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AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SHYAM SELVDURAI'S *FUNNY BOY*

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Abstract

This article attempts to discuss the women characters in Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*. Shyam Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan- Canadian writer. Some reflections of his own life can be seen in his works. Selvadurai migrated to Canada to escape the Sri Lankan ethnic riots along with his family. Thus, both the places, Sri Lanka and Canada play a significant role in his novels. The influences of both places are visible. He portrays different periods of Sri Lanka and the prevalent issues authentically. *Funny Boy* is his first novel which won the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction and the Books in Canada First Novel Award. It was first published by McClelland and Stewart. Owing to its popularity, Deepa Mehta made it into a film that was selected as the Canadian entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 93rd Academy Awards.

The Sri Lankan- Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai is a well-known novelist most famous for his debut novel, *Funny Boy*. The widespread acceptance and relevance of the novel led Deepa Mehta to make a film adaptation of the novel with the same title. His other famous novels are *Cinnamon Gardens*, *Hungry Ghosts*, and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. All the novels deal with a variety of themes and discuss socially relevant matters.

Funny Boy revolves around the story of a young boy named Arjie from his childhood to adulthood, gradually exploring his sexual orientation and coming out. His mother Nalini and Aunt Radha are two major strong female characters in the novel. Radha is an unmarried girl who completed her studies in a European country and came back to Sri Lanka. Soon she becomes a solace for Arjie who has been mocked by his other family members for his

growing gay identity. From the very beginning, Radha is presented in the novel as a bold, strong-willed, and progressive woman having her own opinions about everything.

Meanwhile, she meets Anil Jayasinghe during a drama rehearsal, and their friendship soon turned into a love affair. They both belonged to different ethnic groups: Radha was Tamil and Anil Jayasinghe, a Sinhalese. Thus, even their friendship created problems in their families. Though initially, Radha opens up about her willingness to let her child marry anyone of their choice but reluctance to marry a Sinhalese, reflects the fear everyone, even the most progressive ones kept hidden inside themselves. However, the depth of their love turned Radha bold and finally she decides to live with him irrespective of all the threats awaiting her.

But things turned upside down after the physical attack she had faced on the train. The

trauma of it, Sinhalese people shouting at and calling names like Tamil Pariah and attacking Tamils without any hesitation made her numb towards Anil and their relationship. Despite her unconditional love for Anil, she couldn't emotionally reconnect to him after the atrocity she had experienced. The reality of the horror of ethnic differences hit her so badly and intensely which finally led her to end her relationship with Anil. Though Selvadurai initially presents Radha as an extremely bold woman, during the course of the novel, she gradually succumbed to the social conditions unwillingly. She agrees to marry the man of her family's choice sacrificing her love and happiness. Here, Selvadurai is shedding light on the plight of women during such ethnic riots and conflicts. However, she is not presented as a weak woman, but rather someone who knows well to embrace practicality to survive in a world of conflicts.

Another character through whom the condition of women in a patriarchal society is reflected in the novel is Nalini, Arjie's mother. Nalini too is portrayed as a bold and practical woman. Hints of Nalini's character are revealed initially through her conversations with Arjie regarding his growing gay identity. She tries to make him follow social norms while conscious of the unjustness of her actions. Her inner self knows well that it is not necessary to follow social norms and the hollowness of it. Yet she is afraid of social judgments regarding her parenting. She believes that if a child behaves badly, all the blame goes on to the mother. It sprouts from the pressure patriarchal society imposed upon women.

Later as the novel progresses, Nalini's past is revealed through her relationship with Daryl. Daryl who belonged to the Burgher community in Sri Lanka was in love with Nalini. They both wanted to get married to each other, but as their families opposed, they were separated and Nalini had to marry another man. Gradually she forgot about her relationship with Daryl and led not so a passionate life with her husband. But on seeing Daryl, all her love towards him and the memories of their times spent together started popping up in her mind. She

couldn't control her urge to begin her relationship with Daryl once again.

Through Arjie's eyes, the changes in Nalini are brought clearly in the novel. Selvadurai presents the two women, Radha and Nalini showing extreme boldness while they are in love. He portrays women strongly and passionately embracing their true relationship, and love making them bold. Radha for the first time, opposed her mother and showed courage for her love, Anil. Similarly, Nalini's love for Daryl makes her all the bolder. An instance of it is visible through her brave act of complaining about Daryl's missing.

Daryl who works as a journalist came to Sri Lanka to investigate more about the tortures and atrocities the Sri Lankan government was committing during the period using the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Nalini earlier thought of these mere allegations against the government and praised the present government for its better governing. However, everything proved true with his missing and the murder that followed. Although it was told as a suicide, she knew for sure it was not so.

Thus, from this point onwards a new face of Nalini is showcased. She decides to seek justice for Daryl at any cost. Against her sister's warning, she goes to the police station and made a complaint regarding his missing. She even opened up about her suspicion concerning police involvement in the case. Though reality was revealed slowly with the manipulated arrest of Daryl's servant, she was so resilient to seek justice for Daryl. Thus, Nalini visits a family lawyer to enquire about the possible actions she can undertake. Even after receiving rejection and warning from the lawyer to stop her venture, as a final attempt she visits the servant's village where they were treated so badly. This led Arjie to shout at Nalini, the trauma of it only made Nalini withdraw from her attempts. However, her love for Daryl made her bold from a woman who was fearful of social judgments. The police officer tried to stop her from further involvement with the issues by asserting his friendship with her husband, thus, indirectly warning her about informing about Nalini and Daryl's relationship to her husband. But none of

his attempts were succeeded as she has by then become bold enough to overcome social judgments.

Another bold and practical face of Nalini is shown towards the end of the novel. The ethnic riots were escalating and the violence was reaching its peak. Sri Lanka has started to become a place where even Tamils have become scared to speak their language. Nalini, who by then was convinced about the partial stance taken by the government, knew for sure the impossibility of living in Sri Lanka peacefully. Thus, her search for practical solutions ended up in migration. She finds it as the only option left before them to live a peaceful life. Like her husband, she too had strong ties to Sri Lanka, to her home which was her everything all through these years. She has a deep emotional attachment to it. But as a mother of three children, she is forced to think only in practical terms thus presenting her thoughts about migration to her husband.

She was the first one in the family who thought about it seriously, even before her husband. But he refused, but towards the end of the novel, the migration had become inevitable. It was only then he realizes his failure to be insightful about the issues and regrets not listening to her earlier. They couldn't have faced any of the trauma of the ethnic riots if they had migrated earlier. However, even in the end, it was her practical concerns that played a significant role in protecting her family's safety.

Throughout the novel, Selvadurai is trying to give voice and authority to women in his novels though they lack it at many points in their life. Thus, a deep analysis of the novel portrays the bold and practical side of women in times of adversity. Both Radha and Nalini try to find out balance and joyfulness in life irrespective of the challenging situations. They mold themselves into their best versions through the conflicts they encountered in their life.

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