

# “I am different”: Navigating Queer Identity in 1980s Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

This paper studies the portrayal of queerness in Shyam Selvadurai's novels, *Funny Boy* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, focusing on the theme of homosexuality and character development. Further, the study delves into the significance of mother figures and female relationships in their lives, as well as their love for literature and art, which serves as a platform for introspection and self-expression. Drawing upon the method of textual analysis, the research examines the external and internal confinement experienced by the protagonists and their emotional journeys as they grapple with their identities. It explores how societal norms, family expectations, and internal struggles contribute to their need to hide their true selves. The paper also investigates the characters' evolution from childhood to maturity, as they learn to accept and embrace their sexual orientation. Additionally, the research addresses the novels' broader context, considering the historical and cultural setting of Sri Lanka in the 1980s. It examines the societal and familial pressures faced by closeted individuals during that time, shedding light on the challenges and emotional turmoil experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals. The analysis further reflects on the impact of the novels on readers and the significance of LGBTQ+ representation in literature. It underscores the importance of empathy, understanding, and acceptance in nurturing an inclusive and diverse literary landscape. The research contributes to a deeper comprehension of the complexities of queerness and self-acceptance in a conservative society.

**Keywords:** Queerness, Homosexuality, Closet, Funny Boy, Swimming in the Monsoon Sea, Sri Lanka, 1980s, LGBTQ+

## 1. Introduction

The exploration of queerness in literature has been a vital avenue for understanding the complexities of identity, societal norms, and self-acceptance. Shyam Selvadurai's novels, *Funny Boy* (1994) and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2006) serve poignant narratives delving into the theme of homosexuality, portraying the journeys of adolescent boys, Arjie Chelvaretnam and Amrith De Silva, in the conservative milieu of 1980s Sri Lanka. This paper engages in a comprehensive analysis to scrutinize the characters' development, the role of mother figures, and the protagonists' affinity for literature and art as platforms for self-discovery. By examining the external and internal confinements imposed on the characters, the study sheds light on the societal, familial, and personal struggles that contribute to the protagonists' reluctance to reveal their true selves. Furthermore, the research contextualizes these narratives within the historical and cultural backdrop of Sri Lanka, providing insights into the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals during a tumultuous period. Through a comparative lens, the study aims to unravel the shared and distinct experiences of queerness in the two novels, contributing to a nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ representation in literature. The study aims to analyze how Arjie and Amrith's experiences with their sexual orientation contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges faced by individuals navigating societal expectations and cultural norms, particularly in the context of Sri Lankan society during the 1980s.

### 1.1 Methodology

This research employs a textual analysis method to investigate and interpret the themes of homosexuality and character development. The primary sources for this study are the two novels: Shyam Selvadurai's novels *Funny Boy* (1994) and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2006) which offer rich and nuanced narratives surrounding the experiences of the main characters, Arjie and Amrith, as they grapple with their sexual orientation and self-identity. Both primary and secondary characters, as well as the settings and plot developments, were scrutinized to extract relevant information related to the themes of queerness, character development, and the closeted experiences of the protagonists. Further, a comparative approach was used to explore how the themes and character development in the two novels intersect and differ. By employing a comparative approach, the study highlights the similarities and differences in the protagonists' experiences in the two novels, enriching the understanding of queerness in diverse contexts. The analysis also takes into account the historical and cultural context of Sri Lanka in the 1980s to better understand the societal norms and attitudes towards homosexuality during that period. By considering the broader context, the study aimed to contextualize the struggles faced by the closeted protagonists.

### 1.2 Theoretical Framework

The complex relationship between gender and sexuality is examined in this research study by using a queer theory framework to examine

several of Shyam Selvadurai's novels. A method of literary and cultural research that rejects standard categories of gender and sexuality, queer theory is used to understand the fluidity of sexuality and non-normative sexual categories (Merriam-Webster). This theoretical framework emerged in the 1990s, drawing inspiration from Feminism and Post-structuralism (deconstruction), and it questions standard definitions of sexuality and sexual behavior. It emerged alongside queer studies, women's studies, and homosexual identity politics. Queer theory aims to 'destabilize' conventional concepts of sexuality; the phrase was coined by Italian-American cinema theorist and feminist Teresa de Lauretis at a 1990 conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz (Abelove, 1993). It departs from the homogeneous viewpoint of Gay/Lesbian studies by highlighting the multifaceted, ever-changing nature of sexuality, sex acts, and sex itself. Bisexuality, transvestism, transsexualism, and sadomasochism are some of the non-normative sexual categories that are embraced by queer studies, in contrast to the latter's pursuit of deconstructing the heterosexuality and homosexuality binary (R & Raju, 2023).

