

Funny Boy Study Guide

Funny Boy by Shyam Selvadurai

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Plot Summary

“Funny Boy” is a gay young adult novel by Shyam Selvadurai that recounts the childhood and teenage years of Arjie as he discovers he is gay while growing up in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When the novel begins, Arjie is seven years old, and realizes he enjoys spending more time with his female cousins than his male cousins. He wears women’s clothing and puts on women’s makeup as a child, leading his family to label him “funny” and to make fun of him. This deeply embarrasses Arjie’s parents, Appa and Amma, who insist he no longer play with the girls. As Arjie grows, his parents continue to do what they can to ‘man up’ their son, worried that he may turn out to be gay.

As Arjie grows, he comes to learn about the intolerance, racism, and unfairness of the world in which he lives. Racism exists between the former white, Dutch colonists and the natives of Sri Lanka, and between the Sri Lankans themselves by way of the Sinhalese and Tamils. Sri Lankan culture is very traditional, in which the fathers rule their families even though they have very little to do with the daily lives of their family members. Personal freedoms are very limited. Arjie’s youngest aunt, Radha, is steered away from a personal relationship to an arranged marriage. Arjie’s own mother could not marry a white Dutch colonial because her family did not approve. Meanwhile, war is on the horizon for the Sinhalese and Tamils. This leads Arjie’s father to fire a young man employed in his company who has ties to the Tamil Tigers, a terrorist group.

By the time Arjie is 13, he is beginning to notice other boys and men in a sexual way. His tendencies are noted by his father who decides that Arjie will now be sent to the very traditional, very proper Victoria Academy. Arjie’s father believes this will do him good in manning Arjie up, and in getting rid of his “funny” nature. At the school, Arjie experiences cruelty and discrimination by bullies because he is Tamil, and they are Sinhalese. Arjie is quickly defended by another boy named Shehan Soyza. Soyza and Arjie develop a quick friendship even though Arjie’s older brother warns him that Soyza is gay. The friendship between Soyza and Arjie soon becomes romantic, and then quickly becomes sexual. Arjie believes his choice of love is not wrong, and wonders why so many people look down on homosexuals.

Arjie soon has bigger things to worry about as riots break out against the Tamil by Sinhalese mobs. All across the country, acts of violence are committed against Tamils, including the burning of their houses and the killing of innocent Tamil citizens. Arjie’s own house, and the house of his grandparents, are torched. Arjie’s grandparents are trapped in their car and burned to death. Arjie’s parents decide that they must flee the country for their safety, and decide to move to Canada. Arjie is heartbroken by everything he has lost and must leave behind, including Soyza.



Pigs Can't Fly – Radha Aunty

Summary

Pigs Can't Fly – One Sunday each month, 7-year-old Arjie and his cousins are all dropped off with their grandparents so their parents may have a day to themselves. The 15 cousins divide into boys and girls, with the boys playing in the front and the girls in the back. However, Arjie tends to spend his time with the girls because they enjoy playing with their imaginations, such as pretending to be married. Arjie enjoys dressing up as a bride while his little sister, Sonali, dresses up as a groom. The return of Aunty Kanthi, Uncle Cyril, and their daughter, Tanuja, from abroad, changes things for Arjie. Tanuja gets on everyone's nerves. At their grandmother's 60th birthday party on Ramanaygam Road, Aunty Kanthi lectures the other children about playing with Tanuja. While playing wedding, Tanuja calls Arjie a faggot, a sissy, and a pansy for his being the bride. Tanuja is told to go away, so she tells on everyone.

Aunty Kanthi comes to set things straight. It is then that she sees Arjie dressed as a bride, and drags him in front of the other adults who all laugh. Arjie feels humiliated. Uncle Cyril calls Arjie "a funny one". On the way home, Arjie's parents feel humiliated as well. Arjie's father blames it on her mother, for always allowing Arjie to watch her as she finishes getting dressed. After the party, Arjie's Amma no longer allows him to watch her dressing, but requires Arjie's older brother, Diggy, to include Arjie on his cricket team. Arjie cries that he does not want to, but Amma demands he will. Sonali is sad to learn this, and asks Amma why. Amma says it is because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly.

Still, Arjie smuggles one of his mother's saris to his grandparents' house to play bride. However, as it turns out, no one playing cricket wants Arjie on their team, calling him a "girlie-boy". Arjie ends up annoying and embarrassing Diggy, causing Diggy to chase him back to his grandparents' house. Arjie goes to see the girls who are playing bride. Arjie asks to play, but Tanuja will only let him be the groom. He will not be allowed to pretend to cook or clean, but will be forced to pretend to go to work. Tanuja and Arjie end up fighting over the sari, accidentally ripping it in the process. Tanuja runs to the adults, followed by Arjie. Arjie's grandmother seeks to punish Arjie, but Arjie runs off on his own instead. Arjie begins to cry, knowing that his life will change dramatically from hereon in.

Radha Aunty – Rajan Nagendras and his family have submitted a proposal of marriage for Arjie's Aunt Radha, who has only just returned from studies in America. The Nagendras family is well-respected and wealthy, while Rajan is an engineer in America. The proposal of marriage is accepted for Radha. Arjie and his cousins help the adults transform his grandparents' house for the wedding. Arjie does not remember Radha, for she left for America when he was only three. He expects her to be beautiful, but she is plain though friendly. Radha allows Arjie to play with her makeup, and tells Arjie he can be a pageboy at the wedding.



As the wedding approaches, Amma asks Arjie if he wants to play the role of a child of the King of Siam in the play “The King and I”. Arjie agrees, and attends rehearsals at Saint Theresa’s Girls’ Convent, the school which Sonali attends. Radha is also in the play, which is being overseen by a woman named Aunty Doris. A young man named Anil drives Radha and Arjie home. Arjie’s grandmother is horrified by this because Radha is engaged and because Anil is Sinhalese. Radha considers her mother to be a racist, but Ammachi reminds her to remember history. It is explained that some 20 years before, some Sinhalese people killed many Tamil people because they rioted in opposition to the Sinhalese wanting Sinhala to be the country’s only language. Ammachi’s father was among those killed. Soon after, Ammachi goes to see Anil and his family, telling them that Anil must stop giving Radha rides. This embarrasses Radha to no end. Arjie accompanies Radha as she goes to apologize to Anil and his family. Anil accepts her apology.

While out at lunch at the Green Cabin with Arjie and Radha, Anil asks about the man who seeks to marry Radha. Suddenly, two of Radha’s sisters come across the lunch, and demand Radha leave at once. Radha is embarrassed by the situation. Anil asks if Radha likes him, and says that if they like each other, they can work out the rest. Radha only promises to think about it. Back home, Ammachi announces that Radha will be sent away to stay with her cousin Nages in Jaffna for a month. Radha’s sisters insist that a relationship between her and Anil would never work. Radha insists that it will, but Ammachi reminds Radha she must live in the real world, and that relations between the Tamils and Sinhalese are getting worse once more. Aunty Doris later tells Radha that she married for love, and it caused her family to alienate her. Now, her husband is dead, her parents are dead, her siblings are estranged, and she is alone. Still, Radha continues to see Anil until she is sent away. On her return, the Tamils on her train – including Radha – are attacked by the Sinhalese. While Radha is recovering, Anil tries to see her, but Ammachi sends her away. Radha decides to go through with the marriage.

