

## From Childhood to Queerness: The Social Construction of Sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

Bhup Raj Joshi

Assistant Professor, Far Western University, Nepal

[bhuprajjoshi330@gmail.com](mailto:bhuprajjoshi330@gmail.com)

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7981-6867>

### Abstract

*This article examines the distinction between sex and sexuality through Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994). It situates Arjie's coming-of-age struggle with his queer identity within the wider context of societal expectations and cultural narratives, emphasising how these forces construct sexuality in adulthood amid Sri Lanka's escalating Sinhalese–Tamil conflict. While sex denotes the biological state of being male or female, the socialisation process crucially shapes one's sexuality. The paper thus analyses sexuality as a socially constructed identity in *Funny Boy*, exploring how cultural norms and heteronormative discourses influence its formation and psychological implications for young adults. Employing qualitative textual analysis and secondary sources—books, journals, and research articles—the study draws on Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. Their theories of social construction, performativity, and hybridity suggest that society and culture play formative, rather than merely influential, roles in shaping identity.*

**Keywords:** *biological, formation, gender, identity, performative*

### Introduction

Sexuality, deeply rooted in social and cultural systems, profoundly shapes individual Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* portrays sexuality as a socially constructed identity, shaped and reinforced by the compelling norms of society. Arjie's growing recognition of himself as queer is not merely an individual realization but is continually interpreted in opposition to the rigid expectations of his Tamil family and the 1980s Sri Lankan society. His childhood transgression—preferring to play the “bride” rather than the “groom”—is not inherently deviant but becomes framed as such by his family, who fear social ostracization. As the narrator recalls, this “punishment was not for the playing... but for the way I had played it” (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 11), underscoring how natural inclinations are reframed as deviance through social judgment.

The novel also links Arjie's emerging sexual awareness with the intensifying ethnic tensions of the Sri Lankan civil war, suggesting that both national and sexual identities are contested constructs. His relationship with Shehan compels him to navigate a world in which his desires are deemed illegitimate. As Neloufer de Mel (2001) observes, the text demonstrates how “the private sphere of sexuality is... a site for the contestation of public, national norms” (p. 157). Thus, Arjie's identity is forged through the tension between personal desire and

societal constraint, leading him to understand his sexuality as an act of resistance against a culture determined to erase it.

In this way, the novel interrogates the intricate intersections of sexuality, identity, and cultural norms from the perspective of Arjie, a young boy growing up in Sri Lanka during the socio-political upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s experiences, expressions, behaviors, and ultimately identity—functioning through every sphere of society.

The controversy of sexuality, its emergence, formation, existence and identity has long existed in academia. It is basically the debate between the essentialists and constructionists about sexuality. Although the essentialists' view that sexuality as such is the universal entity which has nothing to do with the experiences and external social environment, the constructionists refute that it is mediated by society and historically transferable. Their logic is that sexuality, especially homosexual category, is not absolute from the social and cultural or socio-cultural conditioning. In this regard, Carole Vance says:

. . . Instead, the focus turned to placing same-sex experiences in much under social and historical context. No longer should the "homosexual" be seen as a universal entity but instead the homosexual category should itself be analyzed and its relative historical, economic and political base be scrutinized. (Vance, 1998, p. 4)

Vance's idea about homosexual sexuality is supportive of the constructionist view. It emphasizes on the socio-economic and historical context to form the identity of a person based on sexuality. Homosexual identity has been interpreted as an ethnographic phenomenon rather than purely biological. So, we can infer that homosexual identity as a deviance is more of a societal reaction which is not separate but a relative phenomenon that receives its many characteristics from the societal reactions. The social prejudices give birth to such categories. It is a process that goes with the socialization of a child.

