

# CLASS, GENDER, RACE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse the ways in which the issues of class, gender and race intersect with the construction of masculinity in *Funny Boy*, the first novel by the Sri-Lankan born, Canadian author Shyam Selvadurai (1965-). A particular understanding of the idea of construction serves as a tool for the interpretation of what it means and what it takes to be a man in Selvadurai's novel. The tension created between the normative heterosexist expectations of parents and educators and the subversive reality of the hero's homoerotic impulses manifests in the narrative representations of social class, gender system and, possibly, racial prejudice. Our intention shall be to explore the author's well-crafted portrayal of a boy's resistance to comply with the identity that normative power creates for him.

KEY WORDS: Construction, gender, identity, masculinity, postcolonialism, queer theory.

## RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es analizar los modos en que los aspectos de clase, género y raza entran en relación con la construcción de la masculinidad en *Funny Boy*, la primera novela del autor canadiense, nacido en Sri-Lanka, Shyam Selvadurai (1965-). Un entendimiento particular de la idea de construcción sirve como herramienta para interpretar lo que significa y lo que conlleva ser un hombre en la novela de Selvadurai. La tensión creada entre las expectativas heterosexistas de padres y educadores y la realidad subversiva de los impulsos homoeróticos del héroe se manifiesta en las representaciones narrativas de clase social, sistema de género y, posiblemente, prejuicio racial. Nuestra intención será explorar la cuidada representación que traza el autor sobre la resistencia de un niño a aceptar la identidad que el poder normativo crea para él.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Construcción, género, identidad, masculinidad, postcolonialismo, teoría queer.

Since the term "construction" suggests quite an important number of different interpretations, a definition of our understanding of the concept—or, to be more precise, of those specific meanings we will be working with—seems a reasonable point of departure. Our intention here is to propose an understanding of construction as a form of structuring reality through a pervasive, almost obsessive im-

position of labels. Implicit in such understanding is, of course, the assumption that construction is always an artificial process; that is, a process which does not *produce* results, but which *is produced* by anticipated results. According to this view, construction becomes a process purposefully designed (that is, constructed) to support a specific result. This is valid so much for the construction of masculinity as an exclusively heterosexual set of traits which determine a man's behaviour, as for the construction of homosexuality as a stigmatized, undesirable injury. This means as well that we will be working on two levels: one, the construction inside the novel, whose understanding we have just explained and which is carried out dialogically by the characters; and two, the construction of the events described in the novel, which is designed by the author and accounts for the evolution of the main character.

The reason why this double understanding of the idea of construction is pertinent here, is its intrinsic relation to ideas like class, gender and race. Every time we analyse issues like, for instance, racial differences, no matter how objective our perspective seems to be, we are constructing views of the world which depend on specific assumptions (the very word "perspective" inevitably destroys objectivity), even if we decide to challenge them (challenge always implies the prior reception of the element to be fought). We carry out an act of *construction*, and not of simple *acceptance*, whenever we positively take a stand on a certain (in this case) socio-cultural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The reference to Edward Said becomes almost mandatory in this respect:

How does one *represent* other cultures? What is *another* culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the "other")? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politico-historical ones? How do ideas acquire authority, "normality," and even the status of "natural" truth? What is the role of the intellectual? Is he there to validate the culture and state of which he is a part? What importance must he give to an independent critical consciousness, an *oppositional* critical consciousness? (Said 325-326)

Given our distrust for objectivity, an "oppositional critical consciousness" surely seems an appropriate definition for the source of Shyam Selvadurai's accomplishment in *Funny Boy*. This novel, narrating the growth of a Sri-Lankan Tamil boy into early adolescence, interweaves the construction of the protagonist's masculinity with parallel discourses on class, gender (as an overall system) and race, thus fulfilling Selvadurai's premise on the intersection of the personal and the political:

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<sup>1</sup> We speak of socio-cultural phenomena because it is due to its force in the relational aspect that construction becomes a particularly important issue. This is not say, obviously, that construction is not to be given attention at the personal level. But when we deal, as it is the case here, with normativity and subversion, the emphasis must necessarily be on its political function.

From my earliest days, then, at some level of consciousness I was aware of the interaction between the personal and the political. How the intimate workings of a family could represent or reflect a larger political context. This awareness of the ways in which the personal and the political are intertwined intrigues me; that the capacities for racism, homophobia, sexism, and other injustices and hatreds are present at all levels within a society. (Selvadurai unnumbered)

These intersections of the personal and the political produce the two types of constructions we have previously described. Normative masculinity and stigmatized homosexuality are not causes in Selvadurai's first novel, but results; since both the hegemony of the previous, and the deviance of the latter are being questioned by the protagonist's sexual development, artificial processes originate that justify the first and disqualify the second, so that the *statu quo* may, even if barely, get out unscathed. We speak about one "construction of masculinity" because we believe the novel to propose an understanding of homosexuality as a form of masculinity, not as an opposition to it. Homosexual assertion challenges and effectively subverts *normative* masculinity, but masculinity is not inherently normative. Thus the idea of a construction of masculinity makes reference to both the normative understanding of the term (the heterosexual centre) and the subversive one (in this case, the homosexual margin).