Analysis

“Funny Boy” is a gay young adult novel by Shyam Selvadurai which recounts the childhood and teenage years of Arjie as he discovers he is gay while growing up in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s and early 1980s. From the very start, the theme of homosexuality is subtly visible through Arjie’s childhood. Arjie prefers to spend his time playing wedding with the girls of his family, but it is not the groom that they want him to be. He wants to be the bride instead. His desire to dress up as a woman, or to wear women’s makeup, are feminine qualities which deeply disturb Arjie’s mother and father, while the rest of the family labels Arjie “funny” – a veiled term for homosexual.

In Sri Lankan culture, family is everything. Family herein becomes a strong and central theme to the novel, and a strong and central pillar to Arjie’s life. Without one’s family in Sri Lanka, one is nothing. The reputation of all family members, the work and success of men, and the loyalty of family members to one another will heavily determine how well an individual does in life. A large part of this family closeness is love (as far as the



mothers are concerned in simple, daily life), but a large part of this family closeness is also honor. A single disreputable family member can irrevocably mar the entire family's honor, which in turn affects how well family members go about their own day-to-day lives.

It is for this reason that Arjie's parents are alarmed at his family laughing at Arjie dressing like a bride. It is for this reason – and out of fear that their son may become homosexual – that they mandate he plays with the other boys in order to man up. The reader will also note that family heavily influences the lives and actions of other family members as well. The kind but plain Radha would rather marry for love than participate in an arranged marriage, throwing the honor of the family into jeopardy. As it turns out, Radha consents to the arranged marriage anyways due to political events, but the fact remains that her family would have still expected the arranged marriage of her either way. As her family explains, Radha must live in the real world. Idealistic love does not hold out against it. This will come to be incredibly important for Arjie in future chapters, as Arjie's own homosexuality and ideas of love will collide with reality.

The reality of Sri Lanka is a socio-cultural adherence to tradition in all ways. These traditions are sometimes rooted in practical experience, such as family coming first, fathers ruling families, and marriages being arranged. These traditions are other times merely unjust – including those relating to homosexuality, race, and intolerance. Homosexuality is deeply frowned upon, and often cause for violent reaction. Should Arjie turn out gay, Arjie's father knows the family honor – and his own – will be greatly stained. Likewise, much of this tension is fueled by political discord that has broken out in violence in Jaffna. The Sinhalese and the Tamil are at odds with one another because radicals in both races consider the other to be inferior and worthy of subjugation. This sort of racism and intolerance both become thematic in the novel, and are deeply rooted in the traditions of Sri Lanka.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Arjie's parents so deeply worry about family members calling Arjie "funny"? How do they attempt to handle the situation? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Radha initially oppose her family's decision to arrange her in marriage? Why does Radha ultimately consent to the arranged marriage?

Discussion Question 3

What is the root of the tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamil? How does this shaky political environment feed into the concerns and direction of Arjie's family life?



Vocabulary

progeny, pretense, gravitated, beleaguered, precarious, hierarchy, peevish, etiquette, admonition, baleful, anguish, dejected, vital, redundancy, vigorously, imperiously, consternation, oblivious, reverie, gallivanting, philosophical, implicating, sporadic



See No Evil, Hear No Evil

Summary

Arjie's father's hard work pays off, as he ultimately comes to build and own a seaside hotel. As a result, Arjie's family becomes very wealthy very quickly. Arjie's father even travels to Europe to promote the hotel. While he is away, an old family friend named Daryl returns to Sri Lanka after spending 15 years in Australia to write an article. Amma explains that Daryl grew up next door to her and her sister, Aunty Neliya. From the heated discussion between Amma and Daryl, Arjie learns there is a war going on in Jaffna between the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese, with the Tamils wanting their own separate state. Later, Amma reveals the disagreement she and Neliya have with Daryl is that he thinks things are getting worse in Sri Lanka, while Amma and Neliya think things are getting better. Daryl learns that Arjie is reading "Little Women", so he brings Arjie gifts in the form of the books "Good Wives", "Little Men", and "Jo's Boys". When Arjie falls ill from infectious hepatitis, Amma brings him to the country house to recover. Daryl comes to visit frequently.

Arjie learns Daryl is descended from the Dutch colonists, and is white. Rarely did the races mix, he explains, because of racism on both sides. Amma and Daryl get into an argument soon after when Daryl explains he will be traveling to where the war is going on in Jaffna to seek out reports of police abuse and torture. It is then that Arjie realizes he has been used as an excuse for Amma and Daryl to spend time alone together. It unnerves him. Back home, Arjie learns that nothing has been heard from Daryl in Jaffna. Arjie's mother brings him to Daryl's home to find it has been ransacked. Amma reports this to Neliya, who urges Amma to be careful because society is not as forgiving about such behavior as a sister is. Amma goes to the police to report Daryl's disappearance. Only when the police learn Daryl is white do they take a report. The police chief, it turns out, knows Amma's husband and reports that Daryl's servant is responsible for the ransacking. The chief also says that Amma's husband would be interested to learn of all that has happened in his absence. A short time later, it is learned that Daryl is dead.

Amma is devastated by this news, and says something must be done. Neliya says nothing can be done. Amma decides to meet with Q.C. Appadurai, an old family friend and civil rights lawyer. Through this meeting, Arjie learns that his mother once wanted to marry Daryl, but her family forbade it. Q.C. explains that in such dangerous times, they must all act like the three monkeys to hear, see, and speak no evil. He warns Amma about her phone being tapped, and explains that if she hears a click while the person she is calling answers, the line has indeed been tapped. Amma tracks down the servant boy, Somartrane, to his home village of Belihul Oya. She travels there with Arjie, but the boy's mother is angered because she believes the rich do not care for the poor. On the way home, Arjie tells his mother she is selfish and was told not to do anything dangerous. One of Daryl's fellow reporters from his paper, the "Sydney-Morning Star",



comes by to ask after Daryl. Amma denies knowledge of anything. The next week, Arjie's father comes home and celebrates his birthday.

Analysis

The intolerance in Sri Lankan society continues to unravel stability, leading to great violence in Jaffna where there is open fighting between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. This intolerance – fueled by racism and traditions – ultimately draws in people throughout the country, and leads to the country at large responding in force against the violence. As the reader comes to learn, it is probably the case that the police of Jaffna had something to do with the disappearance of Daryl in order to prevent him from reporting abuses and torture.

Daryl himself presents an interesting case in the racism of Sri Lanka. Daryl is white, and is a descendant of the Dutch colonials who once ruled the island of Sri Lanka. Daryl wanted to marry Amma, but Amma's family refused to allow this. As Daryl explains, there was racism from the Dutch toward the natives, and the natives toward the Dutch. In Daryl's case, his inability to marry Amma stemmed from racism on the part of Amma's family. It is clear, however, that Amma still very much loves Daryl through the present day. The situation is eerily reminiscent of Radha's own failed attempt at marriage for love. The family had to come first.