As it has developed, queer theory is explored deeply by notable thinkers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and Michel Foucault. It becomes crystal evident in *Queer Festivals* that queer activism is actively building one's identity, in contrast to queer theory's goal of deconstructing it (Eleftheriadis, 2018, p.77). As Sedgwick puts it, "It's about trying to understand different kinds of sexual desire and how the culture defines them." This quotation helps to explain Queer theory. Discussed is the idea that "understanding the relationship between people of the same gender, including the possibility of a sexual relationship between them, is essential to understanding relations between men and women" (Smith, 1998). Gender and sexuality, according to Sedgwick's queer performativity theory, are not static but rather subject to change as a result of many linguistic, social, and cultural interventions (R & Raju, 2023).

According to Sedgwick, who cites post-structuralist thinkers such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, queer performativity undermines heterosexual norms by revealing the constructed nature of gender and sexuality binary notions and by challenging traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. Sedgwick (2003) argues that by emphasizing the multiplicity and flexibility of identities, this approach provides a more inclusive view of human experiences. 'Homosocial' refers to non-sexual social bonds and relationships between people of the same sex, as opposed to the concept of homosexuality, which centers on sexual desire and identity. According to Kosofsky (2015), Sedgwick's concept of homosociality questions the widely held view that romantic attraction and sexual desire are the fundamental building blocks of all human social relationships. According to her, the way society is structured and accepted is greatly affected by friendships and alliances between people of the same sex (R & Raju, 2023).

Sedgwick argues that homosocial interactions, which go beyond questions of sexual orientation and gender identity, are characterized by deep emotional attachments, intellectual collaboration, and shared experiences. Regardless of one's gender or sexual orientation, these relationships are evident in a variety of contexts, including social organizations, corporations, and educational and military institutions (Kosofsky, 2015). Included in this collection of ideas are 'anti-homophobia' (Vincent et al., 2011), homosociality, queer performativity, visibility, and other facets of queer culture. This study seeks to shed light on marginalized voices and experiences within the Asian context, challenge heteronormative assumptions, and disrupt traditional binaries by adopting a queer lens (R & Raju, 2023). By doing so, it aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how queers resist heteronormativity, along with new insights and potential avenues for social change (Worthen, 2018).

## 2. Literature Review

The literature surrounding Shyam Selvadurai's novels encompasses a diverse range of perspectives, each offering unique insights into the complex themes of identity, sexuality, race, and societal norms. The following literature review provides an overview and synthesis of key themes and discussions presented in various articles, shedding light on the multifaceted exploration of these issues within the novels. Firstly, Tariq Jazeel (2005) positions the novel as a diasporic exploration challenging racial and ethnic norms in Sri Lanka. Jazeel argues that the focus on sexualized exclusions disrupts the nation's raced geographies, emphasizing the transcendent nature of identity beyond racial categories. The spatial negotiation in the novel is viewed as a postmodern revision, suggesting the potential for more inclusive societies and expressing hope for reshaping discussions on differences in Sri Lanka through translation into Sinhalese. Whereas, Andrew Lesk (2006) delves into the significance of gender play in Arjie's development. Lesk highlights how Arjie's abandonment of childhood symbols reinforces heteronormative maleness, suggesting that individual pursuits may not challenge the dominant national project. Arjie's sexual and gender transgressions are portrayed as insufficient for reshaping post-postcolonial Sri Lanka, serving as a cautionary tale about the limits of change and the potential loss of home without heightened self-awareness.

Further, Kaustav Bakshi (2012) explores the importance of challenging heteronormative distinctions for survival. Bakshi suggests a potential global LGBTQ+ community emerging with a paradigm shift facilitated by information technology. The article emphasizes the significance of finding one's way of being in a homophobic society and underscores the role of silence as a survival strategy for queer individuals.

Mukesh Yadav and Shalini Yadav (2014) conclude that the novel portrays Arjie's journey toward embracing his queer identity. The use of imagination, fantasy, and play serves as tools to transcend societal borders, and Arjie's alliances with figures like Uncle Daryl and Jegan indicate an acceptance of alternative masculinity. The turning point comes with his alliance with Shehan, empowering Arjie to reject silence and explore hidden possibilities.

While TG Naidu (2015) links the novel to the Sri Lankan civil war and the characters' internal and external exile. The article advocates for the deconstruction of social structures, centering marginalized individuals, and challenging patriarchy in the postmodern era. Emily S.

