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Queering Diasporic Identity: Space, Belonging, and Sexual Awakening in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

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Abstract
This article interrogates the complex tessellation of space, belonging, and sexual identity in Shyam Selvadurai's groundbreaking novel *Funny Boy* (1994). Drawing upon—yet at times departing from—established queer and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, I examine how the protagonist Arjie navigates the treacherous terrain of gender nonconformity amid escalating ethnonationalist violence in pre-civil war Sri Lanka. Through close textual analysis of often-overlooked passages, I argue that Selvadurai's narrative disrupts conventional critical approaches by presenting a protagonist whose queerness functions not merely as metaphor for ethnic marginalization, but as a profoundly embodied epistemology that offers alternative ways of knowing and being. The novel's idiosyncratic spatial cartography—particularly its preoccupation with threshold spaces and contested territories—reveals how bodies become battlegrounds where competing cultural logics clash and occasionally collapse. This perspective challenges prevailing scholarly interpretations that position Arjie primarily as a symbol of national fragmentation. Instead, I suggest that Selvadurai's nuanced portrayal of queer adolescence offers a more radical proposition: that desire itself might function as a decolonizing force capable of reconfiguring the very terms through which belonging is imagined and enacted.
Keywords: Shyam Selvadurai, queer embodiment, Sri Lankan literature, spatial liminality, postcolonial identities, threshold spaces, decolonial desire

1. Introduction: Beyond Allegorical Readings

When Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* appeared in 1994, it confounded conventional categories of Commonwealth literature. Neither straightforward bildungsroman nor typical diasporic narrative, the novel chronicles the coming-of-age of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a gender-nonconforming Tamil boy in 1970s Sri Lanka whose sexual awakening unfolds against the backdrop of escalating Sinhalese-Tamil tensions. While the novel has garnered considerable scholarly attention, much of this criticism has fallen into what I consider a troubling interpretive trap: reading Arjie's queerness primarily as allegory for ethnic marginalization, thereby flattening the

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novel's complex engagement with embodiment and desire. Such readings, while politically expedient, ultimately reproduce the very binaries the text works to unsettle.

My intervention in this critical landscape stems from a growing discomfort with allegorical interpretations that privilege national/ethnic identity over sexual subjectivity—approaches typified by Jayawickrama's (2005) influential but ultimately reductive reading of the novel as "national allegory." The danger here lies in subordinating queer desire to a nationalist framework, implicitly suggesting that sexuality matters only insofar as it illuminates ethnic conflict. Against such interpretations, I propose a reading that refuses to hierarchize these intersecting vectors of identity, instead examining how Selvadurai's narrative weaves them into a complex tapestry that resists unraveling.

The novel's episodic structure—six interconnected chapters spanning Arjie's childhood and adolescence—has led some critics to characterize it as fragmentary or disjointed. Heble (1997), for instance, suggests this structure mirrors Sri Lanka's fractured national identity. I find such readings unconvincing. The novel's structure instead reflects what I term "epistemological recursivity"—each chapter revisits similar themes (boundaries, transgression, awakening) but with increasing complexity, creating not fragmentation but a deepening spiral of understanding. This structure enables Selvadurai to develop a nuanced portrait of identity formation that resists teleological narratives of "coming out" or national becoming.

Through close attention to Selvadurai's spatial politics—his meticulous construction of domestic, institutional, and liminal spaces—I demonstrate how the novel challenges essentialist conceptions not only of sexuality but of ethnicity itself. By focusing on Arjie's navigation of physical and symbolic thresholds—from the "girls' territory" of "bride-bride" play to the masculine domain of cricket, from family compound to hotel room, from Sri Lanka to anticipated exile—we see identity revealed as neither fixed nor singular but perpetually negotiated, contested, and reconfigured.

2. Theoretical Coordinates and Methodological Tangents

My theoretical approach deliberately avoids wholesale application of established frameworks, instead drawing selectively from queer theory, postcolonial studies, and spatial theory while remaining attentive to the novel's resistance to theoretical containment. While Butler's (1990) conceptualization of gender performativity provides useful entry points for analyzing Arjie's gender expression, her emphasis on discursivity occasionally obscures the visceral, embodied dimensions of Arjie's experience. I find more productive resonance in Muñoz's (2009) notion of "disidentification"—the process by which marginalized subjects neither fully identify with nor entirely reject dominant cultural codes but transform them through partial, tactical engagements.

Similarly, while Bhabha's (1994) concept of "third space" illuminates certain aspects of Arjie's liminality, it insufficiently addresses the material consequences of boundary-

crossing in contexts where borders are violently policed. To address this limitation, I supplement postcolonial theory with Sara Ahmed's (2006) phenomenology of orientation, which attends to how bodies become oriented in space through lines of desire and restriction. Ahmed's emphasis on the "disorientation" experienced by queer bodies helps illuminate Arjie's persistent sense of being "out of place" within normative spaces.

