

# THE POLITICS OF EXILE IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *FUNNY BOY*

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## Abstract

An accusation levelled at many migrant writers who write in English with an international audience in mind, is that they rarely engage with the politics of their native land. Many such writers do come back to their homeland to gather material for their fiction or to help themselves make sense of their identity and ancestry but rarely do they extrapolate on the socio-political circumstances that drove them to leave their country in search of a better land. In turn, such texts are usually charged as being inauthentic.

Migrant writers and Exiled writers have much in common except for the fact that the exiled writer generally leaves his or her country behind with a sense of loss and betrayal. They are usually those who are forced to leave their country because of its politics that makes their very existence untenable in their own ancestral homes. Thus, much of the writing done by exiled writers exude an aura of grief, separation and finality as most such writers find that they cannot go back to their native land.

Shyam Selvadurai's first novel *Funny Boy* both lives up to the expectations one would have of the text of an exiled writer while also subverting the accusation that migrant or exiled writers rarely engage in the politics of their homeland. Selvadurai embraces the political turmoil that forced his characters to move to another land, illustrating how in both subtle and obvious ways, the politics of the nation shaped and moulded their identities. Rather than shying away from the ugliness of such concepts as racism and communal violence and even death, Selvadurai instead uses these tropes to highlight how the turbulent political climate ultimately betrayed his protagonist and his family. Therefore, his novel reads as a genuine exploration of the impact that racial and communal politics can have on the identity of an individual and how the politics of exile in turn, inform and shape his narrative.

## Keywords

Exile, Shyam Selvadurai, Politics, Sri Lankan Writers, Loss

There is a plethora of words used to describe the state of a person who leaves the country of their birth and ancestry, uproots themselves and moves to an entirely different world. Some of these words are migrant, immigrant, émigré, exiled and expatriate. Many critics believe that the process of expiating these terms defines the experience of the individuals who choose to or are forced to make this geographical shift. Additionally, it then becomes easy to develop philological categorisations into which these individuals can easily be placed. However, the multitude of migrant, refugeeed and exiled writers and their works prove that such convenient categorisations can be limiting and can ignore the uniqueness and multiplicity of their varied experiences. What is clear however, is that the very experience of moving from one's native country to another creates gaps in identity that many migrant writers struggle to fill through their writing. Shyam Selvadurai and his family left Sri Lanka when Selvadurai was aged eighteen, to escape the violence that ensued during the 1983 riots. Thus, Selvadurai can be classified as both a migrant as well as an exiled writer. Despite the differences between the definition of these two terms, what they both cause in common is a sense of fractured reality, a

sense of non-belonging. Arjie, the protagonist in Selvadurai's novel, navigates a similar landscape to what we can assume Selvadurai himself faced before leaving the country. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Selvadurai grapples with the issue of reassembling his own identity through his narrative and through his central character.

It is entirely plausible that Selvadurai would have experienced the fractured reality that is a common lived experience of migrants, who find their sense of belonging torn between two nations. Such individuals experience confusion and doubt concerning who they are and where they belong simply because of the duality of their lives and the cultures they belong to. Many writers attempt to unravel this confusion by means of re-writing their own histories. This act of re-writing includes the painful process of going back, at least in memory, to the country of the writer's birth. What follows is usually an examining of various forces that aided in shaping the life and identity of the writer. What is important to note here however, is that fact that the country that the writer remembers may well not be the country that natives of that land remember. In this context, it is important to analyse what identity means, especially for the migrant writer. Salman Rushdie posits, in his book *Imaginary Homelands*, that as migrants "our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools" (p. 15). At the heart of this definition is a sense of confusion and disorientation on the part of the migrant about his/her identity. It also hints at the fact that the migrant writer is not wholly in control over his/her own individuality. A sense of belonging evades the migrant due to the fact that they are physically distant from their heritage while also not completely a part of the society in which they live, because of their ancestry. Rushdie goes further to state about his novel *Midnight's Children* that "what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions" (p. 10). In a way, this is what all migrant writers do when they write about the country they left. They re-claim their nation and identity by re-imagining their homelands.

