



Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy: Note of Pathos - A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: There are nearly two types of people living in Sri Lanka. Since ancient history there has been ethnic tension between the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. In this paper we would like to examine the riots of 1983 described in Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*. This paper seeks to examine how the gender identity and ethnic conflict have been portrayed in this novel. This paper wants to justify how the author has portrayed the note of pathos on the individual level and community level.

Introduction

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, pathos is “*is an element in experience or in artistic representation evoking pity or compassion*”. (Webster 695) Since the beginning of literature in western world the readers can find pathos in the writings of great writers in ancient Greek civilization. The great masters who exercised the tragedies and epics arouse pathos in the audience. The great masters in Greek world including Homer, Sophocles, Aescylus, Euripides employed pathos in their writings like *The Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Electra*. Similarly the same thing we find in the works of Seneca and Ovid in his *Metamorphosis*. The same thing we also find in the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster, and Thomas Kyd. The same thing is also to be found in the writings of Henrik Ibsen and John Galsworthy.

In case of the eastern world the same thing also to be found in literature. The great writers in the eastern world are Tagore, Khushwant Singh, Amitav Ghosh and Shyam Selvadurai. In my paper I would like to discuss the note of pathos particularly in Shyam Selvadurai's

“Funny Boy”, According to Amitav Ghosh, “this novel is and extraordinary powerful, deeply moving novel”.

Sri Lanka predominantly consists of Sinhalese (74.9%) and Tamils (11.2%). The Sinhalese are native whereas the Tamils are immigrants. There was ethnic conflict prevalent in Sri Lanka since the ancient history. Since the ancient history the Tamils had settled in Sri Lanka during India's Chola Kingdom. After the settlement of Tamil community there was tension between the Tamils and Sri Lankans not only for the cultural incompatibility but also for the power disputes. During the colonial period (1802-1948) in Sri Lanka the British established English schools in Tamil areas. Therefore the Tamil facilitated themselves in the professional opportunities and civil service after the British rule in Sri Lanka the Tamil flourished in the commercial enterprise and in the civil service. This type of improvement in Tamil communities increased jealousy among the Sinhalese and increased the tension between the Tamils and Sinhalese. Even there was also religious conflict between the two communities. The Tamil are Hindus and Sinhalese were Buddhists. This type of tension culminated in the ethnic conflict. The Tamils wanted to establish a separate state called Eelam but the Sri Lankan Government did not favour this demand. Then there were continuous riots in Sri Lanka after the colonial period. This ethnic tension continued from 1933-2009. In this novel, the narrator portrays the marginalization of the narrator in the micro level as well as the marginalization of the Tamils on the macro level.

Objectives of the Articles

Shyam Selvadurai is one of the greatest novelists in contemporary popular literature. He is also one of the prominent novelists from the Asian regions, particularly Sri Lanka. He was born in 1965 in a Tamil family in Sri Lanka. Shyam Selvadurai was born and brought up in a Tamil and his father belonged to a Tamil family. He wrote. *Funny Boy* (1994), *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), *Swimming the Monsoon Sea* (2005), *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013). From his works I would like to pick up the most celebrated novel, ‘*Funny Boy*’.

Selvadurai covers so many issues in this novel, *Funny Boy*. There are so many issues like class struggle, ethnic conflict, gender identity, irony and pathos to be found in this novel. From the above mentioned issues I would like to discuss in my paper i.e., note of Pathos. This novel shows up that the note of pathos conveys throughout the novel. The issue of pathos would be found in social context, ethnic context and in case of the various characters in this novel. Not only that the note of pathos to be found in the chapters of the novel.

Discussion

There are six chapters in this novel including ‘*Pigs Can't Fly*’, ‘*Radha Aunt*’, ‘*See No Evil and Hear No Evil*’, ‘*Small Choices*’, ‘*The Best school of All*’, and finally ‘*Riot Journal: An epilogue*’. So, I would like to draw up the sense of pathos from the reading of the novel.