The understanding of construction from an authorial perspective, as we anticipated before, corresponds to a certain extent to the idea of *Bildung*. Again, this is a complex arena to enter, not only because of the very complexity of Selvadurai's narrative development of events, but also because of the difficulties that lie on encompassing a satisfactory definition of *Bildung*. As Fernández Vázquez has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> neither the conception of *Bildung* as a phenomenon pertaining exclusively to German *Bildungsromane*, nor the opening of the term to a point where almost any novel would enter the category, can solve the dilemma of definition. In *Funny Boy*, we believe the whole question to depend on the capacity for decision-making<sup>3</sup>. In the same way that at the level of dialogical interaction it is the results that produce the processes, at the narrative level, the *Bildung* becomes alive—or becomes undoubtedly recognizable—towards the ending of the novel, when Arjie takes the decision to save Shehan from the predicament of normative power and effectively

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<sup>2</sup> See FERNÁNDEZ VÁZQUEZ, J.S., *La construcción del sujeto postcolonial: el género del Bildungsroman* (Tesis doctoral. Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> There are other opinions regarding the moment of final choice in *Funny Boy*. Fernández Vázquez (254) supports the idea that this moment of choice, which constitutes one of the basic characteristics of the "classic" *Bildungsroman*, is absent from the narration. Oliva Cruz considers the novel to be structured in "six concentric parts, or six stories that can be read independently, but [which] together... form a whole chain of a *bildungsroman*, or a mosaic of an ill-society, in which the awakening of an artist into consciousness takes place (another joycean portrait, in a sense). Every story is the account of a painful experience that leads to maturity and the knowledge of violence as the protagonist progresses in age and discovery." (97).

*acts* in pursue of such goal. At that moment the novel is re-written by the author, and re-read by the reader. The specificity of this *Bildung* arises from the particularity of the final decision that characterizes formally the “classic” *Bildungsroman*. *Funny Boy* necessarily thwarts the traditional outcome, since the main character does not conform to the notable feature of being normatively masculine; that is, heterosexual. There is a *Bildung*, and a consequent final decision, but this time freedom is exerted to accept intimately his sexual self, while keeping a façade for the sake of social mores and personal security.

This is a particularly complex point since two narrative strategies intersect at the formal level. As a consequence of the narrative climax in ‘The Best School Of All’, the chronological disposition of events imagined by the author re-writes the novel as it extends backwards the political reach of the final moment of decision.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty to grasp and analyse this moment is what gives the impression that

- a) the novel follows a preconceived, chronological, coming-out rationale that conforms the basis for the character’s *Bildung*;
- b) the only chapters dealing with the character’s sexual development are the first (‘Pigs Can’t Fly’) and the fifth (‘The Best School Of All’), which we do not agree with. It is not possible to speak about homosexuality before the fifth chapter as far as the text itself goes<sup>5</sup>. It is the re-writing that the climax produces what gives the impression that the character struggles with a secret homosexuality all along. We believe he does not. A more likely interpretation may be that a second reading emerges on the side of the recipient (the reader), which resettles the previous chapters inside the narrative, as accounts of the repression suffered by the consciously homosexual youth. For the character it is a choice, for the reader, an epiphany. The key to interpret the chapter, and its choice passage, we believe to be in the sentence “The difference that I always felt I had” (256): such indetermination constructs the difference as an unknown motive for conduct (and, in the sense that this motive, even if unknown, prevents the character from full assimilation in the community, it constructs it as an “unknown enemy” as well), and the character as a hero in search for a grail which becomes his own identity.

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<sup>4</sup> We follow Weeks’ idea that the choice of a non-normative sexual option has become a political choice (Weeks 47).

<sup>5</sup> For two reasons: on the one hand, before the fifth chapter the boy has no idea whatsoever that there actually exists something called “homosexuality” (“At fourteen, I was aware of what the sex act between a man and a woman entailed. But between two boys?”); and on the other, it is possible that two different things are being mixed up: “homoeroticism” and “homosexuality”, which are related terms, but not synonyms. The reason why we believe that after the fifth chapter the protagonist acquires a homosexual ([homo]sexual) identity is that there effectively occurs a moment of choice, of *political* choice. He becomes conscious of a necessity of defining himself sexually, in front of Shehan and himself, and politically (even if unadvertedly for the community) in front of institutional abuse.

It would require a whole new article to approach the ways in which Arjie responds and does not respond to the classical conception of the *Bildungsheld*, but the idea of an “indeterminate enemy” we have just seen, can give us a clue to analyse in which ways the character becomes a modern hero. Such analysis will help us to get closer to the construction of masculinity in the novel, as well.

In her brilliant article “Héroe y antihéroe en las letras alemanas del siglo xx”, Ilse M. De Brugger, points out that:

El héroe a la antigua, aun en el caso improbable de que hubiera sobrevivido, está condenado a desaparecer por el simple hecho de que ha perdido su principal forma de manifestación: el combate contra un adversario tangible, la posibilidad de medir sus fuerzas con quien se le enfrenta. Esta constelación ya no existe en las estructuras sociales externas. Los poderes que amenazan al hombre son anónimos y el mismo forma parte de un conglomerado de hombres anónimos. (105-6)

Our analysis, then, purports to answer the question: is modern man able to measure his force against an *internal* adversary? In *Funny Boy*, the combat takes place inside the character, between normative masculinity and its “enemy”, the homoerotic impulse. Class, gender and race constitute the fields in which such combat takes place. The *Held* in *Funny Boy* has an aim to be considered from the postcolonial point of view: his struggle goes in search of the sexual identity that was forbidden to him since early childhood, *conquered* by force by normative masculinity. Arjie’s choice is, again, political, for it effectively constitutes a revolt against the imperialist domination of normative masculinity: it constitutes a *sexual decolonisation*.

## 1. CLASS

The importance of the idea of class in *Funny Boy* reveals itself as a complex issue. The fact that Selvadurai places his protagonist at the heart of a well-off, middle class family can not —and indeed, should not— escape anyone’s attention.

The importance of economic tension as one of the sources which contributed to the outburst of the 1983 riots in Sri-Lanka must not be underestimated. It is no secret that Tamils had been already, for quite a considerable lapse of time, seen as the unlawful usurpers of white-collar positions by a large part of the Sinhalese majority, something bound to disrupt the fragile balance of economic tension with remarkable facility, particularly in the neuralgic centres of the country, most notably in the capital city, Colombo:

It is undeniable that the participation of Sri Lankan Tamils in higher education and the number of white-collar and professional positions that they hold has always been proportionately higher than their demographic size. Yet it is also true that the Sinhalese chauvinists have always exaggerated the level of Tamil participation and their “privileged” position.