Added to Rushdie's exploration is Edward Said's ruminations of the nature of the exiled writer that he investigates in his article '*Reflections on Exile*'. Said claims that exile is "the unhealable rift forced between human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (p. 173). Paramount in Said's discussion on exile is the element of sadness and loss. An exile is one who is forced, usually by political forces, to abandon the land of his birth. This is wholly different to the experience of the migrant who experiences the element of choice. Moreover, the migrant is one who generally makes a geographical move in order to better themselves and their families. Therefore, although there may be a hint of guilt pervading the migrant experience, Said believes that for the exiled, the pervading emotion is one of grief, separation and insurmountable loss. This phenomenon includes forced and shocking loss of geographical, ancestral, historical, and political identity.

Political identity or political awareness and affiliation are concepts that evade many migrant and exiled writers. While on the one hand they feel betrayed by the socio-political forces and actors of their native land which may have forced them to flee, they also have difficulty identifying with the political forces of their adopted land simply because they see themselves as outsiders or non-natives. This in turn creates a sense of disassociation with politics that can be a key characteristic in the writings of many migrant writers.

Case in point, one of the louder criticisms facing fellow Canadian migrant Michael Ondaatje, is that in his text *Running in the Family*, which details the lives of his family members before their eventual migration to Canada, he barely, if at all, engages with the political atmosphere in his native land at the time. Despite the fact that he and his extended family were indubitably affected by these political forces, Ondaatje only makes passing references to it. Chelva Kanaganayagam in his article, '*A trick with glass: Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection*'

highlights this characteristic by discussing how Ondaatje's text remains wholly free of any mention of the civil war that gripped the nation for more than thirty years, despite the fact that he would have been in the midst of it before his departure. Similarly, Kanaganayagam also points out that Ondaatje's allusions to the JVP uprising are also negligible. Kanaganayagam, refutes this method of narrative as he believes that "the author's intention was to distance himself from ideological issues that he did not feel strongly about" (p. 36). Unfortunately, in doing so, Ondaatje ascribes to a certain sense of solipsism that denies his right to assert a strong sense of ethnically Sri Lankan self and identity. Kanaganayagam sees this as the biggest failing of his and most other Sri Lankan writers of English; that they "for the most part, (have) stayed clear of the upheavals that have transformed a kindly, generous nation into a cruel and mindless battlefield" (p. 41). While this method of narration may be true to the writer's sense of self, unfortunately, it gives rise to the sentiment that Derick Ariyam in his article '*Imagining Sri Lanka: Expatriated Versions of the Nation*', puts forward as being held by many local readers. He states that "being between-worlds—and not wholly part of either—the expatriate's expressions of their homeland are often charged as inauthentic" (p. 1).

While of course, writers do and should have the liberty to write about whatever they choose, such charges of being inauthentic and being unable or unwilling to engage with the politics of the nation they left behind, strikes a chord with many native readers. Additionally, the fact that Ondaatje does not engage with the politics of his native country in *Running in the Family* could be taken to mean that those active political forces may have had little or no impact in the formation of his identity and worldview, a concept that is highly plausible. Moreover, Ondaatje does not shy away from the politics of Sri Lanka entirely; his novel *Anil's Ghost* deals almost entirely with the effects of the bloody civil war that overtook the nation for more than three decades.

*Funny Boy* was published in 1994, eleven years after its author, Shyam Selvadurai left Sri Lanka following the 1983 riots. The tale follows its main protagonist Arjie, during the last few years of his life in his native land. Selvadurai has always maintained that the novel is not autobiographical beyond the point of where both he and his protagonist are Tamil, gay and left the country following communal violence. At the opening of the novel, Arjie is eleven and politically naïve. His parents and family do not sympathise with the rebels and do not feel that their existence would be threatened in any way due to the rising tension between the Sinhalese and Tamils as they have no part in it. However, as events unfold in the story, it becomes clearer to the reader and to Arjie that his ethnicity can no longer be denied or glossed over. After a series of minor to medium scale upsets that happen throughout the course of the story to his family because of their ethnic background, things come to a head when Arjie's grandparents are murdered by rioters not far from their own home. It is after this event that Arjie and his family decide to leave Sri Lanka.