In the first chapter, 'Pigs Can't Fly' we met the central character Arjie. In this chapter the author minutely portrays his bright childhood and the loss of it. Here the narrator, Arjie, discussed that in his childhood they used to play with his cousin sisters. They would play the 'bride bride' game where Arjie would play the central role, the role of a bride. They used to adorn themselves with torn, old and stale costumes for the purpose of the game. They would play the game in the 'spent the days'. They happily led their childhood with the game. But there was an unexpected turn in Arjie's life when Kanthi Aunty and her daughter named Her Fatness interfered in his childhood game. Arjie always liked to play with his cousin sisters and he would prefer to adorn himself like a girl. It was his innocence that he enjoyed in his childhood. Finally, while they were playing the 'bride bride' game, it happened that Kanthi Aunty found out that Arjie was playing with girls and she exposed Arjie to funniness before the other members of the family. Kanthi Aunty dragged Arjie and entered the drawing room and said, 'See what I found'. And then "*The other aunts and uncles looked up from their papers or bestirred themselves from their sleep. They gazed at me in amazement as if I had suddenly made myself visible, like a spirit*". (Funny Boy 13)

From that event Arjie was forbidden to play with his cousin sisters and he was forced to do tiresome household jobs like cleaning the furniture and the other utensils, imposed on him by Ammachi. Arjie became totally alone in his childhood. He lost his bright days. He sought after getting into someone as a company but he was not allowed to. Arjie's father forbade strictly playing with his cousin sisters. He complained, '*how long has this been going on. Don't know? Amma cried defensively it was as new to me as to you. You should have known, you should have kept an eye on him*'. (Funny Boy 14)

Arjie repeatedly insisted on joining the game but he was restricted to play. While Arjie wanted to know the cause of the restrictions, his mother replied, because '*the sky is so high and pigs can't fly, that's why.*' (Funny Boy 19) It is very clear from this statement that Arjie felt a sense of loss within himself, conveying the note of Pathos in the audience.

From his childhood to his coming of ages Arjie described his own story as well as his family and other relatives. In the first chapter we have seen that Arjie was forbidden to play with his cousin sisters. In the second chapter he found a company within Radha Aunty. Radha Aunty was the youngest daughter of Ammachi. She had returned from America where she pursued her studies. After meeting Radha Aunty Arjie befriended her. Now Arjie used to spend his days with Radha Aunty. Now Radha Aunty and Arjie played roles in a play called, "The King and I". There we find Radha Aunty met Anil Jaysinghe, a Sinhalese. Day by day Radha Aunty and Anil got closer and they fell in heart for each other. Now there was a problem because Anil being a Sinhalese was not possible to have a relationship with a girl from a Tamil family. Ammachi came to know about the matter and restricted her to meet with Anil. She was sent to Jaffna to keep away from Anil. While she was returning from Jaffna by train, she was badly injured from the sudden attack of the Sinhalese. Now

Radha Auntie was never allowed to meet Anil. Finally, she was engaged with Rajan Nagendra, a successful engineer in America. Her engagement with Rajan was happened on Appachi's birthday. Though Radha Auntie was not happy in this engagement but she had to accept it. This was only felt by the narrator. Arjie couldn't bear to watch the engagement ceremony. He turned away and got into the garden. Sitting in the garden, he was disillusioned about love and the reality. Whatever the love comics he used to read and his bright days with his cousin sisters prove void to him. Arjie mentioned, *"As I listened to its rhythmic sound, I thought of her love comics and 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"*. (Funny Boy 100)

While the family was celebrating the ceremony, none but the narrator could understand the goings on in Radha Auntie's heart. Here also we find the note of pathos at the end of chapter-2 of this novel. Arjie said, *"The pastor now instructed Rajan Nagendra to place the ring on Radha Auntie's finger. Suddenly, I couldn't bear to watch Radha the ceremony. I turned away and walked down the corridor towards the kitchen, not quite knowing where I was going"*. (Funny Boy 99)

The third chapter of this novel entitled 'See no Evil and hear no Evil' also brought the note of Pathos. In this chapter we are introduced to the character of Daryl Uncle. The narrator described him as a tall and handsome. In that time the narrator's father was in foreign for the business purpose. In the meantime, it is noticed that Daryl uncle once had been a lover of Amma. But due to some unavoidable circumstances they could not marry. According to Daryl Uncle the events are now the by gone days. Now Daryl Uncle has come to Sri Lanka to cover the conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese in the Dress Within these days Amma and Daryl uncle became closer. Finally Daryl uncle had to leave. After a few days the dead body of Daryl uncle was found. Amma tried to investigate the cause of death but it was futile me. Amma complained the problem is that no one cares anymore full stop people only look out for themselves. (Funny Boy 14) Finally, the narrator realized that his Daryl Uncle's killer would never be brought to justice (153). The narrator stated that *'the world the characters lived in, where good watch rewarded and evil punished seemed false to me'*. (Funny Boy 153) Finally, Appa phoned to arrive the following week on his birthday. On the eve of birthday party Amma decorated the border of the garden with clay lamps and greet the relatives but there was no cheeriness on her face. This event also brought the note of pathos. The narrator stated,