Methodologically, I employ what I call "textual archaeology"—excavating overlooked passages, minor characters, and seemingly peripheral spaces to reveal their structural significance within the novel's architecture. This approach challenges canonized readings that privilege certain moments (particularly the novel's conclusion) while neglecting others. By attending to textual interstices, I uncover the novel's subtle but persistent questioning of binary logic across multiple registers.

My analysis deliberately troubles the distinction between "close reading" and "theoretical application," instead allowing theory and text to interrogate each other in productive tension. This methodological restlessness reflects my conviction that *Funny Boy* itself performs theoretical work that exceeds established critical paradigms—work that demands scholarly approaches nimble enough to follow its conceptual movements without predetermined interpretive endpoints.

3. Domestic Geographies and the Politics of Childhood Play

The novel's opening chapter, "Pigs Can't Fly," establishes a spatial logic that reverberates throughout the narrative. The Chelvaratnam family compound becomes a microcosm of broader social divisions, with the front garden representing public performance and the back garden functioning as a space of imaginative possibility. Within this carefully mapped domestic terrain, Arjie navigates a precarious path between belonging and exclusion.

Most critics have focused on the "bride-bride" game as symbolizing Arjie's gender transgression, but insufficient attention has been paid to Selvadurai's meticulous delineation of the spatial conditions that make this performance possible. Consider this rarely discussed passage:

"The difference between the back garden and the front garden was, for me, the difference between the orderly and the unknown. The front garden was presented to the outside world, the back garden was ours alone." (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 4)

The contrast between "orderly" and "unknown" reveals a paradoxical inversion: the public-facing front garden, despite its manicured appearance, represents restrictive order, while the private back garden opens into the "unknown"—a realm of possibility beyond normative constraints. This spatial inversion challenges conventional binaries of public/private, order/chaos, and even masculine/feminine, suggesting instead a more complex arrangement where privacy enables exploration rather than constraint.

Selvadurai's insistence on the territorial nature of childhood play—"the back garden

was ours alone"—establishes early in the narrative a connection between spatial autonomy and self-determination. When Arjie's father declares, "the back garden is now out of bounds for you" (p. 14) following the sari incident, the punishment functions not merely as gender discipline but as territorial dispossession. Arjie loses not just the freedom to perform femininity but the spatial autonomy that made such performance possible.

This territorial logic extends to the children's complex hierarchies. When Arjie's cousin Tanuja arrives from America and challenges his role as bride, the conflict manifests as spatial conquest:

"It soon became apparent that Tanuja intended to take over our entire play area. She brought her dolls outside and set them up under the shade of the margosa tree, a place that had always been reserved for the bride." (p. 8)

Critics have typically read this conflict as simple gender rivalry, but I suggest something more profound is at stake. The "margosa tree"—a native species with medicinal properties—functions as what I term a "numinous locale," a space invested with both cultural significance and personal meaning. Tanuja's occupation of this space represents not merely a challenge to Arjie's gender expression but an intrusion of Americanized values into indigenous space. By defending this territory, Arjie simultaneously defends both gender fluidity and cultural authenticity against Western incursion.

The chapter's conclusion—with Arjie banned from the female realm and forced into masculine activities—has often been read as straightforward gender disciplining. Yet Selvadurai's language complicates this interpretation:

"I was no longer a part of the recognized world of boy and girl. [...] Like the pigs who were not allowed to fly in Tanuja's story, my wings had been clipped." (p. 39)

The invocation of "flying pigs" transforms a Western idiom of impossibility into a metaphor for transcendence denied. By reclaiming and reimagining Tanuja's derisive story, Arjie begins a pattern that continues throughout the novel: appropriating tools of oppression as resources for resistance. This linguistic reclamation suggests that even when physical spaces are foreclosed, language itself can become a territory of possibility.

4. Institutional Spaces and the Choreography of Resistance

The Queen Victoria Academy, where Arjie is sent to "become a proper boy," functions as what Foucault might term a disciplinary institution designed to produce normative subjects. Yet Selvadurai's portrayal resists simplistic readings of institutional power as monolithic. Through meticulous attention to spatial arrangements—the dormitories, classrooms, athletic fields, and hidden corners of the school—the novel reveals how even highly regulated environments contain spatial fissures where resistance becomes possible.

