”[T]he Free Play of Fantasy”
The Interrelations between Ethnicity and Sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*

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Abstract

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The goal of this essay is to pursue a reading of ethnicity and sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai’s novel Funny Boy to show the importance of the interrelations between the two and how equally crucial both of these are in order to understand the protagonist Arjie’s journey and search for identity. To investigate the interrelation between ethnicity and sexuality, the analysis makes use of a method of simultaneous consideration that is similar to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s focus on the “simultaneity of discourse” used by black women writers.

The turning points in the protagonist’s life and search for an identity are crucial and influenced by issues of separation, and the theme of exile is prominent in the novel. Selvadurai uses the theme in several aspects on a number of levels, concerning both ethnicity and sexuality. However, the narrative also allows the protagonist to find an alternative route in exploring his identity as a “funny one”.

These turning points are illustrated by a moving beyond the traditional gender roles and the idea of masculinity in areas of gendered and racialised spaces. Selvadurai shows a people that are ethnically and/or sexually divided while at the same time being linked through words and languages that can give and/or take away possibilities.

Hence, a second aim of this essay is to show that the protagonist overcomes the limitations that society has set by choosing the path that is right for him, a path that allows him to be “funny”.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Exile, Funny Boy, Identity, Masculinity, Selvadurai, Sexuality, Simultaneity of Discourse, Racialised Space.
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Introduction

A coming-of-age story revolves around the growth and development of a protagonist, from adolescence to adulthood. There are many themes that distinguish this sort of story but one of them is the theme of exile. This is because the protagonist must leave something behind in order to grow up and move forward into adulthood. It is a necessary journey of exile which every teenager must go through, a journey which is filled with crucial and influential moments and turning points that will forever change one’s life.

*Funny Boy* is such a coming-of-age story. It follows the protagonist Arjie’s growth from a boy of seven years into his late teens. It is a story about exiles on several levels. The novel’s author Shyam Selvadurai uses the term much more literally and the turning points in Arjie’s life are much more multifaceted than in a traditional coming-of-age story. The novel is so much more than an individual personal journey. Arjie is a boy who is trying to come to terms with his own homosexuality in the context of Sri Lanka, a country that is full of ethnic tensions between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, as well as in the context of his own very traditional patriarchal family. He gets exiled from the world of the girls and “the free play of fantasy” (3) which forces him into the world of the boys, a world which he cannot come to terms with. The conflict between the two different ethnic groups also causes him to go into exile, together with his family, to Canada. Thus, Selvadurai chooses to focus on more than the protagonist’s lost childhood and innocence. He lets the novel, and Arjie, explore conflicts and issues concerning racism and sexual identity, both within the family and within the country. In other words, it is a multifaceted novel with many crucial turning points, both in regards to sexuality and ethnicity, and the two are equally important in order to understand the world and life of Arjun “Arjie” Chelvaratnam.

Mae Henderson argues in her article “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition” that if you only focus on one aspect in a literary study another, equally important, aspect will be overlooked: “privileging one category of analysis at the expense of the other […] restrict[s] or repres[es] different or alternative readings” (258). To avoid this, Henderson argues for a method which she calls “simultaneity of discourse” (258). With this term she wants to examine the interrelationships between race and gender and “to acknowledge and overcome the limitations imposed by assumptions of internal identity (homogeneity) and the repression of internal differences (heterogeneity) in racial and gendered readings” (258). Consequently, her method of simultaneity of discourse is
used to create “a model that seeks to account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity” (258).

Like Henderson, I believe that it is necessary to acknowledge all “categor[ies] of analysis”. If you do not, you automatically put a limit to other alternative analyses. I also believe that in order to fully grasp a reading you have to understand the interrelations between race and gender. One cannot be one without the other or in other words, a person is not just a man or a woman, he or she also belong to an ethnicity. Both are equally important in defining who you are. In this essay I will engage in a similar model of analysis that aims for a “simultaneity of discourse”. However, whereas Henderson pursues the simultaneity of gender and race, I will focus on the interrelations between ethnicity and sexuality.

This shift of focus is done in order to demonstrate how Shyam Selvadurai interweaves the protagonist Arjie’s search for his ethnic and sexual identity and the history of the Tamil/Sinhala conflict to highlight the importance of the link between ethnicity and sexuality in order to find one’s identity, an identity which in Arjie’s case will allow him to be “funny”. In order to do this Selvadurai puts forward three key points that can be linked together. Firstly, Selvadurai is moving beyond the traditional gender roles and the idea of masculinity. Secondly, this move takes place in different areas of gendered and racialised spaces between ethnically and/or sexually divided people. The third, and last, key point is the different languages and words that can both give, and take away, all kinds of possibilities, as for example possibilities of power or the possibility to create a new language. The approach of a “simultaneity of discourse” between ethnicity and sexuality will be achieved by analysing how these particular aspects function in Arjie’s search for a “funny” identity. I will be looking at not only how sexuality exiles the protagonist from the girls, different feminised sites and eventually also his own family, but also how ethnicity plays a major part in exiling people from each other, not giving them the possibility to marry and pursue their sexual desires, and exiling them from their home country. However, another aspect that will be identified is the aspect of the alternative ways which will help the protagonist to deal with his exile. Such an alternative way can be found in the protagonist’s ability to imagine, fantasize and play, and which serve as a way to transgress the borders of gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Moreover I will point to how masculine relations of alliance and language can provide some sort of acceptance even though there are relations and languages of domination.
In the Context of Sri Lanka

In *Funny Boy* ethnicity and ethnical conflicts are constantly present, and they play a major part in how the characters live their lives. Therefore, in order to fully grasp the novel it is necessary to understand its context, the country’s violent background.

Sri Lanka is a country with many different ethnical groups that can be “distinguished from one another on ethnic, religious and linguistics grounds” (Chattopadhyaya 51). However, there are two larger indigenous groups: the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Even though there were some minor conflicts between the 10th and 14th centuries they “subsisted […] as best as they could without a conflict” (51). It was not until the British came and divided the country that the Tamils started to feel unjustly marginalized. After the British departure, in 1948, the “communal conflict” was set (51). In 1956 came the enactment of the Official Language Bill which also became the starting point for the first real communal struggle. The Bill decided that Sri Lanka’s only official language was to be Sinhalese, which really angered the Tamils. The riots that followed, in Colombo and the Eastern Province, led to many Tamils being assaulted by Sinhalese mobs (52).

Despite the Bill, Tamil was still a regional language and it was not until 1972 that the Sri Lankan Government rewrote its constitution and declared that “Buddhism [was to be] the State religion and Sinhalese the only official language” (57). However, the Tamils argued that the new rewritten constitution “confirmed their second class status as citizens of their country” (57), during years of political ruling. The Tamil minority’s idea about a separate Tamil state, Eelam, started to get support. In 1974 a liberation movement, the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), was created and decades of violence began, “fuelled variously by linguistic, educational and political nationalisms” (Jazeel 232).

In 1981, the Sinhalese mobs increased their violent assaults against the Tamil militants. They had been given orders to go to Jaffna and crush the Tamil movement so they could not get independence and gain access to Eelam. Jaffna became a militant and occupied area. Villages that helped and hid Tamils were attacked and women were abused, and thousands of Tamils “took refuge in Christian missionary convents to escape the attacks” (64). Thus, the Tamils were exiled from their own country. In March 1982, the Prevention of Terrorism Act was enacted as a law and now the Minister of Defence had the power to arrest anyone he suspected was a terrorist. The year that followed, 1983, “was a tragic one in the history of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka” (66). The Tamils looked upon Eelam as their only chance for a better future which, of course, the Sinhalese Government opposed to. Riots and
violence escalated and on 23 July some TNT soldiers ambushed a couple of militant vehicles in Jaffna which led to the killing of thirteen soldiers. The people in Colombo heard the news about the murder on the afternoon of 24 July. The news of the killing escalated in violent riots in Colombo on the same day. The violent and raging Sinhalese soldiers “went on the rampage, looting, pillaging, and killing in the Tamil areas in Colombo” (68). They had lists with detailed information regarding which houses, shops and factors that were inhabited by Tamils. Thanks to these lists they knew exactly where to attack, where the Tamils lived or were. In other words, where their targets were. The police, which are largely Sinhalese, did not do anything. “They either joined the rioters or stood idly by” (68).

    In 2002, both the Tamils and the Sinhalese agreed on ceasefire. While the TNT have removed their request for an independent homeland, political negotiations within the Government are likely to lead to a “political self-determination to a north-eastern Tamil Province or State within the Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka” (Jazeel 233). In the following year, 2003, the Tigers withdrew from the peace talks and during the next three years violence increased again. At the beginning of 2006 all participants agreed to talk again with the goal to renew their 2002 agreement of ceasefire. However, in April same year the conflict resumed and the attacks continued for the rest of 2006 and 2007. And on 2 January in 2008 the Government finally decided to “abolish the six-year-old ceasefire agreement” they had with the Tigers. The fighting still continues (Narayana & Dawson).

    It is against this background of violence, ethnical conflicts, oppression and exiles, that the novel *Funny Boy* takes place.