"outwardly she seemed happy, almost gay yet once, when there was a lull in the flow of quests, I saw her temple, is Harden tired expression on her face. Amma had placed little clay lamps along the border of the garden. They provided the only light and in their recording illumination, the guests, the waiters, the tables of food, and indeed the whole garden seemed in substantial". (Funny Boy 154)

The fourth chapter of this novel entitled 'Small Choices' bears the note of pathos. Here we find the character of Jegan, a son of Appa's old friends. Appa's friend's widow wrote a letter asking him to find out a job for Jegan who is twenty five years old, once engaged in the 'Gandhiam Movement'. So Jegan's mother wanted him to appoint in a job. Jegan's mother wrote,

"Dear Mr Chelvaratnam, I am writing to request a favour in memory of my late husband. My son, Jegan is a qualified accountant. He's twenty five years old and has spent the last year as a relief worker for the Gandhiam Movement but, due to recent problems I removed him from the organization. He is currently unemployed. Would you be able to find him a post in your business?" (Funny Boy 155)

After few days Jegan comes to Arjie's family. After seeing him, Appa was astonished as Jegan resembled his father. Then Appa decided to appoint Jegan in a job. Day by day Arjie and Jegan become closer, arousing Diggy's jealousy. Now Arjie entered puberty. He observed the men and their physique and even dreamed them. Now Appa apologized for not attending Jegan's father's funeral ceremony. Now Appa appointed Jegan in his office for inspection. Appa and Jegan became closer and often talked and had gossip in the evening and Jegan enjoyed Appa's love story in England. Now Arjie and Jegan often enjoyed jogging in the evening. Suddenly, there happened a bad incident that someone was sticking a 'poster of lamp' on their wall about the upcoming election. Then Jegan came and grabbed the man to the ground but that man challenged him for such behaviour. Appa's hotel was in a small town three hours from Colombo. There were so many hotels owned by Mr Banduratne Madulali who is an anti-Tamil. He supported the persecution of Tamils. While in Colombo Arjie and Jegan were jogging, Jegan met with two strange men, they were Jegan's old school friends. But there was someone who had seen Jegan talking with strange men. After that the police visit Arjie's family. Now Appa asked about the past of Jegan. Jegan clearly expressed his engagement in the 'Gandhiam Movement'. Now Appa called a friend in the police to clear the matter of Jegan. Then Jegan has spent a night in the police custody. The police authority investigate this and under the prevention of terrorism Act.

The next day the press printed the act of suspicion on Jegan. The police cleared him off charges after returning to the family Arjie starts crying and becomes motionless. Now Appa suggested Jegan to take a vacation but Jegan wanted to come back in work again. At work, it is noticed that Jegan was arguing with someone but Appa did not defend Jegan. Now Arjie apprehended what happened to Daryl uncle. Then again everyone became reconciled with Jegan and the family went on a night walk to a monumental rock in which someone threw a bottle to Jegan and called him 'tiger'. Then this incident was reported to Appa who after contacting his hotel came to hear that the boys wear relatives of Banduratne Madulali. Appa then expressed that during right of 1981 it was Banduratne who killed and burned the

Tamils. After hearing this, Amma suggested immigrating to Canada but Appa said there was no employment other than a taxi driver or petrol station man in the foreign.

Again we find there was another obstacle while there was written 'death to all Tamil' on the window but none of the housekeepers were dared enough to wipe it off. Amma then suggested that she would do this by herself because Amma was not afraid of them. Then Appa was in conflict with himself about Jegan and open seen with the glass of whisky. Finally Jegan watch fired from the job. Arjie said, "*Appa was talking about a job in the middle East*". (Funny Boy 205) There are other relatives Arjie repeated, "you can make a lot of money in the Middle East, you know, twice what you'd make here". (Funny Boy 205) Jegan replied what you know about it he added, '*you are just a boy*'. (Funny Boy 205) Finally, Jegan left the house.