[...]

Part of the reason why much of the Sinhalese public persists in the belief that the Tamils have an unduly high share of the jobs in the public sector is that Tamils are



visible in certain fields; this reflects the traditional Sri Lankan Tamil concentration on these professional skills, which they have dominated under conditions of equal competition. (Tambiah 79)

It is possible that such relation, even if present only as far as common knowledge goes, creates a set of expectations on the young middle-class boy which depends not only on being male, but on being male and from a wealthy Tamil family. Whenever one's cultural values are threatened, the tendency goes to reinforce them in full strength; the fact that Arjie is seen as a threat to the family's good reputation becomes, by extension, a threat to their fragile position in such a hostile society as well: "If he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing-stock of Colombo, it'll be your fault," my father said in a tone of finality" (14). The pressure exerted by class expectations must not be underestimated; in a society where homosexuality is a shameful crime, associations may play an important role. One needs only think about Selvadurai's second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*, set in the 1920s Colombo, where the homosexual protagonist, Balendran, goes to the railway station to have sex with a male prostitute; afterwards he becomes tormented by the hideousness of his "crime", when he "would curse himself for his imprudence, for putting everything at risk, his marriage, his family name" (75). Certainly we deal with different periods of time, but becoming "the laughing stock of Colombo" in 1983 for one's sexual option does not give much reason to suppose that things have changed with time. My point is that the fact that Arjie has a place in respectable society by birth, makes it even worse to show an "inappropriate behaviour." There is a connection between economic status and sexual choice. Arjie's family is not only the microcosm where his life evolves, it is also Selvadurai's metaphor for the larger context of society: the established order must be preserved, for the sake of appearances. That is why Arjie's mother could not marry her real love, Daryl Uncle (see chapter 'See No Evil, Hear No Evil'), and as their *liaison* was reborn during Arjie's father's absence, she was harshly condemned by her family—with the exception of Arjie:

She [Arjie's mother] seemed very different these days, happy but strangely nervous. Neliya Aunt, however, seemed to be in a very bad mood, and her anger was directed mainly at Amma.

Sonali and Diggy had changed, too. Sonali had become secretive, as if she had done something very bad, and she spent a lot of time in her room, drawing with her felt-tip pens. Diggy had grown morose and would spend hours in the driveway with his air-gun, shooting at an old condensed-milk tin he set up as a target.

In the next week, both Neliya Aunt and Diggy became increasingly sullen. Then, to my astonishment, they became rude to Daryl Uncle, and, finally, he started coming less frequently. Neliya Aunt never went out to greet him any more and, when he visited, she would retire to the back verandah to help Anula with the cooking. (114)

The fact that Arjie becomes his mother's only support and confident during her affair, becomes in this light more than a simple authorial strategy to have the narrator in a perpetually privileged position. It can suggest that Arjie has become a

symbolic character in nature —symbolic in the sense that he represents freedom; lack of social constraints. No one is blind in the household to that “difference” in him which he will only understand as a result of his relationship with Shehan. The mother is taking the only understanding element in her house to draw support for her dangerous situation. The sensitive *Künstler*-to-be becomes the obvious choice: not Diggy, whose respectable manliness is all too prompt to show off by shooting at his neighbours’ hens. Arjie’s *marginal* masculinity is, ironically, at the centre of attention of those representatives of *central* masculinity (the respectable members of his family, the *Queen Victoria Academy*, society itself). The mother’s construction of Arjie’s sexuality induces her into building a bridge of comprehension towards the son, which benefits her, by interpreting the son’s “difference” as the motive for a sensitivity towards her problem which she does not expect from others. This is also a consequence of the dialogic construction of homosexuality. The conclusion here may be drawn in the form of a question: Does Arjie’s father’s fear originate in the possibility that his son may become “the laughing-stock of Colombo” or, does it stem rather from the preoccupation that he may grow up to be the “the laughing-stock of *respectable* Colombo”?

This question is partly answered by a passage from chapter 4, “Small Choices.” As Arjie’s father shows Jegan the magnificent stretch of luscious beach that extends at the feet of his hotel, Jegan becomes aware that tourists seem to be buying sex from poor boys from the village. To Jegan’s shock, Arjie’s father finds the situation perfectly normal:

Then Jegan leaned forward in his chair and looked keenly at something on the beach. My father regarded him, curious. Jegan turned to him and said, “is what is happening what I think is happening?”

I turned to look down the beach now, wondering what Jegan had seen. There was nothing out of the ordinary. As was usual at this time, there were many foreign men around. A lot of them were talking to young boys from the village.

“Yes,” my father said.

“And they come back to the hotel?”

My father shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“You don’t mind?”

“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?”

My father chuckled. “I don’t see any police out there, do you?” He poured himself another drink. “It’s not just our luscious beaches that keep the industry going, you know. We have other natural resources as well.” (171)

Such contradiction between the theoretical and the practical, or between the internal (the family) and the external (the rest) has been accurately termed by Fernández Vázquez “doble moral victoriana” (247):

Pero además, Selvadurai deja claro que la preocupación de la comunidad por salvaguardar la moralidad sexual —el argumento que supuestamente justificaría la violencia ideológica que se ejerce en contra del protagonista— desaparece en cuanto



se plantea la posibilidad de obtener un beneficio material. Así el padre de Arjie, que defiende con tanta rotundidad el carácter depravado de las relaciones homosexuales, no duda en consentir un tráfico sexual ilícito entre los turistas y occidentales que acuden al hotel que regenta y algunos jóvenes de las aldeas cercanas” (246).<sup>6</sup>

The conflict taking place here is a most complex one: that between profitable business and personal integrity. But both sides of the coin stem from the same understanding of masculinity: the normative one. Arjie’s father is the unquestionable (and unquestioned) head of the family, to a great extent because he is a man, but also because he is the wage-earner:

The phrase “A man’s home is his castle” [...] reaches *back* to an emptied-out image of mastery and integration under feudalism in order to propel the male wage-worker forward to further feats of alienated labor, in the service of a now atomized and embattled, but all the more intensively idealized home. The man who has this home is a different person from the man who has a castle; and the forms of property implied in the two possessives (his [mortgaged] home/his [inherited] castle) are not only different but [...] contradictory. The contradiction is assuaged and filled in by transferring the lord’s political and economic control over the *environs* of his castle to an image of the father’s personal control over the *inmates* of his house. (Sedgwick 14, emphasis in the original)

To work outside, and especially, to *prosper*, become marks of his very manhood. If he failed to prove his ability to maintain the family’s living standards, it would be his *manhood* what would be put to the test. Competitiveness, one of the traditional marks of manliness, lies at the bottom of his discourse (“if I tried to stop it, they’d simply go to another hotel on the front”), as does his ability to appear unmoved at the sight of the corrupted youth, even once Jegan has expressed his profound shock and repulsion towards the situation (“You don’t mind?”). The modern version of the relation between money (and therefore, class) and masculinity has been summarized by Sam Keen as follows:

Una generación atrás, la provisión de las necesidades familiares era todo lo que se requería. Actualmente, proveer estas necesidades sólo le otorga a un hombre el respeto mínimo. Si tu trabajo sólo te permite sobrevivir, no eres considerado demasiado hombre. Ser pobre en una sociedad de consumo es haber fracasado en el

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<sup>6</sup> In *Cinnamon Gardens*, Selvadurai explores again the consequences of the uncovering of the ugly face of respectability that hides under a similar “double morale”. Consisting again in a parallel case of the false respectability of the father *versus* the inappropriate desires of the son, a similar situation takes place when Balendran discovers his brother’s real motives for stabbing his father in the arm and fleeing to Bombay, and his father’s secret affair with his secretary. A good point for debate is the problematic presence in both cases of the “western factor”: in *Funny Boy*, western tourists corrupt local villagers, and in *Cinnamon Gardens*, the father’s secretary and secret lover, Miss Adamson, is an American woman.



examen de masculinidad, o cuando menos haber obtenido una calificación baja. En cada esquina la industria publicitaria nos recuerda que los hombres de verdad, los exitosos, los poderosos, son grandes gastadores. Ellos tienen el suficiente crédito o efectivo para comprar lo mejor. Comprar es signo de estatus social.

[...]

El horizonte en el que nos movemos, el origen de nuestra escala de valores y la forma en que apreciamos la realidad son económicos.” (Keen 74)

Keen’s words become particularly revealing in relation to certain passages of the novel. Apart from the revealing passage from ‘Small Choices’ in which Arjie’s father subtly mocks his childhood friend’s dedication to Oriental Studies,<sup>7</sup> the opening pages of ‘See No Evil, Hear No Evil’ give us a clue so as to the newly acquired affluence of the family which relocates them as “new rich:”

I became aware of something new in our lives when my parents began to go out regularly to cocktail parties, dinner parties, and dances at the Oberoi Supper Club. [...]

Also, every Saturday afternoon Amma and Chithra Aunty would take Sonali, Diggy, me, and Sanath, Chithra Aunty’s son, to the Intercontinental Coffee Shop and treat us to such exotic food as hamburgers and strawberry cake. Then we would go shopping at Cornell’s Supermarket. Cornell’s had opened recently and it was the first American-style supermarket in Sri Lanka. It was a wonderful place, for there on the shelves were items like blueberry jam, kippers, and canned apricots —things I had read about but had never actually tasted. From listening to my father’s conversations, I understood that this sudden availability of imported goods had to do with the new government and something called “free economy” and “the end of socialism.” (101-2)

Thus Keen’s appreciations become of great relevance here, for not only other adults, but the boy himself is able to appreciate his family’s new status (“I became aware of something new in our lives”) through the new items they can afford: “En una sociedad en que los símbolos de la virtud son creados por la publicidad, la posesión de objetos de estilo significa poder.” (Keen 74)

So much in *Funny Boy* as in *Cinnamon Gardens*, a character can be pointed out as responsible for the collision between the protagonist’s privacy and normative society. In *Funny Boy*, this character is Kanthi Aunty. At the time of Arjie’s narration she has just returned from the States, where she had to work cleaning houses. Her daughter, Tanuja, becomes Arjie’s main enemy in ‘Pigs Can’t Fly’, as she wishes to occupy his place as the bride in the *bride-bride* ceremony. Tanuja, whom her cousins have nicknamed “Her Fatness” for obvious reasons, cries for her mother after a

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<sup>7</sup> “My father shrugged. “Just happened that way. We were very close, but then I went to university in England and he stayed here to do Oriental Studies.” He smiled ironically. “He became a great orientalist and I became a great banker.” (156)

row with Arjie and the girl cousins in which she has been addressed as “fatty-fatty-boom-boom”. As a result, Kanthi Aunty presents herself in the back garden and finds Arjie dressed as a bride:

Her gaze fell on me and her eyes widened for a moment. Then a smile spread across her face.

“What’s this?” she said, the honey seeping back into her voice. She came down a few steps and crooked her finger at me. I looked down at my feet and refused to go to her.

“Come here, come here,” she said.

