

## DECONSTRUCTING INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY: AN ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE GENDER EXILE IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY

**Naidu G.T.**

Assistant professor  
Dept. of English  
Don Bosco College (Arts & Science)  
Karaikal – 609 601

### Abstract

Identity crisis is prevalent topic in today's Diasporic writing. In this paper I enhance the point that gender construction for determining one's identity has been a traditional exile. In *Funny Boy* by a prominent diasporic Sri Lankan Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai we find the social-construct of an individual's constraints with regard to mainstream gender prescription being decentered and deconstructed in the novels predominant characters. The writer transcends the societal boundary to attain his Ideal individual identity which he seems to present as inherent within an individual. The novel is staunch advocate of deconstruction social structure bringing forth the unprivileged marginalized to be centered. It decenters patriarchy with marginalize subalterns such as gay, lesbian and feminine on the grounds of individualism in the postmodern Era for relieving one from the gender exile.

**Key words:** Individualism, Deconstruction, Gender, Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*.

Individualism is detained as an embryo of today's any literary and philosophical scenario. therefore I base my paper on the selected novel, *Funny Boy* by prominent diasporic and Srilankan Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai, in which we can find the social-construct of an individual's constraints being decentered of their gender discourse and deconstructed indifferent characters. The deconstruction of one's own individual gender by the characters themselves is also evident in the work. By questioning and subverting the mainstream gender prescription in determining one's Identity, the novel uses deconstructionist philosophy at its core for relieving characters of the internal and external Exiles.

Deconstruction is a theory proposed by Jacques Derrida which has postmodern color for its application for any grounds. Derrida's ideas reduced the world and its constituents merely to fragmented particles tracing for its inexistent center. The traditional notion of looking at the world by the evasive centre has in fact been replaced of its centrality to give space for ideas of non-center. Thus all the theories concerning marginalization evolve from a deconstructive perspective of respective issues. Self is constructed by a society without any centre surrounding it. In this paper I analyze the novel from a deconstructionist lens for attaining the author's advocate for an individual's self construction by his own will.

Shyam Selvadurai is an emerging writer of Srilankan writer. From Srilanka he moved to Canada with his family at the age of Nineteen. He had a study of Creative writing and Theatre and received a B.F.A from York University. His debut novel, *The Funny Boy* has rendered him the place beside some well-known Srilankan Expatriates. *Funny Boy* is a nation bestseller and won Canada the W. H. Books first Novel award and in the U.S. Shyam's second novel *Cinnamon Gardens* was published in 1999. His popular young adult novel *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*(2005) won the Lambda Literary Award. While in Canada, Selvadurai came to terms with his own Homosexuality. Therefore, *Funny Boy* dealing with the protagonist's Gay identity can be called the Semi-autobiography.

Shyam Selvadurai's *Bildungsroman*, develops its story as the narrator grows up in a Sri Lankan Tamil Family, witnessing other characters torn between the social construct and that of their own, finally finding his own spiritual end of being a gay. Arjie the narrator and the protagonist, reveals quitedecenteredidentity and sticks himself to extreme labels, either lesbian or gay. Power plays a vital role in determining the social constraints. Since Arjie remains the power center of the Kids'house of his age in his grandmother's house, he fixes the rules and regulations of his world. In fact he does not shed lights of social boundaries on the world he constructs. The taboos that the protagonist dares to fence off vividly shows up to be natural. Here comes the question of demarcation of sexual limitations. The writer advocates for the queer Identity he possesses and gives voice to the so far marginalized Gay and lesbian Identity.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator seems to be concerned about the societal construct of an Individual's Gender Identity on the basis of biological differences. He decanters gender bias grounded on societal norms and becomes constructor of his own identity on no other grounds of biological organs but his own inner self. As the novel opens, it is evident he assumes himself as a girl and wants always to be glued to the girlish behavior, for instance playing bride-*bride*, a game meant only for the girls and into cosmetics too much. In order to escape the internal exile that the societal fence has rendered in return, it is he who reconstructs the rules of *bride-*bride** as per his own fancy and imagination since he holds the power of the kid's world. However he could not establish his rules in the world of big ones. The writer's view of all kids' games equates with the elderly society's access. He sees the society is constructed with evasive norms for its access, as the kids' games constructed with certain rules. Thus Derrida's discourse of deconstruction of structure can also be called for discussion. The writer allows a free-play of gender roles present in the society to derive the deconstruction of the structure that the society has imposed on an individual's label.