The intolerance in Sri Lanka is not merely one of race or warring factions. The intolerance experienced in Sri Lanka also has to do with class. The reader should note with interest that when Amma goes to seek out Daryl's houseboy, the houseboy's mother accuses Amma of not caring for her and her family because they are poor. Indeed, the woman is right: Amma would never have had anything at all to do with lower social classes at all had it not been for Daryl's disappearance. Amma's singlemindedness in seeing and then trying to find Daryl leads to great danger, as Arjie himself notes. Arjie argues that Amma has put them all in danger through her searches and selfishness. Indeed, Amma has ironically been thinking of herself first before her family – and this is something that cannot be allowed. Only the honor of her family, and the upstanding reputation of her husband saves Amma from any actual trouble. Family is everything, and family protects Amma – even though Amma was willingly endangering the very thing that protected her.

Discussion Question 1

How does Amma's situation with Daryl compare to that of Radha and Anil? Why were Amma and Daryl not allowed to marry?



Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Amma is justified in spending time alone with Daryl, and then going through such great lengths to find him – even at the endangerment of her own family? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Arjie is justified in his assertion that his mother is selfish, thinks only of herself, and has endangered her family? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

affluence, compounded, infectious, convalesce, opulence, rubbish, callous, unwitting, accomplice, sultriness, dispel, immobile, commiseration, insurrection, insubstantial



Small Choices

Summary

A letter arrives from an old friend's widow for Arjie's father requesting employment for her 25-year-old son, whose role as a Gandhiyam relief worker has ended. Amma worries about this because the Gandhiyam have been known to associate with the Tamlin Tigers. Arjie's father decides he will either hire or reject the boy based on his politics. A few days later, Jegan Parameswaran arrives to interview with Arjie's father. Arjie's father is ready to hire Jegan on the spot, for Jegan so closely resembles his father. Arjie's father won't hear talk of politics, even though Amma wants to know what Jegan's politics are. Jegan is invited to move in with the family. He becomes like a son to Arjie's father. Arjie, meanwhile, has turned 13 and is beginning to notice other men.

Jegan and Arjie also develop a closeness which Arjie's father approves of, because he hopes it will man Arjie up, and get him away from his childhood tendencies to do things like wear women's clothing. Jegan says he doesn't think anything is wrong with Arjie. Thw two begin to go jogging, during which time Jegan stops to talk to two men he says are old friends. Meanwhile, the government holds a referendum to extend its power. Jegan confronts a pro-government supporter plastering posters to the family's hotel property wall, and throws him to the ground. While Arjie's aunts approve of this, Arjie's father worries. Meanwhile, Arjie's father turns a blind eye to the tourists who come to the hotel to solicit children and teenagers for sexual purposes. Arjie's father also cautions Jegan about lecturing the hotel staff, for the Sinhalese are very anti-Tamil at the moment. He also notes his hotel would have been burned to the ground if it were not for his hotel manager and staff talking down a mob. He goes on to explain that the Tamils must learn to play the game to survive because they are a minority. In a private conversation with Arjie, Jegan admits to having once been a Tiger, but having left because he disapproved of their brutally violent tactics. Jegan must confess as much to Arjie's father when the police come by for questioning.

Jegan and Arjie's father go to the police station. Arjie and his family wait impatiently at home. When Arjie's father arrives home alone, he explains that under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the police are keeping Jegan overnight for questioning. It is revealed that the police have picked up the two men who Jegan spoke with while jogging for planning to assassinate a Tamil politician considered a traitor by the Tigers. Arjie's father says no one must say anything about Arjie jogging with Jegan in order to protect the family from accusations of harboring a terrorist. However, the family's connection with Jegan still breaks out in the papers the next day. Some of the hotel staff turn cold toward Arjie's father.

When Jegan returns from the police station, Arjie's father suggests that Jegan take a trip for a while, but Jegan refuses to go. While out on the beach, he, Arjie, Amma, and several relatives are chased by a drunken mob of sons and friends of Bandutrane Mudalali Amma suggests emigrating to Australia or Canada. Arjie's father will hear none



of it. The hotel is later vandalized with anti-Tamil graffiti. Arjie's father and uncle decide to fire Jegan as a result of such mounting pressure. Jegan leaves and is never seen again. Amma encourages emigration once more, but Arjie's father refuses to hear of it.

Analysis

Now at the age of 13, Arjie is beginning to notice other boys and even men. He is becoming attracted to them without truly realizing it yet. Here, the theme of homosexuality again surfaces, but only subtly. The arrival of Jegan to the family home is a blessing for Arjie's father, who believes the time that Jegan and Arjie spend together will man Arjie up. Arjie's father continues to worry that his son is turning out gay, and believes that Jegan will be the kind of role model his son needs. However, this is before the political situation of the country, along with intolerance and racism make the situation of Jegan's staying with Arjie's family impossible.

Arjie's father does everything he can to remain neutral with everything going on to the country – from foreigners arriving to sexually abuse young children and teenagers to the escalating violence between the Sinhalese and Tamil elsewhere in the country. Arjie's father is primarily concerned with his family and his business, and hopes that a position of both moral and political neutrality will keep him safe. However, Jegan's ties to the Tamil Tigers make this impossible. As a result, Arjie's family's hotel becomes the target of discord and a mob that nearly turns violent. At long last, Arjie's father must fire Jegan, for Jegan has only become a liability. The intolerance that has plagued so much of the country has at last come to fall on Arjie's father, despite his efforts to remain neutral.

Once again, family and tradition are paramount. A man's duty truly is to his family and his work. For Arjie's father, work is the way he is able to provide and care for his family. It is to keep his hotel running smoothly and profitably that he turns a blind eye to pedophilia and the sex trade, but also is willing to turn out the son of his deceased best friend when the political situation becomes explosive. Family is everything, and Arjie's father is willing to do whatever it takes to uphold his family's honor because he realizes so many other lives are at stake. While Arjie's aunt initially approve of Jegan's antagonism toward local political activists, they quickly turn against Jegan when they see the danger such political confrontations can have. Indeed, the reader should note that the decision to fire Jegan is not one made by Arjie's father alone, but at the insistence of one of Arjie's uncles as well.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Arjie's father bring Jegan to come and stay with his family? Why does Arjie's father refuse to speak about politics when Jegan arrives, even though his wife insists on it? What does this ultimately lead to?



Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Arjie's father's position of neutrality in both moral and political issues is an act of calculation for the safety of his family, or the act of a coward who will not make a stand? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Arjie's father is justified in sending Jegan away? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

spontaneous, orientalist, ironically, awestruck, pariah, volatile, placatingly, tentatively, jovially, defamation, exasperated, emphatically, emigrate



The Best School of All

Summary

Arjie learns from his father that he is to be sent to Victoria Academy, already being attended by Diggy, to make Arjie a man. Diggy explains it is because their father worries Arjie will turn out funny (homosexual). Diggy warns Arjie not to get on the bad side of Principal Abeysinghe, known as “Black Tie”. Arjie is forced to dress in pants and to dress well for school at the Academy. From the start, Sinhalese students mock Arjie for being Tamil, including a mean kid named Salgado. But a boy named Soyza sticks up for Arjie. Arjie finds himself attracted to Soyza. Soyza explains that kids like Salgado can do almost anything, since they are in high favor with Vice Principal Lokubandara, a political appointee. This includes torturing kids like Cheliah. Arjie is, however, also singled out by Black Tie and Mr. Sunderalingam for his theatrical talents. Arjie will be made to do a recitation to test these talents.

