"HOMELESS AND HOMESICK": EXILE AND BILDUNGSROMAN IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY

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ABSTRACT

It is the purpose of this paper to analyze the literature of a Sri-Lankan writer who has been urged to emigrate because of the social and racial problems risen between Tamils and Sinhaleses in Sri-Lanka, in the last few decades. Shyam Selvadurai (*Funny Boy*), now living in Canada, a new novelist of the nineties, describes a paradisiac country in violent turmoil and writes about the decision to leave a seemingly impossible situation for a "promised" land. It will be interesting to examine the contradictions between these very different but enriching civilizations, the Eastern and the Western, specifically in the way they face religion, gender and race. Special attention would be paid to the notions of *bildungsroman*, the loss of innocence, the growing-up of political conscience, the racial discrimination, and the literary metaphors of exile.

The postmodern condition is by definition characterized by fragmentation. But this can be a good help to solve the problem of modern writers placing themselves at a crossroads, because of their origins, exiles and nationalities. In America, the literature of minorities is always being reinvented. We can speak about *transcultural* writers, the product of an international culture without limits, because of their own decisions and, or, social conditionings. Those writers live in that abstract space Marshall McLuhan called *global village*, that is, a no-man's land without a specific identity, or else, with an identity of its own, characterized by polysemy, by creativeness, and non-canonical approaches to the literature of the world.

It is well known that the recent history of the American continent has been produced by migrant forces which have been coming in different waves from all over the world. These waves of different people and races, coming to this promising *newfoundland* to find a new *El Dorado*, are a challenge to the people which came in it first (as it was and has always been in the history of the world since the very beginning), and consider themselves the owners of the land. But, without entering in these broader concepts of possession and inheritance of the territory, what can be stated clearly is that the situation of modern North America, specifically, is that of a mosaic, a microcosm of ideas, races, religions... which clash many times against a conscience of Unity —as alluded in the very concept of Canada.

The migrant condition is, therefore, a contradictory term in a land of possessors and victims, because the previous one establish the rules of government and the others adjust and try to imitate (in order not to be discredited), but keeping and progressively losing, in a series of generations, their own identities and differences. It is a situation, that of the emigrant, which is both frustrating and enriching, in a fascinating paradox that proves sometimes very creative, mainly in the hand of artists and intellectuals —let us forget about the social differences and restrict to migrant writers and intellectuals. On the one hand, the recent emigrant loses the power of roots and the knowledge of both the traditional and the imposed rules and language, that is, he/she lives in an unknown territory, with the fascination and vertigo of the discoverer of a new reality; on the other and after a while, both world begin to mix up, building slowly a new reality much richer than the one of a monochrom citizen but less safe and comfortable. It depends on the level of adjustment and the cultural power of the subject that it can result in a very rich and metaphoric literary force, leading to the creation of a hybrid. The possibility of watching and comparing the new with the old, after the first cultural shocks, transforms in the only privileged condition for the emigrant, and saves from schizophrenia. This is also a fascinating borderly condition because the eye watches from the ex-centric position (a terminology now in use for the study of differences in non-canonical literature), so that one can feel the reality from the outside, from the first non-implicate, innocent situation of the newcomer, mocked by the experts but mocking their certainty at the same time. Undoubtedly, the emigrant condition leads to a paradoxical status in which one temporarily loses the solid grounds and education, like a new-born child starts learning the new language and rules, a little bit looking like a decent fool to the eye of the established, but being able to judge from that seemingly inferior position, like an old-man who knows more than you but cannot express it.

Little by little, the emigrants begin acquiring a conscience of their own margins, more powerful than those of other citizens, because of their own inferior condition as foreigners. That is the reason why the marginalized group themselves into other *tribes*, other issue-oriented unities, that are not properly placed inside the orthodox movements alone. Another important fact is that the emigrant oblige themselves to the task of finding and creating a new and more equal language to express a different world, so they become postmodern writers acting against many other war fronts: now, the enemies will not only be the social injustices, but also the racists, because they show themselves far from their goals as different and *coloured* people, and a whole chain of intersections of class, race and gender provoke a very interesting postmodern intellectual debate.

