



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

FUNNY BOY

An Introduction to Shyam Selvadurai:

Shyam Selvadurai was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father. Due to the ethnic riots in Sri Lanka, the Selvadurais were forced to leave Sri Lanka in 1984. They immigrated to Canada when Selvadurai was nineteen. He studied creative writing and theatre and has a Bachelor of Fine Arts from York University. He also has a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia where he studied creative writing.

Shyam Selvadurai's novels have been published in translation in Spain, Italy, Germany, Israel, Denmark, Sweden and Turkey. His first novel, *Funny Boy* was published in the year 1994. In 1998 Selvadurai came out with *Cinnamon Gardens* a novel which has been published in nine languages. This was followed by *Story Walah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* (2004) which is a collection of short stories edited by him. He also authored *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, a young adult novel which won the Lambda Literary Award. His latest work is *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) which was short listed for the 2013 Governor General's Award for Fiction. Selvadurai even contributed to Time Asia's special issue on Asian diaspora; in his essay "Coming Out" he talks about the discomfort experienced by him when he visited Sri Lanka in 1997 along with his partner. Articles by him have appeared in several magazines and newspapers including the Time Magazine, the Enroute Magazine, the Toronto Life, The Globe and Mail, Walrus Magazine, The New York Times, and the Toronto Star to name a few.

Introduction of the Novel

Shyam Selvadurai's first novel, *Funny Boy*, won the Smith Books/ Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Men's Fiction. The novel is at once innocent and wise fanciful and uncompromisingly frank in its depiction

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

of Arjie Chelvaratnam's happy and harrowing childhood. The novel focuses on Arjie's coming of age during the tumultuous years before the riots in 1983, when Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese violently turned on the minority Tamils. Arjie realizes that he is doubly endangered as a homosexual and a Tamil, because both identities have become intolerable in the Sri Lanka of 1983. Selvadurai's novel details Arjie's struggles and eventual acceptance of himself as gay man, a Tamil and a citizen of the world. *Funny Boy* led to Selvadurai being classified and studied as both a "postcolonial" and "gay" writer.

Outline of Sinhala-Tamil Conflict

The Tamil population, which is in a minority in Sri Lanka, originated from India in two waves: the immigrants to Sri Lanka between the third century B.C. and thirteenth century A.D. and the Tamil labourers brought by the British, 1825 onwards to work in the tea plantations. In the fifth century B.C., indo-Aryan emigrants from India created the Sinhalese population in Sri Lanka. Broadly speaking, Sri Lanka's population is divided into three "ethnic" categories or communities: the Sinhalese who are the majority, constituting about 75% of the total population; the Tamils, the besieged minority, at about 16%, and the Muslims, who make up 7.4%. [The 1981 census (obtained from Tambiah 4), quoted the Sinhalese population at 74% and the Tamil population at 18.2%. There has not only been a decline in their percentage population, but the decline in the case of the Tamils has been more owing to riots and Tamil migration to other countries.] The Tamils themselves are by general consent further divided into two categories: the Sri Lankan Tamils, who comprise 2% of the total Tamil population and consider themselves indigenous and the Indian Tamils, who make up 5.6%, the majority of which trace their origins to the south Indian labourers brought by British from 1825 onwards. The religious affiliations of the people of Sri Lanka are: Buddhists form 68% of the population, Hindus 17% and Christians and Muslims 8% and 7% respectively. However, the quantitative and distributional facts of Sri Lanka's population are not as simple and the Sinhalese and Tamil profiles require a closer look in order to understand the complexity of their conflict. The mother tongue of the Sinhalese, the Sinhala language, belongs to the indo-European family. The mother

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

tongue of the Tamils (and also many Muslims) is Tamil, a Dravidian language. The majority of the Sinhalese are Buddhists. The remaining are Christians. The majority of Tamil population is Hindu, though they too have a Christian minority. The descendents of these Portuguese and Dutch form a miniscule part of Sri Lanka's population called the Burghers.

Prior to colonial occupation, the Tamils living in Sri Lanka controlled the northern part of the country, while the Sinhalese ruled the southern region of the land. Sri Lankan history as a colonial settlement began in 1505 when the Portuguese took control of the country. Sri Lanka obtained independence in 1948 when the British left and the country became a self governing dominion with a government dominated by the Sinhalese elite assuming power and Stephen Senanayake as the elected prime minister. [Sri Lanka was then called Ceylon and acquired its present name in 1972.] 1948 also saw the passing of the Citizenship Act that made more than a million Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin disenfranchised and stateless. Thus, beginnings of a long standing argument between the Sinhalese and the Tamils can be dated back to the country's independence since the Act was an attempt to "purge" Sri Lanka of people belonging to a certain race. [It was in 1964 nearly sixteen years after the Citizenship Act, that Sirimavo-Shastri pact was signed for the repatriation of stateless plantation workers to India.] But perhaps the most critical moment in the history of Sinhala-Tamil conflict was SLFP's (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) victory in the 1956 general elections: a victory that was based on the wave of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism with strong anti-Tamil overtones. This became further visible when S.W.P.D. Bandranaike, the new prime minister, declared Sinhalese as the sole official language of Sri Lanka. This outraged the Tamil minority and Colvin de Silva spoke out against "Sinhala Only," warning that it will divide the country along ethnic lines. The year is also important for the first anti-Tamil riots that broke out then.