     **Exile from the “Girls”**

     In a country that is dominated by oppression and exile, the idea of home becomes extremely important. It becomes a place where you can take shelter and it becomes your refuge, a place that you can escape to in order to flee from the outside pressure. bell hooks brings out how important a home can be for those who feel that they are racially suppressed:

     Despite the brutal reality of apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. […] For those who dominate and oppress us benefit most when we have nothing to give our own, when they have so taken from us our
dignity, our humanness that we have nothing left, no ‘homeplace’ where we can recover ourselves. (34)

Andrew Lesk points out that in Funny Boy “Arjie […] witnesses subjugation not only of Tamils to the majority Sinhalese but of various other groups, notably homosexuals […] and women” (35). Thus, the idea of home becomes a place for him where he can take shelter from the racial oppression that takes place in Sri Lanka. In other words, it is a place which is important to him. Unfortunately, he will soon lose his shelter when he is exiled from it.

The loss of home can be identified in two different ways. Firstly, he discovers that home will not be a sheltered place while he is struggling with himself and his homosexual feelings. In discovering his own sexual identity it is his family that stands for the oppression and home becomes a gendered site and a place of exile. Secondly, at the end of the novel he will experience how it is to stand without a “homeplace”. This is so, because the Sinhalese have literally burned down the family’s house, and in doing so they have also taken away the one place where they can “recover”, robbed them of their “homeplace”.

The dominating and oppressing Sinhalese have taken away their “dignity” and “humanness”, and as a result of that, the family has lost everything and therefore needs to start all over again in a new country where everything is new for them.

By the time I had turned onto our road, I could already feel a few drops of rain on my arms. The road was deserted. From the top of it, I could see our house, its black walls and beams visible above the other houses. When I reached it, I pushed open the gate. Something was different from the last time I was there. The house looked even more bare, even more desolate than before. Then I realized what had happened and I stared at our house in shock. Everything that was not burned had been stolen. […] How naked the house appeared without its door and windows, how hollow and barren with only scraps of paper and other debris in its rooms. I felt hot, angry tears begin to well up in me as I saw this final violation. Then, for the first time, I began to cry for our house. I sat on the verandah steps and wept for the loss of my home, for the loss of everything that I held to be precious. (310-311)

This passage mirrors a “mediat[ion] between times so that the entire narrative becomes a negotiation between childhood in an island of the past and adulthood in a continent of the

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1 Tariq Jazeel makes a similar reference to bell hooks in the article “Because Pigs Can Fly: Sexuality, race and the geographies of difference in Shyam Selvadurai’s Funny boy”.
diasporic present” (135) as Sharanya Jayawickrama puts forward. Or as Arjie himself puts it at the beginning of the novel:

Yet those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved. Like a ship that leaves a port for the vast expanse of sea, those much looked forward to days took me away from the safe harbour of childhood towards the precarious waters of adult life. (5)

Arjie’s statement clearly indicates that the story we are about to read is following the motif of a coming-of-age story. It is a journey of development with dimensions of both sexuality and ethnicity within a home and a country.

Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman put forward a theory of the home as the “territorial core” and that it can be ascribed to the notion of bringing up “identity, security and stimulation” (215). The authors also state that the concept of home has been feminised thus giving a home a personality of its own. This gendered site has developed a “feminisation of place” and thus developed the home “as a woman’s place [which] resulted in both ‘place’ in general and ‘home’ in particular being produced as sites of nurture, stability, reliability, and authenticity” (215). Already in the opening pages of the novel we learn that there are gendered sites and territories, both in Arjie’s home and at his grandparent’s home. On the “spend-the-day[s]” (Selvadurai 1) his grandparent’s yard has been divided between the female and male cousins:

[W]e had developed and refined a system of handling conflict and settling disputes ourselves. Two things formed the framework of this system: territoriality and leadership.

Territorially, the area around my grandparent’s house was divided into two. The front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys, although included in their group was my female cousin Meena. In this territory, two factions struggled for power, one led by Meena, the other by my brother, Varuna […].

The second territory was called “the girls’”, included in which, however, was myself, a boy. It was to this territory of “the girls’”, confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch, that I seemed to have gravitated naturally […].
For me, the primary attraction of the girls’ territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagination, I was selected as leader. (3)

For Arjie it is not the matter of being female but “the free play of fantasy” (3) that entices and lures him into the world of the girls. It is especially in the game of “bride-bride” (4) that he can use his imagination and transform himself into the role as a bride. The fascination of the game comes with his power “to leave the constraints of [him]self and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world […] seemed to revolve” (4-5). However, this transformation is only possible in the feminised spaces like the backyard and the kitchen porch. These sites become sites where gender identity are fluent. Arjie is not yet aware of sexuality and gender roles. He only sees the game as something neutral, as something that allows him the freedom of being himself which he cannot be in the boys’ world, a world where the boys played cricket, a game which is a typically masculine Sri Lankan sport. Arjie’s reason for not wanting to play their game is because of its discomforts, getting dirty and sweaty.

Arjie is the only one of the children who is allowed entrance into other feminised spaces, such as Radha Aunty’s and his mother’s bedrooms. According to Jayawickrama, these are “spaces which permit and enable the performing of an ideal of female identity” (128). Being in his mother’s bedroom was an experience that he considered “almost religious”. This is because even if he “adored the goddesses of the local cinema, Amma was the final statement in female beauty” for him. And to be allowed into her bedroom was for him “a greater boon than that granted by any god to a mortal” (Selvadurai 15). Radha Aunty’s room is also a feminised space that Arjie is allowed into. However, before she came back from America, it was just an ordinary and boring room. But after her return it is “transformed by her personal effects” (49). She has brought with her different kinds of make-up, make-up that his mother did not have. She has lipsticks and nail polish in all kinds of colours and shiny stars and circles that were like “pottus” (49). And for Arjie, these things look and belong to another world. Both these rooms are sites where he gets to experience feminine rituals and customs that create an “almost religious” (15).

Unfortunately, he would soon have to experience what it would be like to be exiled from both these feminised sites, both the backyard that belonged to “the girls”, and his mother’s bedroom. It all starts with his female cousin, Tanuja, coming back from abroad wanting to be the leader. Tanuja is often referred to as “Her Fatness” a cruel nickname that
Arjie feels belongs to “that cruelly direct way children have” (5). Lesk, however, calls attention to the irony of this nickname. Tanuja who is about to take away, and challenges, Arjie’s role as the leader is slowly “moving away from ‘Her Fatness’, to perhaps, Her Highness” (38). Tanuja coming from abroad has experiences of Western education, and therefore has a more closed bourgeois perspective. She feels that he cannot be the bride because “he’s not even a girl […] [a] boy cannot be the bride […] [a] girl must be the bride” (Selvadurai 11). Selvadurai says himself in an interview with Jim Marks that:

The people in the novel are in a place that has been colonised by Western powers for 400 years. A lot of Western ideas - bourgeois respectability, Victorian mortality - have become incorporated into the society, and are very much part of the Sri Lanka Society. (7)

This means, in other words, that Tanuja “has learned powerful, accusatory terms foreign, literally and figuratively, to young Sri Lankans” (Lesk 38). In saying these things, that Arjie cannot be the bride because he is not a girl, she forces the issues of gender and gender roles upon their fantasy play. Consequently, the world of the adults is being forced upon them. The world that has established which gender roles are socially accepted. And it is because of Tanuja, and maybe even more so because of her parents, that the other adults become aware of Arjie playing “bride-bride” with the girls and not cricket with the boys. Tanuja’s mother drags him into the drawing room, forcing him to face all the other adults who respond very negatively to his appearance. He is accused of being “funny”, a moment that will change everything for him:

One day, about a week after the incident at my grandparents’, I positioned myself outside my parents’ bedroom door. When Anula arrived with the sari, Amma took it and quickly shut the door. I waited patiently, thinking Amma had not yet put on her blouse and skirt, but the door never opened. Finally, perplexed that Amma had forgotten, I knocked timidly on the door. She did not answer, but I could hear her moving around inside. I knocked a little louder and called out ‘Amma’ through the keyhole. Still no response, and I was about to call her name again when she replied gruffly, ‘Go away. Can’t you see I am busy?’

[...] I crept away quietly to my bedroom, sat down on the edge of my bed, and stared at my feet for a long time. It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn’t comprehend. (16-17)
Exiling him from these feminised sites, his parents are trying to control his “funny” behaviour. Or as Tariq Jazeel puts it, “they hope the correct gender behaviours and sexual desires can be imposed on him, inscribed onto his body” (238). Because of being called “funny” Arjie is not allowed into his mother’s bedroom anymore and he realises that their relationship is forever changed and nothing would be the same between them again. But he does not realise why; he does not understand the meaning of “funny”. His mother does not know how to explain this to him maybe because she herself does not quite understand why, and therefore she says “[b]ecause the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly, that’s why” (19). This is an answer that does not satisfy him because he still does not understand. His mother is equally dissatisfied but she cannot see any other alternative for Arjie. Gayatri Gopinath argues, therefore, that she gives him an answer that “attempts to grant to the fixity of gender roles the status of universally recognized natural law and to root it in common sense” (172). Similarly, Arjie’s mother is also trying to create a universal law when she tells him that “big boys must play with other boys” (Selvadurai 20). Arjie who is still unaware of the stereotypical gender roles that society has implemented is not satisfied with his mother’s answer. Amma does not know how to explain the issue of gender for her son and therefore states that “[l]ife is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them” (20), when Arjie wonders why he have to play with the boys. Amma’s statements are examples of yet another thing that puts an end to his fantasy world without gender roles, and forces reality upon “bride-bride”.