Again Arjie lost a friend in his life. This event brings note of Pathos in the audience. Arjie stated, "*As I watched him go up the steps I thought bitterly of how wrong I had been to think that friendship was possible between us. I hated Jegan now with a hot, tearful anger*". (Funny Boy 206)

The fifth chapter of this novel entitled "The Best School of All". This chapter also brought note of pathos. The title of this chapter was called so because this title has been derived from a poem written by the physical training teacher in the victory academy the poem is-

"We'll honor the school we knew,

The best school of all:

Way will honour yet the role we knew,

Till the last bell call.

For, working days or holidays,

And glad or Melancholy days,

At the best school of all". (Funny Boy 226)

Arjie was admitted in this school because it was decided by Appa. Appa decided so because he thought it will force him to become a man. He said, "*This academy will force you to become a man*". (Funny Boy 210) When Arjie was admitted, he was warned about the students and teachers by Diggy. Diggy warned him about Shehan who was a gay and Diggy also warned him about the Black Tie, the principal of the academy. The Black Tie would

beat the students severely even he would broke the teeth of the students with slapping. *“Once The Black Tie had beaten Arjie severely. He would beat to eradicate the ills and burdens of Sri Lanka”*. (Funny Boy 224) He said, *“As long as I am principal, you will have discipline in this school”*. (Funny Boy 223)

In the school Arjie became befriended with Shehan. Shehan told him about the conflict going on between Black Tie and Lokubandara. Mr Lokubandara who holds political power and he wants *‘to change the name of the school, which he felt too British’*. (Funny Boy 220) Shehan explained, *“Since all Buddhists are sinhalese, that means the school would be Sinhala School, and there would be no place for Tamils in it”*. (Funny Boy 220) Shehan continued, *“Black Tie was a Buddhist but he was opposed to Lokubandara's ideas. He wanted the school to be for all races and religions”*. (Funny Boy 220) That is why the Black Tie forces Arjie to recite a poem for the school function as it was his final plea to prevent the government to reorganize the school. Arjie became nervous to recite the poem and black tie had beaten Shehan also because he failed to help Arjie in reciting the poem.

In the meantime, Arjie got closer to Shehan. Once Shehan kissed him, then the narrator realized, *“I now knew that kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common”*. (Funny Boy 250) Not only that they become close to each other and they have enjoyed sex in his parent’s garage. He said,

“His hands were on my hips now, moving slowly towards my stomach. They seemed bigger than I would have expected them to be. Then he pressed me against the wall and I realized that, though it was Shehan, he had the size and strength of the head prefect. I began to panic. I tried to escape from him, but he held me tightly against the wall. Now he placed his lips over mine and I couldn't breathe purple spots appeared before my eyes and my lungs began to hurt so much I felt they would tear apart”. (Funny Boy 266)

He stated, *“For the remainder of the night, I tossed and turned restlessly in my bed, torn between my desire for Shehan and disgust at that desire”*. (Funny Boy 266)

After having sexual intercourse with Shehan, Arjie realized his gender identity. He felt a crisis within him, which he cannot expose. While Arjie realized that he was a gay, he was well aware of the fact that he cannot be included in the mainstream society. Similarly like Arjie the Tamils in Sri Lanka became the victim of racism. Here Arjie became doubly marginalized both as a Tamil and a gay.

Once Arjie visited Shehan's house, after driving there he came to know from the servant that his mother has left the family *“because his father had no time for the family as he was always out of the country on business”*. (Funny Boy 271) Now it is clear that Shehan felt a

sense of loss in his own house. So, it is evident that after getting Arjie he finds a friend within Arjie.

Finally, the school function was held and Arjie deliberately jumbles of the poem after catching the sight of Shehan. All the teachers were confused but Mr Sundera lingam complimented him. After that Black Tie begin his speech and accused Arjie when the prizes were distributed. Arjie ras upstairs to meet Shehan and Shehan was confused Ajie expanded for you ha continued. I could not bear to see you suffer anymore (Funny Boy 284). Then Arjie and Shehan head back to the gallery and he gazed at Amma and felt a sudden sadness thought, *“what had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with her forever. A part of the family in the same way. I now inhabited in a world than they did not understand into which they could not follow me”*. (Funny Boy 285) Here at the end of this chapter the narrator also brought the note of pathos in the audience. At the end, Arjie and Shehan wind out of the auditorium. The narrator said, *“we stood for a moment, each lost in his own thoughts, then why began to walk together towards the stairs that led down to the auditorium”*. (Funny Boy 285)