Unable to disobey her command any longer, I went to her. She looked at me up and down for a moment, and then gingerly, as if she were examining raw meat at the market, turned me around. (12)

After dragging Arjie by the arm and forcing him to stand in front of his family dressed as a bride, the scene finishes by Arjie being dismissed by his parents:

My father pretended he had not heard and, with an inclination of his head, indicated to Amma to get rid of me. She waved her hand in my direction and I picked up the edges of my veil and fled to the back of the house. (14)

Kanthi Aunty’s decision to drag Arjie to the centre of the drawing room may have a deeper significance than it seems in terms of class conflict. A deeply rooted class tension may be manifesting in the ideological violence exerted on Arjie. All along the chapter, it is possible to appreciate a certain anxiety, on the side of Kanthi Aunty and her daughter, to show off and to make sure that no one forgets that they have been working in the States. This is probably a strategy to disguise the fact that during their state they had to accept jobs alien to their social position in Sri Lanka, in order to make a living. Six-year-old Arjie perceives this anxiety, yet is not able to trace down its motives:

Kanthi Aunty was tall and bony, and we liked her the least, in spite of the fact that she would pat our heads affectionately whenever we walked past or greeted her. We sensed that beneath her benevolence lurked a seething anger, tempered by guile, that could have deadly consequences if unleashed in our direction. I had heard Amma say to her sister, Neliya Aunty, that “Poor Kanthi was bitter because of the humiliations she had suffered abroad. After all, darling, what a thing, forced to work as a servant in a whitey’s house to make ends meet.” (8)

In order to deny this reality, Kanthi Aunty needs to show her family’s economic welfare, which she attempts to prove through her daughter, whom Arjie says to possess two “marvellous dolls” (probably Barbie and Ken) which were totally out of reach for Sri Lankan children: “For us cousins, who had grown up under a government that strictly limited all foreign imports, such toys were unimaginable... It was with these dolls that my cousin from abroad hoped to seduce the other cousins away from me” (8). Moreover, when Kanthi Aunty drags Arjie to the living-room dressed as a bride, it is Kanthi Aunty’s husband the first to explode in laughter, and

he is the one who cries out to Arjie's father, "Ey Chelva... looks like you have a funny one here" (14). Kanthi Aunty's husband's only intervention, far from being trivial, is actually central to understand the relation between the economic and the conception of normative masculinity which rules the family. Arjie's humiliation is Kanthi Aunty's triumph; her family's intense uneasiness and constant attempts at economic show-off become blurred at the perspective of her well-off sister's son becoming "funny." That accounts possibly partly for Kanthi Aunty's eagerness in dragging Arjie to the living-room: it is, to a certain extent, a form of vengeance, a release of economic anxiety for her and her family, a way to feel, at least once, superior. Opposed to their *supposed* economic crisis (supposed because they try to deny it all the time) is now the *evident* sexual inversion of the boy, which they can all perceive. In this context, thus, Cyril Uncle's intervention becomes central, because he is the first to laugh (one could wonder whether the family would have laughed, had he not exploded in "booming laughter"), and, more importantly, the one who ultimately *constructs* Arjie, forcing the family to build a bridge of motives towards Arjie, when he labels the up-to-now undefined boy as "funny."

## 2. GENDER

The gender system in Arjie's family responds to the normative stance. The household evolves around a father whose main importance is earning the family's income. We do not know much about him until 'Small Choices'. However, his power inside the house is greater than it seems. As it follows from traditional gender structures, he takes all the important decisions, and only when he is absent can the family enjoy some greater freedom, a freedom which is destroyed whenever the father is home ("I thought of how strange it would be to have him [Arjie's father] back here, sitting at the table every morning reading the newspaper, his loud voice announcing the news of the day to Amma and forcing the entire household into a premature awakening." (153)). The father becomes thus more of a psychological figure than a real one, entitling himself to be the model for the sons and the legislator of the area under his surveillance. Selvadurai depicts the process of acquisition of a set of traits that makes a man "manly" (the "good" traits), and which consequently makes clear other characteristics that are "unmanly" (and "bad") and should be avoided or, at least, hidden. Arjie begins to understand the importance of these traits when he recognizes himself as the subject of a certain construction; which is tantamount to say, when he understands that he has been labelled "funny". This is the word with which others classify him as pertaining to a community which already exists, and to which they do not (and do not wish to) belong. It is undoubtedly a process of othering. Although the narrator speaks about "*my* exile from the world I loved" (5, emphasis mine), it is rather the world who exiles from him, in a process similar to one exposed by Baldwin in reference to the experience of being back in America in 1975 (Mauro and Clementelli 75). But it is more than that. Since the construction is already imposed, it is not an effect, as one could expect, but a cause. Due to this "labellization" of experience, processes originate from now

onwards. Now, every movement that Arjie attempts to do will be seen as supporting this anticipated construction, in the same way that the adhesion of other characters to the normative stance produces other types of behaviour (purposefully opposed to Arjie's) and will be seen by others as consequences of manliness (although they are not really consequences, but artificially created arguments expressed through different paths of communication: the visual, the bodily, the oral, etc.).

The main point here is to define what characterizes the male imagination in Arjie's household. This is surely a difficult-to-grasp concept, and a definition on our side is mandatory. By "male imagination" we will be referring here not so much to images or symbols in a strictly literary sense (a "male muse" or "eternal man", for example<sup>8</sup>), but insofar as it relates to everyday life: what it means to be a man in the world Selvadurai depicts and how is this "meaning of manliness" working in relation to our proposal for an understanding of the process of construction.

Expectations on males follow largely the heterosexual matrix (Butler), first in Arjie's household and later at the *Queen Victoria Academy*. Arjie's construction of masculinity is a problematic matter, since on the one hand, he is constructed as a "funny boy" from 'Pigs Can't Fly' onwards, yet, on the other he is also classified by his anatomical sex, through the relation between being born male and becoming a man: he is ultimately forced to adapt to an artificial construction, to become the living embodiment of an artificial identity existing in his father's mental reality:

"I've come to a decision," he said. Then he looked at me. "I'm transferring you to the Victoria Academy in the new year."

[...]

Nobody else at the table seemed surprised by the news, and I realized that I had been the last to hear of his decision.

"But *why*?" I asked.

"Because it's good for you."

I didn't like the sound of this.

"What's wrong with St. Gabriel's?"

"Nothing. It's just that the Victoria Academy is better for you."

My father was being evasive, and this made me even more suspicious.

"Why is it better?"