The initial "aggressors" in Sri Lanka were not the armed Tamil terrorists, the LTTE, but leading Tamil politicians in 1958, "mounting a non-violent Gandhian satyagraha campaign to make known their fears" (Tambiah 71). [Prime Minister Bandranaike and FP leader Chelvanayagam had signed a historic agreement (the B-C pact) on a federal solution, devolving wide-ranging powers to the Tamil-majority north and east



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

province. Barely a week later was the pact abrogated under pressure from UNP which, led by Jayawardane, supported solely Sinhalese aspirations and mobilized opposition to what is called unacceptable concessions made to the Tamils.] The government reacted violently by sending police and military forces to Jaffna to suppress the agitation. W. Howard Wriggins' description of the riots, reprinted by Tambiah, help in an understanding of the crisis.

The outbreak of violence began when a train, presumed to be carrying Tamil delegates [...] was derailed and its passengers beaten up by ruffians. The next day Sinhalese labourers set fire to Tamil shops and homes in nearby villages where they lived intermingled with Sinhalese. Police stations were surrounded by large crowds and their communications cut so that effective protection to scattered Tamil residents could not be assured [...] arson and beatings spread rapidly to Colombo. Gangs roamed the districts where the Tamils lived, ransacking and setting fire to homes and cars, and looting shops. Individual Tamils were attacked, humiliated and beaten. Many were subjected to torture and killed outright. The outbreaks threatened to become religious riots when a Hindu priest and temple were burned and a Buddhist temple demolished. Some ten thousand Tamils were reported to have fled their homes to seek safety in improvised refugee camps established in requisition schools and protected by police and army units [...] after three days of terrifying disorders, the prime minister broadcast a message to the people, urging them to remain calm. But his reference to a prominent Sinhalese who had been killed in Batticaloa only incensed the Sinhalese masses the more and the riots grew in intensity [...] the toll during [...] included an estimated 300-400 killed, over 2000 incidents of arson, looting and assault, and 12,000 Ceylonese transformed into homeless refugees.

Some nine years later, the political situation of Sri Lanka took a new turn, when, in 1967, the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP-People's Liberation Front) was formed by

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

educated but unemployed, predominantly Sinhalese youth. In April 1971, this front led an armed insurrection that had been characterized as the “first large-scale revolt against the government by the youth in this country” (ibid 14). The JVP has been described as an ultra-left organization, dominated by educated, unemployed or disadvantageously employed youth. It appears that the insurgents were children of the rural poor, all Sinhalese and mostly Buddhists. There were among them hardly any members of any other ethnic and religious minority.

This armed insurrection was brutally put down, with thousands of Sinhalese youth being killed. A state of emergency was also declared, which was to continue for six long years. The insurrection was indicative of the malaise of frustrated aspirations among the newly educated youth of a country whose liberal education program was at odds with its insufficient economic expansion. [Socio-political and economic circumstances of the country – its being embroiled in problems and issues of economic development, modernization etc. are often quoted as the critical tension underlying the real cause for the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka.] Further it also led to the fear of the frustrations being redirected (in the near future), toward a more defenseless scapegoat, an ethnic minority credited with undue advantages and privileges. The government subsequently, in 1972, enacted a Sinhalese-supremacist “Republican Constitution” for the country, which made Buddhism as the de facto state religion. [Ironically, the architect of this constitution was the same Colvin de Silva, who had made the famous “one language two nation” speech in 1956.

Resentment against the government grew as this constitution supported Buddhism as the state religion on an official level. Consequently, a small group named Tamil New Tigers was formed in the Jaffna peninsula to fight for Tamil rights. [A 17-year-old high school student named Velupillai Pirabhakaran formed the group. This is the beginning of the notorious LTTE.] In 1974, the Sinhalese police attacked the International Tamil Cultural conference in Jaffna: an attack which the Tamils describe as “unprovoked.” In addition, the Tamils felt that the state was discriminating against Tamil students’

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

admission to universities. The Sinhalese favoured an admissions policy based on a quota system that gave an edge to their population ratio.