In the re-invention of the world, emigrant writers see themselves forced to speak against their own cultural breed and formation, and in doing so they become nearer most of the other marginal groups of the American landscape. This ideal, unreal, world is by definition decentralized and peripheral, that is, its borders are imaginary or self-invented and imposed. It creates a magic world of memories and subjectively chosen frontiers, which are the product of the power of physical and mental dislocation.

And something even more attractive to the modern critics is that these notions of *unity in diversity* bring about other intersections and coincidences which are stronger than the national ones. They form a shocking movement, grouping together different races and ethnic origins under different names. One of the best examples can be seen in the activist group of *radical women of colour*, that appeared some years ago in the western coast of the American Pacific. They find the quality of being *marginal* women of different racial and gender origins as the only point of contact: a new and risky classification that is working very well with the Chicana movement and the Afro-American in the U.S. border and with the Asian-Indian immigrants in Canada, for example.

The proof of the strength of these women is shown by the existence of publishing houses both in Canada and the United States, like Aunt Lute in California, or Little Sisters in British Columbia, to embody the power of the word to end with long-time silence. In this sense, a book which became the epitome of the metaphor of borders and breaking boundaries is Gloria Anzaldúa's famous *Borderlands: La Frontera*. The title is in itself a metaphor of the marginal quality of their poetry as outcast and coloured people in this society. They live in at least three borders or *nations* (innerscapes) that marginalize them: that is the racial, the gendered, and for some of them the sexual option (their lesbian condition). All this is proved to be stronger than their ethnicity, however powerful as this may be. They find themselves nearer a same tribe than being Chicana, American, Canadian, Mexican or Indian. And indeed they produce together a corpus of what can be called and can be included in the canon of postcolonial literature, because it shares the same attributes as the *colonized* literature of orthodox origins brought to the comparison with the colonizer body of thought.

That is the reason why the spatial factor stresses the feelings of exile. We live in a world in which colonial exploitation, cultural imperialism, ideological domination and racism are still present, although hidden by a mask, a subtle mask of hypocrisy. So, after picking up and elaborating the collective history of their own countries and their colonial past, they notice they are part of the third world and understand they are capable of defending their roots and affirming themselves. In the case of the *radical women of colour*, they also call themselves *third world women*, inside the first world culture, to stress the feeling of isolation from the highway, and their outcast condition. In this way, they lose their anonymity, their vulnerability, and can try to give solutions not only to the colonial knowledge of the past, but also to the new colonialism of the present.

Therefore, acting against another kind of imperialism, the colonization of the mind, new generations of radical women writers appear nowadays, with enormous success, passing over the hermetic borderlines of literary canons. One must applaud their courage of being marginal, because only a peripheral perspective can offer a new discourse. These diversities and paradoxes build a picture, vivid and multicoloured at the same time, of the American cultural movement. The complexity of these writers is caused by the coexistence of different cultures without a supremacy of one to another, and ethnicity does not lead to isolation, but on the contrary, to a fertile plurality, to a rich hybridity. This kind of fight proves much richer and more politi-

cally radical than the previous ones taken by the more homogeneous groups. Nevertheless, the success of both, although still in the middle of the process, has permitted the spread and the coming into light of very rich North American minority culture that has, undoubtedly, the inalienable right to shine by itself.

There are around 300.000 Canadians of Asian origins, including the ones who have settled there coming from Europe, and the other continents. Their groups have their own distinct values and heritages, which have enriched and are still enriching the mosaic of the Canadian culture. A bridge, as it was stated before, can be established between them and against the Canadian orthodox portrait.

There is also a strong activity involving these groups through the appearance of specific journals, associations, university sections, etc. The majority of the Canadian writers of Asian origins were born in India, next in Ceylon, and then Pakistan; many of these writers are university formed, and some of them wrote before emigrating to Canada. Most of them stick to the standard English, blending it with North American expressions and their works revitalize the literature of the continent through the force of the hybrid (In Salman Rushdie's words, the "chutney" of both cultures, spicy as the Orient, witty as the Occident, politically engaged as the mixture of both).