Diggy warns Arjie about spending time with Soyza, because everyone believes Soyza is gay and has sex with the prefect every day. When Arjie fails his recitation, Soyza volunteers to help Arjie memorize another poem. Arjie meets Soyza at the British Council library to look up the poems. That night, Arjie has a sexual dream about Soyza. The next day, Arjie talks to Mr. Sunderalingam about why he tolerates how strict Black Tie is. Sunderalingam explains that Black Tie is the best bet that minorities like the Tamil have in the school, so they as Tamils must give their loyalty to Black Tie. That afternoon, Soyza kisses Arjie. It catches him by surprise, but he enjoys it. Arjie goes to visit Soyza at his home in Cinnamon Gardens, an upscale neighborhood. It is clear Soyza expects more romance, but Arjie doesn't know what to do, so he leaves knowing he has disappointed Soyza. Arjie's parents believe that his friendship with Soyza is merely friendship, and encourage Arjie to invite Soyza over. Arjie agrees. Later, Diggy tells Arjie he will be sorry for doing such a thing, and to be careful or Soyza will lead him down the wrong path.

Soyza comes over on Sunday. During a game of hide-and-seek, Arjie and Soyza kiss in the garage, where Soyza grinds against Arjie until Soyza climaxes. Arjie becomes upset by this, and afterwards begins to wonder what would have happened if anyone had caught them. Arjie lashes out at Soyza, bringing up the rumors of the prefect's office, and then hitting Soyza in the face. Soyza leaves. That night, Arjie has sexual dreams about Soyza. The next day, they make up. Arjie wonders how loving Soyza could possibly be wrong, but knows he will be in trouble if anyone finds out. He believes this is because the rules are made by those with the power to make them, while those like himself and Soyza must suffer. He wonders if it is possible for people like him and Soyza to have power. Soyza explains he wants to travel to England to be with his mother.

It is later revealed that Arjie will recite poems to complement a speech by Black Tie in order to save the diversity of the school. Arjie recites horribly, but it allows Black Tie to



make his point before the audience assembled at the school, among which is an important government minister. Arjie later tells Soyza he recited the poems in defense of Soyza.

Analysis

As Arjie continues to grow as a teenager, his father continues to worry about his son's lack of masculinity. As a result, Arjie's father decides he will be sent to Victoria Academy in the hopes such a strict, traditional school will further whip Arjie into shape and do away with his effeminate ways. Ironically for Arjie's father, the exact opposite thing occurs. Arjie's time spent at Victoria Academy will allow him to fully indulge in his homosexuality as Arjie comes to enter a relationship of sorts with Soyza. Soyza helps Arjie to recognize that he is indeed homosexual. This also gives Arjie the ability to consider his homosexuality, and to come to the conclusion that there is nothing wrong with it –and to wonder why his family, and Sri Lankan culture, should look down on homosexuality in general.

This attitude toward homosexuality is indicative of Sri Lankan culture and tradition, which prides itself on male masculinity, and chastises male femininity. Men are to be powerful and dominant, not weak and submissive like women. The traditional nature of society – of men ruling families, and of families being all important – must be upheld no matter what. This is especially important in times of political unrest and politically-motivated violence, as Arjie and the reader will come to see in the final chapter of the novel. This attitude of intolerance not only reinforces the theme of intolerance, but makes life difficult at best for Arjie. As the reader will recall, Radha faced such intolerance and tradition for wanting to marry the man that she loved rather than to marry the man arranged for her.

Intolerance exists elsewhere, including in Victoria Academy. As Diggy warns Arjie, Arjie should stay away from Soyza because there are all sorts of sexual rumors floating around about Soyza. These include that he has sex with the prefect and that he is homosexual. Arjie does not care for Diggy's warnings. Intolerance does not exist only against sexuality, but the school itself is Sri Lankan society writ small. At school, the Sinhalese rule the halls and do all they can to make the lives of Tamil students miserable. They get away with so much because the vice principal is a political appointment – but only get so far because the principal, even though only just barely, still maintains ultimate control over the school. Arjie's decision to recite poetry in conjunction with the principal's public address is a stand against intolerance, both racial and sexual.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Arjie sent to Victoria Academy? What happens instead? Why does Arjie not tell his parents about this?



Discussion Question 2

What sorts of intolerance does Arjie face at Victoria Academy? How does the school reflect society at large? What does this mean for Arjie and other minority students?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Arjie decide to go ahead and read poetry for Black Tie? What are the poetry and the speech intended to do?

Vocabulary

evasive, appalled, preposterous, negligible, immunity, immaculate, quizzically, chastise, conspiratorially, acquiescence

Riot Journal: An Epilogue

Summary

It is late July, 1983. On the morning of July 25, word comes that riots in Colombo have broken out against Tamils. Relatives come in to see Arjie and his family to confirm that Tamil houses are being burned to the ground. It is also later confirmed that the police and the government are doing nothing to stop the mobs, prompting many, including Arjie's parents, to believe the government is behind the rioting. As of 1:00 in the afternoon, the government declares a curfew is in effect and that anyone caught without a pass will be shot on sight. Instead of bringing an end to the riots, this makes them worse. Word later comes that the police and the armed forces are cheering on the mobs.

By the evening, Arjie's family instructs he and his siblings to escape over the wall should the mob come to their neighborhood. Members of the family keep watch through the night. After midnight, the mobs arrive. As planned, the family sneaks over the wall during which time their house is burned to the ground. Arjie's grandparents' house is also torched. For the next two days, Arjie and his family remain in hiding with relatives. Soyza comes to see Arjie, and for the first time, the fact that Soyza is Sinhalese seems to matter to Arjie like never before. Soyza is safe from the mobs. By the night of July 27, the hotel has been attacked and burned. Appa has agreed to leave for Canada. By July 29, order is restored and the riots have ended, but nothing can ever be the same again. By August 2, the riots flair up again. Arjie's grandparents are burned to death in their car by a mob. By August 25, Arjie and his family have received their passports.

Arjie and his family are only allowed to emigrate with 500 pounds, thanks to the new laws. They will have to stay with Uncle Lakshman, who already lives in Canada. The thought of being poor scares Arjie. Arjie visits and has sex with Soyza for the last time. Arjie then returns to the ruins of his house and cries for everything he has lost and will lose. As he heads back to meet his family, the heavy rain obscures the view of the ruins of his house in the distance.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the themes of intolerance and racism come to the fore. After years of political tension and outbreaks of violence, the worst finally boils over into country-wide brutality. Sinhalese mobs attack and kill Tamils, and torch and destroy their homes and property. What is most frightening is that the government is believed to be behind the rioting, as the government, the armed forces, and the police are doing nothing to try to quell the mobs. Indeed, the racial violence and intolerance of the Sinhalese toward the Tamil is only encouraged and cheered. Arjie and his family know they are in serious trouble, and must figure out what their next step may be. Arjie's parents ultimately come to decide that emigration is their only plausible option.



