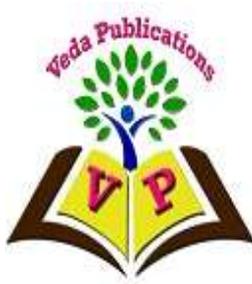




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**QUESTIONING DEMOCRACY: A STUDY OF SHYAM SELVEDURAI'S *FUNNY BOY***

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*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Midnapore City College, West Bengal, India.*Mail Id- prasantapradhan7407@gmail.comdoi.org/10.33329.joell.8.3.21.56**ABSTRACT**

What does it mean to live in a 'democratic' society where freedom of choosing language, religion, casting votes, individual sexual identity all are just like a reverie for someone? Declaring a country 'democratic' is easy but maintaining and cultivating those ideals among the politicians as well as citizens is a herculean task. Set in a post-colonial Sri Lanka, Shyam Selvedurai's novel *Funny Boy* is a groundbreaking novel of gay studies, race studies, and adolescence studies questioning the meaning of democracy throughout the novel. This study aims to analyze *Funny Boy* as a critique of democracy where Arjun, Radha Aunty, Appa, Amma, Anil, Shehan almost all the characters despite belonging to the Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka fails to find their individuality, and their voice is choked off by the fear of 'authority'. By tracing the concept of democracy in a true sense, this paper shall highlight the problem of being a Tamil, the difficulty of raising voice against injustice, the mental dilemma in discovering a homosexual partner, and finally how the political, as well as stereotypical tendencies of the society, annihilate the concept of democracy.

Keywords: *Democracy, Liberty, Freedom, Funny, Individual Identity, Power.*



The word 'democracy' has its root in the Greek language. It derives from 'demos' meaning 'the people' and 'kratos' meaning 'power or rule'. Together it means peoples' rule or power. So in the word 'democracy' itself, people are at the center. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Democracy is a government of the people, by the people and for the people". Liberty and equality are two momentous principles while we consciously utter the word 'democracy'. John Stuart Mill's philosophical essay *On Liberty* criticizing the tyranny of the government emphasizes the importance of individuality. He demands liberty to lead a healthy life. Mill in this essay also points out how a person causes a problem by imposing his own ideology on others. He said: "A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case, he is justly accountable to them for the injury." (Mill 2001, 15). So living a liberal life, especially in the field of choosing one's race, religion, sexuality, language are some significant parameters of democracy.

But Vincent Ostrom in his book *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville's Challenge* questions 'Are democratic society viable?' Answering this question one can easily anticipate it is a kind of word that just gives a pleasing effect to the ear as an implementation of democratic culture in society is far away from the reality. The ideology of democracy more or less is manipulated by politics and power. Those people who are in power controlling humans for their own advantage. William Riker in *The Art of Political Manipulation* conceptualized politics as "the art of structuring the world so you can win." (W.H. Riker 1986, ix).

Political persons, who possess the power of supreme authority having no intention to look after peoples' needs, manipulated and force the citizens to accept their ideology. 'Democratic' society draws someone's attention to the place of one's own culture, language, belief, equality, and most importantly one's own freedom. Considering these we can say it's a problematic term and extremely critical with regard to societies that are supposed to be democratic. Citizens are to be first in a democratic society. If this is being true then the choice of the

citizens, their opinions should come into effect sometimes. But the Government always turns a deaf ear towards the subjects. In order to make the choice of the politicians a new normal, power politics plays an important role. French philosopher, Michel Foucault concentrates on how power works in different strata of society. He defines power as "not an institution, a structure, or a certain force with which certain people are endowed; it is the name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society." (Foucault 1980, 236).

In demolishing democracy, the government as well as a stereotypical tendency of the society is equally responsible. As a whole, government destroys it very skillfully by making it a new normal and on the other hand citizen's conservative mind destroys it in different strata of society. Ultimately citizens assist the government to change the concept of democracy wholly. Not only do those who are in power restrict people's freedom and opinions but citizens also restrict fellow citizens' choice and freedom. So, the general question which will always arise: Can we call a society democratic if casting own vote, choosing own life partner, recognizing own sexuality, equality in the name of the race everything is violated in the name of power?

Shyam Selvedurai's award-winning novel *Funny Boy* published in 1994 deals with diverse issues of post-colonial Sri Lanka. At surface level, Selvedurai vividly depicts the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese (majority) and Tamils (minority), the psychology of a child (Arjun) at an early age, the problem of being a homosexual, and the problem of thinking an inter-caste marriage. But at another level we can study this story as a satire on the conceit of those in power and criticizing the oppressive nature of society by portraying the relationship between Arjie with his parents, Radha Aunty with Anil, Arjie with Shehan, and finally Selvedurai candidly attacks Sri Lankan democracy through the death of Daryl Uncle by the Sinhalese mobs and the government's cold attitude towards this inhuman act.