Two good examples of the paradoxical situation of the immigrant's mind, navigating between two seas in struggle, the tides of nostalgia and the boat of logic and civilization, help to affix what can be called the "mind of the exiled", the present and past of the transcultural writers. The emphasis put in the Canadian environment is clearly seen in the immigrant's poetry. A feeling of rejection, commonly seen in the immigrant's psyche is illustrated dramatically in the portrait of Canadian nature (its geography, climate, landscape, the urban image as a symbol of loneliness), compared with the living land of the past as the realm of dreams.

The poem "Immigrant", by Rienzi Crusz, compares the revision of a middle-aged man of his youth in Ceylon; the nostalgia makes the past stronger than the present, and the present is seen as a white mist that cleans that spicy past. There is a contradistinction between the wildness that lies inside the mind and the refined civilization represented by the eraser snow of the Canadian landscape: the "white silence" of civilization.

At forty, the bone had set hard as stone. The belly conditioned to a chemistry of rice, curry and strong tea. My love for Vilma, and my hatred for John basked naked, like stone pillars in my courtyard. Lesser likes and dislikes grew as wild lilies and weeds, and I could pluck them out at will with my bare hands. All this in Ceylon, where the sun burned to a passion on my tame skin.

Then I decided to come to Canada.

Soon the snow covered all:
my Vilma, my John, my lilies, my weeds.
A film of ice spun round my skin,
my fires sputtered to a white wind
and died
with a curse on their jaws.
Gloves, snow boots, ear-muffs,
now preached angrily of the death of the sun.

But somewhere,
in my forty-year blood-stream,
in the roots of my crow hair,
in the sunned joints of my limbs,
lurk leopards on green trees,
elephants trumpeting night's violence
Vilma and John struggling in their shadows,
wild lilies and weeds
straining
their thin bones
against a crust of ice,
waiting
to break loose.

For the time being, perhaps,
no one will know my real name,
or guess where I really come from.
Who'll ever know
that I was once a clown
in the carnival of the sun,
when I now live
without
my loves and hates,
wild lilies and weeds,
only the passion
of the unsaid word,
the white silence
of civilization.

In "There and Here", R.U. Gahun, compares both worlds as well, and the nostalgic world of heat is full of fragrances, while the Canadian one is characterized by order, discipline, culture but at the same time monotony opposes the artistic chaos of India.

There in the Land of Ind it is night...
A night of stars strewn
And a crescent moon above,

A night saturated
With fragrances of milky jasmines
And majestic magnolias,
A night leniently lined
With blossomed mango-trees
And fenced by henna-bushes,
A night neatly hemmed
By Himalayan sentinels

Casting their spell On the mighty peninsula.

There the gods are asleep: The lovers are awake Inhaling the mingled fragrances In the arms of the Himalayas Of the land of Ind.

Here in the Land of Can
It is day...
A day in a brick walled school
With square white rooms
Framed with green black-boards
And lined with rows and rows
Of rectangular wooden desks
Backed by wooden chairs
That cage bored boys and girls
Ready to be tailored
Into supreme coats
Of a supreme System
Created by the highest
In the High Capitol.

Here the gods are awake: The lovers are pilled Inhaling the hangover sound In the arms of the bricked building Of the Land of Can.

Although the two worlds become a fixed cartoon cliche of the real ones, they also represent the mind of the exiled, fighting constantly against two contradictory forces: the centrifugal that evades from the alien reality, and the centripetal that keeps his/her mind tightened to the new system.

One of the best examples to illustrate the characteristics of a literature of exile is Shyam Selvadurai's first novel, written in 1994, *Funny Boy*. This writer of Sri-Lanka origins was born in 1965, and now lives in Toronto. Toronto has become then, the place to hide from the violence and the outcast condition, the displacement from home.