Gopinath talks about Arjie’s entry into the boys’ world as an “entry into proper gender identification [which] is figured in terms of geography and spacialization, of leaving one carefully inscribed space of gender play and entering one of gender conformity” (170). She convincingly argues that the novel’s gendered sites iterate “nationalist framings of space” which talks about an “inner” space as a site of “spirituality and tradition” and personified as a woman, and an “outer” space which is a space of masculinity, “politics, materiality, and modernity” (170).2 The novel shows clear and distinct differences between what Gopinath refers to as “inner” and “outer” space. The “inner” site is where the girls’ territory is and where the women are ruling and the “outer” space is where the boys’ territory is, a territory of the masculine game of cricket.

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2 Gopinath Gayatri refers to Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution to the Woman’s Question" in order to get a more thorough analysis of how the “inner” and “outer” spaces were created.
And if you go beyond the borders of the grand parents’ yard, political and ethnic tensions are ruling the area.

However, Gopinath also argues that Selvadurai is challenging these gendered spaces. This is because he allows the “inner” space to be something more than a site of gender agreement. He allows gender and fantasy play. And by doing this he “reveal[s] how non-heteronormative embodiments, desires, and pleasures surface within even the most heteronormative of spaces” (170-171). By allowing gender and fantasy play, imagination becomes a strategy for Arjie which he uses to his advantage in the play.

However, Arjie is not prepared to leave his “inner” space and join the “outer” one. He is not prepared to let Tanuja take his place as the leader “claiming for herself the rituals [he] had so carefully invented and planned” (Selvadurai 21). He knows that he has done something wrong but he does not know what. The only thing he now knows is that he wants to go back to “the girls’” and he is prepared to do anything to accomplice that. He uses his wits and fantasy to find a way to upset Tanuja and disrupt the game. Lesk points out that Arjie now understands how “his desire to transgress matches his cunning and his ability to own the symbols which would ensure his place as leader, and that he must be more visibly male” (39). With this questionable statement he argues that Arjie’s cunning, to not let his cousin take over the leadership and to avoid his mother’s decision about playing with the boys, is very typical male behaviour. It can be debated whether this really is typical male behaviour or not. Who says that not also women can be very cunning and deceptive in their behaviour? Consequently, such behaviour can be difficult to gender. So why does Lesk do it? Is he trying to give Arjie some masculine traits and accordingly trying to rescue him from being too girly? In any case, Arjie’s behaviour in the game is soon outplayed by the battle of the sari.

The game is not just about playing different roles. It is also very much about the symbol of the sari, or as Lesk puts it forward, about the “questions around ownership of the sari; not that he [Arjie] ever wears it again, but that he has it” (39). As a part of his cunning and attempt to regain the part as the leader he “swallow[s] the bitter pill of humiliation” (Selvadurai 31) and agrees to play the part of the groom. How important the sari is to Arjie, or rather its importance as a symbol, becomes clear when “the sari began to tear […] and the sari tore all the way down” (35). It resulted in “a moment of stunned silence” (35). Arjie’s aspirations to become the leader have failed and his hope has been ripped in two. In anger, he grabs hold of Tanuja and rips her sleeve and it is now that the world of the adults again interferes. His grandmother comes out and she who does not realise the importance of the sari
being ripped apart is more upset about how Arjie has treated his cousin. However, even if the tearing of the sari was an accident it becomes a symbol for his departure of the girls’ world. He knows that he can “never enter the girls’ world again” (39) and that he never again would be able to transform himself into a bride. All his scheming and cunning has led nowhere. The exile from “the girls’ world” has “caught [him] between the boys’ and the girls’ worlds, not belonging or wanted in either” (39). However, all this rebelling and to openly wanting to be a part of the girls’ world have made him realise something. From now on in the novel he is portrayed as a more careful boy (or young male) not wanting to give the rest of the judgemental world any reason to marginalize him.

By excluding Arjie from “the girls” (3) and forcing him into the boys’ world of games of cricket, his father also forces his idea of what masculinity is and how a proper man should act upon him. He feels that Arjie’s “funniness” is some sort of a danger to the norms of masculinity and therefore, believes that by excluding him from “the free play of fantasy” (3) he will force his son to change his personality. This can be linked to how Pierre-Jean Cabanis looked upon physical training. He saw it as a way to change a man’s character and to help him escape unwanted “imagination” (Mosse 61). George L. Mosse argues that the world has invented homogenized stereotypes. In Mosse’s analysis, as in many others, we live in a world that does not look upon men and women “as individuals but as types” a fact that “meant that there was no room for individual variations” (6). And variations that failed to live up to the masculine ideal became then the “countertypes [...] the traditional outsiders” (13). There are several examples of countertypes; however, the ones that are considered most frightening are homosexuals. This is because “they were stereotyped, on the other, because they were assimilated” (71). It was frightening, for the rest of the society, to know that they could “live unrecognised, hiding among the population” (70-71). This is something of which Diggy, Arjie’s older brother, is aware and afraid. He knows about Shehan and his reputation and he warns Arjie to be friends with him, saying “‘[i]f you remain Soyza’s friend, people will think you’re like him and you’ll become the laughing-stock of the whole school’” and “that Soyza could easily lead you down the wrong path” (Selvadurai 232, 256).

The ones who became the outsiders were those who did not follow the masculine norms and who could not live up to the masculine ideal. An important symbol of this masculine ideal is the male body. Gymnastics was considered the right way to reach the “standard of masculine beauty” (Mosse 28). Gymnastics was a sport that “control[ed] unlawful passions as the moral imperative gained ever-greater importance in discussions
about physical exercise” (40-41). According to Mosse, Germans thought that gymnastics was one of the sports to practice in order to approach the male ideal. They meant that it was useless to be part of a team because team sports only meant competition. The English, on the other hand, and more important in this context of a previous British colony, regarded team sports as an “education in manliness” and that boys in public schools “had to prove [themselves] in the fight against sin” (46). Arjie’s parents, and especially his father, are worried about their son turning out to be a “funny one” (Selvadurai 14) and force him to play with the boys and take part in their game of cricket. In doing this they hope to control his “unlawful passions” and teach him how to “fight against sin”. Unfortunately, Arjie does not measure up to the masculine norm and the standard of masculine beauty. He does not want to take part in cricket and “[t]he pleasure the boys had standing for hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun, watching the batsmen run from crease to crease, was incomprehensible to [him]” (Selvadurai 3). Here, masculinity becomes a set of norms that Arjie can not measure up to. Jazeel argues that the “attempt to discipline his body, to regulate [his] sexual desires, to safeguard [his] heteronormative masculinity” instead “produces in this case a boy who feels ‘funny’” (234). However, the novel will show that Arjie is able to find an alternative masculinity together with his alliances with Uncle Daryl, Jegan and Shehan. This I will return to in full in the section “Exile from the Family”.

Besides this, his appearance does not seem to be very masculine; rather he has very feminine traits. This we learn from Radha when she teaches Arjie how to put on make up: “‘Gosh’, she said. ‘You would have made a beautiful girl!’” (50); and aunty Doris thinks that Arjie “should have been a girl with those eyelashes” (55). Moreover, Jayawickrama draws attention to Arjie being given “stereotypical negative attributes of female identity” (128) in the novel as in the case when Shehan says to him “[d]on’t be such a girl!” (Selvadurai 249). Another example is when his male cousins give him the nickname “girlie-boy” (25) when he has been forced to play cricket with them. However, a double standard can be found within Arjie’s family about one’s ability to cross gender boundaries.

One of his female cousins, Meena, is doing exactly the same thing as Arjie is doing, only opposite. She played with the boys and strived to be their leader. However, just like Jayawickrama says, we never learn anything more about her character and “her identity is never […] problematized by considering what experiences she might have in the boys’ domain” (128). A possible reason for this lack of problematising in the novel can be linked to Penelope Eckert’s and Sally McConnell-Ginet’s theory about the fact that it is easier for girls
to get away with playing with boy toys than the other way around. A theory which I will return to more in detail in the section “Exile from the Family”, when talking about the differences between gender related toys.

**Exile from Pursuing Sexual Desires**

While the previous section discussed Arjie’s exile from home and feminised space, to a school that would teach him to be a man because of his sexuality, this section will discuss how ethnicity can exile people from each other, not allowing them to marry and pursue their sexual desires. The novel’s characters are people who live in a society where ethnicity is constantly present and where the family and its honour are extremely important.

The society Arjie lives in is an ethnically divided society. It is a society where religion and ethnicity are crucial to your own identity and to power relations between the people. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that even if

> the discourse of religion and culture is distinct from that of power relations, concretely and historically it is always embedded in them. This is true not only in relation to hierarchies of power within the religious and cultural institutions and their relations to more general structures of class and power within the society, but also in relation to the religious and cultural imaginations and their hierarchies of desirability as well as constructions of inclusions and exclusions. (42-43)

In other words, religion and culture are always linked to power, not only in cultural institutions but also, very much so, in society itself. In *Funny Boy*, religion and ethnicity are linked to power on several levels and the linking dictates how the characters live their lives in their society. It affects them personally and in their relationships with others, for example the lives of Radha Aunty, Aunty Doris and Arjie’s mother and father. Minoli Salgado puts forward that they “cover a wide range of ethnic and cultural pairings (Tamil-Sinhala, Burgher-Tamil, Tamil-English)” which are brought up in order to show how they have “fail[ed] as a result of the collective investment in maintaining ethnic differences” (8). All these pairs of different ethnicities fail because they simply cannot overcome the long history of conflict and the dividing of ethnicities.

