



## **CONFLICT OF CULTURAL VALUES IN SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Funny Boy is a persuasive bildungsroman. It is a collection of six interrelated short stories that are joined together by the narrative voice of the protagonist. In the first short story titled "Pigs Can't Fly" the protagonist, Arjun Chelavaratnam (who is known as Arjie) is introduced. He is a young man living in Canada and he recalls his Sri Lankan childhood days. The first story focuses on child's perspective on his own place, the second story titled "Radha Auntie" offers child's perspective of adult world. The third story, "See No Evil, Hear No Evil" deals with ethnic violence. The fourth story, "Small Choices" shows that political and economic forces exasperate ethnic tension. The fifth story, "The Best School of All" revolves around Arjie's sexual awareness. The novel is a universal story of growing up. It is also a story of an adolescent who struggles to establish an autonomous identity in opposition of surrounding authority figures. It exposes the horrors of ethnic conflict and simultaneously accounts the gradual sexual awakening of its young protagonist. It shows the emergence of Arjun's sexual consciousness, and his coming to terms with his new sexual self. It is the love between Arjun and Shehan covers the ethnic differences of Sri Lankan society like an arched roof. Selvadurai sees the relationship of Arjie and Shehan as the antidote to Sri Lanka's national madness. He felt the necessity to write about the issue of homosexuality because it is a taboo subject in the country like Sri Lanka. He grew up in the atmosphere of Tamil and Sinhalese violent conflict. Being homosexual he decided to write about this issue as a therapy for himself and to voice the silence of those (particularly children) who have problem of expressing themselves about such issues. Arjie, the protagonist in the novel is passing through the same problem. He feels alienated and confused because he has different outlook and attitude towards life. He is different from others. Selvadurai shows through his*

**DR. MOHD. TARIQ**

1Page



*characters in the novel, Funny Boy that conflict of cultural values are responsible for alienation and confusion in individuals. The present paper explores the themes of confusion, alienation and loneliness in the novel through the study of characters.*

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of conflict of cultural values is revealed through the character of Arjie's father, Appa. Arjie and his cousins play many children games together, but what he likes the most is a game called "bride-bride" (FB4). He dresses up like a bride in a sari, his cousins help him in the game of bride-bride. He feels like a glamorous Tamil film actress. He dislikes playing with the boys and feels boring and dull in the company of boys. Arjie's problem starts when the innocence of childhood games isolated by adult. His Kanathi aunty discovers him dresses like bride and drags him in front of his parents. His parents are embarrassed and others make fun of him. At this point Cyril uncle make fun of him and sarcastically remarks, "looks like you have a funny one here" (14). He realises that his father is angry with him. Appa refuses to let his son play with girls. Appa is a man who is concerned with his social reputation in society. If the villagers ever discover that Arjie is "funny", the representation of the Chelavaratnam family will be lost. He takes up the matter of Arjie very seriously. He decides to send him to British-style public school The Victorian Academy in Colombo where he will be forced to become a real man. He is troubled by his son's lack of interest in sports and other traditional male pursuits. But Arjie completely disagrees with this idea. Appa is a man of traditional values; his values of life create confusion for Arjie.

The theme of conflicting cultural values unfolds through the character of Shehan. He is Arjie's boyfriend. He is rejected from society due to his uncommon cultural value system. His physical appearance is also different from other boys of his age, "His upper lip was thin, lower lip full, his forehead was fine and well shaped, his eyebrows thick and unruly, unlike any of the other boys, he wore his hair long" (217). He becomes the object of ridicule for other boys. They tease him for his appearance. He is alienated from the school environment due to the difference in his physical appearance, but he shows faith in himself and his beliefs. He has certain power that gives him confidence, "there is a confidence about him, and understanding about himself" (217). Shehan has very bad reputation at school and he has terrible problems at school. But he is still friendly whenever the chance comes up - when Arjie arrives at Victorian Academy, he is welcomed by Shehan. Both feel comfortable in the company of each other and they soon develop a special relationship. Diggy, Arjie's brother who is also in the same school realises that both have become very close and fast friend. Diggy, warns Arjie about Shehan, "you better watch out for him, you don't want to become associated with Soyza"(231). He also tells Arjie about the rumours are going around that Shehan has sexual relationship with the school prefect, if he will be seen with Shehan, he too



will be object of ridicule, but it doesn't bother Arjie. He likes Shehan because he has different view of life. Shehan is also rejected and alienated from society. Shehan is isolated because his view of life is different from others which lead towards conflict of cultural values.