Yet, it is when the traditional ways of Sri Lanka are at their darkest that they are also at their brightest. While Arjie's father's contention that family must come above all else at first seems a stuffy, backwards, and convenient way of denying freedom of love and freedom of marriage, let alone the rights of women, in times of danger it becomes a saving grace. Arjie's family remains on guard and protective of one another as the violence comes to their neighborhood. They keep watch, and wake one another when violence arrives. They help each other escape the house just before the mobs set fire to it. They are taken in by relatives, and cared for until the violence dies down.

The family has survived by relying on family. They will continue to survive in the new world of Canada by relying on family that has already emigrated. Whatever shortcomings family may have had previously – in terms of love, primarily – it is ultimately for the best. As the reader will remember Arjie's family saying, idealism often runs into the real world and cannot survive. Such is the case of Arjie's romance with the Sinhalese Soyza, and such is the idealistic conceptions of home that Arjie has. In a truly practical sense, it may be argued that all that is required of each family member has ultimately paid off in the long run. This is for the reader to decide. The reader should also note that the final scene of the novel involves Arjie as he prepares to meet his family, looking back at home through the rain but being unable to see home through the rain. This is highly symbolic of sadness, of the tears that Arjie cries, and the idea that one cannot go back to the way things were.

Discussion Question 1

What finally convinces Arjie's parents to leave Sri Lanka for Canada? How does Arjie feel about this? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Earlier in the novel, it is explained that idealism, such as in love, cannot withstand the cruelties of the real world. Do you believe this is true based on the novel? Why or why not? Do you believe this is true in the real world itself outside the novel? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

It may be argued that all the requirements of family – such as arranged marriages – are ultimately necessary, and pale in comparison to the long-term importance of family. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

menacing, devastation, anonymous, extorting, penniless, synchronization



Characters

Arjie

Arjun “Arjie” Chelvaratnam is the main character and narrator of the novel “Funny Boy” by Shyam Selvadurai. Arjie, a Sri Lankan, is seven when the novel begins, and in his mid-teens when the novel ends. Arjie grows up with the knowledge that he is gay, stemming from his desire to wear women’s clothing as a child to his sexual attraction to other boys and men as he becomes a teenager.

Arjie’s parents disapprove of his tendencies, so they seek to man him up by sending him to the strict Victoria’s Academy. Here, Arjie falls in love with Soyza instead, having his first sexual experience with Soyza as well. Despite the intolerance Arjie faces for being both gay and Tamil, Arjie believes there is nothing wrong with him, and wonders why the world cannot accept him for who he is.

Arjie’s wide-eyed idealism comes crashing down when reality, by way of political and social violence, appear. Arjie’s relationship with Soyza crumbles as a result, and causes Arjie and his family to emigrate to Canada.

Diggy

Diggy Chelvaratnam is the older brother of Arjie. Diggy is very masculine, very incisive, and very straightforward. Diggy worries that Arjie may end up being gay, and so warns Arjie about spending time with Soyza. Diggy also proves to be an important source of information for Arjie when Arjie attends Victoria Academy, for Diggy gives Arjie insider’s knowledge about who to stay away from, and what not to do.

Sonali

Sonali Chelvaratnam is Diggy and Arjie’s younger sister. Courageous and pretty, Sonali is a fierce defender of her brother Arjie as they grow up. Sonali defends her brother against the intolerance of her parents, wanting Arjie to be able to do what he wants and when he wants. Sonali’s courageous defense of Arjie is a very rare thing in Sri Lankan society, and something for which Arjie is very grateful.

Amma

Amma (Nalini Chelvaratnam) is the mother of Arjie, Sonali, and Diggy, and is the wife of Appa. Amma at first appears to be very traditional – doing as her husband says, arguing that the family must be put first, and demanding there be order and structure in the family – but is in reality just as human as everyone else.



It turns out that Amma had a failed relationship with a white man named Daryl, due to her family's racism and insistence she be arranged in marriage. When Daryl comes back into her life and is murdered, Amma risks the family's safety by trying to find out what happened to him.

By the end of the novel, Amma becomes the foremost advocate for emigration to Canada amid the rising violence.

Appa

Appa Chelvaratnam is the father of Arjie, Sonali, and Diggy, and is the husband of Amma. Appa is also the son of Ammachi and Appachi. Appa is a very traditional, very strict man who puts his family above all else, and relishes in his ability to make money to provide for them both financially and in reputation.

Appa is horrified to learn that Arjie might be gay, so he endeavors to ensure that Arjie will man up through various methods, such as spending time with Jegan and attending Victoria Academy. He does this not out of hatred, but out of a sense of love and honor in the hopes of protecting his family.

Appa also does his best to remain politically and morally neutral so that his business and family might pass through the national violence undisturbed. When this fails, Appa agrees that emigration to Canada is the only option.

Radha

Radha Chelvaratnam is the sister of Appa, the sister-in-law of Amma, the daughter of Appachi and Ammachi, and the aunt of Arjie, Sonali, and Diggy. Radha is an accomplished, cultured, and kind girl who, upon graduation from college in America, is to be arranged in a marriage. Radha does not want to marry in this fashion, but longs to marry for love instead.

Her romance with Anil is frowned upon and discouraged by her family, but Radha does her best to stay with him even though she is Tamil and he is Sinhalese. However, violence committed against Radha by Sinhalese mobs, and the pressure of her family cause Radha to consent to the arranged marriage in the end.

Daryl

Daryl Brohier is a white, Dutch descendant of the Dutch colonists who once ruled Sri Lanka. Daryl grew up next door to Amma, and the two fell in love and wished to be married. However, racism against whites by Amma's family meant such a marriage was impossible, and Daryl left for Australia to become a reporter for the Sydney Morning Star.



Daryl returns to Sri Lanka to cover the violence and the political turmoil, where he reunites with Amma. Daryl is ultimately killed while investigating claims of police brutality and torture.

Soyza

Shehan Soyza is a gay student who attends Victoria Academy, and sticks up for Arjie. Soyza recognizes that Arjie is gay long before Arjie himself actually acknowledges it. Soyza and Arjie begin a friendship which quickly becomes romantic, and which in turn quickly becomes sexual. This occurs despite the fact that Soyza is Sinhalese and Arjie is Tamil. Despite their relationship, societal and political pressures ultimately break Soyza and Arjie apart.

Jegan

Jegan Parameswaran is the 25-year old son of Appa's deceased best friend from many years before. Jegan, a Tamil, is also a supposed former member of the Tamil Tigers, who seems to lose his job in relief work due to his past. His mother convinces Appa to give Jegan a job based on the history of friendship between him and her deceased husband. Jegan is at first warmly welcomed, but his political antics and past lead him to be scrutinized by the police, lead to discontent at the hotel, and lead to graffiti and a near-mob. As a result, Jegan is fired and sent back to Jaffna, where he is never heard from again.

Ammachi and Appachi

Ammachi and Appachi are the grandparents of Arjie, Sonali, and Diggy. Ammachi and Appachi are very traditional, very strict, but also very kind grandparents. One day each month, they babysit all of their grandchildren while their children and their spouses have the day to themselves. The grandchildren love these days.

Ammachi and Appachi later arrange a marriage for their daughter, Radha, which Radha at first rebels against but then comes to consent to.

Years later, Ammachi and Appachi are brutally murdered when they are burned alive in their car by a Sinhalese mob.