My father picked up his fork to indicate that the subject was closed. "The Academy will force you to become a man," he said. Sonali, Amma, and Neliya Aunty smiled at me sympathetically before they continued with their meal. Diggy had a look on his face that told me he understood all the things my father had not said. (210)

This is the more violent side of the process of construction: the imposition of an identity by force.

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<sup>8</sup> See Yvonne TRAPP'S "Research on the Male Muse" at the site <http://webukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/trapp.htm>

This is certainly not alien to the everyday experience of most males. A man's identity is a forced necessity; one could say, that artificiality works to an awesome degree in the shaping of the respectable male identity. Hacker affirms that "en general, la masculinidad es más importante para los hombres que la feminidad para las mujeres" (qtd. in Badinter 51), an idea that finds expression in *Funny Boy* as Arjie is dragged to his grandparents' living-room for being playing with the girl cousins, whereas his cousin Meena, despite leading one of the rival cricket teams in the boys' territory, is not considered potentially deviant. This is not to enter the discussion whether a greater pressure is exerted over males than over females, something which is out of our scope here, but to point simply to the *plasticity* (insofar as it is artificial) of the process of male-identity construction.

The question is that Arjie's innocence makes this artificiality all-too-evident, and a crossing of injuries (of different types, as we will point out) takes place. This point needs further clarification. We are dealing with two types of construction, both of which have a common stem (Arjie's family as a microcosmic representation of the macrocosm of society): there is a construction of masculinity which Arjie's father defends (which we call normative masculinity) and another which he scorns (his son's, which we call subversive masculinity). And among them is Arjie, dressed as a bride.

Since it follows that we are dealing with a one-sided vision of reality, Arjie's cross-dressing is *read* as a sign of homosexuality, although this specific word is never *said* (which means that a third construction is being avoided). Thus Arjie's supposed homosexuality is the involuntary cause of two injuries, which we could define as the male injury (since Arjie is not considered male) and the homosexual injury (since Arjie is considered homosexual). The male injury —caused by Arjie's transgression— becomes, due to its spontaneity (as opposed to normative artificiality), naturalness and innocence, a threat to the artificial strains of normative manhood. And the homosexual injury is caused by this episode as well, because the image reverts to its source; that is, the process of construction that begins with Arjie's forced entrance to the living-room turns against him and injures him in full force (we are referring, in this case, to Eribon's definition of injury (31)). The male injury and the homosexual injury are opposites: the male injury is caused by the mere possibility of homosexuality (homosexuality becomes, to say it so, a "hole" in the spotless uniformity of normative masculinity) and the homosexual injury is caused by the insult. Therefore the first is defensive, while the second is defenceless; the first demonstrative, the second, performative; the first is social, the second, intimate, and so on so forth.

One calls therefore for a definition of the limits of such an idea as "the male imagination" from the normative perspective. Given the complexity of such a task, we will attempt to do so only within the margins of the book. Or, in other words, what are the elements that constitute normative masculinity at the most immediate level in *Funny Boy*?

To a great extent these elements are summarized by the poems by Sir Henry Newbolt ('Vitaï Lampada' and 'The Best School of All') which ultimately cause Black Tie's fall: excellence in physical activities (manly sports), discipline, courage,



heroism, loyalty to one's friends and superiors (legitimization of homosocial ties), capacity to stand hardship and suffering, despise for worldly vanity, and a desire to be considered a model for other men (a strikingly kantian proposition).<sup>9</sup> An analysis of this "male imagination" produces a most interesting result, one which constitutes one of the features of the *historical* idea of masculinity, the idea of demonstration. However, there is something particularly modern about this specific type of demonstration: it is homosocial. This does not mean that it did not occur in other periods of literature. The history of literature is full of examples of what we could define (even if anachronically) homosocial demonstration, and particularly in relation to representations of the military. But the modern identity of man as a fragmented reflection of its own ideal, that both calls for and resists analysis, renders homosociality a central position in the discussion of the historical process of the idea of male demonstration.

To be a man is essentially a practical task, indeed, excessive verbosity is often considered inappropriate in the code of normative masculinity, not quite manly<sup>10</sup>. A man is a man in action, not in words. That is partly the reason why so much importance must be given to the narratives of war, a literature in which man is always active and displaying, a field with few words and frantic activity. Survival becomes a masculine triumph because it takes place among men, a man's value depends on his capacity to stay alive through ineffable horror and loss. But this was probably the case in other examples of war literature from previous periods of literature. What makes it relevant here? We would like to propose an answer that redirects our discussion to *Funny Boy*: modern homosocial demonstration in men as represented in the novel reflects a necessity to desperately cling to those same values which are presently called into question by contemporary thought, among them, the dichotomy between the masculine and the feminine, and the aspects that *make a man of oneself*: honour, courage, comradeship —and heterosexuality. In other words, the sense of belonging to the male homosocial community. Bonino adds the following imperative to Brannon and David's four imperatives of masculinity:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to notice the similarity of such a code with the military. This can be checked out through an analysis of the meaning of being a soldier and being in war as it is exposed in two well-known narratives of war; Ernst JÜNGER'S *Las tempestades de acero* and the novel that has been defined as "the most famous of all pacifist novels" (Mosse 108), Erich Maria REMARQUE'S *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929. See David Glover and Cora Kaplan 56-68.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Schwenger 18; Luis Bonino 41-64, especially 57.

<sup>11</sup> Brannon and David are two North American psychologists who described in 1976 four imperatives which purported to reflect male considerations of manliness. These imperatives, as cited in Bonino 2000, were summarized by the following phrases: 1. *No Sissy Stuff*; 2. *The Big Wheel*; 3. *The Sturdy Oak*; and 4. *Give'em Hell*. Bonino adds a fifth, which we have quoted here. The full reference from Bonino's article is R. BRANNON and D. DAVID, *The Forty-nine Percent Majority* (Washington: Wesley, 1976).