The government introduced a “standardization policy” that claimed a rise in the number of Tamil students admitted. But since university admissions are calculated largely on the basis of district populations, and since the Tamils form a majority in only six of the total of twenty-four districts, the Sinhalese students enjoy a conspicuous advantage over their Tamil counterparts on the basis of their demographic rather than a merit based criteria.

In recent times language has become a powerful marker of ethnicity and of national identity. “Secessionist nationalism [is often] based on radical ethnicity, or at least politically mobilized forms of ethnicity [and] can take many forms, of which the two most prevalent are ethno-linguistic nationalism and ethno-religionism” (Gerard Delanty 129). In many ways, the Sinhalese-Tamil tensions in the form known to the world are part of a twentieth century phenomenon, an increasing “ethnic” mobilization and polarization previously unknown. These regimentations owe more to the ideas and polemics of contemporary “nationalist” ideologues and the politics of nation making and election winning than to earlier concerns and processes. The year 1977 onwards politics in Sri Lanka took a more racist turn with JR Jayawardane back in power with a thumping five-sixths majority in parliament. The TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) contested on a platform which sought a mandate for a sovereign Tamil Ealam. The party won overwhelmingly in the North and performed very well in Tamil dominated areas of East, becoming the major opposition party in parliament. Severe anti-Tamil riots broke out immediately after elections in Sinhalese majority areas, killing hundreds of Tamils.

In two years time, armed activities of Tamil militant organizations increased. So did the anti-Tamil riots in Sinhalese majority areas and Jaffna peninsula was effectively brought under martial law. As Tamil violence continued, military repression was increased in the north. The extent of the violence is visible in the act of the burning down of the invaluable Jaffna Public Library by Sri Lanka’s armed forces, allegedly under the

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

direction of two government ministers, Gamini Dissanayake and Cyril Mathew. But the major orgy of anti-Tamil violence took place in 1983 and the entire country came under its grips.

The 1983 Riots

It is believed that the riots started over a relatively “small” incident. On July 23, Sri Lanka’s Tamil youths, calling themselves the “Liberation Tigers,” ambushed an army truck and killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. This attack occurred in Jaffna, which was within Tamil territory under army occupation. The army leaders then brought the mutilated corpses into Colombo, to display them to the people. Some Sinhalese, disgusted and horrified at the sight, went out of control: killing Tamils, as well as burning houses, businesses, and factories. For three days, this burning and pillaging continued and the Tamils accused the president and the government of doing nothing. [The president seemed powerless to act, for he himself, for fear of being besieged, was scaled off and protected in his residence.] On July 25 and July 27, 53 Tamil prisoners were killed within city jail. [These 53 Tamilians were believed to be “terrorists.” The official version of the incident is that outraged Sinhalese prisoners in the same jail conducted the murder. But since the Tamil terrorists were kept apart in maximum security, the murders could not have taken place without official collusion.] All in all, more than three thousand Tamils were killed and over 150,000 became refugees, many fleeing the country to India and the West. The fall out was that thousands of youth joined militant organizations. All these events mark the beginning of a brutal civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, which continues today, with non-combatants from both sides systematically targeted – first by Sri Lanka’s armed forces and then by Tamil guerillas.

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

The LTTE is a highly organized militant outfit with approximately 10,000-armed combatants in Sri Lanka; about 3,000 to 6,000 form a trained cadre of fighters. Known for recruiting both women and children, the LTTE also has a significant overseas support structure for fundraising, weapons procurement, and propaganda activities. Today the LTTE is the most ferocious and notorious terrorist group to recon with. In their unrelenting drive for a separate homeland, the Tigers have carried out more suicide bombings than Humus. [The LTTE justifies its demand for a homeland by accusing Sri Lankan government of a racist attitude towards its Tamil population and feels that Sri Lanka has failed in protecting minority interests. However, in spite of many rounds of peace talks, the LTTE is decided that it will settle for nothing less than an independent nation.] Perhaps they only fall short of the Al Qaeda and the latter's 9/11 attacks. Nonetheless, LTTE remains a ruthless organization in its own right. Joe Rubin, a video journalist, in "The Story" has noted the extent of their brutality. He interviewed a Tamil newspaper editor, Manoranjan, who is critical of the Tigers' terror tactics and their use of child soldiers. According to Rubin, "this kind of reporting can get you killed in Sri Lanka [...] human-rights organizations estimate that the tigers have killed 8,000 fellow Tamils considered to be traitors to rebel cause." Political assassinations include the suicide bomber attacks against Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993 and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, which is its only known act outside India. Rubin even ventured north onto an area filled with refugees from the fighting between the government and Tamil guerrillas and he reports that the conditions are deplorable. Ironically, the government sees these camps as a way to control terrorism, but according to Rubin, the conditions in the camps create potential recruits for the Tamil Tigers.

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====