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FUNNY BOY

Title and Narrative Structure

The novel *Funny Boy* does not have a conventional narrative structure. The larger narrative of the novel comprises of six short stories (which form six chapters) told from the perspective of a school-going boy named Arjie. Each story reveals some aspect of adult life to Arjie and also contributes to the larger story which the novel tells.

The first chapter, “Pigs Don’t Fly” reveals how children’s games reflect the larger social structures of Sri Lanka. Arjie learns that for the most part, his family will be ashamed of what he is and would expect of him to pretend conformity with normative values of sexuality. His mother’s statement at the end of the chapter, that Arjie must play cricket because “pigs don’t fly” makes him realize that to be different and to be allowed to express that difference is as unusual as the prospect of flying pigs. Arjie cannot express his sexual orientation without incurring the disgust of an intolerant and unjust society of which his parents (particularly his father) are a part of.

The second chapter/story “Radha Aunty” is a further learning experience for Arjie. Mesmerized by Janaki’s romance comics, Arjie has a rather orthodox notion of how Radha aunty would behave; he expects that she should be coy and reticent, that her entire world should revolve around her fiancé. Instead he meets a girl who can hold her own and even resort to subterfuge to meet the man she loves. This is the story in the novel in which Arjie realizes a fact of Tamil life in Sri Lanka which will reappear in the last story; that the political situation in Sri Lanka is such that try as others may, inter-race relations cannot be maintained. Radha aunty’s experience and choices debunk notions that Arjie believed to be universal truths; the hero and heroine of every love story do not marry and live happily ever after and personal choices are dictated by political situations.

The resulting conflict is reiterated in the chapter/story “See no Evil.” When Arjie and Amma realize that Daryl Uncle’s house has been ransacked, Arjie does not want to keep

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quiet. Both he and his mother want justice for Daryl Uncle and to expose the people who are behind his death. At the same time, Arjie also experiences a rush of fear and anger when he and his mother visit Somaratne in his village and are first followed by some unidentified people and then even attacked with stones. For the first time Arjie is able to appreciate the dilemma that his parents, Radha aunty, Anil and many others face. He learns that the only means by which one can survive in a conflict prone country is to turn practical and to forgo idealism. Perhaps emotional ties and Arjie's innate sense of justice demand that Daryl uncle's murderers be brought to justice. However, the world that the likes of Arjie inhabit cannot be painted black and white; that people like his father are not evil or villainous for sacking Jegan in order to preserve their own families. His conflicting emotions regarding Daryl uncle's death and the events there after then reflect the conflicting emotions experienced by Amma, Appa and Radha Aunty.

The word "funny" means odd, strange or unusual or peculiar. It is also often used to suggest homosexuality. The title of the novel plays on the word "funny" to indicate both Arjie's sexual orientation as well as the many unusual experiences (social and political) that he has. From the beginning, it is Arjie's involvement that ties all the stories together. He is Radha aunty's confidant in her quiet trips to meet Anil. He is also his mother confidant when she has a brief affair with Daryl Uncle. He even accompanies her on her many trips to the police station, Daryl Uncle's house and Somaratne's village to piece the story of Daryl Uncle's disappearance. After Daryl Uncle's body is discovered, it is Arjie who lends his mother quiet support in the face of her loss. Thus his experiences are funny or unusual from those of his brother (Diggy) and sister (Sonali); while the latter two have only known the trauma of political conflict and displacement, Arjie has been closely associated with the many instances in which political strife successfully has torn personal lives. Even before Diggy, Sonali and Appa had experienced the death of Ammachi and Appachi due to communal riots, Arjie had heard what the government and its people are capable of from Jegan. He had also witnessed the power wielded by the government and its capacity to destroy people, in Daryl Uncle's death. In other words, Arjie's experience of life in Sri Lanka are organized



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through each of these stories and are in that very different and peculiar to that experienced by other boys of his age. Each story then both structures and is in turn structured by Arjie's experience of the world; each story as would a children's story, comes with a moral in the end which teaches Arjie means by which to survive in the world.

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