Symbols and Symbolism

Books

Books are read by Arjie throughout the novel. Arjie loves to read. His favorite book ends up being “Little Women”. In traditional Sri Lanka, beyond studies or necessity, reading is considered a woman’s pastime. Arjie’s love of reading unnerves his father, and is one of the “tendencies” that Arjie has that his father wishes to get rid of.

Sari

A sari is a traditional Sri Lankan robe-like style of clothing for women. Arjie is enamored with saris, and enjoys wearing them himself – especially when playing the bride with his cousins. Arjie’s family discovers his enjoyment of dressing up as a girl, which they all laugh at and mock. Arjie is ultimately labeled “funny” – a veiled way of saying homosexual. This angers Arjie’s father, who forbids Arjie to ever wear such clothing again.

Makeup

Makeup is worn by the women of Arjie’s family. Arjie himself likes to wear makeup, even though he is a boy. This behavior considered “funny” by his family. When Radha returns home from her studies, she applies makeup to Arjie without realizing the background as to why Arjie is not to wear makeup anymore. Arjie, however, enjoys it thoroughly.

Degrees

Degrees are earned by the older members of Arjie’s family who attend college. Degrees are primarily earned by the men of the family who in turn use them for business and their careers. Women earn degrees as a matter primarily of attractiveness to potential suitors in arranged marriages. Upon receiving her degree in America, Radha returns home to find herself in an arranged marriage.

Poetry

Poetry about the quality and importance of school life is read by Arjie to accompany a speech by Black Tie. The poetry that Arjie reads is meant to reinforce the importance of tolerance at schools, and the importance of including all different kinds of people. Arjie recites the poetry primarily as a personal statement in defense of his, and Soyza’s, homosexuality.



Speech

A speech is given by Black Tie to an assembled audience of parents, community members, a government minister. The speech underscores the importance of diversity in schools – including in academics and those who attend the school at all. The speech is a valiant stand against the racism and intolerance creeping into the school by way of politics and violence around the country. The speech is given an applause, but ultimately has little effect.

The Sydney Morning-Star

The Sydney Morning-Star is the Australian-based newspaper at which Daryl works. It is on assignment from the Morning-Star that Daryl travels to Sri Lanka to cover the violence, and to investigate allegations of police cruelty and torture. When Daryl goes missing, another reporter from the paper is sent to find him, but Amma denies any knowledge of Daryl's fate.

Diary

A diary is given to Arjie as a gift to record his thoughts and feelings. His diary makes up the final chapter of the novel, "Riot Journal: An Epilogue". The diary entries, which run from late July to late August, cover the riots that finally lead to Arjie's family's decision to leave for Canada. The diary is a reminder of everything that Arjie and his family have lost, including Arjie's romance with Soyza.

Passports

Passports are sought for Arjie and his family by Arjie's parents in late July when the riots become especially violent, leading to the burning down of the family's home and the hotel. The passports will allow the family to leave the country. The passports are finally made ready by late August, when Arjie and his family decide they will emigrate to Canada.

Rain

A heavy rain falls on Arjie after he cries while visiting the ruins of his home before emigrating to Canada. The rain is symbolic of loss, sadness, and is heavy enough that Arjie cannot see the ruins of his home while looking back as he leaves. The rain therein becomes symbolic of everything that Arjie will never be able to return to, and will never have again.



Settings

Colombo

Colombo is an affluent and major coastal city in Sri Lanka. Colombo is the hometown of Arjie and his family. Colombo is where Arjie and his family live, and where his father works at his hotel. Colombo is one of several seats of power throughout the country for the government, and is one of the many places where the Tamil are outnumbered in great quantity by the Sinhalese. Colombo serves as the main setting for the novel, for it is in Colombo where Arjie begins his story and ends his story. Colombo is the location not only of his family's hotel, but of Victoria Academy, the home of Soyza, and becomes the site of great riots against the Tamil. It is in Colombo that Sinhalese mobs ultimately come to burn down Arjie's family home, and it is in Colombo where Arjie's grandparents are burned alive in their car. It is ultimately from Colombo that Arjie and his family emigrate to Canada.

Jaffna

Jaffna is a major northern city in Sri Lanka, and is home to the Tamil Tigers, a sizable Tamil population, and a separatist movement to give the Tamils their own state. Jaffna is the hometown of Jegan, and it is while in Jaffna that Jegan becomes a member of the Tigers only to later quit. It is to Jaffna that Radha travels to see a relative, and it is later on the return from Jaffna that Radha's train is attacked by an anti-Tamil mob. Jaffna becomes a center of violent political unrest, and is the city to which Daryl travels to investigate allegations of police torture. Daryl is never heard from again upon his traveling to Jaffna, nor is Jegan ever heard from again in his return to Jaffna.

The hotel

The hotel, owned and operated by Arjie's father, is located at the beach just outside of the city of Colombo, proper. The hotel is a beautiful, Western-styled building that is geared primarily toward tourism. Arjie's father runs his hotel efficiently, and with a blind eye to the politics, sexual indiscretions, and sexual crimes of some of his guests. Arjie's father hopes this will protect the hotel. When violence does ultimately break out in Colombo, Arjie's father's neutrality doesn't save the family home or the hotel, as both are torched.

Australia

Australia is a country and a continent located southeast of Sri Lanka. It is to Australia that Daryl moves as an adult following his failed attempt to marry Arjie's mother. In Australia, Daryl becomes a reporter for the Sydney Morning-Star, and travels to Sri

Lanka to cover the political unrest. Daryl ends up missing, prompting another reporter from Australia to journey to Sri Lanka to attempt to find him.

Canada

Canada is a country in North America that throws open its doors to refugees from Sri Lanka during the political unrest. Canada is already home to members of Arjie's family, including Lakshman. Lakshman offers Arjie and his family a safe place to stay in Canada until they get their feet on the ground. Arjie's parents decide that the family will indeed emigrate to Canada, a very good, safe, and tolerant country.



Themes and Motifs

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is an important theme in the novel “Funny Boy” by Shyam Selvadurai. Homosexuality involves romantic and sexual attraction between individuals of the same sex. In the novel, Arjie comes to understand that he is homosexual, and endures bigotry and intolerance regarding his homosexuality.

When the novel begins, Arjie is seven. Arjie, as a child, has a predilection for spending all of his time with his female cousins where he plays wedding and dresses up like a bride. His extended family finds this something to mock and laugh at, while some of the more incisive members of the family recognize homosexuality in Arjie, calling him “funny”. Arjie’s parents are mortified by this, and endeavor to do what they can to remove such tendencies from their son as a matter of family honor and safety.

Arjie’s parents determine that he will play sports with his brother Diggy, spend time with Jegan, and that he will attend Victoria Academy with the hopes that such activities will man Arjie up and eliminate any feminine and homosexual tendencies he may have. Arjie, however, continues to dress as a girl, wear makeup, and do things considered womanly such as reading despite his parents’ efforts to curtail his budding homosexuality.

However, it is while Arjie attends school at Victoria Academy that he realizes he is actually homosexual. He begins a sexual relationship with Soyza, even though Diggy warns Arjie to stay away from Soyza, and even though homosexuals are looked down upon at school. Arjie believes that all that matters is that he and Soyza love one another, and that everything else in the world is irrelevant. However, this hopelessly idealistic conception of love is dashed by the cold reality of the world. Arjie’s relationship crumbles as political divides lead to violence, which in turn means Arjie and his family must flee the country.