V. Respetar la jerarquía y la norma. La masculinidad se sostiene en el no cuestionamiento de sí, de las normas y de los ideales grupales (los de la masculinidad incluidos), en el estar contenido en una estructura y en la obediencia a la autoridad o a una causa, obligándose a sacrificar lo propio con la ilusión (casi siempre incumplida) de que algún día el varón será dueño de sí (o al menos de alguien/ algo). Lo deseado/ temido es, desde esta creencia, pertenecer/ no pertenecer a un grupo (de varones), ya que ellos (y no las mujeres) son los que avalan con su aplauso la masculinidad (Marques & Osborne, 1991). (49)

Arjie's classification by normative consent as a "sissy" (a "funny boy") immediately provokes a certain understanding of his behaviour: he cannot have courage, he cannot commit any deed of honour, indeed, he cannot survive in the field of normative homosociality. Selvadurai's triumph consists in portraying such construction of the character at the dialogical level and subverting it at the end, when Arjie becomes a modern male *Held*: a hero fighting for new male concerns, but hero and male indeed.

### 3. RACE

The relation between race and masculinity is not so clearly defined as that between class and masculinity or gender(s) and masculinity. Therefore, our intention here shall be merely to propose some ideas which could be interesting while discussing the issue of the construction of masculinity in the book, and to point out a number of problematic points which may be analysed on the light of the concern with ethnic tension that the book explores.

The second chapter in *Funny Boy*, 'Radha Aunty', is the first to deal extensively with the issue of racism. From the first references to the tense situation in the country, a relation between race and masculine behaviour is slightly pointed at:

"Who is he?" Ammachi demanded.

"A boy. From the play."

"What is his name?"

"Why?"

"What is his name?"

"Anil."

"Anil who?"

Radha Aunty was silent.

"What is his last name?"

"Jayasinghe," she replied finally.

Ammachi let out a small cry that was both triumphant and despairing. "A Sinhalese! I knew it!"

Appachi came out onto the front porch, drawn by the sound of her voice. Ammachi turned to him. "What did I tell you? She was getting a lift from a Sinhalese. Only a Sinhalese would be impertinent enough to offer an unmarried girl a lift." (57-8)

Arjie's grandmother's insistence in getting to know the boy's surname can of course be traced down to her father's assassination by a Sinhalese mob, to which we



will return immediately. But her final assertion that “Only a Sinhalese would be impertinent enough to offer an unmarried girl a lift” verbalizes a conscious strategy of othering on the basis of Tamil and Sinhalese male costumes and social behaviour; Sinhalese men are constructed as unfaithful and indecent in opposition to Tamils. Ethnic background is thus proposed as a logical source for appropriate or inappropriate behaviour; Ammachi’s reasoning follows the logic that, since the Sinhalese are to her so undesirable, their actions correspond in her view to their moral stance. Obviously another conflict lies at the basis of the episode, the generational one, for it becomes evident that neither is Radha doing anything aberrant, nor has Anil any kind of ill intentions. But to Arjie’s grandmother, his racial origins become inextricably linked to his unmanly behaviour. Of course, the question that follows is what elements make a real man in the eyes of Arjie’s grandmother, and the answer proves an interesting one. It can be drawn through the analysis of the character Radha marries at the end. First at all, and most important, he is Tamil. But it is worth citing the description that Ammachi herself gives her family at the beginning of the chapter:

“What kind of a man is he?”

“An engineer,” Ammachi replied. “Works for a big company in America. Very well off.”

“An engineer!” one of the aunts cried. “How wonderful for Radha.”

“And such a good family, too,” another added.

“What about his character?”, a third asked.

“Excellent,” Ammachi replied. “Doesn’t drink or womanize. And we know for a fact that there is no insanity in the family.” (42-43)

To the question of “what kind of a man” he is, Ammachi replies with an account of his professional life, from which we infer that the household conceives a man’s worth depending on his salary. This is a commonplace of men’s studies, as we saw during the first part of this article. Taking into account the importance of traditional marriage customs in Sri Lanka, which the chapter deals with to a great extent, it is only logical to suppose that a great importance is given to a man’s salary, yet it is strikingly referred to as the first of the elements that define “the kind of man he is”. To create even a greater opposition, Radha meets Anil Jayasinghe while rehearsing for a theatre play, which makes him at least an artistic person, something traditionally considered not the best option for a possible groom. The weight of the family is omnipresent, and about his temperament she points out that he “doesn’t drink or womanize” and that “there is no insanity in the family.” So his personality, his virtues and his defects, are either not important or unknown, which means that love is secondary here. These are quite striking things to say, if one thinks that not drinking, not being unfaithful, and not having madness in the family are the factors which can make a good husband of a man. We can conclude that, if this is termed “excellent”, then drinking and unfaithfulness should be possibly “normal” (and tolerated). As we see, contemporary literature calls urgently for a redefinition of the whole of male experience as it is revealed in literary texts.



After having heard it from Radha Aunty after her discussion with Ammachi, Arjie becomes intrigued by the meaning of the word “racist” and the story of the dismembered corpse (that Janaki reminds Radha) as an explanation for her mother’s anti-Sinhalese sentiments:

“She [Ammachi]’s such a racist,” Radha Aunty said to me.  
I looked at Radha Aunty. I did not understand the meaning of the word “racist,” but I could tell that it was not a nice thing.  
“Radha, baba, you mustn’t forget what happened,” said Janaki.  
Radha Aunty clicked her tongue against her teeth impatiently. “Oh, I’m so tired of that,” she said. “Why can’t we just put it behind us.”  
Janaki sighed and said. 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 and cut pieces out of him.”  
I stared at Janaki in shock.  
“I know, I know.” Radha Aunty said, brushing aside Janaki’s remarks. But is that a reason to hate every Sinhalese?” (59)