Selvadurai engages with the politics of the time in both subtle and obvious ways throughout the text. For example, in the second chapter, Arjie's aunt forms a relationship with a Sinhalese man which she is forced to give up after the train she and other Tamil passengers are travelling in are attacked by the Sinhalese. Later on, an old friend of his mother's, a journalist, goes missing whilst investigating the political turmoil in the country and Arjie's mother too faces alarming resistance when she tries to discover what happened to her friend. Through these situations, Selvadurai details the heightening tensions between the two ethnic groups, paving the way for the ultimate debacle that forces Arjie's family to leave their country. The final chapter describes how during the 1983 riots, Arjie's family's house is looted and burned, a neighbour helping them escape by climbing a ladder over the fence and hiding in a Sinhalese neighbour's house. During that same riot, Arjie's beloved grandparents are surrounded by rioters while out in their car, and the car set on fire with the elderly couple inside.

The raw emotion and direct narrative style that Selvadurai employs to paint his narrative does much in taking the reader inside the psyche of one who is forced to come to terms with the fact that their native land can no longer shelter and protect them. This is analogous to what Said talks about in his article when he states that exile is a state of ‘unhealable rift’ and that in essence it causes a sense of insurmountable loss. Selvadurai himself however states that he does not consider himself an exiled writer, at least not anymore<sup>1</sup>.

What is truly significant in Selvadurai’s writing, however, is how he does manage to engage with the politics of his native land despite his migrant/exiled status. Instead of shying away from the painful details and facets of a distasteful history, Selvadurai embraces the ugliness of racial tension and communal divisiveness and weaves it into his recreation of events. The way the violence and tension unfold, drives Arjii to act in a certain way and to make certain choices and in essence the socio-political turn of events shapes his identity. Unlike many other migrant writers who gloss over the politics of both native and adopted nations, Selvadurai acknowledges its importance in the formation of identity. Although he may no longer live in his native land, he does not deny the impact of its politics on his identity. This embracing and acknowledgment of the importance of politics in the formation of identity, sets Selvadurai apart from his colleagues.

One of the main points that Said makes in his thesis is that the exiled writers text is marked by a sense of grief and loss associated with losing one’s homeland. Selvadurai too remarks that during the writing of *Funny Boy*, he certainly felt a sense of loss and grief for the home he had left behind and in that, agrees with what Said has hypothesised. He also states that for him, his novel was a way for him to say a final goodbye to the land that he was forced to leave on account of his ethnicity, an aspect of himself that he had no control over<sup>2</sup>. However, he also states that he no longer feels this sense of loss as the civil war is now over and he is free to travel to Sri Lanka, something that he does quite frequently. Additionally, Selvadurai maintains very strongly that now he feels as if he has two homes instead of one. This ties in neatly with Said’s extrapolation on the ultimate viewpoint that exiled writers settle into. He states that;

“Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal” (p. 186).

The fact that Selvadurai has experienced the setting of two distinct locations and lays claim to two homelands, gives him a unique perspective of the transient nature of the human condition free from the superfluous connections to nationalisms that people of one nation sometimes ascribe to.

Finally, Said postulates that exiled writers experience a sense of betrayal from their native land whose socio-political forces compel them to leave it behind. This betrayal is one that is both damaging and liberating. Damaging as it sunders the connection between human being and native land and liberating as it allows the exiled access to an awareness that is beyond the reach of common people. As Said states, “Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid or secure” (p. 186). Selvadurai agrees that at the time of his departure from Sri Lanka at eighteen, and for years after, he did indeed feel a great sense of betrayal by his nation. He states that he and his family no longer have a home in Sri Lanka which in itself speaks of the magnitude of trauma and displacement he would have experienced. Selvadurai, however, is in a privileged space at the moment due to the end of the civil war. He states that he has come a long way in reconciling with his native land and that the work he does with young writers and his Writing to Reconcile program had aided in this endeavour. This is of course a space that very few exiled individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Shared with me via personal email.

<sup>2</sup> Discussed via personal emails

get to inhabit. For most of them, there is no hope of return and no chance of reconciliation with their nations. Thus, although *Funny Boy* ends on a note of finality and goodbye, Selvadurai's relationship with Sri Lanka has revived.

Ultimately, it must be noted that much of the sentiments expressed in Edward Said's pivotal postulation on the state of the exiled, find resonance in Shyam Selvdurai's *Funny Boy*. It is a heart-warming, nostalgic and at times grief laden text filled with all the emotions one would expect from the exiled writer. Chief among the more significant aspects of Selvadurai's text however is his willingness to engage in the politics of his native land. His ability to embrace the darker aspects of his country's civil war makes *Funny Boy* an authentic narrative that native readers can relate to and share.

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