Racism

Racism is an important theme in the novel “Funny Boy” by Shyam Selvadurai. Racism is the hatred, mistreatment, or mental state of another based on that individual’s skin-color and race. Racism, and racial attitudes, appear in many ways in the novel, with each one of them affecting the plot in various ways.

Early in the novel, Arjie is exposed to the racism that stretches back decades in his country between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. While the ultimate origin of this racism is unclear, what is clear is that many members of each race of Sri Lankans consider the other to be inferior in all aspects. These racial tensions often lead to violence and unrest at worst, and mistrust and alienation at least. When the Sinhalese wish to make their language the only language of Sri Lanka, the Tamils riot.



During the riots, one of Arjie's relatives is killed. As such, the family harbors great dislike for the Sinhalese.

When Radha comes home from college, she is quickly arranged in a marriage with another Tamil man. Radha, however, has fallen for a Sinhalese man named Anil. Arjie's family blocks Radha's relationship with Anil because he is Sinhalese, and because the marriage is not arranged. Radha argues that race does not matter, but she is told that it does. She is sent to stay with a relative in Jaffna for a while, and upon her return, is attacked and seriously injured for being a Tamil. This gives her doubts about Anil and the Sinhalese at large, so she decides to go through with the arranged marriage.

The race-fueled distention between the Sinhalese and the Tamil ultimately results in violence across the country, in which the Tamil minority is targeted, brutalized, and in many cases, murdered. Among those killed are Arjie's grandparents. This prompts the family to finally leave Sri Lanka. Arjie's mother's old romantic flame, Daryl, left the country more than a decade before following his failed attempt to marry Arjie's mother. Amma's family was heavily racist toward whites like Daryl, and would not even conceive of their daughter marrying a white man. Amma, like Radha, was forced into a racially-appropriate arranged marriage instead.

Intolerance

Intolerance is an important theme in the novel "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai. Intolerance includes exclusionary attitudes and actions of disapproval based on anything from race to gender to sexual preference. In the novel, intolerance persists strongly as a result of traditional Sri Lankan culture, and affects the plot in various ways.

Racial intolerance can be seen in numerous places throughout the novel, most notably in the political strife and violence that breaks out between radical Sinhalese and radical Tamils. This racial intolerance puts the Tamil people in a subjugated position in society and in social organizations like schools, where the Sinhalese routinely victimize the Tamils. Elsewhere, social institutions – such as marriage – absorb racial intolerance. For example, Amma is not allowed to marry a white man when she is a young woman, while Radha later is not allowed to marry a Sinhalese man because she is Tamil.

Class intolerance is also important in the novel, though in less conspicuous ways as race. Arjie and his family take for granted their wealth and luxury in life, knowing that it comes from their father's hard work, but also never stopping to think how great they have it in life. They treat their servants kindly though dismissively, and have little interaction with lower class people unless they work for the family's hotel. Indeed, when Amma goes to track down Daryl's houseboy, the houseboy's mother tells Amma that she and the other rich people care nothing for the poor, and that Amma would have never associated with the poor without a self-interested reason. The intolerance that Arjie's mother, and many in his family, has for the lower classes is clear.



There is also a great deal of intolerance toward homosexuality. Considered unmanly and contrary to Sri Lankan traditions, homosexuality is stamped out wherever it is found. When Arjie's parents suspect he may be homosexual at the age of seven, they immediately seek to ensure he will not turn out gay by forcing him to play sports, to spend time with Jegan, and to attend Victoria Academy. They say this is for Arjie's own good and the good of the family, but Arjie only wants to live his own life. As Arjie learns, however, the intolerance toward homosexuality outside of his family is even greater, meaning his relationship with Soyza is a daily danger to Arjie and Soyza.

Tradition

Tradition is an important theme in the novel "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai. Traditions and tradition are the time-honored actions and attitudes of a society, culture, or country that arise from belief, practical experience, or a combination of both. Traditions are meant to hold social groups together, distinguish them, and to provide uniformity. Some traditions leads to intolerance, while other traditions are invaluable.

Sri Lankan tradition regarding men and women and their proper roles and places is very traditional, especially as regards family. While the man works and earns for the family, the woman tends to household duties and the day-to-day particulars of life. As such, there are activities and actions traditionally associated with gender – such as with women doing all the cooking and reading for leisure, let alone wearing feminine clothing. Arjie runs afoul of these gender traditions, enjoying reading, wanting to dress in women's clothing, and wanting to cook when playing bride with his female cousins.

Sri Lankan traditions are also clear in marriage. Because family is considered so important, marriage is seen as the key to family, and thus marriage itself is crucial. As a result, marriages are nearly always arranged. These arranged marriages are based upon the family's honor, wealth, race, and connections among other things. Radha's arranged marriage will be to an engineer from a good family. Amma was denied a marriage to a wealthy white family because they are not Sri Lankan, and because they are not considered suitable for relatives.

While these traditions can indeed be seen as manifestations of intolerance, they ultimately serve a purpose. As it is explained to Radha early on, there is a real world that must be dealt with apart from idealism. Amma almost wrecks her family's safety by trying to find out what happened to Daryl. Radha, who professes no racism herself, was still brutally attacked by racist Sinhalese. Arjie, though he argues his homosexuality is normal, comes to find out that the real world of Sri Lanka does not agree. Homosexuals are brutally targeted for their deviation from the Sri Lankan norm and are mocked and derided. Arjie's parents' attempts to curtail his homosexuality are a matter of protecting the family, and protecting Arjie himself.



Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Funny Boy” by Shyam Selvadurai. Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. Family proves to be tremendously influential, and invaluable, not only to Arjie’s life, but to the plot of the novel as well.

Family is everything in Sri Lankan culture, forming the very core of society and culture. A family’s honor is valued above all else, for honor will make or break a person’s life. An honorable family’s member will find easier access to everything from education to work to marriage arrangements, whereas a dishonored family’s member will struggle to have any such chances at all. Just as a family’s reputation may make or break an individual’s chances, so too can the actions of an individual make or break a family’s reputation.

This is why it is so important for the family that Radha marry a respectable, family-approved man. A marriage to a Sinhalese without the same kind of reputation as their family will do nothing to benefit the family, and may even harm them in the long run. The same was true for Amma years before when she very nearly had a marriage with Daryl. The same is now true for Arjie, whose parents attempt to curtail his homosexuality not only for his own protection, but because it will reflect badly on every single other member of the family, and the family name as a whole.

But these practical family traditions ultimately pale in comparison to the love and loyalty the family members have for one another. This holds true in the riots in Colombo. When Arjie’s intermediate family is targeted by the mobs, extended family takes them in and takes care of them following their house and hotel being torched. Other family members come and go to ensure that they are all alright, and the entire family is shaken by the murder of Ammachi and Appachi. It is because of this final act that the family decides beyond a shadow of a doubt to move to Canada, where they will rely on the kindness of family to help them settle.



