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QUEER IDENTITY IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY

The terms 'queer' and 'queerness' are difficult to understand as a marker of troubling or subversion. The concept of queerness leads into Queer Theory developed during the 1990's, largely in response to Foucault's concepts of a 'regime of power'. This regime 'describes the mobile techniques of power, operating beyond the narrow sphere of law, that organize the meaning of bodily sensations'. This theory invites us to consider the subject as an effect of gendered processes and practices within various regimes of power. Donna Penn states that the use of the term 'queer' in the names of organizations, recent books, articles, film series and academic sub-disciplines represents more than a remedy for the increasingly cumbersome, designation lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered. So it is more important to see Queer theory wholly enmeshed in a discussion of identity, multiple identities, and the possibilities of changing identity. Shyam Selvadurai's debut novel, "Funny Boy" compellingly speaks of negotiation of the cultural values invested in girls' play and boys' games, of strong-headed mothers and emancipated daughters, of the nationalist struggles between Tamils and Sinhalese, and of gay versus heterosexual relationships. We will examine the novel in particular based on the protagonist's development of queer identity and the protagonist's ability to transgress the borders of gender, ethnicity and desirability.

The fixity of gender boundaries in the novel is materialized through spatial configurations. Arjie, his siblings and all his cousins are dropped off every Sunday at their grandparents' house, where they spend the whole day playing. During this play the space and activities one can join are dependent on one's gender. A male can join boys playing cricket and the girls were confined to the back garden and kitchen porch. However, Arjie prefers the girls "sphere", as he admits "the pleasure the boys had for standing hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun, watching the batsmen run from crease". Selvadurai gives a detailed account of one of Arjie's transition during the game of bride-ride:

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The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki's cracked full-length mirror- by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes-I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self."

The above description of Arjie's highlights how he was reluctant inside his heart [Inner Space] to play with boys and at the same time he was forbidden to play with girls [Outer Space]. It becomes more interesting when we read it in the light of Judith Butler's notion of gender as drag. Butler points out the fact that drag "reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself- as well as its contingency". With the help of clothes and make-up, Arjie becomes an icon, "a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested."

Arjie's queer identity challenges the social norms and masculinity in particular. Judith Butler uses the term "to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically define through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality". Arjie's performance of gender- queering signals to the adults in the room the possibility of an even more serious "offence"- homosexuality.

The absence of the words homosexual and queer in connection with Arjie are very prominent. Selvadurai has instead chosen the word "funny" to describe the protagonist's same sex desire. It has been argued that Selvadurai chooses the word because the author refuses to constrain Arjie's identity within a requisite essentialist notion of gender identity and instead instates the development of an understated and sensitive political expression as Arjie's sexuality becomes a space of liminality that offers valuable potential for the author's sense of identity, home and community. Both of them argue convincingly. Arjie is in a transitional state in his life in which he



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develops from being a young boy to a young man. When the author chooses to describe this development with other words than homosexual, queer or gay he allows Arjie to come to terms with his identity as a “funny one” without labelling him within a traditional gender identity. He is in “a space of liminality” because he is positioned between two worlds, the girls’ and the boys’, a position that is allowing him to narrate his story for the reader from his own perspective. And it is a perspective that allows him to understand and link the events around him together with his own feelings, beliefs and desires.

Another important label, besides the label “funny”, is the name of the game, “Bride-Bride”. Campbell-Kibler’s notion about certain words not having any meaning until they are assigned interpretations when used, depending on the context, can be applied to this label. It is a label that seems incomprehensible when you think what the game is all about, that is, a wedding. Therefore, more appropriate labels could have been “Bride-Groom” or just simply “Bride” as Gopinath puts forward. She argues that “the game’s title [...] references both the unimportance of the groom and the hyper-bolic femininity embodied by the figure of the bride, as well as the potentiality of a female same-sex eroticism that dispenses with the groom altogether”. It is a game in which the groom has no significant place:

It was a role we considered still and boring, that held no attraction for any of us. Indeed, if we could have dispensed with that role altogether we would have, but alas it was an unfortunate feature of the marriage ceremony.

For Arjie, however, it is not a game about being feminine. It is his chance and possibility to transform himself, “to leave the constraints of [him]self and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self”. It is his chance to be the one he wants to be, not the one his parents or society wants him to be, and with the help of his fantasy and imagination he is able to do it. The combination of language and sexuality creates a possibility for him to be the one he wants to be.

Therefore, the novel documents Arjie’s journey to his own Queer identity. His sexuality, while a topic of discussion for his family, is not confronted directly. For Arjie,



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Imagination, fantasy, play serve as a negotiation device for him, in order to overcome the borders of gender, ethnicity and sexuality. The masculine alliances with Uncle Daryl and Jegan point to some acceptance of an alternative masculinity, a “funny” masculinity. And the alliance with Shehan is the ultimate turning point, a point that would give Arjie the courage to refuse to be silent and explore the “powerful and hidden possibilities” such a relation could give. Moreover, it gives him the courage to choose “the wrong path”, a path that is the right path for him even if it is a path that would exile him from his family and lead him into a world “into which they could not follow [him]”. Throughout the novel, he is always referred to as “funny.” He recognizes that this term carries a negative connotation, but doesn’t understand its complexity, stating that “It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn’t comprehend”. Throughout the novel, Arjie is also increasingly aware of his feelings towards the boys in his school, accepting that he thinks of the shorts they wear and longs to be with them. However, he only fully grasps his sexual identity and its familial implications after a sexual encounter with one of his male classmates. Arjie then understands his father’s concern and “why there had been such worry in his voice whenever he talked about me. He had been right to try and protect me from what he feared was inside me, but he had failed” .

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