Arjieas a kid has a catch of other kids to establish his rules Therefore the serious issue the narrator brings forth can seem to be merely a fun factor for the society since it is made in the kids' as well as that of Women characters. Both are acting the role of marginalized sections of society. Bu the writer views society with its structure as merely a fun. As he grows up he is prevented by his parents from doing all sorts of such funny at the same time serious taboos. However he sees a replica of his own sexual self in his schoolmate Shehan to whom he gives the soul of his voice. Here one can see the narrator's internal exile as being unable to expose his sexual identity and reveal his real self to the outer world, standing outside the society. Physically he is living in the society but he feels exiled mentally because of the taboos it throws on his construction of individual Sexual identity.

The protagonist's counterpart, Shehan is diametrically opposite to himself with regard to the show off of his gender as a gay. To be precise, he never feels sorry for his being a gay unlike Arjie. Though the narrator happens to be the proxy of writer himself, Shehan remains the

spokesperson of Selvadurai's unspoken latent voice. Thus Shehan is also rendered as the representative of the narrator's concealed desire for his happy-go construction of self. When the narrator feels worried about his bisexual relationship and shows his aversion to him, Shehan openly critiques him and the head prefect of the same sort living for the society not for themselves, because the society would take them 'laughing-stock'. It is evident in the following words of Shehan himself.

"I know your type, you and the head prefect and the others like you. Pretend that you're normal or that you are doing it because you can't get a girl. But in the end, you are no different from me." (p.265 Funny Boy)

'On the other side, the feeling of exile is displayed in Feminist point of view. The Female characters of the storyline in some way or other undergo a sort of individual oppression due to the societal confines. In the first place, we have Arjie's mother, Nalini who happens to act as a wife to Arjie's father, and a mother to her kids. In fact she is the victim of patriarchal society and is stereotyped to bear the responsibility of fostering her kids in a proper way. This is how Arjie's father shrugs off his duty to foster his kids pouring everything on his wife's head, To escape this exile of self-depression, at the absence of her husband she develops an extra-marital affair with her childhood friend, Daryl who comes to meet her after his long stay in Australia. She could not continue this relationship because of two reasons: the political tension prevailing outside due to the civil war between Sinhalese and Tamil people and the male patriarchal society she has been made of. Due to the war, Daryl has to leave for Jaffna immediately and her affair with him cuts off. However she does feel the fulfillment of her life at least for a few days deconstructing her gender roles, as long as Daryl being with her. She shows an extra-concern as to whereabouts and what about of him. When Sonali, Arjie's sister asks her why a boy cannot participate in girls' game, she is quite satirical about the male patriarchal structure in her reply as: because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly.'" Here she metaphorically refers all male community to pigs.

Secondly we have the character, Radha, the narrator's Aunt who had her Study at America. As she returned from America, a multicultural domain, she could not break off the society as the daughter on her own soil. Her friendship with Anil, a boyfriend in theatre-performance, is not accepted by her family as he is a Sinhalese. But Anil steps out his Sinhala label and proves as a human being through his nice character. However she could not escape the exile she undergoes by showing her resistance. This shows that if a male got his foreign education, he could be allowed to go by his whims and fancies and a female is not.

All characters at one point meet at a juncture of cause for their both internal and external or physical Exile, which is resulted of the civil war. The novel is set against the increasing violence between Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lankan civil war of 1983. In history, it is referred to as Black July because 400-3000 Tamil people were killed and thousands of houses were destroyed leading a wave a Sri Lankan Tamil to leave their land for other countries. The author Shyam Selvadurai his family were force into the exile after 1983 racial riot against the Tamils in Colombo. Thus the war plays a very important role in exiling the characters in Funny Boy both mentally and physically. Despite the presence of split between Tamils and Sinhalese is there politically, the narrator, Arjie and his gay friend Shehan Soyza transcend such narrow domestic walls spiritually in cultivating their gay relationship.

Shyam Selvadurai transcend the social domains to attain an ideal Individual Identity which he seems to present as innate. The novel is a staunch advocate of deconstruction of social structure, bringing forth the unprivileged marginalized to be centered. It decenters patriarchy

with marginalized feminine, gay and lesbian constituents on grounds of individualism in the postmodern time.

**References**

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. New Delhi: Penguin Publishers, 1994

Seldon, Raman, Widdowson, Peter and Brooker, Peter. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary literary theory*. (Pearson Education, Harlow, 2005)