



**Towards a Redefinition of National Identity in Sri Lanka: An Attempt to
Trace Its Culture and Politics through Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy***

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Abstract

Mode and manner of 'Nation' has constantly being changed in keeping pace with societal, psychological, contextual background of a country. Indeed, this idea of 'Nation' is continuously in a state of fluidity. The concept of it in several decades ago do not hold good for the present time. So one has to analyse it in new light, with proper perspective and new idea. It is analysed in terms of shared history. So, in analysing the basic premises of 'Nation' one has to understand the cultural context and its literary textualisation. The main concept of it derives from the European

interpretation. However, the idea of the modern nation-state as we know it arrives in South Asia as a product of Western impact. The idea of the nation is, according to Benedict Anderson ‘the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time’ (12). There is deep relation between the state and nation. Modern state performs its function through inclusion and exclusion, absorption and fragmentation. So the ongoing debate goes on whether the idea of ‘Nation’ tends towards the empowerment of state or hegemonisation of state. My paper would study the idea of ‘Nation’ in the context of modern Sri Lanka’s political upheaval. I would analyse *Funny Boy* of Shyam Selvadurai and show how it contains the succinct notion of ‘Nation’ after 1980.

Key words: Nation, Nationalism, Conflict, Sinhalese, Tamils.

The joys of childhood, friends of our youth
ravaged by pieties and politics,
screaming across our screens, her agony
at last exposed, Sri Lankan burns alive.

(*Big Match*, 1983: Yasmine Gooneratne)

Sri Lanka has faced heavy onslaught from the civil war that has become the ultimate fate of this small island. As a result this country has experienced the ups and downs in its presentation of the total idea of community. Different community represents different construction of Nation and there is no doubt that each idea is imaginary. So, total idea of ‘Nation’ has been fragmented. Various writers in Sri Lanka have caught this subtle issue and given form to that issue with their own fictional point. Shyam Selvadurai is one of the most well-known examples of those writers.

Shyam Selvadurai is an expatriate writer and is now living in Canada. In his writing he gives voice to the history of Sri Lanka. For over forty years Sri Lanka has been a nation divided by violence. Ethnic crisis is very important issue throughout Sri Lanka's history. 30 years of prolonged war in Sri Lanka was entirely based on the ethnic issue, which resulted in great calamity accompanied by huge bloodshed.

Tamil agitation for a separate state and violence perpetrated by both guerrilla groups and the military has plagued the country. Indeed, the Tamils were the minorities in that country. They were deprived of all opportunities that the citizens of a country should claim. So they took the last resort to agitation and political movement. Indeed, Sri Lanka's bleak picture started to show after its Independence from the clutches of British. Before its independence Sri Lanka as one 'State' enjoyed the monolithic view of 'Nation' and there was not insurmountable diversity in the air. Rather this country enjoyed the status as an island paradise when it became independent. S. Makenthiran has written, "People were contented whether rich or poor. The different communities lived in remarkable amity. Having lived much of my younger days in the Sinhala South, it is a pleasure to recall the pleasant atmosphere that prevailed in pre-independent Ceylon." But this paradise state once gained was lost soon. Indeed, under one umbrella of British administration, different communities such as Muslims, Tamil, Sinhalese, and Burgher lived with one another in perfect unison. So Sri Lanka then enjoyed the homogenized concept of 'Nation'. But the country went through the racial turmoil and blood bath once it gets independence. Raging conflict then went on over the issue whether Tamils were the original inhabitants or the Sinhalese set the first foot on this country. It is in the name of 'pure' identities that ethnic or otherwise that genocides or massacre are carried out throughout periods. This text does not seek to unearth the original identity issue of the inhabitants of Sri Lanka. Rather, it

explains the fabric of society, the sexual orientation of the characters. My effort should be to explore the violence and victimization that people in general in Sri Lanka have to undergo in crisis time. To treat the new idea of Nation Selvadurai has probably interrogated, interpreted and problematized the history as the medium through which we can retrieve individual memory. Shyam Selvadurai suggests alternative way as to how different individuals within the minority community might relate to one another and construct imaginary idea of 'Nationalism' as Benedict Anderson pointed out. This recreation of history in a way reveals consciousness, anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of individuals and communal and national issues. He has successfully exploited some historical points of post-independence era and re-thinks and re-narrates about the community of Sri Lanka through various narratives woven into the texts. So, national politics form an independent sub-text to the main action of this entire novel.