In *Funny Boy* the protagonist, Arjie, has been identified as a homosexual. But his being homo or hetero as the identity marker is not necessarily biological, as Jane Kroger says identity is formed in a process in a context “. . . historical, socio-cultural and developmental traditions have all decisions to account for various dimensions of human development, including identity” (Kroger, 2004, p.3). According to Kroger, the identity of a child is a social construct of cultural, ethnic, social and class contexts. Therefore, it is a synthesis of the inborn (self) and the outer world (other). Although Arjie is a male, he performs certain so-called feminine roles repeatedly, like opting for the bride role. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established.

### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, taking Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) as both a literary text and a cultural document negotiating questions of identity and sexuality. Through close reading of key narrative episodes where gender roles, sexual identity, and cultural norms converge—particularly in the characterization of Arjie—the study examines how meaning is produced through narrative voice, symbolism, and language.

The research is grounded in postcolonial and sexuality studies, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence to explore Arjie's identity as one situated between conflicting cultural, familial, and colonial influences. Michel Foucault's concept of sexuality as a discursive construct provides insight into how power and institutional norms regulate bodies and desires, revealing sexuality as a historical and social production rather than a natural state. Judith Butler's theory of performativity further illuminates how gender and sexuality are enacted through repeated performances rather than fixed identities,

while her notion of subversion through re-signification informs the reading of Arjie's defiance of heteronormative roles. Additionally, Coates' feminist and cultural perspectives contextualise the novel within broader discourses of sexuality and representation.

Methodologically, the study integrates close reading with theoretical interpretation. Selected episodes are analysed through the frameworks of Bhabha, Foucault, Butler, and Coates to reveal how *Funny Boy* participates in the cultural discourse of sexuality formation. This is exemplified in the chapter "Pigs Can't Fly," where Arjie's choice to play the "bride" subverts gender expectations, embodying Butler's performativity and Foucault's discursive regulation, thereby illustrating how Selvadurai reimagines cultural constructions of sexuality.

### Results and Discussion

*Funny Boy* portrays young adult sexuality not as an innate essence but as a socially constructed identity shaped by cultural norms, family expectations, and colonial legacies. Arjie's "girl-boy" identity is constantly policed by his relatives, showing how gender and sexuality are regulated through social practices rather than biological determinism (Butler, 1990). Furthermore, the novel situates Arjie's experiences against the backdrop of ethnic conflict, demonstrating that sexuality intersects with broader structures of race and nationalism (Gopinath, 2005, p. 76). By weaving together desire, politics, and identity, Selvadurai illustrates not only how young adult sexuality is constructed through cultural norms but also contested through personal agency. In the episode of the story, Arjie and Meena's option for the opposite games to their traditionally supposed roles can be associated with the idea of Robert Selinger Trites that the power and repression on the child leads to crossing it. His idea of crossing the barriers of culture, social norms and suppositions about the traditionally allocated gender roles to make out a boy or a girl, have been disturbed by Arjie and Meena. To quote Robert Selinger:

Children's literature often affirms the child's sense of self and his or her personal power, but in adolescent novels, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the level of power that exists in the myriad social institutions within which they must function . . . social construction of sexuality, gender, race, class, and cultural more surrounding death. (Trites, 2000, p. 3)

Sexuality, as a social construction, can be derived from the statement of Selinger. If gender and sexuality are the social performative matters, they are very likely to be reconstructed and subverted, as in the case of Arjie. Although Arjie and the girls play a variety of games, the most fundamental site of disrupting and subverting performativity is the game *bride-bride*. It includes the whole process of wedding ceremony. As the title of the game suggests, the most important role is that of the bride, while in the hierarchy of bride-bride, the least important role is that of the groom. Although the game is based on the ceremony which culturally formalizes and elaborates heteronormative logic, the sex of the children playing the ceremony is not a determining principle in the allotment of roles.