Ethnicity is, according to Nira Yuval-Davis, a notion of “dividing the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’” (44), and in her discussion about the ‘other’ Yuval-Davis refers to Zygmunt Bauman’s book *Life in Fragments*, drawing on his argument that morality has to be looked
upon as “pre-social” (46). This pre-social morality appears when a person becomes aware of
an “other’s” existence “and a choice arises concerning the way in which that ‘other’ should be
treated” (46-47). Yuval-Davis also points out that Bauman clarifies that morality is not
something that everyone possesses, but that

the need for human morality precedes rather than follows specific religious
and other cultural systems. […] All societies have a pool of cultural traditions,
collective memories and ‘common sense’ in which the image of the ‘others’
and the ‘rules’ about how they should be handled are to be found. (47)

Racism and ethnic prejudices are then some things that happen when you decide “to exclude
and/or exploit the immutable ‘other’” (49) in one way or another.

In Funny Boy, these “cultural traditions, collective memories and ‘common sense’”,
which shape how you treat the “other”, are very strong and present. The novel shows
specifically how culture and collective memories shape, and decide, the characters’ belief in
how you should treat and behave towards someone that is not Tamil or Sinhalese. In some
cases, it even leads to outspoken racism. This is the case when the families of Radha and Anil
hear about their relationship. Both Radha’s mother and Anil’s father are very outspoken in
their feelings about their childrens’ romance. Radha’s mother, Ammachi, gets upset when she
first learns the name of the man that has given her daughter a lift home: “A Sinhalese. I knew
it! […] Only a Sinhalese would be impertinent enough to offer an unmarried girl a lift”
(Selvadurai 58). Anil’s father also makes a remark about their relationship and about Tamils
in general: “We are from a good family as well. High-country Sinhalese, we are. Last thing
we also want is for our son to marry some non-Sinhalese. […] Be careful. We Sinhalese are
losing patience with you Tamils and your arrogance” (66). Both these remarks are very
judgemental and racist. Both of them let the country’s long history of ethnic conflict influence
and decide how they treat someone who does not belong to the same religion and ethnicity as
they. We do not get any information regarding the exact reason to why Anil’s father feels the
way he does, for example if something personal has happened to him because of the ethnic
conflict. However, we do get to know the reason behind Ammachi’s racist attitude. Her father
was one of many that were killed in the race riots of the 50s.3 That memory has forever
changed how she feels towards all Sinhalese and how she feels they should be treated.

3 The race riots of the 50s is the only historical marker in the novel that Minoli Salgado argues ”marks [Arjie’s]
awareness [and] works to reinforce his increasing awareness of ethnic polarization” (9).
Ammachi’s remark makes Radha call her a racist. She does not realise why her mother cannot put this incident behind her and move on. She does not feel that her grandfather’s murder is “a reason to hate every Sinhalese” (59). Janaki’s response to this is: “you were too young to remember when they brought the body home. You should have seen it. It was as if someone had taken the lid of a tin can and cut pieces out of him” (59). In other words, Radha is lacking the “collective memor[y]” (Yuval-Davis 47) that has shaped her mother’s behaviour. If she would have had the memory of her grandfather’s brutally mutilated body then she also would have behaved differently. As it is now, her behaviour and open mind have been influenced by her living abroad for a longer amount of time. It has made her start to question issues like ethnicity.

The notion of otherness can be linked to ethnicity, but it can also be linked to gender which can be seen in Funny Boy. The novel shows examples of how women are seen as others and are somewhat oppressed. Yuval-Davis points out that “the construction of womanhood has a property of ‘otherness’” (47). “In the 70s and the 80s, feminist politics were neatly divided into separate schools” (6). What separated these schools were their opinions on what they thought was the reason behind women’s oppression, some of them thought it was the law, others pointed at capitalism whereas others argued that the reason behind women’s oppression was the husbands “holding on to their privileges” (7). Yuval-Davis also argues that

Women’s oppression is endemic and integral to social relations with regard to the distribution of power and material resources in the society. Gender, ethnicity and class, […] are intermeshed in each other and articulated by each other in concrete social relations. They cannot be seen as additive and no one of them can be prioritised abstractly. (7-8)

This statement can be linked to Henderson’s theory on the interrelations between race and gender. In a reading you must take into consideration both, if you do not you risk to miss alternative readings. One person cannot be one without the other. Like Henderson, Yuval-Davis also points out how important it is to emphasise the connection between issues like gender and ethnicity and that they can not be seen or analysed separately.

In Funny Boy we can see examples of this oppression and “otherness” to a person who is very close to Arjie, his mother. And therefore, this is a form of oppression that affects his life and journey to adulthood. Between Arjie’s parents it is his father who has the superior
role which automatically positions his mother in the inferior role. He is the one that makes all decisions and formulates all rules. This is apparent in the issue about what Amma should wear on his mother’s birthday: “we had been late, because etiquette (or rather my father) demanded that Amma wear a sari for the grand occasion of her mother-in-law’s sixtieth birthday” (Selvadurai 6). And when their son’s unusual behaviour comes to his attention, Arjie’s father immediately blames Amma for this: “[i]f he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing-stock of Colombo, it’ll be your fault, […]. You always spoil him and encourage all his nonsense” (14). Being in the inferior role that Amma is she cannot do anything about this. She is also aware of how society would look at her: “if the child turns out wrong, it’s the mother they always blame, never the father” (19). Her role as a mother has become her identity. Her identity as a woman has been suppressed. It is not until when she meets Daryl Uncle that she once again can find her identity as a woman. She starts to dress “up in her smartest pants suits and [leaves] the house, not returning until it was time for Sonali and Diggy to come home from school. She seemed very different […], happy but strangely nervous” (113). And furthermore, as Jayawickrama also points out (128), it is not until we hear Daryl say her name, “Nalini”(Selvadurai 106), that we learn her name. Before she had been reduced to the name Amma, mother.

Jayawickrama puts forward that it is the women’s “ability […] to transgress social norms” (128) that makes it easier for Arjie to affiliate with them. Likewise it is easier for them to affiliate with him because of his transgression of the border of gender. Both Amma and Radha Aunty include Arjie in their secret relationships with Daryl and Anil. Maybe they feel that because he also conceals something he is the one person whom they can trust and put their faith to. He is just as marginalized and powerless, due to his in-between state as a “girlie-boy”, exiled from both spaces. Both women make him their confidant and share their individual secrets with him assured that he will not betray them or their secrets. It establishes a bond between Arjie and the women, a bond that is created because of his funniness. Radha Aunty uses Arjie as an excuse when she is going to meet Anil. As for example on the day at the zoo when she says to Mala Aunty: “‘our friend’- meaning [Arjie] - ‘has to use the toilet.’ She pressed my hand hard, warning me not to seem surprised” (Selvadurai 83). She entrusts Arjie with her secret, the secret that no one else could know anything about.

Amma also puts a lot of trust in her son. She expects Arjie to keep her relationship with Daryl a secret, not to tell anyone that “Daryl Uncle was with us all the time” (117) during their vacation in the hills. She also says to him “[d]on’t tell anyone about this, you
hearing?" (124), referring to her going looking for Daryl at his home when she was worried about his disappearance. Confiding in a child would not normally be a good idea. But in this case it seems that the women know they can trust the child because like them, Arjie is also contradicting and challenging social norms, being a “girlie-boy”. In other words, the norms that society and the long history of tradition have implemented.

However, at this point in his life Arjie is not aware of the familial ridicule Radha Aunty and his mother would have to endure if their secrets were to come out. It is not until later in his life when he has come more to terms with his own sexuality that he understands. At the moment, the only thing he worries about is what would happen if his father found out Amma’s secret:

I felt a cold chill of fear as I realized that I was an unwitting accomplice in this scheme for Daryl Uncle and her to spend time together, away from the family. I thought of my father and felt my dread deepen. What would happen if he found out? Surely they would have to be divorced. (118)

Thus, the oppression of women and seeing them as “other”, in Funny Boy, begins in the home where it is the father who represents patriarchy. This idea of patriarchy is very differentiated, it comes in many forms and appears and is at work in many places such as the “social domains of employment, household production, culture, sexuality, violence and the state” (Yuval-Davis 7). In such a patriarchal system the family becomes a “social unit” (7) in which it is the father who rules, seeing it as his duty to control the women’s virtue in order to save the family honour. In order to save the family honour and the women’s virtue both Radha Aunty and Amma were sent away when their families learnt about their romances with men of another ethnicity. The family thought that if they sent them away from the temptation they would forget them and everything would go back to be normal again. This kind of exclusion can be linked to Arjie’s exclusion from “the girls’” (3) in order for the family not to be “the laughing-stock” (232) of the town.

