

## **Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict in Shyam Selvadurai's 'Funny Boy'**

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### **Abstract**

The ethno-linguistic conflict between the majority community of Sinhalese Buddhists and a minority group of Tamil Hindus has caused devastating violence in the country for over three decades. The Sri Lankan government made policy-level changes to establish Sinhalese as the official language of the country and systematically disfavored Tamil-speaking citizens in the education system and government administrative jobs. This paper seeks to examine the impact of Sri Lanka's civil war on the lives of Tamil citizens by analyzing Shyam Selvadurai's 'Funny Boy' which narrates the experiences of a young Tamil boy, 'Arjun,' and his family as they find themselves increasingly marginalized in their homeland. The paper examines how public violence from the conflict begins to permeate the personal lives of the characters and make them a part of the 'collective memory' of violence inflicted on the Tamil community.

**Keywords:** Conflict Studies, Homosexuality, Identity politics, Ethnic violence, Queer studies

The linguistic conflict between the Sinhalese Buddhist and Tamil communities in Sri Lanka changed the nation's political landscape. For the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sri Lanka was marred by a violent civil war between the Sri Lankan government that favored the Sinhalese community and the Tamil extremists that demanded a separate Tamil country. In this paper, I aim to analyze Shyam Selvadurai's novel 'Funny Boy' which is set against the backdrop of this ethnic conflict, and how the two central characters of 'Arjuna' and 'Auntie Radha' deal with the violence of the conflict as it permeates their personal lives and leaves them as secondary citizens in their homeland.

The nation's language issue heightened in 1956 when the ruling Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike passed the Official Language Act of 1956, which made Sinhalese the only official language of Sri Lanka. This was the most significant move in independent Sri Lanka to favor the majoritarian Sinhalese community (Perera 2). This act became known as the 'Sinhalese Only' language policy. The passage of this bill brought the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict to prominence as it made the Tamil community realize that they were no longer just being excluded unofficially through the disparate implementation of earlier resolutions but were now being legally ostracized from the political and educational system.

Apart from the 'Sinhalese Only Language policy, constitutional changes were made in 1971 to favor the Sinhalese language in the education system by allowing a proportionate number of students to qualify for university entrance exams to several students who sat for the exam. This automatically allowed more Sinhalese-speaking students to qualify for the exam due to their higher population. These policies heavily impacted the ability of Tamil students to access higher education and heightened the feeling of legal discrimination. The new ethnolinguistic policies of Sri Lanka sought to decline the representation of Tamils in the education sector as well as administration. They segregated the Tamil-speaking students and Sinhalese-speaking students in the public education system.

The roots of the civil war can thus be traced to the early 1970s when the first guerrilla attacks took place against the government. The resistance had emerged from the youth wing of the Federal Party of Sri Lanka. The youth party was disillusioned with the slow progress made by peace talks with the government. The government policies disfavoured the Tamil youth in high-level administrative jobs, and the lack of employment despite higher education coupled with policy-level changes to put Tamil speakers at a disadvantage pushed the youth wing into taking up violent means of protest and ultimately forming the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the L.T.T.E. The L.T.T.E. was the organization at the forefront of violent attacks on the government, demanding a separate Tamil state that catapulted into a civil war.

Shyam Selvedurai's novel 'Funny Boy' narrates the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka as observed by a young boy who does not fully grasp the complex political crisis in his country. Shyam Selvadurai himself witnessed the worst of Sri Lanka's civil war and relocated to Canada after witnessing the 1983 Colombo riots. The novel's protagonist, Arjuna, is a young boy beginning to understand two different identity struggles. His first struggle revolves around his homosexual desires and his feminine nature, which is looked down upon by his family, and he is thus asked to pursue more masculine activities. The second struggle he faces is his Tamil identity as he begins to realize the marginalization his community faces in Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lanka. Daniel Coleman remarks on similar lines about how Arjuna's identity is developing on multiple axes of "gay and straight, Tamil and Sinhalese, upward and downward mobility [and] colonial subject and postcolonial agent" (10). The novel charts out Arjuna's development as he realizes that he is doubly suppressed because of his queer and Tamil identity. The novel focuses on the marginalization caused by belonging to the minority Tamil community, which is then expounded by double marginalization based on gender, sexuality, and other subaltern identities. Each chapter of the novel deals with a character who faces this double marginalization, and the two characters being analyzed in this paper are the protagonist 'Arjuna' and his aunt 'Radha.'