In modern South Asian context nationalism has become the perpetration of ideology of major community. It has become the new normative force which claims to represent the interests of the entire nation. But as modern civilized country is inhabited by diverse group of people, it should allow disparate social group to interact in order to encourage the task of nation-building. There are various criteria for the development of 'nationalism' such as language, ethnicity, religion, the consciousness of having belonged to a lasting political entity etc. In the context of Sri Lanka's formation of national identity, ethnicity plays the major role. But this ethnicity foregrounds the conflict of nation and consequent identity crisis of the minor Tamil community. *Funny Boy* foreshadows primarily the ethnic differences and conflict. Moreover, this text also portrays problem over language. It shows nationalism at the cross-road because as Nivedita Majumdar states in her book *The Other Side of Terror*-“The Sinhalese used their numerical dominance to cast aside ideas of secularism and a pluralistic polity in favour of a race-based

nationalism.”(xxxv). Thus, *Funny Boy* is a carefully constructed novel delineating political turmoil. It reads the values, attitudes, and peculiarities of a ‘particular class of people at a particular moment in Sri Lanka’s history’.

Anthony D. Smith in his book *Nationalism and Modernism* deals with the concept of nationalism in the context of modernism. For this he has surveyed ideas from multiple theoreticians. For example, we should think about the concept of polyethnicity of William H. McNeill in his lecture *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History*. According to this concept, in every civilized state polyethnicity should be the norm. Various reasons such as social, economical, military, cultural etc compel a state to be replenished with polyethnic people. It brings about hybrid identities of the people. So, there is no pure ethnic nature of the ‘Nation’. Thus national identities are composed of narratives of ‘the people’, and they operate under a ‘doubled’ and ‘split’ signifier-split between the past and the present, the self and the other. Thus ambivalence of national identity is made. This superimposed identity fragments the nation. ‘Inner domain of national culture’ is always determined by the major section while minority remains always as the Other. There is a concept of ‘gender nation’ field which is rich in this novel for analysing various narratives and discourses. Moreover, there is the concept of ‘Nation’ in the concept of globalisation. In the overwhelming idea of Nation a country becomes supersede by a cosmopolitan culture. There remains an overwhelming combination of political independence, economic globalisation, mass communication and cultural hybridisation. Hobsbawm is the propagator of this concept.

Multiple ethnicities prove to be a destructive phenomenon for a country if the different ethnics do not live in harmony with each other. Sri Lanka is a country much ravaged by different ethnic people. *Funny Boy* is a novel divided into six parts. From second to sixth parts reveal

underflow of disturbances, conflicts in different segments of society of Sri Lanka. They reveal the hollowness in different areas such as love, marriage, familial relationship, education, politics, culture etc. The chapter called “Radha Auntie” exposes the society seen from the innocent vision of the narrator Arjie. Arjie’s idea of world was fed by imagination. Radha auntie would run into a short period of love with Anil. Radha auntie was Tamil by birth, whereas Anil was Sinhalese in blood. So the family of Radha auntie could not stand this relationship of them. The narrator could not find the rationality of ethnicity being a bar in the path of love. So he asks,

I was in a Sinhalese class at school and my friends were Sinhalese. My parents’ best Friends were, too. Even our servant was Sinhalese, and, in fact, we spoke with her only in Sinhalese. So what did it matter whether Anil was Sinhalese or not? (*Funny Boy* 59).

The love between them did not bear fruit in the ultimate bondage of marriage. The narrator derived the hard fact of reality: “...how fervently I had believed in them; believed that if two people loved each other everything was possible. Now, I knew that this was not so.” (100) The fact of different ethnicity builds two different ideas of nation. Radha Auntie got the first experience of ethnic violence in a train journey when Sinhalese mob threw stones at her.

The ‘bloody bandage’ around her head ultimately broke her relationship with Anil. This chapter also draws attention to the fact that idea of ‘Nation’ is affected by culture. Language is the basic premise of culture. The people who speak in national language actually bear the torch light of culture. So in South Asian context we have seen that there is a political tendency in determining the national language. For this there is a rivalry between the Hindi and Telegu in India. In Sri Lanka the rift between Sinhala and Tamil becomes all the more vivid and it

necessitates two different states. Appa of the narrator states the basic history of Sri Lanka: “The Sinhalese wanted to make Sinhala the only national language, and the Tamils did not like this. So there was a riot and many Tamils were killed.”(61) As a result a group of Tamils emerged called Tamil Tigers. They wanted a separate country which they would call Eelam in order to keep their identity in flow. But still an elite section of the Tamils had to accept the Sinhalese because to them Sinhalese was “the real language of the future.” However, this attempt of making the Sinhala the national language was disastrous. As a result many of the Burgher people left the country as they could not adopt Sinhalese language. The conflict between the Sinhalese and the Burgher did not conflate due to the distinguishing skin-colour too.