But Funny Boy is more than a novel of exile, it is also a proof of the other exiles that a man can suffer as a consequence of growing-up and facing the incongruities of maturity. Funny Boy opens up with a portrait of a young boy who has a special quality: he is a happy, middle-class boy who shows a predilection for culture, art, reading, beauty, in opposition to the other male members of his family. He's not particularly fond of sports and other physical activities, instead his main favourite game consists of dressing like an Indian bride, in silk, using an old sari of his aunt and marrying another of his girl cousins, in the weekends in which the whole family met in their grandparents' house. For Arjie, the protagonist, this game represents that novel-quality that brings with it the passion for adventure and romance like those Bombay-films so popular in this area of the world, with all the paraphernalia that they carry within. At this time of his early life, Arjie believes that the real world has to do with the romantic tone of his favourite book: Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. His family —due to the treason of one of his female cousins, who is envious of the leadership of Arjie among the other girls, is worried about his turning out a "funny" boy, a euphemism to designate those sexually harassed by a different sexual choice, and so they forbid him to play with them, instead they command him to go out and play sports with the boys—he had always found them dull and primitive, as symbols of a pre-literary world in which fantasy vanishes into the realm of competition, strength and rivalry.

Funny Boy is, thus, structured in six concentric parts, or six stories that can be read independently, but together they 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. The loss of innocence is expressed in the first story with the giving up of the sari dress, an innocent game for a child of seven, found guilty of depravity in the adult-eyes. It is the first farewell in a series of good-byes:

I turned and, with the sari still in my hands, I fled. I ran from the back garden to the front gate and out. In the field across the way, the boys were still at their cricket game. I hurried down the road towards the sea. At the railway lines I paused briefly, went across, then scrambled over the rocks to the beach. Once there, I sat on a rock and flung the sari down next to me. "I hate them, I hate them all," I whispered to myself. "I wish I was dead." / I put my head down and felt the first tears begin to wet my knees. (38)

I glanced at the sari lying on the rock where I had thrown it and I knew that I would never enter the girls' world again. Never stand in front of Janaki's mirror, watching a transformation take place before my eyes. No more would I step out of that room and make my way down the porch steps to the altar, a creature beautiful and adored, the personification of all that was good and perfect in the world. The future spend-the-days were no longer to be enjoyed, no longer to be looked forward to. And then there would be the loneliness. I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either. (39)

Arjie learns to disguise his overt and natural feelings of refinement and dresses up with a different kind of sari (in this case, the furtive clothes of secrecy and simulation will be his next skin), and his feelings of alienation show tragically cruel to his tender age.

As the second and the other stories are narrated, there will always be a loss of some kind and a process of painful learning. "Radha Aunty" (the second story), his younger aunt, is a woman educated in America that puzzles Arjie's mind in wonder of the charm of Hollywood's film, represented by the Western clothes she wears the first time he sees her; when she falls in love with a young man of a different ethnic group, they keep their love in secret, and Arjie is the only one that knows it. But now we, readers, also learn that Arjie's family belong to the Tamils, and the hatred between Tamil and Sinhalese (whom the young man belongs to) is overwhelming. In this story, the literary symbol for Arjie is a film like *The King and I*, in which a white tutoress falls in love with the king of Siam, but never marries a different race. However, this cliche, this façade also falls down when after deciding to marry in secret with that man, Radha aunty is involved in a train riot near home and is beaten severely by violent sinhalese activists. She learns the meaning of fear and the impossibility of a happy ending is shown tragically, so she marries instead an orthodox wealthy older Tamil merchant, and Arjie discovers, to his new wonder, that life is not, again, as the Hollywood melodrama teaches.

The meaning of the word "racism" shows strikingly logic to Arjie's mind, and a bit of the naivete of his adolescence is lost for ever. Little by little, Arjie's eyes become sadder and that happiness of the beginning starts to fade.

I asked Amma if she knew *The King and I*. She said she had seen the film a long time ago. As far as she remembered, it was the story of an English governess who goes to the court of Siam to teach English and other Western subjects to the king's children and wives.

"Does she marry the king at the end?" I asked eagerly.

"Marry the king?" Amma repeated. She laughed. "You must be mad."

"Why?" I cried, disappointed that the story didn't end with a marriage.

"Because at that time people didn't marry outside their race."

"And now?" I asked, determined to get a happy ending out of the story. "If it was now, would they have married?"

Amma looked at me, irritated by my persistence. "I don't know," she said. "Probably not."

"But why not?"

"Because most people marry their own kind," Amma said in a tone that warned me not to ask further questions.