The characters in the novel will become aware that it would lead to exclusion and exile from their families if they would go through with it and marry an “other”. At first Radha Aunty is very open minded regarding issues like ethnicity and love but she still has some doubts because she knows about her grandfather’s murder. So when Anil brings up the question of marriage her hesitation shows:

‘Would you allow your child to marry a Sinhalese?’ ‘Yes, definitely.’ ‘And yourself?’ ‘What?’ ‘Would you marry a Sinhalese?’ Radha Aunty glanced
quickly at him and then looked away. ‘Probably not.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because.’ ‘So then you are anti-Sinhalese.’ ‘No!’ ‘But you just said-’ ‘What I meant was that, yes, in principle I would. But now…’ (68-69)

She has now realised that everything is not as simple as she wants it to be. From this passage we learn that even though she lacks the collective memory that her mother has about the past, she struggles with her principles. In other words, what she feels she ought to do in order to stay true to her ethnicity. She is in conflict with herself, torn between her sexual desire, that tells her to get married, and her ethnicity. This conflict can be linked to Arjie’s inner conflict concerning his ethnicity and sexuality. This is an example that shows how important it is to do a simultaneous reading of both sexuality and ethnicity, in order to read and understand the depth of her personal conflict.

From Aunty Doris she learns what the outcome would be if she were to marry Anil. Aunty Doris is a Burgher who married Paskaran, a Tamil. Even if their marriage were a happy one she sacrificed her family to be with him. “My father never did forgive me and he forbade my mother and sisters to have anything to do with me. They emigrated to England without ever telling me, left no address or anything” (81). As can be seen in the example, it is once again the father who makes all the decisions and has taken upon himself to protect the family honour, and in this case it results in excluding the daughter from her family. Doris advises Radha to take this into consideration before she makes a decision and wants her to know what she would be sacrificing. She says: “life is a funny thing, you know. It goes on, whatever decisions you make” (81).

Arjie’s mother also finds out that she would be sacrificing, just like Aunty Doris, her own family if she does not stop looking for answers regarding Daryl’s disappearance. In her quest for answers she gets advice from several people around her to leave it be, as for example from Q.C. Uncle:

‘These days one must be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.’ […] ‘So,’ she said, ‘a close and dear friend dies and I must do nothing about it?’ ‘Exactly, my dear,’ he replied. ‘But how can one live with oneself, knowing one has done nothing?’ ‘You must remind yourself that you have a family and they could be at risk.’ (141)

However, it is not until Arjie gets physically hurt because of her quest that she finally realises that she has to stop searching for answers in order to save her family.
It is not only the women in the novel that have experience of having relationships with an ethnically other. Even Arjie’s proper father had in his youth an affair with a girl from another ethnicity, an English girl. But because of their different ethnicities the relationship did not work. They had both wanted to marry each other. But when he had gone back to Sri Lanka for a holiday he had come “to his senses. An English girl, […], would never fit in with his family” (164). Again it is the family and the family honour that in the end makes the relationship impossible.

In all these examples, Radha and Anil, Amma and Daryl, Appa and the English girl, we can see how neither can subvert their ethnicities, or as Yuval-Davis so convincingly argues “[g]ender, ethnicity and class, […] are intermeshed in each other and articulated by each other in concrete social relations” (7). None of these characters can escape their gender, ethnicity or sexuality. It is these attributes that define them and shape their “social relations”, and which eventually will put them in exile and oppression if they try to “marry outside their race”. This is because “most people marry their own kind” (54). If not, the sacrifice would be too big, the sacrifice of being exiled from their families.

Exile from the Family

Even if Arjie cannot live up to the masculine norms he finds an alternative masculinity that helps him cope with his several forms of exile, which will be discussed in this section. His masculine relations of alliances give him the possibility to see alternative routes. Routes that help him become the person he wants to be, even if that means being “funny” and will eventually exile him from his family.

The biggest concern in anti-essentialist gender studies is the need to think of a new way to approach the idea of “a single, distinctive form of masculinity across time and space” (Johnson and Meinhof 19). In doing this, theorists are accentuating how masculinity is constructed in society and deeply influenced by its context, and how they are therefore very intangible and changeable. In thinking of masculinity as “multiple subjectivities” (19), they give priority to the pluralized instead of the singularised:

The concept of ‘male power’ is then dislodged by the notion of ‘hegemonic’ or ‘hierarchical’ masculinities, perhaps best characterized as those forms of masculinity able to marginalize and dominate not only women, but also other men, on the grounds of […] class, race and/or sexuality. (20)
Johnson and Meinhof refer to Robert Connell’s book *Masculinities*, in which he argues that the best way to theorise hegemonic power is to see men as a group and study how power decides, within that group, how they work together:

To recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of *alliance*, *dominance* and *subordination*. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on. (37; italics added)

Arjie is, as Lesk points out, “‘inside’ the masculinist discourse to which he biologically defaults as male, but also outside it, as (self-) estranged funny boy” (32). And as both an insider and an outsider he experiences typically, what Connell has discussed in another context, “the relations between different kinds of masculinity” (37). He experiences relations of alliance together with Uncle Daryl, Jegan and of course with Shehan, all of whom see Arjie for who he is, beyond his “tendencies”. With the principle Black Tie he has a relation of dominance because he, literally, loses his voice when he must stand and face the principle and his cane. And with his own father he has a relation of subordination, this is because it is his father who makes all the decisions and therefore Arjie is left with no other choice than to obey. At least for some time anyway.

The alliances with both Uncle Daryl and Jegan come from the fact that they are men that Arjie finds appealing. This is because, according to Lesk, “they take an unfettered interest in him and come to his defense” (42). Another reason is because both of them change his sense of home. Daryl Uncle becomes “a frequent visitor” (Selvadurai 113) to the house that previously had been his father’s domain. He is a person that makes Arjie laugh and always makes an effort to include Arjie in the conversations that he has with Amma. He is also quite different compared to Arjie’s father, both in looks and in his opinions about issues like gender and race. Daryl’s appearance seems to be favoured by Arjie:

I found myself observing his high cheekbones and the glints of gold in his brown beard, his thighs and the way they changed colour at the edge of his shorts, and his gentle, courteous manner, […]. I couldn’t help comparing him to my father, who, with his balding head, thin legs, slight paunch, and abrupt way of talking to Amma, cut a poor figure next to him. (116)
In this passage it becomes evident that Arjie is more appealed by Daryl and that he is figured as more attractive than the father. The alliance with Daryl also brings out an early homosexual attraction in Arjie that foreshadows a later attraction to other men.

The difference between the two men is also apparent in their opinions about Arjie’s reading. One of Arjie’s favourite books is *Little Women*, a book that according to his father is “a book for girls. A book that boys should not be reading, especially a boy of twelve” (104). Daryl Uncle, on the other hand, does not think that it is a girl’s book and he even offers to go and buy Arjie the sequels. Arjie is again surprised when he realises that *Little Women* also used to be one of Daryl Uncle’s favourite books, thus, learning that maybe it was not a book for girls only, after all. Maybe for Arjie, reading the book was just another way to “overcome the limitations imposed by assumptions” (Henderson 258). The alliance with Daryl is a crucial turning point in Arjie’s journey. It gives him the possibility to see an alternative way in a site which otherwise is dominated by subordination.

In Eckert’s and McConnell-Ginet’s study of gender, they bring up how it is the father who is more likely to use “differential language patterns to boys and girls”, that it is the father who is more likely to “reward [the child] for choosing gender-appropriate toys” (20), and that this is more aimed to sons than at daughters. They also point to the fact that activities and toys that are associated with boys have more value and that boys often are discouraged from having anything to do with activities and toys that can be associated with girls. This is because, a girl can get away for acting “like a boy” and that she then can get the label “tomboy” (21). In some societies this label is accepted but it would be quite different if it was the other way around. If a boy was to prefer to play with the girls and their toys he would get the disparaging term “sissy” (22). This can all be linked to *Funny Boy*. Arjie’s father is the one who discourages Arjie to play with girls, or in this case read “girls’ book”, fearing that he will get the label “sissy”, or “funny”. This might thus explain how it is accepted that Meena plays cricket with the boys without the threat of being labelled negatively. I will return to a more elaborated discussion about labels and their different meanings in the section “Exile from Sri Lanka”, in relation to the words “funny” and “bride-bride”.

Daryl’s alliance with Arjie is further illustrated in that he is also someone who tries to explain to him issues of race, and the reason to why people can not marry outside of their ethnicity, just like Amma.
It was not that easy [...]. Some Sri Lankan people thought Burgher people were too white to marry their children and some Burgher people thought Sri Lankan people were too brown to marry theirs. (116)

However, both Daryl’s and Amma’s explanations are too extensive for Arjie and the scope of the conflict makes Daryl Uncle’s death incomprehensive for him at the end. It exists outside of his world:

A man I had known, a man who was my mother’s lover, was now dead. I was aware that it was a significant thing, a momentous event in my life even, but, [...] it seemed something that happened outside my reality, my world. (136)

The masculine alliance with Jegan, like the one with Daryl, can be linked to Arjie’s homosexuality. Both of these men are men that trigger homosexual feelings and desire in him. Jegan changes Arjie’s perspective of the home when he comes to their family. Jayawickrama puts forward the notion of “personal space [becoming] an increasingly fraught site for Arjie, the performance of gender which transforms space modulates into the transfigurative enacting of desire” (129). She means that it is not until Arjie meets Jegan that he becomes aware of the sexual desire within himself, even if there were signs of sexual desire in his alliance with Daryl. She also argues that Selvadurai formulates this powerful desire by using “the transformation of space” (129), and refers to the passage when Jegan moves in with Arjie’s family and Arjie expresses “I felt that his presence would invest this commonplace, familiar environment with something extraordinary [...] the place seemed to have become sacred by his presence” (Selvadurai 162-163). Very soon Arjie starts to take notice of Jegan and his looks and realises that he “admired how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers” (161). These kinds of thoughts, regarding Jegan’s appearance, can be linked to the similar kinds of thoughts that Arjie had in regards to Daryl’s appearance. Thoughts which previously had been suppressed inside him were now something that he felt was not banned anymore. He acknowledges to himself that

[...] lately, I had found that I looked at men, at the way they were built, the grace with which they carried themselves, the strength of their gestures and movements. Sometimes these men were present in my dreams. I felt the reason for this sudden admiration of men had to do with my distress over the recent changes in my own body [...]. I had started to notice a wetness on my sarong in the morning. [...] I longed to pass this awkward phase, to become as physically attractive and graceful as the men I saw around me. (161)
This passage can be linked to the motif of a coming-of-age story and Arjie’s journey into becoming a young, “attractive and graceful” man. And it is thanks to his alliances with Daryl and Jegan that he is about to leave his childhood behind and move forward to be the person he wants to be.