Although he is a boy, he always naturally fills the definitive female role. In this portrayal of Arjie's dressing up rituals, Selvadurai maintains a delicate balance between the perceived wholeness and the stability of gender identities and performance which constitutes those identities. Arjie's feminine identification clearly matches for him as a deeper inner level, but the level of his "self", the writer emphasizes the process of identification as Arjie assumes a glamorous feminine appearance. In this connection, he says, "the dreaming up the bride would now begin, and then by the transfiguration . . . I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascent??? into another more brilliant ???more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 40). At this point, we can see Arjie inventing his inner

self. Here, he does not feel that he is crossing the established gender borders, and he does not experience any violation. In this connection, Karen Coats points, "Renouncing one's jouissance doesn't mean that it disappears. Rather, it circulates in the other, kind of like a sick-day pool" (Coats, 2004, p. 3). Arjie leaves the pleasure of being a boy or playing the role of a groom and finds more pleasure in playing the role of bride. Being a boy, he seems to adopt the bride's position, which does not mean that he has subverted his male sex. It is merely a matter of pleasure rather than the identity as a female. But it is the outer reality that gears up the subversion of his sexuality as homosexual.

When Arjie understands that he is feeling comfortable and happy in femininity at the age of seven, he is not aware of the connection between his gender and biological sex. He does not feel any shame for crossing the boundary of social expectations. But he is simply treated as an odd male having a feminine nature based on his performance or the roles he plays among his friends. In this regard, Butler's argument supports the idea of gender identity as gender identity is always a *doing*. He gives priority to the performativity rather than the biological reality. In terms of the roles in society gender identity can be formed/reformed, constructed/deconstructed, but it cannot be generalized in subverting the sex (a biological reality). A person may be tagged as homosexual or lesbian by the roles, but sexually he/she cannot be generalized, like Arjie. But the majority heteronormative power in society can subvert the sexuality by exercising power and creating discourse about sexuality, like that of gender. Michael Foucault's argument about sexuality in his book *The History of Sexuality* is that "the pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light" (Foucault, 1978, p. 45). For Foucault, pleasure that is related to sexuality does have a relation with power as it can create sexuality too.

In applying Foucauldian idea of sexuality to the case of Arjie, he is subjugated to the power exercised upon him by the parents, relatives and the entire society. His behaviour and inclination to the female role rather than to the male has been taken as taboo. It has multiplied his identity as abnormal. The bullying fashion of Kanthy Aunty of Arjie is because of the power she possesses and practices to make him meet the social standard of heteronormative sexuality of the society.

The sexuality of Arjie as a social construction can be further clarified by the term 'funny' used by the family members. It was given to him to mean abnormal sex. The nicknames like 'Pangy', 'faggot' and 'sissy' (Selvadurai, 1994, p.11) resonating with the female names are suggestive of the transformative sexuality of Arjie. Amma's injunction and Arjie's protest to follow the forceful imposition to maintain his normativity is the contradiction between the essentialist and constructionist views of sexuality. This inherent contradiction can be clarified by the statement of Gyatri Gopinath: "rhetoric of non-conformity as perversion is undercut by Arjie's mother making apparent the nonsensical nature of gender codification" (Gopinath, 2005, p.475). Despite the parents' weak logical soundness, the mother tries to regulate and maintain Arjie's gender identity. She even forces him to perform masculinity by playing cricket. It means that the sexuality of a child can be manipulated or changed. All the efforts of the parents are targeted at making him a boy. If sexuality is merely a natural phenomenon why does the culture of Arjie play so much of a role in changing him into so-called heteronormativity? This is a question to be pondered to prove sexuality as social construct.

The climax of Arjie's sexuality to be the matter of construction is in *The Best School of All* in the novel, *Funny Boy*. It reveals the hope of the parents that Arjie can be transformed from homosexuality. They can regulate his sexual identity with support of British Modelled School, supposedly a sex converter. Appa's explanation in this regard can be the evidence of it, "The Academy will force you to become a man" (Selvadurai, 1994, p.210). Presumably, the

academy will cleanse Arjie of the broadly inclusive "funny" identity. In this statement, Appa also believes that Arjie can grow into heteronormativity with the proper application of the institutional force of The Queen Victoria Academy. By making Arjie get rid of the existing company, the parents mean to reconstruct Arjie's sexuality. This relocation of him from St. Gabriel to Victoria is supposed to change the culture, community and company which can make Arjie a full masculine.

