, Amma is at first somewhat hesitant about letting Daryl Uncle visit her home.

Yet at the same time, she believes that since her affair with him was a long time ago, it is unlikely that his presence will interfere with the relationship she has with Arjie's father, so she therefore decides to let him continue his visits. Daryl Uncle begins to visit more and more frequently, and despite warnings and feelings of unease expressed by her sister, Neliya Aunty and Arjie's siblings, Amma does not think negatively of him. In fact, it is because of the hostile attitude that Neliya Aunty and Diggy, Arjie's brother, have toward Daryl Uncle that she decides to leave for the hill country (Selvadurai 111). There they are eventually joined by Daryl Uncle, and away from the watchful eyes of Neliya Aunty, he and Amma grow closer.

As with the relationship between Radha Aunty and Anil, there are details of the relationship between Amma and Daryl Uncle that are kept secret from relatives, particularly Arjie's father. This is due to the fact that in Sri Lankan culture, adultery and divorce are heavily frowned upon, so frowned upon in fact, that they can tarnish the image of entire families in the eyes of the community. When Arjie realizes that Amma and Daryl Uncle are having an affair, he recalls a family where the parents had separated as result of the father's infidelity, and states "I shuddered at the idea of these things happening to our family" (Selvadurai 115). Additionally, since Amma is Sri Lankan and Daryl Uncle is a Burgher, there is also much societal disapproval to their relationship as a result of their ethnicities, so this is another reason to continue to keep their relationship hidden from society.

It is ultimately Daryl Uncle, not Amma, who acts out of naivety, which is ironic since unlike in Radha Aunty's case, where she is the pursued partner and thus hesitant to begin a

relationship, Daryl Uncle is the pursuer and the one who convinces Amma to be in a relationship. Shortly before Amma and Arjie are to return to Colombo, Daryl Uncle informs her that he must soon travel to Jaffna, as that is where the torture allegations that he was sent to investigate are taking place. Knowing that there is fighting going on in Jaffna, Amma has an argument with him in which she tries to convince him to stay with her, but despite her best efforts, in his naivety, Daryl Uncle insists that he will be safe because the fighting in Jaffna is simply between Sinhalese and Tamils (Selvadurai 113-114). Daryl Uncle ends up paying the ultimate price for his naivety, for when he is in Jaffna, he is brutally killed, presumably by the government, bringing both his life and his relationship with Amma to a tragic and traumatic end.

Perhaps the novel's most notable relationship is the one between Arjie and his partner Shehan in the last two chapters. It is distinct in the sense that aside from being affected by the ethnic identities of the two partners involved, it is also affected by their sexual identities. In addition to one being Tamil and the other Sinhalese, they are both homosexuals. In the same way that there is a divide between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lankan society, there is also a divide between heterosexuals and homosexuals, to the point where if their sexuality is discovered, they bring great shame to their families and run the risk of treatment as societal outcasts.

Although they are more accepting of the Sinhalese and inter-ethnic relationships than Ammachi, Arjie's immediate family disapprove of homosexuality, especially Diggy and his father, and they thus strictly enforce the divide between heterosexuals and homosexuals. For instance, after Arjie is caught cross-dressing while playing bride-ride at Ammachi's home in the first chapter of the novel, his father angrily expresses to Amma in an argument how he desires for Arjie not to become "funny" (Selvadurai 14). Also, the reason Arjie's father sends him to the

school where he meets Shehan is because it will “force” him to “become a man” (Selvadurai 205). Thus, for these reasons, certain details of Arjie and Shehan’s relationship are at all times kept secret from Diggy and Arjie’s father, including the fact that it is romantic in nature.

Arjie and Shehan’s relationship is also unique in the sense that Arjie does not attempt to push Shehan away when they first meet, but rather does so when Shehan decides to make their relationship more intimate by making love to Arjie for the first time while he is visiting his home. Not knowing how to react to what has happened between them, Arjie, influenced by the homophobia present in his family and Sri Lankan society, gets into an argument with Shehan shortly thereafter and hits him (Selvadurai 259). Stunned by Arjie’s rejection, Shehan leaves him. Later, however, Arjie realizes that he was mistaken and accepts his sexuality, affirming that Shehan “had offered me his love. And I had scorned it” (Selvadurai 262). It is the acceptance of their sexuality that allows Shehan and Arjie to rekindle and continue their relationship.

Even so, Arjie and Shehan’s relationship does eventually come to an end, not so much because of their sexuality, but because of their ethnic identities. Even though there is no disapproval of the fact that Shehan is Sinhalese and Arjie is Tamil in his family, there is still disapproval in Sri Lankan society as a whole, and another factor that allows Arjie’s relationship with Shehan to survive up to that point is his naivety with regard to how it could be affected by the fact that it is inter-ethnic. The traumatic event that leads to the demise of his naivety is his experience of the Black July riots of 1983, during which Sinhalese mobs killed more than 1,000 Tamils (Sadarangani).

In addition, thousands of Tamil homes were looted and burned to the ground, including the homes of Arjie’s family, and before long, the riots claim the lives of Arjie’s grandparents. After the Black July riots, which mark the beginning of the civil war, there was a mass exodus of

Tamils from Sri Lanka (Sadarangani), and Arjie's family decides to join this exodus and move to Canada. When Shehan visits Arjie in order to check his wellbeing in the aftermath of the riots, Arjie's feelings for Shehan do not change, but he becomes aware that Shehan is Sinhalese, describing this sensation as "a thin translucent screen" through which he watches him (Selvadurani 295). It is at this moment that Arjie realizes that one way or another, his relationship with Shehan will indeed come to an end, for even if their homosexuality was tolerated, their relationship would still be disapproved of since it is inter-ethnic. Due to this realization, Arjie loses his false optimism that he and Shehan can stay together permanently, despite being afraid to leave him. Alas, in contrast to Radha Aunty and Amma, he is better able to handle the trauma brought about by the end of his romantic relationship, and he begins to slowly drift away from Shehan, even before the separation that ends their relationship forever.

In spite of the challenges they face, it is though the same cycle of creation and destruction that all three relationships pass, and they manage to both subvert and reinforce societal divisions based on ethnicity and sexuality. In the case of ethnicity, all three relationships are inter-ethnic, and they all eventually reinforce the divisions between Tamils and Sinhalese and Burghers and Sri Lankans respectively, for it is as a result of these divisions that the relationships are extinguished. As for sexuality, Arjie and Shehan's relationship, which is homosexual, manages to subvert the division between homosexuals and heterosexuals because it is never discovered and they manage to escape persecution. Even when their relationship comes to an end, it is because of the Sinhalese-Tamil division, not the homosexual-heterosexual division. Whether they reinforce divisions or subvert them, these relationships have one trait that they all share in common: injustice. This injustice is caused by certain close-minded beliefs in society that, wrong

as they may be, are believed to be right since those who have power say they are. Alas, it is though this injustice that these three romantic relationships are torn apart.

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