Styles

Point of View

Shyam Selvadurai tells his novel “Funny Boy” in the first-person reflective omniscient narrative mode from the perspective of main character Arjie. Arjie is telling his story years and years after the events have occurred, for he continually interrupts the narrative to provide contextual information that would not be available at the time – such as noting during the first chapter that he would one day move to Canada, or during the chapter “Small Choices” that Jegan would never be seen again. Indeed, Arjie is telling his story about growing up gay in Sri Lanka long after he has moved to Canada to escape the violence described in the final chapter of the novel. As such, he is reflecting on the events of the past and is able to fill in critical pieces of information that he was missing at the time (such as Jegan’s fate).

Language and Meaning

Shyam Selvadurai tells his novel “Funny Boy” in language that is educated and mostly formal. Arjie, who serves as the novel’s narrator, is very wealthy. As a result, he is sent to the best schools there are in Colombo, where he receives a top-notch education. Likewise, Arjie is very well-read, as reading is one of his favorite things to do. His language is very educated as a result, for he uses words like preposterous instead of ridiculous, or immaculate instead of clean. The formal nature of his language can be seen in words like affluence and joviality, and is reflective of the culture of the upper class. The upper class is very refined, very genteel, and very professional – all things which are reflected in Arjie’s language.

Structure

Shyam Selvadurai divides his novel “Funny Boy” into six primary sections, including five chapters and an epilogue. Each of the sections of the novel are long, with “The Best School of All” coming in at 75 pages in length. Each section of the novel revolves around a particular period of Arjie’s life, and includes all the events and situations of that period. For example, “Small Choices” involves political unrest and the arrival of Jegan to live and work for Arjie’s family. The sections themselves ultimately form a loose narrative of Arjie’s life, but may indeed actually be read as independent short stories that do not actually have to depend upon one another for context or relevance. The epilogue of the novel takes the form of Arjie’s journal entries, as the violence in Colombo reaches unprecedented scales resulting in the murder of Arjie’s grandparents, and the family’s decision to move to Canada.



Quotes

Yet those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved.

-- Arjie (Pigs Can't Fly paragraph 13)

Importance: As a child Arjie loves spending time with his cousins, especially his female cousins. Arjie enjoys dressing up as a bride when the girls use their imaginations. Arjie notes, however, that this is the beginning of the end for life as he knows it, not merely because his family will flee from Sri Lanka to Canada to escape the rise of Communism, but because Arjie's entire world will change as a result of his activities as a child.

Life is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them.

-- Amma (Pigs Can't Fly paragraph 128)

Importance: Following the humiliation of her son being made fun of for dressing like a bride at her mother's birthday party, Amma determines her son will play cricket with the other boys. Arjie does not want to do this, saying it is stupid and not fair. In simple logic for a child (which can be extrapolated for the world of adults), Amma contends that life is full of having to do stupid things. In other words, people must often do what is expected of them, even if it means giving up some freedom to do such things.

If we like each other, we can work out the rest.

-- Anil (Radha Aunty paragraph 322)

Importance: Radha and Anil fall for one another, but their blossoming romance is discovered by Radha's family. Anil argues that their love can work because their love will allow them to work out everything else. Anil's hopeful and idealistic attitude comforts Radha to a small extent, but then she knows she will have to face down her mother and her family.

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

-- Radha (Radha Aunty paragraph 388)

Importance: Radha admits to her mother and her family that she believes she is in love with Anil. Her explanation that everything else is unimportant is emblematic of the idealistic world of young love. Radha genuinely hopes that, like Anil has said, everything else can be worked out provided there is love. (This is important because it can be extrapolated to homosexuality.) But Radha's mother harbors no such conceptions about the world.

Ultimately you have to live in the real world. And without your family you are nothing.

-- Ammachi (Radha Aunty paragraph 389)

Importance: Here, Radha's mother responds to Radha's assertion that two people who love each other can make things work because everything else is unimportant. Ever the



realist, Mammachi counters that this is not true because people have to live in the real world of Sri Lanka with all its flaws, expectations, and shortcomings. Family is vital for survival in Sri Lankan culture, especially in times of political troubles such as those fast approaching. Radha will need to do as expected of her by her family to survive.

I watched my father... Unlike Amma, he was a distant figure who had very little effect on our everyday reality. We dealt with him mainly through avoidance.

-- Arjie (Small Choices paragraph 19)

Importance: Arjie relates a common fact of Sri Lankan culture, in which men tend to focus on business and have little to do with the daily lives of their families. Arjie's father goes on to have a better father-son relationship with the son of an old friend, Jegan, than he does with his own children. In Sri Lankan culture, a father's will is law, and all must obey no matter what. Arjie and his siblings do as they are told, rarely defying him, and always try to avoid him because they are not that close to him.

The Academy will force you to become a man.

-- Appa (The Best School of All paragraph 12)

Importance: Arjie learns that he is to be sent to Victoria Academy. Arjie is not happy about this, and wonders why this is to occur. Appa explains that this will occur because Arjie must be made into a man and forced to grow up. Arjie still doesn't completely understand what Appa's reasoning is, but knows he has little choice in the matter.

He doesn't want you turning out funny or anything like that.

-- Diggy (The Best School of All paragraph 18)

Importance: Arjie asks his brother why he is being sent to Victoria Academy. Diggy explains it is because their father is worried that Arjie will continue to turn out funny – a polite way of saying “homosexual”. It is hoped that Arjie's time at the Academy will straighten him out and cause him to do away with his effeminate qualities and tendencies.

Salgado and others like him are in high favor with Lokubandara. They can do whatever they like.

-- Soyza (The Best School of All paragraph 83)

Importance: When Arjie starts school at Victoria Academy, he quickly learns that the Sinhalese kids are dominant. Soyza explains that Sinhalese kids like Salgado can do almost anything, since they are in high favor with Vice Principal Lokubandara, a political appointee. This includes torturing kids like Cheliah. The Principal, and others, can do nothing about it because of Lokubandara's connections and political nature.

What had happened between us in the garage was not wrong. For how could loving Shehan be bad? Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble.

-- Arjie (The Best School of All paragraph 526)



Importance: Arjie's relationship with Shehan Soyza continues to grow over time. Arjie comes to accept that there is nothing wrong with his relationship, but knows he will be in trouble if he is found out. He believes this is because the rules are made by those with the power to make them, while those like himself and Soyza must suffer. The reader will recall from Radha earlier in the novel that Arjie has quickly learned there is a real world apart from his idealistic conceptions of love.

Appa was on the phone, and from the expression on his face, we knew that something had happened.

-- Arjie (Riot Journal: An Epilogue paragraph 1)

Importance: On the morning of July 25, word comes that riots have broken out in the city of Colomba. Innumerable Tamil houses have been burned down by Sinhalese mobs seeking revenge for the actions of the Tigers. The situation is desperate, and this is the beginning of the end of Arjie's life in Sri Lanka.

It's time.

-- Neliya (Riot Journal: An Epilogue paragraph 29)

Importance: At long last, the anti-Tamil mobs target Arjie's neighborhood. He and his family escape over their property wall, after which time their house is burned to the ground. Aunt Neliya's words that it is time to flee are not merely only reflective of the immediate need for safety, but are symbolic of everything that Arjie will come to lose. It is time for life as it is known to end, and for a new life to begin. This life will ultimately begin in Canada.