Jegan is also the first one that really defends him when Arjie’s father takes up his anxiety about his son’s “tendencies”. Jegan responds that he does not think that there is anything wrong with him and for this he grows as a person in Arjie’s eyes. It creates a bond between them and Arjie states that “I had never talked to anybody like that before nor had anybody spoken to me with such frankness” (205). It is also important that both Daryl and Jegan, who influence Arjie so much, are men that are opposed to how the government oppresses the Tamil minority. And consequently Arjie becomes well conversant with the struggle.

Another crucial point in his journey towards adulthood is when he seems to take an opposite direction of what his father believes, which is that it is important not to upset the Sinhalese. At least not if you want your business to flourish. The father is willing to look the other way when something awful is happening, as in the scene on the beach. He is aware of the fact that homosexuality is something that exists in Sri Lanka and although he condemns it he implies that it is a good thing as long as it helps the country to reach its commercial purpose, and help his own hotel reach its commercial purposes:

‘What am I to do? They have paid for the rooms. Besides, if I tried to stop it, they’d simply go to another hotel on the front.’ ‘But isn’t it illegal?’ […] ‘I don’t see any police out there, do you?’ […] ‘It’s not just our luscious beaches that keep the tourist industry going, you know. We have other natural resources as well.’ (171)

That kind of “natural resources” is something that Yuval-Davis calls attention to when she refers to “relationships between racialised others” and, in doing so she takes up the industry of sex tourism as an example. A tourism which has become one of many post-colonial countries’ biggest source of “economic survival” allowing “male orientalist dreams of inexhaustible pools of sexual pleasures and ‘exotic’ sexual objects” (52). Arjie’s father has no problem accepting foreign men using these young boys sexually in order for himself, and his hotel, to prosper. Looking at homosexuality this way he does not have any problems with it.

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4 Andrew Lesk makes a similar point in the article "Ambivalence at the Site of Authority: Desire and Difference in Funny Boy".
But when it comes to his own son showing certain tendencies he immediately becomes oppressive and starts to take action to prevent it from flourishing. Jayawickrama points out that “while Arjie’s sexuality is a threat to norms of masculinity, sex between men for sale is an aspect of the economy that allows [the father] to survive as a hotelier” (130). Again it is important not to oversee either ethnicity or sexuality to understand this scene. Most of the men who come and use these young Sri Lankan boys sexually are probably white men from the West. Their ethnicity and sexual preference do not matter, but Arjie’s homosexual feelings towards someone who does not belong to the same ethnicity as he does, who is a Sinhalese and not a Tamil, matter.

In order to prevent Arjie’s tendencies to flourish, his father decides to transfer him to the Victoria Academy, a school that he feels will be better for his son because “the Academy will force [him] to become a man” (Selvadurai 210). In saying this he does not just mean that he wants his son to grow up but also to become a heterosexual, and thus also follow the norms of masculinity. Ironically though, it is at this school that Arjie confirms his homosexuality as a “funny one” (14). John Beynon writes about the Victorian public school and that it has been named to be nothing less than a “factory for gentlemen”. It was a site that was supported on “intimidation and violence” in order to “facilitate the development in boys of both the mental and physical toughness which were the hallmarks of Victorian masculinity” (41). It was a school that would give the boys “a healthy mind and body” but at the same suppress their sexuality (41). The Victoria Academy is ruled by the principle, the Black Tie, with an iron hand. He rules the pupils and, in similar Victorian spirit, he bases his ruling on intimidation and violence. He is especially attentive when it comes to the pupils showing any tendencies of being “funny” and he sees it as his duty to give them “a healthy mind [and to] suppress their sexuality”. Any boy who are too feminine, would it be if they were to wear their hair too long, blink too hard or lick their lips (Selvadurai 211), they would have to be punished and consequently become disregard an “ills of burden”. And “once you became an ills of burden, you remained one for a long time” (224). Suppressing someone’s sexuality is very much linked with the idea of a healthy mind. In this case, it could be interpreted as having a healthy mind is to show no “tendencies”, that is, being heterosexual.

This kind of punishment is a fact and as Diggy says it: “[o]nce you come to The Queen Victoria Academy you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other boys will look down on you” (211). This is something that shocks Arjie and he does not understand why
someone does not do anything about it, like telling their parents. On his first day at the new school he gets even more shocked. This time, it is because of how the other boys act:

This door opened out onto a quadrangle where a game of rugger was in progress. I paused in the doorway, reluctant to descend into the quadrangle. Most of the boys were much older and bigger than I was, and they were playing rugger with a brutality I had never seen at St. Gabriel’s.

[...] The open corridor outside the classrooms was filled with boys about my size, yet they seemed much older. The bravado with which they walked and the crude words they used reminded me of the boys I had seen playing on the railway lines and beaches. (214-215)

Gayatri Gopinath argues that the school “functions as a site for the indoctrination of normative gender and sexual identity as well as ethnic affiliation” (175). In doing this she, like myself, argues that a simultaneous reading is necessary, both sexuality and ethnicity are issues that must be analysed, in order to fully understand the depth and the meaning of the school. Gopinath brings up as an example the use of surnames instead of first names which immediately indicate the pupils as being either Tamil or Sinhalese. It is not until Arjie and Shehan become more intimate that they start to call each other by their first names instead of their surnames, Chelvaratnam and Soyza, which are ethnically indicating. The school is also a racialised site in the sense that it becomes a place where Arjie meets other racialised marginalisation. It is not until now that he becomes fully aware of how much the Tamils must fight the ongoing racism that exists in their everyday life. There is a division between the different ethnicities, not just because of the pupils’ surnames, but also in dividing the classes. There are Tamil classes and there are Sinhalese classes. He also comes face to face with racism when another student does not want him in the same class because of his surname, in other words because of his ethnicity. Another occasion when racism shows, and which Arjie becomes a witness to, is the scene in the toilet when a Tamil student gets attacked by Sinhalese students. Jazeel brings out a descriptive statement regarding the Academy as a site which indoctrinates the boys to issues as gender, sexuality and ethnicity, when referring to the following passage:

[A]t the Academy – the best school of all - Arjie witnesses the social performances that reinforce the marginalising discourses of race and ethnicity,
and the manly masculinities that underscore these racialised identifications. (241)

For Arjie, the school is a site where he feels different, both in regards to his ethnicity and sexuality. However, he soon finds comfort in his relation of alliance with Shehan. They are similar in the fact that neither of them fit the standard of the masculine ideal, instead both of them are feminised. Shehan is a boy, who like Arjie, is different. However, he has something that Arjie lacks, and that is power and self-confidence. A power and self-confidence that could be connected to him being more confident with his sexuality than what Arjie is:

[I]t became evident to me that Souza had a certain power which gave him immunity from bullies like Salgado. Where this came from I didn’t understand. It was certainly not his physical strength. His long eyelashes and prominent cheekbones gave his face a fragility that looked like it could easily be shattered. Yet there was a confidence about him, an understanding of his own power. He was also daring, for, unlike any of the other boys, he wore his hair long. It fell almost to his shoulders. (217)

His relation of alliance with Shehan gives him an entrance into a deeper understanding of the issues of ethnicity and sexuality. This alliance is also another crucial turning point in Arjie’s journey toward adulthood, a turning point of possibilities. Shehan is the one who informs him about the political conflict that goes on within the walls of the Academy. It is a political conflict that mirrors the political conflict outside of the walls of the school. Shehan tells him about the conflict’s main characters: the principal, Black Tie, and the vice principle, Lokubandara. He goes on by saying that Black Tie, a Tamil, wants to stay in charge of the school so he can keep it multiethnic while Lokubandara, a Sinhalese, wants to transform the school which he feels is too British. He wants to change it into a Buddhist school. Consequently, that would mean that there would be no room for the Tamils seeing that all Buddhist were Sinhalese (220), and as Jazeel points out it would “marginal[ise] Tamil students and […] the Tamil teachers” even further (242). Arjie is a boy who believes in a multiethnic society and he has several friends who are not Tamils, such as Shehan, who soon also would become his lover. As a consequence, he is not sure that just because he is a Tamil, as the principal, it is with him that he must feel solidarity:

I was not sure that, as a Tamil, my loyalties lay with Black Tie. I thought of Mr. Lokubandara and the way Salgado and his friends had assaulted that Tamil boy.