Politics is thus controlled by the major group of the society. The chapter called ‘See No Evil, Hear No Evil’ portrays the separate identity formation of ‘Nation’ by presenting the virulent nature of politics in democracy. Politics is the inseparable part in the argument of war: “They were arguing about politics and I learned that there was a war going on now in Jaffna, between the army and the Tamil Tigers, who were fighting for a separate state.” (109) The worst side of the politics is that the major section makes law in its own interest. Thus it brought Prevention of Terrorism Act only to curb the dissent voice of the marginal community. The very irony is that this Act serves as a ‘tool for state terrorism.’ For its adverse side Daryl Uncle died while he was on the hunt of the news. More adverse is the fact that no one would be able to raise question against this act. Everyone would have to connive at the injustice. So ‘Daryl Uncle’s killer would never be brought to justice.’(153) The title ‘See No Evil, Hear No Evil’ is, therefore, aptly justified. The only witness of the murder of Daryl Uncle has to succumb to the recent political situation. Thus, Somaratne’s mother raises the very question of safety:

I had two sons...The first was killed by the army during the 11971 insurrection. Now my second son comes home with his right arm paralyzed. Do you want to paralyze his other arm, too, or make him lose an eye? (148)

Even school education system is politicised. The chapter ‘The Best School of All’ illustrates this point. The narrator’s parents sent him from St. Gabriel to The Queen Victoria Academy in order to provide him with more amenities so that he learnt Sinhalese with more quickness. But the experience in this school shattered him. Here, too, Sinhala-Tamil thing goes on. There is a conflict between Black Tie and Lokubandara-two teachers in this school. Lokubandara is the model of typical Sinhalese. So he wants to make this school a Buddhist School because all Sinhalese are Buddhist. Since all Buddhists are Sinhalese, that means the school would be a Sinhala School, and there would be no place for Tamils in it. (220) Black Tie is immune to this partiality. As a result he ‘wanted the school to be for all races and religions.’ Thus throughout the school hours the narrator experienced injustice. He questions this 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 like Shehan or me 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. (274)

Indeed, the title is ironic. Throughout it the narrator throws the question about how to make a school better. Surely, politicised ambience cannot make a school better. School is a place where

people from all caste, creed and religion would study and make efforts towards the formation of united 'Nation'.

Selvadurai presents the violence of riot in the last chapter entitled 'Riot Journal: An Epilogue'. Riot occurs when two or more communities try to capture their individual identity. By negotiating this identity they want to form the idea of nation. Sri Lanka experienced the terrible wounds of violence which is not easy to heal. Selvadurai writes about the experience:

From the late '70s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) became the dominant Tamil political voice, demanding a separate state and resorting to increased violence in order get this separate country. Finally, the tension boiled over in the July 1983 riots. That morning of 24 July, I got up early like I always did and went for a jog, this new non-competitive sport a sop to my father that finally freed me from the tennis court. (*Many roads through paradise*, xxi)

Thus the majority section Sinhalese rose in fight against the Tamils. It is written in a diary which keeps records of the development of the fight. The apparent calm Colombo was thus raged under the tempestuous conflict. The narrator's parents expressed helplessness by uttering –“How can government be doing this? After all, we Tamils helped vote them in.”

Their house would be turned into ashes and destruction because the Sinhalese thugs were rampaging by holding electoral list. The state, in a way, was combined to destruct one section of the people. Many Tamils families were openly burnt down. However, in this dire situation a Sinhalese family would save them. They all understood that their stay in this little island has no validity. Thus, they have to be prepared for a holocaust of situation. Here Selvadurai represents the private struggle of his characters against the backdrop of a crisis-laden national drama. It also

focuses on the patriarchal norms and definitions of the communities in Sri Lanka. The journalistic section thus, highlights the emergent Tamil nationalism. Selvadurai is a 'realist' writer who draws upon his own experience of socio-cultural relations. He exposes the hidden history of co-existence and challenges the prescriptions of official history by assessing communal riots. Selvadurai highlights how nationalism becomes the religion of history, sacralising the authentic past of the community. Here focus will be made on religion and ethnicity and attempt will be made how they play crucial role in fashioning the idea of nation even in modern day. Sayantan Dasgupta in his edited book *A South Asian Nationalism Reader* rightly writes, "The Tamil-Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka has spawned a plethora of texts that reflect on and provide clues to understanding cultures of nationalism in Sri Lanka" (xxxix). Here construction of nation would be from the ideology of minority stand point. Tamils are minorities in Sri-Lanka.