In addition to theories of gender and sexuality, Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concept of the "mimic man," outlined in *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* (1994), offers a critical framework for understanding the performative construction of sexual identity.

The characters Arjie, Shehan, Jegan and even Meena can be compared to the colonized/non-normative sexuality, and others are colonial authority. And the consistency in the behaviour of Arjie and Shehan can authorise their power. At this point, the sexuality and identity resonate politically rather than the biologically. The sexualized identity as the cultural-social or socio-cultural construction as claimed in the title can be further substantiated with the discourses of medicine, religion and law, as claimed by Weeks that homosexual identity is a forceful discourse. He says, "The law and its associated penalties made homosexuals into outsiders and religion gave them a high sense of guilt, medicine and science gave them a deep sense of inferiority and inadequacy" (Weeks, 1990, p. 31). Here, his focus on the social, cultural and political factors like religion, law and politicized medieval sciences are the external things that encouraged/formed homosexuality as an 'odd' identity.

### Conclusion

To sum up, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* offers a deep exploration of sexuality and identity formation within the intersecting contexts of family, ethnicity, and nation. While Arjie's coming-of-age journey highlights the challenges of negotiating a queer identity in a society governed by rigid gender norms and heteronormative expectations, the novel as a whole foregrounds how cultural, social, and political frameworks shape personal experiences of desire. Through a qualitative textual analysis, framed by theories of sexuality such as Michel Foucault's ideas of discourse and Homi K. Bhabha's notions of hybridity, this study has demonstrated that Arjie's "self" is not a natural or fixed essence but a socially constructed identity. At the same time, the text complicates the question of whether sexuality is wholly constructed or bears traces of essential desire, as seen in Arjie's natural inclination toward feminine roles and male companionship. By situating Arjie's struggle within the broader narrative of ethnic conflict and social upheaval in 1980s Sri Lanka, *Funny Boy* not only reinforces the significance of his perspective but also raises larger questions about how identities—sexual, cultural, and national—are produced, contested, and lived. Ultimately, the novel and its protagonist compel readers to rethink the processes of identification, belonging, and resistance in the framework of gender, sexuality and postcolonial condition.

### References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). Of mimicry & man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse. In *The location of culture* (pp. 42–45). Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism & the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). Critically queer. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies*, 1(1), 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-1-17>
- Coats, K. (2004). *Looking glasses & Neverlands: Lacan, desire, & subjectivity in children's literature*. University of Iowa Press.

- de Mel, N. (2001). *Women & the nation's narrative: Gender & nationalism in twentieth-century Sri Lanka*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality*: Vol. 1. An introduction (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Gopinath, G. (1996). Funny boys & girls: Notes on queer South Asian planet. In R. Leong (Ed.), *Asian American sexualities: Dimensions of the gay and lesbian experience* (pp. 76–80). Routledge.
- Gopinath, G. (2005). *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas & South Asian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Kroger, J. (2004). *Identity in adolescence: The balance between self & other*. Routledge.
- Rao, R. R. (2000). The politics of gender & culture in Indian diaspora: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* & Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*. *Journal of Comparative Literature & Aesthetics*, 23(1–2), 49–60.
- Selvadurai, S. (1994). *Funny boy*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Selvadurai, S. (1994). *Funny boy*: A novel. Harcourt Brace.
- Trites, R. S. (2000). *Disturbing the universe: Power & representation in adolescent literature*. University of Iowa Press.
- Vance, C. S. (1998). Social construction theory: Problems in the history of sexuality. In P. M. Nardi & B. E. Schneider (Eds.), *Social perspectives in lesbian & gay studies: A reader* (pp. 167–170). Routledge.
- Weeks, J. (1990). *Coming out: Homosexual politics in Britain from the nineteenth century onward*. Quartet Books.