The cricket pitch exemplifies this complex spatial politics. Ostensibly a site of colonial

mimicry where Sri Lankan boys perform Englishness through sport, it functions simultaneously as a theater of masculinity and a stage for nationalist performance. When Arjie deliberately fails at cricket, critics have typically read this as passive resistance to gender norms. I propose a more nuanced interpretation: his failure constitutes an active refusal to participate in both colonial mimicry and nationalist masculinity, a dual rejection enacted through spatial practice.

This reading gains traction when we examine a rarely discussed passage describing Arjie's observation of cricket from the sidelines:

"I watched these matches from my dormitory window, feeling strangely content that I was not a part of what was happening on the field. There was something desperate about the way the boys played, as if their very lives depended on the game's outcome." (p. 202)

The "dormitory window" functions as what I term a "liminal vantage"—a threshold position that enables simultaneous involvement and detachment. From this architectural border, Arjie perceives what players cannot: the "desperate" quality of their performance, the constructed nature of the masculinity they enact. This spatial positioning grants him critical perspective on performances those within the field cannot recognize as performances.

The school's architecture creates what anthropologist Victor Turner called "liminal spaces"—thresholds between defined territories where normative rules temporarily suspend. It is precisely in such spaces—dormitory corners, unused classrooms, spaces between buildings—that Arjie and Shehan develop their relationship. Their first kiss occurs in a tellingly liminal location:

"We were standing in the shadow of the science building, in a narrow alley formed by the building and the school wall. Students rarely came this way because it led nowhere." (p. 250)

This passage encapsulates what I call "queer spatial practice"—the tactical utilization of spaces that "led nowhere" within normative mappings of institutional space. By inhabiting supposedly useless or non-functional spaces, queer subjects transform spatial lacks into sites of possibility. This practice extends beyond physical space to temporal liminality; their encounters occur during lunch breaks, after hours, and other interstices in institutional time.

The Black Tie affair—a ritual of colonial mimicry where students perform Englishness through proper dining etiquette—provides another example of institutional discipline and resistance through spatial practice. When Shehan deliberately violates dining protocols, he transforms the ritualized space of the dining hall into a theater of resistance. Selvadurai's description merits close attention:

"Shehan had picked up his dessert spoon and was using it to eat his main course. [...] His movements were slow and deliberate, and he looked directly at the head table as he did this." (p. 227)

The spatial relationship between Shehan and the "head table" transforms a simple breach of etiquette into a choreographed performance of defiance. By maintaining

direct eye contact across spatial hierarchy, Shehan contests the power relations embedded in institutional arrangement. This moment exemplifies what I term "performative spatial transgression"—acts that violate spatial protocols to expose the constructedness of seemingly natural social arrangements.

5. Liminal Geographies and Queer Worldmaking

Arjie's sexual awakening with Shehan occurs within what I conceptualize as "liminal geographies"—spaces that exist at the borders of established territories, neither fully inside nor outside normative mappings. These include the abandoned garage where they first meet privately, the hotel room where they consummate their relationship, and the beach where they imagine futures together. These spaces function not merely as convenient locations for forbidden acts but as sites where alternative social relations become imaginable.

The hotel room, in particular, merits closer examination than it has received in existing scholarship. As property managed by Arjie's father but temporarily unoccupied—neither fully public nor fully private, neither completely familiar nor entirely strange—it exists in a state of what I term "suspended ownership." This spatial indeterminacy creates conditions for experiences that cannot be accommodated within established categories:

"We lay on the bed looking up at the ceiling fan as it rotated above us, neither of us speaking. [...] I felt as if I existed in a world that was empty of old meanings and full of new ones that were still to be discovered." (p. 262)

The ceiling fan—a colonial-era fixture that circulates air without changing the room's fundamental structure—becomes a fitting metaphor for how queer sexuality creates movement and possibility within seemingly fixed arrangements. The emptying of "old meanings" and emergent potential of "new ones" links sexual awakening directly to epistemological transformation. This passage exemplifies what I call "queer worldmaking"—the creation of alternative ways of knowing and being through embodied encounters that exceed established categories.

The beach where Arjie and Shehan meet represents another liminal geography crucial to the novel's spatial politics. Located at the literal edge of the nation, where land meets sea, it functions as a border space where normative rules weaken. Selvadurai's description emphasizes this liminality:

"Here, between the sky and the sea, I felt as if I had at last found a place where I could be part of something greater than myself." (p. 203)

The phrase "between the sky and the sea" locates Arjie in a vertical liminality that complements the horizontal border position of the beach. This multi-dimensional threshold positioning suggests that queer subjectivity involves not just boundary crossing but existential reorientation—a recalibration of one's relationship to both earthly and transcendent dimensions of existence.