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I thought of the way Black Tie had beaten both Shehan and me. 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. (247)

Arjie refuses to follow the political and social structure at the school and it is his friendship with Shehan that makes him go against everything that his father fears. This is because Shehan is both Sinhalese and rumour has it that he is gay. Arjie is taking a stand for his own sexuality, his “tendencies”, and puts them above the issue of ethnicity. Their alliance soon develops into something more than just being friends. At night Arjie starts having erotic dreams about him and Shehan and the following morning he feels “the familiar wetness on [his] sarong” (243). Then one day Shehan suddenly surprises him by giving him a kiss: “[m]y mouth must have opened in surprise, because I felt his tongue against mine for a brief instant. Then it was over” (249). It is a kiss that confuses him and he does not know what to think of it. But still it is a kiss which makes him long for more kisses: “I realized I had not only liked that kiss but I was also eager to experience it again in all its detail and sensation” (251). In Shehan he finds a kindred spirit, someone that is just as he is:

The difference within me that I sometimes felt I had, that had brought me so much confusion, whatever this difference, it was shared by Shehan. I felt amazed that a normal thing – like my friendship with Shehan – could have such powerful and hidden possibilities. […] I now knew that the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along. (256)

Arjie has now come to a point in his life when he is aware of how issues such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity can, and probably will, put a constrain to his life as well as to the people around him. This awareness has moved him further away from “the free play of fantasy” (3) and after his first sexual encounter with Shehan he realises, as Gopinath argues, that “such homoerotic sex has pushed him outside the purview of family as he has known it, produc[ing] a form of exile that is layered onto the previous ones and that prefigures the ones to come” (172).

In a game of hide-and-seek, which in this context is very suitable, Shehan seduces Arjie and they have sex. Both of them hide in the garage so that Arjie’s sister will not find them. The symbolism in the game hide-and-seek is quite obvious. Previously, Arjie has been forced to hide his deviant “tendencies” and feelings and now he hides his homosexual love to Shehan in the darkness of the garage. The fact that it takes place in the garage, a place that is detached...
from the home itself, is something that Jazeel points to as being important. He argues that “the garage, the very alveoli of domestic non-space, is the only place in the house where Arjie can explore his as yet latent same sex desire” (239). He refers to Gaston Bachelard’s book *The Poetics of Space*, which brings up the “images/dreams of the cellar as a domestic space of concealment and fear” that Jazeel argues can just as easily be applied to the space of the garage. This is an argument that is very convincingly argued because as mentioned previously it is in the darkness of the garage that Arjie conceals his homosexual desire and feelings from his sister Sonali, but also from the rest of his family and the world:

‘Ready or not, I’m coming’. […] Sonali’s footsteps were coming up the driveway towards the garage door. […] ‘I’m here,’ she said tentatively, peering into the garage. ‘I’m coming to catch you.’ […] She stood there for a few moments longer and then, either because she was afraid of the dark or because she thought she was mistaken and we were not in there, she walked away. (259)

Afterwards, however, he does have to go outside from the concealment that the garage offers and face his family inside the house. Once seated at the table and he starts to look at his family he sensed that he “had committed a terrible crime against them, against the trust and love they had given [him] (262), or as Gopinath expresses it “an unbridgeable distance” had opened up between him and the rest of the family. He had now chosen “the wrong path” (Selvadurai 256) that his brother had warned about. Arjie compares “the innocence of [his mother’s] smile and the dreadful act [he] had just committed” and he even goes so far as to believe that his father “had been right to try and protect me from what he feared was inside me, but he had failed. What I had done in the garage had moved me beyond his hand” (262). Again he is being exiled, now from his own family, an exile that is being reinforced by his idea of choosing “the wrong path”.

However, after some time he comes to terms with his guilt. Jazeel argues that it is something he has to go through in order to make “a subversion of the impossible demands that domestic patriarchy and gender expectations make of Arjie” (240). Arjie realises that

[r]ight and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were. […] What had happened between us in the garage was not wrong. For how could loving Shehan be bad? Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble. I thought of how unfair this was and I was reminded of things I had seen happen to other people, like Jegan, or even Radha Aunty, who, in their own way, had experienced injustice. How was it
that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? [...] If you were like Shehan or me you had no choice but to follow what they said. But did we always have to obey? (273-274)

Arjie does not obey. In order to save Shehan from the Black Tie he comes up with “a diabolical plan” (277). It is a plan that will forever change his relationship to his family: “I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now habited a world they didn’t understand and into which they couldn’t follow me” (284-285). It is a world where sexual desire and connection means more to Arjie, than family honour and responsibility do. Arjie is going through an exile from his family towards a grown man’s own beliefs and desire, beliefs and desires that will give him the confidant to refuse to be silent.

Exile from Sri Lanka

This section will discuss how in a country of domination and subordination, the choice of language you speak can give you possibilities. Possibilities of power, or the possibility to create a new language when ethnicity and sexuality are joined. A language that helps you be the one you want to be.

According to Jeanne Marecek, Sri Lanka is a country that is represented of four larger religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, and has as many as three official languages, Sinhalese, Tamil and English. It is also a country that has many different ethnic groups which for a very long time have been involved in ethnic conflicts with each other. Marecek argues that “within every ethnic group, cross-cutting factors such as language, religion, caste, region and urban versus rural residence make for multiple identifications” (139). She makes a reference to Valentine Daniel who argues, in his book Charred Lullabies, that “race, religion, and language have formed an unholy alliance that is charged by its claimants, adherents, and speakers, respectively, with the mission of dividing the nation’s citizens” (140). In Funny Boy, such an “unholy alliance” and “mission of dividing” is very much the core of the novel as representatives from all these different ethnic groups and languages can be found in it, and who, in turn, are dividing the country.

Salgado argues that “the connection between language and ethnicity, which substantiate the discrete ethnic markers of ‘Sinhalese’ and ‘Tamil’, was very much the product of British orientalism, and was embraced by the Sinhalese who stood to gain from it” (12-13). The novel Funny Boy shows examples of such a connection, and these examples enforce the idea of the Sinhalese as a majority which holds all the power, and the Tamil as a minority.
Jayawickrama argues that “to survive in the society depicted in the novel requires certain strategies and choices, which Selvadurai explores though the relative possibilities of speaking Sinhalese or speaking Tamil” (129). She points out the example that after Arjie has come to an awareness of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict and the long history behind it, he understands why his father has put him “in a Sinhalese class from grade one because [he] wanted me to learn Sinhalese” with the reason that “Sinhalese was the real language of the future” (Selvadurai 215, 61). But also the example that Sinhalese becomes a language of power in the scene where Radha Aunty is attacked on the train from Jaffna back to Colombo. Attacked by two Sinhalese men, “one carrying a stick and the other a belt” (90), she only manages to escape because the family friend who was travelling with her “spoke good Sinhalese and the men had believed he was Sinhalese” (90). Another example of Sinhalese, and English, being the languages of power is found in the scene at the police station in which Arjie’s mother is concerned about Daryl’s mysterious disappearance. It is because his mother speaks good Sinhalese and English that they get better treatment than they would have got had she not spoken the languages:

The policeman behind the counter studied us for a few moments, looking at our clothes and general demeanour to decide what treatment to give us. Fortunately, Amma’s Sinhalese was good. ‘I am here about a friend who’s been missing for a few days,’ she said. ‘Where does he live?’ the policeman asked brusquely. He had decided to give us the more courteous treatment. (126)

And when the superior officer, who speaks to them in English, understands that they speak English too his manner changes and becomes more “casual and friendly” (127).

Being able to speak Sinhalese and English offers many possibilities in Funny Boy. Speaking Tamil, however, has limited possibilities in a society which is dominated by the Sinhalese. In a society where the Tamils belong to the minority many are afraid of speaking Tamil and some even wish they were Sinhalese so they could have freedom and possibilities. Arjie’s father is aware of these circumstances and realises how they have to act in order to survive:

[W]e are a minority, and that’s a fact of life. […] As a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game. Play it right and you can do well for yourself. The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous. Go around quietly, make your money, and don’t step on anyone’s toes. (173)
As Tamils we must tread carefully […] Even I have to be circumspect when I’m talking to the staff. If I was a Sinhalese, like Sena, I could say and do whatever I liked. (190)

Arjie’s mother replies that: “[o]ne doesn’t feel safe speaking Tamil these days” and starts to think that maybe the idea about a separate state is not “such a stupid idea, after all” (190). If there was a separate state at least then you could say and do whatever you liked. She does not want her children “to live like we do. Always having to watch what they say and do” (190).

Sonali, Arjie’s younger sister, even goes so far as to wish that she “was a Sinhalese or a foreigner” (196). Jayawickrama argues that “Selvadurai’s representation of the values and identities of Sinhalese and Tamil foregrounds the idea of languages of power and how various individuals or groups are positioned within or outside them” (131).