I found my enthusiasm for *The King and I* ebbing. I couldn't see the point of a play where the hero and the heroine didn't get married at the end. Amma must have read my mind, because she said, "You'll have a good time. The songs in *The King and I* are very catchy." (54)

One of the main hits of this novel that makes it a success is the way in which we, unaware Western readers, learn progressively, together with the protagonist, not only the cultural background of Sri-Lanka folklore and traditions, but also the subliminary tensions and the activism that hides behind the blind turistic side. After experiencing the division between Tamils and Sinhalese we assist to the experience of guerrilla fights, of the Tamil tigers, of terrorism and bigotry (it had, until now, been always away in the city of Jaffna, the focus of pre-war tension), and police, state repression. In the third story, Arjie's mother meets a former boyfriend, a man who is in fact a deffender of Tamil values as a minority race in the island, against the injustice of the

Sinhalese majority. He will be killed by the police after being tortured and his corpse will appear anonymously in the river, some days later. The personal learning for Arjie in this case, is not only the political preconsciousness of this middle-class family, but also the peeping into the such complicate world of married couples, and the hints of adultery. He also learns that hidden romances are not so easy-going as in films and novels, and that they can happen to your own family, to your surprise and amazement.

All those cultural shocks mould Arjie's consciousness of life and art, and unveil his beautiful ingeniousness into a growing rebellious character. It is a ritual awakening, as the tribal huntings and the losing of infancy are for the young men-warriors in primitive tribes. It affects Arjie's hypersensitivity and intelligence (the one that kept him apart from the other boys' world), and also with the feeling of exile from the "ordinary" world, the feeling of isolation from the mainstream, into the fringe of difference. It can then be well described as a process of marginalization, an intersection with race and gender that places Arjie at a borderland in both areas.

The learning of the other two stories (the fourth and fifth) will lead to the disintegration of the world of the first one (a kind of wealthy, safe paradise that was understood as such only when it disappears, as it always happens). In the fourth story, the betrayal of values because of the fear of losing one's position in life proves one of the bitterest experiences. Young Jegan, (the son of Arjie's father's best friend) comes to work with him after the death of his father that left that family —formed by Jegan and his mother—in a precarious economic condition. Jegan is a source of problems as, little by little, we learn that he belongs to the frightening Tamil tigers, and he becomes a danger for the hypocritical relationship that exists between Arjie's father, who is a well-established hotel owner in Colombo, with his Sinhalese neighbours. As some racist graffities appear in the hotel and the gossipping of the employees arouses, Jegan is fired and the moral boundary between friends is cut for the sake of the family; but, again, a new painful experience turns into a growing nightmare, into the nearby catastrophe that avvicinates. In this sense, the whole novel tries to establish the causes of the inevitable necessity of exile. It is not only a need for refuge from the outside for the individual "queer" boy, but also a socio-political runaway of a family that tries to avoid the racist hatred and violence.

Part the fifth consists of Arjie's longed-for loss of virginity that takes place during his stay at his secondary school. Schools are microworlds, where the adult performances are repeated without the filter of the false politeness; that is why the same racist hates and social clashes are even more evident between pupils. Arjie makes friends with a young boy with a bad reputation at school. Shehan is an outcast and the other boys advice Arjie not to establish contact with him. The experience of the first sexual relationship is not a very successful one and takes place furtively in darkness, but it marks the growing-up of a child into adulthood. It is also the turning point of a young man who takes decisions and opts for sexual and moral choices. It happens that Arjie is chosen by the head of the school to recite some patriotic poems because of his good voice and his special, soft personality. This dean is a tormented tyrant who employs physical punishment with the pupils whenever something goes out of the rules, following a more than rigid moral doctrine. Through the use of terror and whipping, he fulfills his goals and finds relief to his own tensions and problems. He was the one who had Shehan's long hair cut and he whipped both, Shehan and Arjie, when they couldn't recite at all because they were in front of him. When the crucial moment of the public-reading comes, Arjie pretends to be so nervous that he mixes

two poems together, making a terrible fuzz, ridiculing himself and the school, among a laughing audience. This is made on purpose, for Arjie has taken the decision to fight against the injustice of a system with an active protest. He is no longer a mere big-eyed witness of life, instead he becomes a guerrilla-man, a manipulator, in his way. In front of a terrible reality he acts as a romantic hero, and he does that out of love: to revenge all the tortures inflicted upon him.