The two characters provide outsiders' perspectives on the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in 'Funny Boy.' They do not look at the conflict with the same hard-lined perspective as the rest of the extended family. Arjuna's family shares memories of past violence that the Sinhalese community and the Sri Lankan government have inflicted on them, and they do not believe in reconciliation with the Sinhalese. Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs theorized collective

memory as a shared pool of memories, knowledge, and information of a social group that is significantly associated with the group's identity. The collective memories can bring together people who have shared similar experiences and can conserve the history of the social group, which is then passed on over generations. It is the collective memory of the violence caused by the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict that makes Arjuna's family reluctant to resolve between the two communities.

Arjuna's aunt, Radha, has been educated in the West and away from Sri Lanka for a few years. She is introduced in the second chapter and is explained to have already met a man from her community in the United States of America, Rajan, whom she intends to marry. Upon her return to the country, she starts working with a local theatre group and falls in love with Anil, who belongs to the Sinhalese community. Her social memory of the conflict is neither as strong nor as updated about the recent violence that took place while she was safe in the United States of America. Thus, Radha does not immediately reject the idea of a harmonious existence after marrying Ail. Her opinion about marrying a Sinhalese man is shaped later on by her family members, who explain to her how she would be betraying the 'good fight' of Tamil independence if she married a Sinhalese man. She is made aware that she will become a social and familial outcast if she keeps relations outside the Tamil community. The second factor that shapes her opinion is the violence she faces. The train she takes to get back home from Jaffna is attacked by rioters and is burnt, bringing her in direct contact with the ethnic violence and harming her. From here on, Radha's perspective about the Tamil-Sinhalese relationship changes, and she agrees to marry within her community. The incident changes her perspective about having a harmonious existence with the Sinhalese, as from here on, she shares a part of the collective violence faced by her community.

Arjuna's perspective on the ethnic conflict is limited due to his age, and his first understanding of the issue comes through Auntie Radha's affair with a Sinhalese man. His direct experience as a Tamil minority came when his father enrolled him in Victoria Academy. Sinhalese-Tamil hostility is witnessed in this school on all levels, from management to student classrooms. The first segregation incident occurred when a fellow student tried to send Arjuna and his brother to a class section different from what they were allocated, indicating that Tamil students must be taught separately from Sinhalese students. This indicates how segregated the two communities had become and how the educational institutions perpetuated the linguistic divide.

The school's principal, Black Tie, is also trying to avoid a change in leadership that would turn Victoria Academy into a Buddhist institution. Black Tie's desire to get Arjuna to recite the poem 'The Best School of All' in the prize-giving ceremony and to restructure the institutions to emulate the ideals portrayed in the poem are continuous responses to the growing tension between the Sinhalese-Tamil students in school. Arjuna does not grasp the school's management politics and cannot view Black Tie as an ally. Katherine Bell explains, "To this end, Black Tie's use of nostalgia here is not simply regressive; his secular ideals are

important. Arjuna is meant to represent and embody these ideals at the prize-giving ceremony, in front of the minister of education and the entire board of education.” (258)

Arjuna’s father sent him to English medium schools to keep him away from the direct Sinhalese-Tamil segregation in public schools and to learn English medium education so he could join the Tamil middle class, which felt capable of surviving in the changing socio-economic realities of Sri Lanka. However, the linguistic dispute ran too deep and had managed to permeate private institutions, signifying how the new language and educational policies favoring Sinhalese had affected both public and private education sectors. Private and English medium education could no longer provide social and economic safety to Tamil students against the Sinhalese favoring government policies.

Shyam Selvedurai’s ‘Funny Boy’ manages to illustrate through the life of a young boy how the minority community of Tamil was not only inflicted with physical violence but also deep-running cultural violence that sought to dismantle their linguistic identity and their access to the education system. Selvedurai’s representation of the Sinhalese and Tamil communities demonstrated the idea of languages of power. It illustrates how the dominant language created opportunities and the minority language restricted possibilities in Sri Lankan society, ultimately proving to be the fault line that would create violence in the nation for decades to come.

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