Despite being declared officially as the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in 1978, it is clearly visible that most of the characters of the



novel- Arjun, Amma, Radha Aunty, Anil, Daryl Uncle utterly failed to find their individual identity and freedom. They are not able to live a life of their own. The Sinhalese who make up the largest ethnic group, controlling Tamils want to build a Sri Lanka of one community and one language- the Sinhala language. Appa (Arjun's father) dominates Arjun and forced him to understand the role of gender in society. Radha Aunty who belongs to the Tamil community loves a Sinhalese person Anil, forced to marry Rajan Nagendra as inter-caste marriage may create agitation in both the family as well as both the community. Amma (Arjun's mother) finds difficulty in questioning the death of Daryl Uncle who was unjustly killed by the Sinhalese mobs. So, not only the government or politics responsible for snatching liberty and freedom but also the citizens of the society, who use power in a wrong way and in the end creates an environment of fear where everybody lives a life of oppression controlling by others.

Divided into six chapters, the novel *Funny Boy* at the beginning, deals with Arjun's so-called unusual girlish behavior which established the tag of Arjun as 'funny'. The 'bride-bride' game, where Arjun always wants to be a bride creates Arjun's identity as a person of different entities (funny) as well as it creates a gap between Arjun and the society, including all his family members. While Arjun was playing that bride-bride game Kanthi Aunty pulled him and everybody thinks of him as laughing stock:

"Then the silence was broken by the booming laugh of Cyril Uncle, Kanthi Aunty's husband. As if she had been hit, Amma swung around in his direction. The other aunts and uncles began to laugh too, and I watched as Amma looked from one to the other like a trapped animal. Her gaze finally came to rest on my father and the first time I noticed that he was the only one not laughing."(Selvedurai 1994, 14).

And by the time Cyril Uncle utters a very powerful line toward Ajie's father: "looks like you have a funny one here" (Selvedurai 1994, 14) evidently brings forth the conservative mind of the society. But what makes a boy 'funny'? Who posed the criteria to become a

'funny' boy? What are the characteristics of a 'funny' boy? And finally who are the persons who coded such a boy like Arjie as 'funny'. The answer will be 'power'. Arjie's attraction for Shehan is not freely expressed as Arjie knows the attraction of a man for man is against the code of society. Even when Arjie wants to play with the girls, Arjie's mother says: "You're a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys". (Selvedurai 1994, 20). In fact in the bride-bride game Her Fatness bluntly rejects Arjie's idea of help with the cooking:

"The groom cannot help with the cooking."

"Why Not?" I protested.

"Because grooms don't do that."

"They do."

"Have you ever heard of a groom doing that?"

I couldn't say I had, so I demanded with angry sarcasm,

"What do grooms do then?"

"They go to office."(Selvedurai 1994, 31).

Evidently, individuality is lost because of the establishment of such conservative ideas that a man cannot be able to show his attachment with a man, a grown-up boy cannot play with a girl or a man will always take control over office work. So, in spite of living with the ideas of 'free will' and 'freedom' Arjie is actually caught up by the net of traditional established thought of the society. And Arjie can't break those shackles of the net as Arjie's mother says "Because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly."(Selvedurai 1994, 23).

According to G.D.H. Cole, "Liberty is the freedom of the individual to express without external hindrances to his personality." It is true that liberty is limited by the social principles and laws of the state. But restricting Radha Aunty from marrying Anil just because he belongs to the Sinhalese race is an attack on democratic thought. Society will not decide who will marry whom. It is totally a choice of the individual. Because of the racial conflict between Tamil and Sinhalese, the family members of Radha Aunty decided to marry Radha with the same race (Tamil) person Rajan. In fact, while Arjie



enthusiastically asked his mother about the play The king and I and the possibility of the marriage between English governess with the king at the end of the play, Arjie's mother clearly denies it and disappointed him with the answer: "Because at that time people didn't marry outside their race." (Selvedurai 1994, 54).

The authoritative figure of Radha Aunty's family takes away the freedom of choice from Radha and Radha had to follow the words of her parents as Tamils do not like Sinhalese and vice versa. Being a human, the choice to pursue our own good and following our own mind's voice is significant. As J.S. Mill in the essay *On Liberty* clearly suggests:

"The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily or mental or spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest." (Mill 2001, 16).

As inter-caste marriage is against the code of society Radha Aunty can't marry Anil. Radha Aunty's individual identity is lost in front of the authoritative 'power' of the family. Significantly love also fails to conquer the racial confrontation between Tamils and Sinhalese. It is clearly visible in the conversation between Radha Aunty and Mala Aunty:

"If two people love each other, the rest is unimportant."

"No, it isn't. Ultimately, you have to live in the real world. And without your family you are nothing." (Selvedurai 1994, 78).

Finally, Selvedurai puts liberty in question when Rajan Nagendra places the ring on Radha Aunty's finger and subsequently placing the ring on Radha's finger against the will of Radha discards Radha's identity as an individual human being.