The final chapter of this novel entitled "The Riot Journal" also brought the note of pathos. In this chapter the narrator described the tragedy that happened to the narrator as well as to all the Tamils in Sri Lanka. In this chapter, the narrator included the events of ethnic conflict ant violence on the Tamils. In this chapter the narrator minutely noted the violence happened in Sri Lanka in 1983 in diary form. First of all the narrator noted the massacre in July 25, 1983. The narrator observed, *“All the Tamil houses near the Kanaththa Cemetery had been burnt”*. (Funny Boy 286) The radio broadcasting in Sri Lanka event did not mention about the massacre. Arjie noted. Then the radio news is beginning again. We have listen to the broadcast at 6:00, 7:30, and 8:45 but there is still no mention of the trouble (288). It was evident that the government tried to hide this news. Arjie noted that where the massacre was going on, the government declared curfew but at late. Arjie Observed, *“1:00 P.M. the government has now declared curfew. Anyone caught on the road without a curfew pass will be shot on sight. But the riot had not stopped after the curfew. The narrator observed, 3.00 P.M. the announcement of the curfew has not stop the rights and in fact the fighting has got worse”*. (Funny Boy 290)

Next Arjie mentioned the incidents of July 27, 1983. He observed, *“7. 00 P.M. Yet there was nothing to buy. A Lot of the grocery stores is owned by Tamils and they have all been destroyed”*. (Funny Boy 301) Then Arjie mentioned his meeting with Shehan. The narrator felt a sudden joy within him. He said, *“Only one visit brought me pleasure, for this afternoon to see me. I had not sent him since the riots began”*. (Funny Boy 301)

The incidents of ethnic riots in Sri Lanka had spread over the world. The narrator said, *“It seems that there are demonstrations in Canada and England and India against the Sri*

Lankan Government" (Funny Boy 302). Arjie then mentioned that his one of the uncle's name Laxman wanted them to Leave Sri Lanka and to come over Canada so that they can at least get refugee status there. At first Appa waited for few days for the end of riot but the right was not ended and the situation got worsened. When the situation was not in control, a part decided to Live Sri Lanka Appa said, *"it is very clear that we no longer belong in this country"*. (Funny Boy 304) At last Arjie's family lost everything even the houses and assets were destroyed. Arjie said, *"The reality of losing our house is slowly beginning to sing in, but what I feel it's nothing like what I imagine. I expected to be sad and nostalgic for a part of my life that is now destroyed"*. (Funny Boy 305) Before leaving Sri Lanka for the last time Arjie met Shehan. He notes this meeting in his diary of August 27, 1983. He said, *"I can still smell his particular odour of my body which always liners on me after we make love"*. (Funny Boy 309) For the whole life he had to lose his love interest and friend Shehan. Again Arjie for the last time visited his family old burn down house and what he observed there everything was destroyed. He said,

"Finally I could not cry any more. I leaned back on one of the verandah posts, exhausted, and stared out at the garden. It looked so forlorn. The grass had grown, but in uneven patches, and the roses had lost most of their petals. The araliya tree was bare of its flowers. They, too, must have been stolen. I was struck then by a bitter irony. These araliya flowers would probably be offered to some god as a pooja by the very people who had plucked them, in order to increase their chances of a better life in the next birth". (Funny Boy 311)

The concluding chapter of this novel is vivid, poignant and very tragic. This final chapter also brought out the note of pathos. Here we observed that the Tamils had lost their houses, people were bunt down to death, endless massacre, random violence and persecution,

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that this novel is pregnant with the sense of pathos. From the first to the last chapter of each chapter we observed the pathos in Arjie's childhood. Then in Radha Aunty's life, then in amma's life, next Arjie noted his losing of his love interest and friend Shehan. Finally this novel arouses pathos among the people over the world. The people over the world lamented for the loss of lives and protested against the Sri Lanka government for the support of inhuman brutality on the Tamil. This massacre and riot the world has observed during the civil war in America (1861-1865). Similarly the same civil war the world head observed during the civil war in Spain (1936-1939). It is worth remembering to quote here Martin Luther King Jr., *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can"*. (A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches)

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