From the perspective of the studies of masculinity, there is a possible interpretation here that we would like to develop. What is described in the lines above is actually the fragmentation of the patriarchal body. It is significant that it is precisely the grand-grandfather the member of the family that Selvadurai chooses to suffer the terrible consequences of the riots, and the form in which he is killed. Obviously this stems from a historical reality. But from the point of view of the analysis of gender in a traditionally structured household, the defilement of the patriarch’s body can be read as a greater insult, a more significant loss for the family (and particularly for the daughter, Ammachi) in symbolic terms. In the popular male imagination, the worst thing that can happen to the male body is undergoing defilement. That is partly the reason why so great an emphasis on carnage is exerted on the narratives of war. A man’s manhood depends as well on his integrity, partly on the moral aspect, of course, but on *physical* integrity as well. The dismemberment of Ammachi’s father’s body represents an insufferable affront, the dislocation of family roles, the defilement of the whole family indeed. Since the gender system in the family is thus destroyed, the grandmother presumably assumes the patriarchal roles, something we infer from her overwhelming domination of the household and its inhabitants and from the unobtrusiveness of her husband, described by Arjie in ‘Pigs Can’t Fly’ in the following terms:

There my grandparents Ammachi and Appachi sat, enthroned in big reclining chairs. Appachi usually looked up from his paper and said vaguely, “Ah hello, hello,” before going back behind it, but Ammachi always called us to her with the beckoning movement of her middle and index fingers. With our legs trembling slightly we would go to her, the thought of the big canes she kept behind her tall clothes almariah strongly imprinted upon our minds. (2)

The fact that Ammachi is the one in charge is emphasized by the ever-disturbing presence of the canes. The canes are Ammachi’s; she, and not her hus-

band, is the final authority and the one who decides punishments. The children fear disturbing her, not disturbing her husband:

The one we understood, never to appeal to was Ammachi. Like the earth-goddess in the folktales, she was not to be disturbed from her tranquillity. To do so would have been the cause of a catastrophic earthquake. (3)

It is interesting to note Selvadurai's coherent narrative symbology; canes are inextricably linked to people who inflict punishment and are in control, people whom Arjie is afraid of and rebels against. They appear twice in the novel as possessions of people who try to modify his behaviour and who represent the highest authority in different moments of life; the first in childhood and the second in adolescence: Ammachi and Black Tie. Moreover, one must not forget that the assumption of leading roles on the side of Ammachi constitutes, in this context, an assumption of *male* roles.

Now, we would like to stress a final, intensely moving metaphor which Selvadurai offers to the reader, in which masculinity and race can be seen again melted, this time with greater aesthetic beauty, for a specific meaning. The fact that Shehan is Sinhalese and Arjie is Tamil is not sensed by Arjie until the final explosion of racial hate. Since Arjie speaks Sinhalese only and has always been to Sinhalese schools and played with Sinhalese friends, he does not recognize the racial difference when the moment comes to have a Sinhalese lover. This realization comes later. But so does the realization that Shehan was simply showing him his love, and not debasing him, when he makes love to him for the first time in his parents' garage.

The sex scene constitutes, above all, the great moment of the breaking down of the bodily boundaries. Before this moment, Arjie's attraction to other men had remained an aesthetic experience, never surpassing the mere appreciation of male beauty, however passionate such appreciation could be. When Shehan enters into him it is not mere sex what is being portrayed. It is Arjie's reconciliation with his own body, which had previously been severed from him, what is at stake. Through Shehan's understanding of the physical side of love Arjie begins to recognize the sensual reality of his own self, and the mistake in which he has been forced to live by social incomprehension. This is too heavy a burden to dismiss instantaneously, and so Arjie's first reaction is the rage of confusion. He cannot bring himself down to the experience.

We would like to propose a reading of this moment from the perspective of race. After Ammachi's anti-Sinhalese sentiments, Radha being attacked by Sinhalese rioters in a train, Daryl Uncle being murdered presumably by the Sinhalese police, and the whole issue with Jegan —his affiliation to the Tamil Tigers and his father's hotel being boycotted by local Sinhalese youth—, Arjie falls in love and starts a relationship with a Sinhalese *boy*. And that could be, to our understanding, another key to a reading of the text from the perspective of race. Once he recognizes the true nature of what had happened between them, Arjie realizes everything is a matter of control:

Right and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were. I thought of Shehan and myself. 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? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't. If you were powerful like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. If you were like Shehan or myself you had no choice but to follow what they said. But did we always have to obey? Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? I thought about this, but no answer presented itself to me. (273-4)

The first time Arjie hears the word “racist” he hears it as Radha’s definition for Ammachi. The first time he is pointed as “funny” he is called so by an adult, and later corroborated by his own father. In both cases these are labels: constructions. Just because he is seen dressed as a bride, Arjie is subsequently constructed as a “sissy” and all his movements interpreted in that light; for the reason that he is Sinhalese, Anil is in Ammachi’s mind constructed as disloyal, and his lifts considered not a gesture of friendliness, but of indecency. The thing that makes the sex scene such an interesting image for an analysis from the perspective of race, is the fact that it symbolizes the potential of physical love to disrupt and destroy prejudice; after realizing its true meaning, Arjie reconciles with himself (finds his own identity in a world that has relentlessly *identified* him a thousand times) and when the time comes to confront the riots, his love for his Sinhalese boyfriend endures:

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 from him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him. (302)

This is another final manifestation of the *Bildung*’s outcome: the formation of a growingly sensitive and mature critical mind.

The understanding of construction as an artificial process of classification is as palpable as the attempts of normative power at manipulating reality. The one who has the power is the one who names, who classifies, who defines, be it socially, sexually or racially. An analysis of Selvadurai’s novel from this perspective shows the artificiality of the whole process and its rationale, namely, that the *statu quo* needs to be respected at all costs, for the benefit of the privileged. However, and in a remarkable narrative effort, Selvadurai manages to create a modern young *Bildungsheld* who proves both sensitive and strong, vulnerable and daring. No doubt it is subversive to make a funny boy the bravest boy of his class. And well-done, indeed.



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