Throughout the novel, the individual voice finds it difficult to flourish. The voice of Arjie, Radha Aunty,

and even the voice of Arjie's mother also faces the same problem. In the case of Arjie and Radha Aunty we can blame the society but by suppressing the voice of Amma, Selvedurai assaults the government critically. The third chapter of this novel titled "See no Evil, Hear no Evil" delineates the helpless condition of humankind in front of those who hold the 'power'. Those persons who take the oath of keeping up the law are responsible for breaking the law. And the common man in spite of realizing the real truth of the politicians, feel fear to voice against those. Raising voice against injustice means you are risking your own life to death.

Selvedurai is severally critical towards those who grab the power. In the middle of the novel, we find Daryl Uncle is killed by the Sinhalese mobs. But who will raise the voice of justice against it? While everyone knows that Daryl Uncle's death is unnatural, no one wants to raise a voice against it. Amma, Arjie's mother tries her heart and soul to find the murderer of Daryl Uncle. She pleaded to Neliya Aunty: "He didn't die by drowning. You know that. He was killed, then thrown into the sea." (Selvedurai 1994, 137). In this respect the conversation between Neliya Aunty and Amma is very significant in order to put several questions on democracy:

"Of course they have witnesses who saw him go swimming" she said sarcastically. "They have witnesses for everything these days." Her sari lay on the floor around her feet. She stepped over it and picked up one end. Then she looked at both of us. "We have to do something. We can't let this go by."

"Nalini," Neliya Aunty said.

"What?" Amma demanded. "You think we shouldn't do anything?"

Neliya Aunty looked down at the floor. "There's no point now," she said. "Nothing you do will bring him back." "But something must be done," Amma cried angrily. She began to fold her sari. "People can't get away with these things. This is



democracy, for God's sake."(Selvedurai 1994, 137).

So, Selvedurai deliberately criticizes the persons who in spite of living in a democratic society fail to utter any individual voice. Selvedurai brings forth the tragic condition of human life where justice is suspended because of political influences. When Arjie's mother thinks of legal action against the inhuman act of murdering Daryl Uncle, Q.C. Appadurai, a civic rights lawyer warned her by saying "These days one must be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." (Selvedurai 1994, 141). There always remains a possible danger of one's own life if he or she seeks to find justice.

The racial conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese forced the family of Arjie as well as most other Tamil families to dislocate themselves from Sri Lanka to some other parts of the country. Arjie's parents had to accept the bitter truth of leaving their homeland because of the riots of 1983. By depicting the growing intolerance on Tamils, Selvedurai beautifully questions the role played by the people's government at that time. Tamils are exiled from their motherland. But the elected government (who gets power by the votes of both the Tamils and Sinhalese) has no concern over the physical as well as the emotional attachment of Tamils with their homeland. In this regard Amma and Appa's conversation is very significant to question the role of a democratic government:

"How can the government be doing this?" Amma was saying bitterly. "After all, We Tamilsa helped vote them in."

"We're not one hundred per cent sure that they are behind the rioting," my father said. "Of course they are. If not, why aren't they declaring curfew, and why aren't the police and army stopped the mobs?" My father didn't respond.

"It has been planned in advance. Otherwise, how could the mobs get electoral lists so quickly?"(Selvedurai 1994, 289).

In a society where the Tamils belong to the minority and Sinhalese as the majority, it is very general that Tamils' houses will be burned and the minority only can see the "spiral of smoke" of their houses. The belief of Arjie's father that he belongs to Sri Lanka is no longer remains in his heart. He who loves his country and takes pride in being a Sri Lankan finally utters: "It is very clear that we no longer belong to this country" (Selvedurai 1994, 304). So, a government that is constructed by the votes of the people apart from all races, looks biased towards the racial conflict, ultimately gives influence to the mobs to create riots. Finally, because of the political tensions, Arjie's family decided to make an alien country Canada of their own, where at least they will feel safe from the attack of the mobs.

Furthermore, the identity of Shyam Selvedurai as a Sri Lankan- Canadian writer also puts questions on democracy as well. Selvedurai, like Arjie by birth is a Sri Lankan but because of the riots of 1983 (known as 'Black July'), he was forced to leave Sri Lanka and takes the citizenship of Canada. The last chapter of this novel "Riot Journal: An Epilogue" vividly portrays the unethical and brutal treatment of Sinhalese mobs over Tamils. Selvedurai's presentation of the oppressive nature of power-holder finds perfection when we find that the phone of Arjie's family is trapped by the authority and their personal conversation is heard by some others. So, the irony is that you are living in a democratic country of free thought and free speech but your conversation will be controlled by some others.

It is certain that we get ourselves free from the colonial subjugation but it will take some more time in order to free ourselves from the oppressive nature of the human mind. The novel is a staunch advocate of the power structure in society. All characters at any point in time feel that they are not independent in spite of living in an independent country. Arjie and Radha are manipulated by their family and stereotyped society, Amma's thought is manipulated by the fear of power-holder and as a whole, human thought is manipulated by the government. Racial oppression, ethnic oppression, gender oppression, religious oppression, class oppression, economic oppression, sexual-orientation



oppression- all are controlled by a single word 'power'. Ultimately, this 'power' leads to the domination and oppression of people and violated the true meaning of democracy.

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