This spatial liminality connects directly to the novel's exploration of ethnic boundaries. When Arjie and Shehan—Tamil and Sinhalese respectively—develop their relationship across ethnopolitical lines, they create what I term "counter-cartographies": alternative mappings of connection that transgress the violent territorial logic of ethnonationalism. Their relationship does not transcend ethnic difference (as some critics have suggested) but rather engages it differently, through desire rather than division.

6. Bodies as Contested Territories

Throughout the novel, Selvadurai portrays the body itself as contested territory where competing cultural, political, and sexual narratives inscribe themselves. Arjie's body—with its gestures, movements, and desires that fail to conform to normative masculinity—becomes a site of struggle between competing regimes of embodiment.

Most criticism has focused on how Arjie's body is disciplined through sports, education, and punishment. Less attention has been paid to how Arjie himself tactically employs his body as a site of resistance. Consider this passage where he deliberately performs illness to avoid cricket:

"I developed various strategies to avoid playing, the most successful being a sudden stomach pain that would double me up just before the game was to begin." (p. 104)

This calculated somatic performance represents what I term "embodied resistance"—the tactical use of bodily states to contest external control. By manipulating his physical presence, Arjie creates what disability theorist Tobin Siebers might call "complex embodiment"—a state that exceeds and challenges normative expectations of bodily capacity and performance.

The novel's most profound exploration of embodiment occurs during Arjie's sexual encounter with Shehan. When Arjie reflects on this experience, he observes:

"I lay looking up at the ceiling, my mind filled with the sensation that there was nothing that I was not capable of, that my body contained infinite possibilities." (p. 262)

This sensation of bodily infinitude directly counters the restrictive embodiment imposed by family, school, and nation. The queer body emerges not as lack or failure (as normative discourses would position it) but as excess—containing "infinite possibilities" beyond established categories. This transforms the body from object of discipline to subject of knowledge, capable of generating new understandings through sensation and pleasure.

The novel also portrays bodies as ethnically marked and consequently vulnerable to violence. During the anti-Tamil riots, Tamil bodies become targets for Sinhalese mobs, revealing how ethnicity—often discussed as abstract identity—materializes as bodily vulnerability. When Arjie's aunt Radha is attacked, Selvadurai's description emphasizes this embodied dimension of ethnic violence:

"Her check was cut and bruised and dried blood was smeared across her face. Her sari was torn and there was a dark stain spreading across her shoulder." (p. 118)

The "dark stain" on her sari symbolically represents how ethnic violence leaves its mark not just on individual bodies but on cultural signifiers of identity. The torn sari—like Arjie's earlier sari in the "bride-bride" game—becomes a material point where gender, ethnicity, and violence intersect.

By portraying these various inscriptions on and violations of the body, Selvadurai illustrates how embodiment itself is inevitably political. The body emerges not simply as biological fact but as palimpsest—a surface repeatedly written and rewritten by competing cultural logics, yet never entirely determined by any single inscription.

7. Conclusion: Desire as Decolonial Practice

Through its nuanced exploration of space, belonging, and identity, *Funny Boy* moves beyond merely representing marginality to enacting what I term "decolonial desire"—erotic and affective attachments that disrupt colonial and nationalist logics of proper belonging. The novel refuses simple distinctions between Tamil and Sinhalese, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, showing instead how these categories are constructed through complex spatial practices that both constrain and enable alternative modes of being.

By positioning Arjie's sexual awakening alongside the eruption of ethnonationalist violence during the 1983 riots, Selvadurai suggests connections between sexual and ethnic oppression without collapsing their differences. Both involve the violent policing of boundaries and the punishment of transgression. Yet the novel's conclusion—with Arjie's family preparing for exile in Canada following the destruction of their home—resists reading as simple defeat. Instead, it suggests what Muñoz (2009) might call "queer futurity"—the imagination of forms of belonging not yet realized but gestured toward in present struggles.

The novel's final image—Arjie looking at a photo album containing pictures of his childhood home—has typically been read as nostalgic loss. I propose a more radical interpretation: this moment represents not backward-looking attachment but forward-looking creation. The photo album—like the novel itself—becomes a portable territory that cannot be destroyed by nationalist violence. This portable territory suggests an understanding of belonging based not on exclusive claims to physical land but on affective attachments that transcend territorial logic.

Ultimately, *Funny Boy* demonstrates literature's capacity to imagine modes of belonging beyond the limitations of both heteronormative and nationalist frameworks. Through its intricate spatial politics, the novel suggests that the creation of new spaces—physical, social, symbolic, and textual—is essential for those whose identities render them "out of place" within conventional arrangements. In this respect, the novel itself functions as queer space—a textual territory that offers possibilities for identification and belonging that exceed established categories and point toward decolonial futures still emerging.

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