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TAMIL-SINHALESE CONFLICT IN FUNNY BOY

Even though “Funny Boy” is very much about the personal growth of the protagonist Arjie (modeled on the author), each individual episode highlights the growing unrest during Selvadurai’s residence in Sri Lanka. Since his family is a mixed (Tamil/Sinhalese) one, the novel focuses a great deal on the complications that arise between friends, lovers and neighbours when political ethnic differences impinge upon them. Radha (a Tamil) and Anil (a Sinhalese), more like the ‘state-crossed lovers’ are unable to sustain their relationship given their ethnic differences. The couple does attempt to give their relationship a chance until violence intervenes. Radha realizes the wisdom of Mala Auntie’s words: “ultimately you have to live in the real world. And without family, you are nothing [...]”. The real world begins to dictate and its reality is two fold: on the one hand people like Radha and Anil end their relationship and on the other, “people [from] mixed marriages [...] find themselves in a terrible dilemma”.

Alix Goldberg, in “Discussion of the Sinhala/Tamil conflict throughout Funny Boy” says that, “after Radha Auntie’s direct experience of violence, she no longer has an open mind with regards to her love for a Sinhalese man. She reflects the view of her extended family, in transferring the feelings of hatred towards her attackers onto Anil. Ammachi and Kanthi Auntie’s feelings when they say, ‘haven’t you people done enough? Please go [...] you are not wanted here,’ are indicative of Radha Auntie’s transformation as she does not stop them or intervene in time [...]” Through the instances of Radha Auntie, Selvadurai tries to point out that political realities of Sri Lanka that do not allow its people to romanticize love. Auntie Dorris’s experience of being left alone in the world for having married a man belonging to another community is indicative of that,

Now Paskaran is dead and I’m alone. Of course my sisters want me to come and settle in England with them. But what would I do there? Sometimes I wonder if it was all worth it in the end.

Radha Auntie takes Dorris as a warning of what the future might hold for her if she decides to marry Anil. It is not that one experience with violence has ‘closed her mind’ or that she has transferred her hatred for her attackers onto Anil. That would be too

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reductive, given the complex situation that informs the novel. It is just that Radha has come to realize that, “[even] if two people love each other, the rest is [equally] important [...]”. The anger that she then directs at Anil is misdirected only in that she is angry at the impossibility of the situation and has come to realize that love cannot conquer all. Radha lives in a real world – one that is torn by an ethnic conflict that seems to have no resolution. The novel debunks the belief “that if two people loved each other everything was possible”

Radha and Anil are not the only lovers torn apart by the conflict. Arjie too is directly affected by it in his relationship with Shehan, a Sinhalese boy. In the chapter “The Best School of All,” Arjie formulates his own opinion about the conflict. As he begins his relationship with Shehan, he is made more and more aware of the hostilities around him; the hostility is not only because of his homosexuality; the tension between Black Tie and the Vice Principal of the school represent a microcosm of the larger tensions. Not wanting to “choose sides,” Arjie questions the distinction between the two,

Was one better than the other? I didn’t think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandara stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better [...]”

Selvadurai’s objective is not to communicate that tensions mark only Sinhalese/Tamil relations. He also reflects on the manner in which tensions dominate and dictate same-race relations owing to a false sense of “nationalism” that the two warring parties circulate and survive on. In the chapter “Small Choices,” Arjie’s father warns Jegan, “one must be careful not to antagonize the wrong people.” Jegan’s protests, that he has been given the job on merit, and therefore should not enlist resentment on the part of Sinhalese employees, are justified. But the reasons quoted by Arjie’s father are equally reasonable.

“You gave me the position because I was good [...] not because I was Tamil”

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“They don’t see it that way. You know how we Tamils are always accused of favouring each other”

“And the Sinhalese, they never do that?”

“But we are minority and that’s a fact of life.”

“The fact of life” is that the Tamil people are constantly put on the spot – both by the Tamil guerillas and Sri Lanka’s government. “The fact of life” is also that Jegan has to be ultimately dismissed from work for having had connections at one point with the Tamil Tigers. Truly, theirs is a world of “small choices” – small because people like Jegan are not welcome back into the mainstream and are thereby forced to return the world they were once associated with. It is also a world of “small choices” (as the title of this chapter indicates) because Arjie’s father, by virtue of being a member of the minority community, has to prove his “nationalism” so much more than a Sinhalese would have to. And it is also the “fact of life” that the likes of Jegan become Tamil Tigers by default.

The novel does not indicate what becomes of Jegan after he is dismissed from employment by Arjie’s father. But given the odds, in all likelihood, he rejoins the Tigers. His situation is indicative of the growing stakes surrounding characters’ interactions with the political tensions of Sri Lanka. Personal relations are all marked by violence and tragedy; the relation between the populace and the state is also marked by death.

In the chapter “See No Evil” Daryl Uncle’s death/murder (his tension with the government) is only an example of the plight of those that set out to find “the truth.” Daryl tries to investigate state terrorism, as he understands and sympathizes with Tamil resentment. However, he disappears without a trace and his body later turns up, dead, floating in the river. Circumstantial evidence points to death by drowning but Arjie and his mother know better. Even before his dead body is found, Arjie and Amma suspect foul play when they realize that Daryl Uncle’s house has been ransacked. They decide to file a missing person’s report with the police only to realize that they inadvertently bring trouble for Somaratne, Daryl Uncle’s domestic help. Somaratne is picked up by

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the police for questioning and is falsely accused and arrested for ransacking Daryl Uncle's place and stealing things from it. Later Arjie and Amma find out that Somaratne was so badly beaten in police custody that one of his arms is paralyzed. The two eventually reconcile with the reality of the political situation in Sri Lanka: there is no justice for the minority community and the only way that a Tamil person can survive is to lie low and not question either the government or the LTTE. In "Riot Journal," the last chapter of the novel, the conflict continues, both in the narrative structure and Arjie's life. Selvadurai is careful not to give his experience of the riots as a reconstruction of past events based on memory, one that could lead to any kind of mutation in the process of representation. It is therefore a "record" of his experiences in the form of journal entries and thus not a narrativization of that experience. The entries are disjointed, beginning in a rapid succession but soon falling farther apart. The linearity of the text breaks down, as if the tension can no longer serve the thread that holds the story together.

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