There is another concept of 'gender nation'. There is an element of queerness. Gender and sexuality as categories of social experience give shape and meaning to the construction of a special community which we understand as 'gender nation'. Queer-narrative in this text emphasizes the significance of class formation in addressing question relating to alternative gender and sexuality. This is the first Sri Lankan English text which takes the issue of 'queer' element. This text continues and contests western model of queer identity. Western world is seen as a progressive and modern site of homosexual emancipation because of its visible queer movements. Queer adolescence becomes intertwined with the identity formation in critical times. Arjie in this novel often goes into the transgression of gender binary in those times when he goes to visit his grand-parents with his siblings and cousins each week end. Arjie seemed to have gravitated naturally to the girls' territory near the kitchen as it promises "the potential for the free

play of fantasy”. Arjie’s cross-gender identification reaches its height in the game of ‘bride-bride’ when he dresses up ‘in the clothes of the bride’. It actually reinforces the idea to dismantle masculine/feminine binary:

I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful shape, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world, represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palu, seemed to revolve. It was a self-magnified, like the goddess of the Sinhalese and Tamil Cinema, larger than life...I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested (4-5).

It reveals ‘the gay appropriation of the feminine’ of a child who is in the way of adolescence. There is an idea that “in the hierarchy of the bride-bride, the person with the least importance, less even the priest and the page boys, was the groom” (6). It reveals the marginalised position of the character. It may serve as the sub-text of the much later issue of marginalisation of a community. So in the context of *Funny Boy* gender construction plays a heavy role in the formation of society at the micro level and of the nation at the macro level. The publication of *Queer Transessions of Race, Nation and Gender* spearheaded the output of a body of literature where there is an intersection of sexuality, gender and nation. *Funny Boy* contains this element also. The chapter “The Best School of All” tries to question the queer identity of the people. The narrator would enter into the relationship with Shehan. Still he knows well that the external world would not allow this type of relationship. In this context he questions,

They were the ones who had broken his rules-no blinking, no licking of lips, no long hair- a code that was unfair. 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...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 had seen happen to other people like Jagan, or even Radha Aunty, who, in their own way, had experienced injustice. (274).

This is the very identity of gender construction which the narrator experienced in life and which plays heavy role in the construction of nation in the broad canvas.

We also observe ethnic nationalism in the context of globalisation. Globalisation indicates the exposure to the outer world. In the second half of 20th century globalisation is a common phenomenon. The British left colonised countries but it gave them legacy for mode of communication to the external world. Even amidst the raging issue of ethnic conflict Sri Lanka was caught in this globalisation. The narrator says, 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."(102) As a result people enter into a new lifestyle and got a new vision of watching the external world. So the narrator affirms the fact that "our affluence seemed to reach a new height when my father announced that he was going to Europe to promote the hotel and also to take a holiday" (103). So the globalisation is not at all always unacceptable in the fact that it helped people to hold relation amidst the tempestuous moment. The country is in a state of splitting position. Still, the fact of globalisation makes a bond between two individuals-narrator's father and Sena Uncle. This is a good point to observe. Anthony D. Smith celebrates this kind of globalized nation as 'not the transcendence of ethnicity but the revitalisation of ethnic ties by the very process of globalisation that are presumed to be rendering them obsolete...' (215). This kind of ethno-national organisation builds

solidarity because of its correspondence to the collective need in complex societies. This kind of relation is pre-eminently cultural. In this age of multiculturalism and universalism, the feeling of belongingness is restricted not to one state only. People feel to be drawn to this even though they belong to the different countries. Selvadurai shows this. In the last chapter *Riot Journal: An Epilogue*” the narrator probes this very fact:

It seems that there are demonstrations in Canada and England and India against the Sri Lankan government. When Appa had finished the telephone call, he was silent for a moment. Then he told Amma that Lakshman Uncle wanted us to come as refugees, that this would be a good time to claim refugee status. I felt joyful at the thought of getting out of this country, and I could see hope in Diggy’s and Sonali’s faces too. (303)

Therefore, they have to go on exodus knowing the fact that great difficulties lie ahead. This kind of terrible experience is not new. But the context changes with its correspondence text. Selvadurai captures this true fact with dexterity and herein lays his uniqueness.

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