Davis (2017) discusses the novel's conclusion as a narrative exposing the betrayals of neoliberalism. The article critiques oversimplified readings of the novel as a triumphant gay coming-of-age story and emphasizes its geopolitical and economic context.

Deepak Jose Vadakoot and TK Pius (2018) highlight hurdles and challenges faced by individuals in same-sex relationships due to societal, religious, and legal norms. The examples of characters like Arjie, Balendran, and Amrith illustrate the complex challenges faced by those navigating their queerness within societal expectations. Chitra Sadagopan and Yanuka Devi Baniya (2023) on the other hand, conclude that the novel explores sensitive issues of race, ethnicity, and gender through the protagonist, Arjie, and identifies heteronormative codes and gender stereotypes as contributors to his identity crisis.

N Barani (2019) underscores the challenges faced by Amrith as a gay individual, emphasizing the pervasive issue of bullying and societal shaming experienced by the LGBTQ+ community. Whereas, Pranamy Bha and Dhishna Pannikot (2022) discuss the impact of behavior modification on masculinity and highlight incongruities in determining the appropriate response to behavior within the patriarchal system.

Overall, these articles collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of Shyam Selvadurai's novels, highlighting their significance in challenging societal norms and advocating for more inclusive and accepting societies. The exploration of identity, sexuality, and the impact of historical events provides a rich tapestry for readers and scholars alike to delve into the complexities of the novels. Considering the said factors, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how external forces intersect with personal struggles, influencing the characters' decisions to hide their true selves. Moreover, this exploration seeks to shed light on the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals during a tumultuous period in Sri Lanka's history, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of queerness and self-acceptance in a conservative society.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 *Funny Boy and Swimming in the Monsoon Sea: An Overview*

*Funny Boy* is a novel written by Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan-Canadian author. The book was first published in 1994 and is considered one of the seminal works of queer literature, exploring themes of identity, ethnicity, and sexuality against the backdrop of the civil unrest in Sri Lanka. The novel is set in Sri Lanka during the 1970s and 1980s, a period marked by escalating tensions between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority, eventually leading to the Sri Lankan Civil War. The story follows the life of Arjie, a young Tamil boy who is discovering his own identity and coming to terms with his homosexuality in a conservative and turbulent society (Singh, 2016).

The title *Funny Boy* is a term that Arjie's family uses to describe his effeminate behavior. The novel is divided into six interconnected stories, each focusing on a different stage of Arjie's life and the challenges he faces as he navigates his complex identity in a society where traditional expectations clash with his desires and emotions. Throughout the novel, Selvadurai explores themes such as family dynamics, societal expectations, the complexities of ethnic and cultural identities, and the personal struggle for acceptance and self-discovery. The backdrop of the civil unrest adds a layer of tension and conflict to the narrative.

*Funny Boy* received critical acclaim for its poignant portrayal of a young boy's journey toward self-acceptance in the face of societal pressures and political turmoil. It was awarded the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Fiction in 1995 (Singh, 2016) and has been widely recognized for its contribution to both queer literature and postcolonial literature. The novel's exploration of intersectionality, culture, and sexuality has made it an important work that resonates with readers seeking insight into the complexities of identity and social change (Fling, 2013, p. 108)

*Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is another novel written by Shyam Selvadurai. It was published in 2005 and is often categorized as a young adult novel. Like Selvadurai's debut novel *Funny Boy*, this book also explores themes of identity, cultural differences, and self-discovery. However, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is set in a different context and features different characters. Here's an overview of the novel:

*Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* follows the story of Amrith, a 14-year-old boy of mixed heritage who lives in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The novel is set in the 1980s, providing a backdrop of political and ethnic tensions similar to those found in *Funny Boy*. Amrith, who is of Tamil-Sinhalese descent, was raised by his aunt and uncle after the death of his parents. He forms a close bond with his cousin, Niresh, which brings new experiences into Amrith's life. As Amrith navigates adolescence and explores his identity, he finds himself drawn to Niresh. The novel delves into Amrith's feelings and confusion as he grapples with his emotions for Niresh and his understanding of his sexuality. The cultural differences and expectations of the society he lives in further complicate his journey.