The last story of the novel has got the form of a diary. It is an epilogue that summarizes the story in a circular way. Precisely, the form of a diary has to do with the epiphany of the artist, after the healing of the scars of experience. Writing a diary anticipates the autobiographical reference to the making of a novel like the very *Funny Boy*.

The "Riot Journal", as the title indicates, explains the unchaining of violence in Colombo, the destruction of Arjie's house and hopes, the conscience of the impossibility of living a peaceful life between Tamils and Sinhaleses, and the murder of his grandparents in a street riot, after burning their car with them inside. All these cross-references appeal to the life of that naive boy of the beginning, which is now in ruins. The end of hope is the last painful experience inflicted upon the artist's conscience. The curfew edicted by the government closes a period of growing and the good-byes and the longing for a new promised land where to start a new life as emigrants shows as the only possible solution. The past is now not only abandoned but also destroyed by the radical external forces symbolized by the burning of Arjie's home (the altar of his past), and the siege of the remnants thereafter.

3:00 P.M. We have just heard the news about Ammachi's and Appachi's house. It, too, has been destroyed. Ammachi and Appachi are all right, however, and they are going to drive to Kanthy Aunty's house. She lives in Colombo Seven and, so far, that area has not been affected at all. Sena Uncle said that Ramanaygam Road looks like someone has dropped a bomb on it. So many houses have been destroyed that, from the top of the road, you can see clear to the railway lines and the sea. When I heard this I thought about childhood spend-the-days and all the good times we had there. These thoughts made me cry. I couldn't cry for my own house, but it was easy to grieve for my grandparents' house. (299)

When he makes love for the last time with Shehan, he takes conscience of his Sinhalese origin:

Shehan 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)

The funeral of Arjie's grandparents brings the whole family again for the last time. Radha aunty returns from America with a different and grave expression, and the image of a new world appears in perspective: this is going to be Canada. A dreamy Canada full of mystery because of the ignorance of that reality so far-away from this land.

"When this is all over, we'll start to make plans for Canada." I am glad he said that, because I long to be out of this country. I don't feel at home in Sri Lanka any longer, will never feel safe again. (304)

Today I received my passport. As I looked at it, I finally realized that we were really leaving Sri Lanka; that in two days we will be in a strange country. I thought about how, when we were young, Diggy, Sonali, and I would sometimes imagine what foreign countries were like. All those Famous Five books, and the Little Women and the Hardy Boys. We would often discuss what fun it would be to go abroad, make snowmen, have snowball fights, and eat scones and blueberry jam. I don't think that we ever imagined we would go abroad under these circumstances, as penniless refugees. We are going, not with the ideas that something delightful awaits us, but rather with the knowledge that great difficulties lie ahead. / Today I watched a beggar woman running from car to car at the traffic lights, her hands held out, and I wondered if this would be our plight in Canada. (308-9)

The final image of the book symbolizes the mental turmoil of a mind between the shadows of the logical lack of knowledge of the future, and the mist of the loss of one's country, one's only reality:

I began to ride up the road, and the rain suddenly started, falling in great torrents, as it does during the monsoon season. When I reached the top of the road, I couldn't prevent myself from turning back to look at the house one last time. For a moment I saw it, then the rain fell faster and thicker, obscuring it from my sight. (312)

Funny Boy represents, after having analysed it, the epitome of a literature of discovery in a real postcolonial environment. It intersects with gender as most of the lesbian and gay studies, forming a minority of sexual choice. It also intersects with race and shows the effects of everyday racist wars (as in the former Jugoslavia or in Rwanda nowadays). And, finally, it is a prototype of the pre-emigrant conscience and, moreover, it is a bildungsroman, the learning of a young boy going into the sedative, hypnotic benefits of literature to end with, or partially relieve from, the painful experience of injustice.

Notes

* This paper was partially presented in a Lecture form at Swansea (Wales) and La Laguna. The results are part of a Research Project granted from the Spanish DGES (PB95-C03-02)

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