To fully grasp the meaning and the possibilities (or impossibilities), that the choice (or lack of choice) of language gives, you have to take into consideration not only the language of ethnicity, but also the language of sexuality. Jayawickrama points out that “[i]n Funny Boy, sexuality becomes a disorienting language that offers an alternative vector of negotiation of the over-determined discourses of identity structuring Arjie’s world” (134-135). She continues by pointing to the “focus on the ‘tongue’ [which] becomes not only an evocation of sexuality but of a new kind of language” (131). She brings up examples as in the scene when Arjie is learning to say Shehan’s name, he has “to get used to its newness on [his] tongue” (Selvadurai 242), but also the dream Arjie has about Shehan in which “every time [he] spoke to him he answered in Tamil, knowing that [he doesn’t] understand” (242). Jayawickrama argues that it is in this scene that “Arjie’s lack of understanding Tamil and of his sexuality are brought together” (131). When Arjie is thinking about his and Shehan’s relationship he thinks of what kind of “powerful and hidden possibilities” (256) such a relationship might give. During their first sexual encounter together, a language is created:

He closed his eyes but I kept mine open, fascinated by the muscles of his face, the way they tightened and loosened with the movement of his lips. Now, I could feel his tongue against my teeth, a silent language that urged me to open my mouth. Before I quite knew it, I was responding to the prompting of his tongue. (258; italics added)

Jayawickrama convincingly draws the conclusion that “if Sinhalese is represented as the language of masculinity and power, Tamil becomes the unspoken language associated with an unarticulated sexuality” (131). Although language and ethnicity often pose difficulties for the
characters, we can see in this example that when ethnicity and sexuality are joined, and a language of possibility is created in the novel.

“Within the hierarchical domain of the Victoria Academy […] the language of power represented by sexuality enables Arjie to imagine a means of contesting the power held over him” (Jayawickrama 132). In other words, even in a space of domination possibilities can appear, possibilities which will give the courage to choose side. Black Tie chooses Arjie to be the student who will recite two poems at the prize-giving ceremony. This is because of the quality in his voice. When Arjie is to recite the poems in front of Black Tie he cannot do it. This is because of the cane that the principal possesses which serves as a symbol of power and intimidation:

I gazed at the cane and the poems fragmented in my mind, like a shattered reflection on a pond. I could capture only a word or a phrase and sometimes even a complete stanza, but where and how they fitted together I couldn’t remember. (235)

However, when he realises that the principal is going to structure his speech around the two poems that he is suppose to read, the roles become opposite. Now it is Arjie who is in the position of power: “Instead of trying to get out of reciting the poems, I would do them. But I would do them wrong. Confuse them, jumble lines, take entire stanzas from one poem and place them in the other until the poems were rendered senseless” (277). Jayawickrama states that “the poems that fragmented in Arjie’s mind through fear are now fragmented by him enabling him to reclaim his voice and its appropriation by the principal” (133). She also argues that Arjie’s decision to recite the poems, but to do them wrong, expresses his “refusal to remain as a silence or erasure within their structures of power” (133). It gives him the possibility to stand up for himself, and the person he is, in a site where sexual tendencies are subdued.

Sexuality and “tendencies” are things that are oppressed, and one way to this is to give them labels that sometimes do not have a meaning. Kathryn Campbell-Kibler puts forward that “[s]tudying the use of different sexual identity labels can shed light on questions regarding semantic variation and change” (5). She states that in order to answer a question such as “what conditions make possible the process through which different meanings are attributed to the same label” you have to analyse “the various ways in which the social practice of meaning-making is controlled and determined” (5-6). She continues by pointing to the fact that “words do not really have much meaning at all – they are assigned interpretations when used; and the
interpretations given to a particular word can vary from one context to another” (6). In the novel *Funny Boy*, it is the label “funny” in connection to Arjie and his “tendencies” that causes him confusion:

> It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn’t comprehend. I thought of what my father had said about turning out ‘funny’. The word ‘funny’ as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, ‘that’s funny’. Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been an hint of disgust in his tone. (17)

Just as Arjie points out, the word “funny” can have many different meanings depending on the context. As he has not yet been able to come to terms with his (homo)sexuality, he is unable to understand the word in the context that his father puts it. It is a label that is based on the attitudes from a very patriarchal society.

Campbell-Kibler argues that “labels draw on social stereotypes, moral attitudes, old connotations and future possibilities – in short, ideologies of various kinds” (6). Arjie’s brother, Diggy, brings out these “moral attitudes” and “old connotations” when he warns Arjie about being friends with Shehan, a boy whom rumour has it is gay. If he were to be friends with him, “people will think” Arjie is “like him” and he would “become the laughing-stock of the whole school” (Selvadurai 232). Diggy draws this conclusion based on society’s old traditions about a patriarchal community and family. However, as Jayawickrama claims, Arjie is able to use the derogative label “funny” to his advantage when “in the role of the fool […] he himself initiates laughter that proves redemptive of his position” (133) as when he deliberately recites the poems wrongly at the ceremony.

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. Salgado and Jayawickrama have similar opinions about the reason for it. Salgado proposes that Selvadurai has chosen the word “funny” because that “indicate[s] the instability of his subject-positioning” (11), while Jayawickrama argues that he chose 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. (125)
Both of them argue convincingly. Arjie is in a transitional state in his life in which he 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 in 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” (171). 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. (Selvadurai 6)

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” (4). 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.

At the end of the novel, in the chapter *Riot Journal: an Epilogue*, the focus has shifted from the spoken words and languages to the words that are written down. Arjie writes down his thoughts and feelings in a diary because as he says: “the only thing for me to do is write” (287). He writes in his home which is under threat from the Sinhalese mob, in a country that is ravaged by violence. Jayawickrama convincingly states that:

[i]n the midst of intensely fraught space, when Arjie assumes the position of the diarist he also enters a liminal space: as his journal entries connect, interpret
and preserve the expression of his subjective experience in a moment of extreme change, they also mediate between times so that the entire narrative becomes a negotiation between childhood in an island of the past and adulthood in a continent of the diasporic present. (135)

It is “in a moment of extreme change” that Arjie is trying to “connect and interpret” the violence that hunts his family and his home country, Sri Lanka. When he, and his family, stand face to face with their burnt down house he can “feel no sorrow” (298). He tries to understand that they will never again live in that house, “but [his] heart refus[es] to understand this” (298). They do not allow themselves to cry because “if we started we would never stop” (298). One thing that can cheer Arjie up, in the midst of all that horror, is when he meets Shehan. And it is not until then that he becomes aware that, even if they are so much alike, they are also different:

He was trying to cheer me up, and as I listened to him talk, something occurred to me that I had never really been conscious of before – Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not. This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him. (302)

Jayawickrama puts forward the notion that when the author Selvadurai “shifts the concept of identity into a different spatial mode” he states “that because of shared sexual ‘difference’ the ethnic barrier is made permeable. The category of ‘ethnicity’ is pared down so that it becomes only one of a potential myriad of ‘translucent screens’ that determine relationships between people” (135). The question of sexuality and ethnicity becomes an issue that is just there in the novel. Sexuality and ethnicity are present in “the translucent screens” through which you have to read the novel. Their coexistence, or simultaneity, takes the story into a time of exile, a literal exile which Arjie is forced into because of his ethnicity and a figurative exile from the family because of his sexuality and “funniness”.

**Conclusion**

Mae Henderson pointed to a “simultaneity in discourse” in her article “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition”. It is a theory that “seeks to account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity”; and is designed “to acknowledge and overcome the limitations imposed by assumptions of internal identity (homogeneity) and the repression of internal differences (heterogeneity) in racial and gendered readings […]” (258). The aim with this essay has been
to do a similar model of analysis. However, whereas Henderson pursues the simultaneity of gender and race, I have focused on the interrelations between ethnicity and sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*.

The theme of exile is very prominent in the novel, and not just because it follows Arjie’s necessary journey of exile from being a young boy into being a young man, as in any other coming-of-age story. *Funny Boy* is a much more complex story since the author Shyam Selvadurai has used the theme in several aspects on several levels, concerning both ethnicity and sexuality. In addition, he has used the theme in such an aspect that has allowed the protagonist to find an alternative route in finding his identity as a “funny one”. By using Henderson’s “simultaneity of discourse” as a method, these aspects can be identified and better understood.

Because Arjie’s “tendencies” to be a “funny one” does not follow the general concept of a traditional gender identity or the traditional norms of masculinity, sexuality become an exiling force in the novel. He is exiled from the gendered space of “the girls’ territory” and the feminised site of his mother’s bedroom and sent to a school that would control his “funny” behaviour and learn him to be a man, a man who would have “a healthy mind and body” (Beynon 41) and measure up to the “standard of masculine beauty” (Mosse 28). Consequently Arjie should not show any “funny tendencies” and turn into a heterosexual man.

Alongside the aspect of sexuality, the aspect of ethnicity also becomes a notion that exiles. Because of the novel’s background, the ethnical conflict in Sri Lanka, ethnicity becomes an issue that influences the way the characters lead their lives. It affects how they treat people of another ethnicity, and in the end exiles them from each other because they cannot subvert their ethnicities. In other words, ethnicity becomes a notion that does not allow the characters to marry the one they love or pursue their sexual desires. If they were to subvert their ethnicities the sacrifice would be the expanse of their own families.

The novel does, however, show alternative ways that would help Arjie deal with the forms of exile that his sexuality and ethnicity have brought him into. Imagination, fantasy and play serve as a negotiation devise 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” (Selvadurai 256) 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 couldn’t follow [him]” (285).
Select Bibliography


Lesk, Andrew. “Ambivalence at the Site of Authority: Desire and Difference in Funny Boy.”