This pattern of cultural conflict of values is also revealed through the love affair of Radha and Anil in the second story entitled "Radha Aunti". Their story offers child's view of the adult world. Radha aunt returns to Sri Lanka after studying in US. She falls in love with Anil Jayasinghe, a sinhalese. Her family is against the inter-ethnic love affair. She is forced to marry Rajan Nagendra, a Tamil. Radha aunt symbolises "Americanized" view. When it comes to marriage, culture and tradition are not so much significant for her, but her family is strong believer of traditional values, particularly about Sinhalese. Ammachi says, "Only a Sinhalese would be impertinent enough to offer an unmarried girl a lift (58). Radha tries to forget Anil but finds it impossible. Radha's family sends in her isolation for a few months, so that she can forget Anil. When she comes back, she is forced by her family to marriage Rajan Nagendra, a Tamil. Doris, one of the old friends, tries to convince her about marriage, he explains the reality of marriage, "whether you married the person you loved or not, seems to be less important as time passes." (81) Radha sacrifices his love and marries Rajan in order to maintain good relationship with her family members. Radha and Anil's relationship symbolises that differences of cultural values lead to loneliness and segregation between two lovers.

Like Radha and Anil's forbidden love, the secret love of Arjie and Shehan also reveals the theme of isolation. They have kept their love a secret in order to avoid conflicts within their society. Arjie explains that his admission in Victorian Academy is a boon in disguise, the best thing that could happen to him. He feels like this because he has finally found someone who can see world from his perspective. Arjie's boyfriend convinces him that it is okay to be different. Both of them like each other because there are powerful and hidden possibilities in their relationship. When they declare that they are boyfriends, Arjie becomes confused, but now he realises that why his father think that he is "funny". He tries to end his relationship with Shehan, but he cannot. He realises that this is the culmination of his feelings. Shehan plays very significant role in his life. He has become medium for Arjie's self realisation. Arjie truly discovers himself. This is the most dangerous situation, when the person is passing from such troublesome phase in his life, where he cannot ignore the reality, that who he is, even if that means disgrace for one's family and community. Arjie says, "I was no longer a part of my family in the same way I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me"(284). Their relationship has brought a lot of confusion into their life, particularly in the life of Arjie, their relationship has caused Arjie to detach himself from his family and society.



The themes of isolation, confusion and conflict of cultural values are revealed through various characters in the novel. Plot of the novel also contributed to the physical manifestation of the major and allied themes. Through the portrayal of characters, the novelist is trying to suggest that how different cultural beliefs can lead towards isolation, confusion and conflict of cultural values. Before discovering himself, Arjie goes through a lot of confusion. His character shows only elements of fear and loneliness. Shehan saved him from this situation. Only he understands Arjie. He is like Arjie. Shehan leads Arjie to his epiphany. He becomes a medium of realization for Arjie. He helps him to come to the terms of his inner self. He also motivates him to think of his happiness, rather than the happiness of others. There will be some sort of discrimination somewhere but world will be better place of living. If people will understand that true beauty is in differences and diversity. Selvadurai has given this message through the novel, *Funny Boy* that respecting differences of others will result into formation of better society. He is optimistic about it. The reading of the novel suggests that it is only possible through inculcating tolerance among people in society. In absence of tolerance society will be chaotic society and human relationship will be complex human relationship.

Abbreviation used in the Paper:

FB: Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994.

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