#### 3.2 *Homophobia*

The term Homophobia encompasses a wide range of harmful beliefs, biases, and acts of discrimination against those who identify as LGBTQ+. The root cause of this problem is a long-standing prejudice against people who do not conform to the traditional gender binary or who identify as heterosexual. Quoting Stein,

*Homophobia exists in diverse forms and varies in different contexts, challenging the notion that it is solely driven by male anger toward feminized men. Instead, it is depicted as a flexible cultural construct that can be employed differently in different situations. A nuanced approach to analyzing homophobia is crucial to grasp its complex nature and multifaceted manifestations.* (Stein, 2006)

Plummer is right when she says that it is fundamental to the system that keeps tabs on gender inequality and does nothing to change it

(2014). To successfully address and challenge these harmful beliefs, Worthen argues for educational activities tailored to millennials, specifically millennial cisgender men (2020). Also, Woodford wants

*To improve the campus climate for LGBT students, it will be important for educational programs to effectively engage politically conservative students. Encouraging conservative students to participate in existing LGBT awareness programs may be beneficial. But we believe that specialized programs are needed* (Woodford et al., 2012, p.310)

There is a strong correlation between homophobia and traditional gender norms and expectations. Some people may see male-on-male partnerships with a certain amount of stigma because they link being the receiving party in a same-sex relationship with being weak or feminine. To further understand the many forms of prejudice, it is helpful to compare and contrast the anti-feminacy views held by homosexual males with those held by other marginalized groups (Taywaditep, 2002). According to McCann et al. in “Marginalization among the marginalized,” people can learn to accept and even celebrate variation in gender and sexual orientation if they are exposed to other viewpoints and diverse populations. This can help them overcome their homophobia and adopt a more inclusive worldview. According to the study, men’s reactions to homophobia can differ depending on whether they are open to change or stuck in their ways. It goes on to say that not all men will relearn homophobia, no matter how much they read, how much travel they do, or how much time they spend interacting with people outside of their sports clubs. Despite this, the study does show that some people may be able to develop and become more accepting of gender and sexual variety as they get older and encounter other viewpoints (McCann et al., 2009).

### 3.3 *The State of Being Closeted*

Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* deal with the theme of homosexuality through the eyes of adolescent boys, Arjun (Arjie) Chelvaretnam and Amrith De Silva. Both novels share a similar Sri Lankan setting in the early 1980s. The Protagonists – Arjie and Amrith are entering their teenage phase, while they are simultaneously getting to know about their sexual orientation which comes as a shock for them. Arjie and Amrith have certain characteristics in common. For instance, the role of mother and mother figure is imminent in the lives of both characters. Love for one’s mother is one of the overpowering emotions prevailing in these novels. Though Arjie is bewildered by the knowledge of his mother’s relationship with Daryl uncle, he has never stopped loving his mother. Even he is the one who is least bothered about this sudden change in their household, whereas his siblings and Neliya Aunty are distraught with Daryl’s intrusion. Arjie seems to be content with the changes in his mother’s behavior as long as he can spend time with her, though he is fraught with the intensity of the consequences of such an affair. In the case of Amrith, he cherishes the memories of his childhood with his mother. He resents going to her grave in the beginning as he is not ready to forgive her for sending him away to Bundle’s house. Eventually, he makes peace with her by visiting her tomb as “he leaned closer and whispered, “I am different”. Just by saying it out loud, just by admitting that it was so, Amrith felt the burden of his secret ease a little.” (Selvadurai, 2005, p. 205)

It is comprehensible that the protagonists are at ease with the presence of women - the mother figures like Bundle Aunty and Radha Aunty and other female personas like Sonali, Meena, Selvi, and Mala. Arjie and Amrith have access to the women’s world (Iyer, 2015). Arjie trusts Sonali more than he trusts his brother Diggy. He also shares a good bond with Radha Aunty. Amrith despite his dark emotions likes Selvi and Mala who treat him as if he is their biological brother. He also adores Bundle Aunty and he finds it difficult to hate her. Even when the protagonists describe the physical features, traits, and behaviors of these women, there is a hint of amusement visible in the narration, which again shows how these two boys are involved in these women’s world. Another striking similarity between Arjie and Amrith is that their love for art and literature. Arjie is into *Little Women* and Enid Blyton which is disapproved by his father who thinks that those kinds of books are for girls and not for a twelve-year-old boy (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 104). He is thrilled to take part in the play *The King and I* because he can wear make-up, and costumes and can dance around the stage. Similarly, Amrith is also excited about the Inter-school Shakespeare competition in which he can play the role of Shakespearean heroines. This artistic sensibility in both characters makes them prone to deep thinking about the lives and people around them. This sensibility enables them to introspect which altogether reveals their sexual inclination. It enlightens them with new knowledge of their selves.

Despite all the other themes present – like ethnic conflicts, political turmoil, and familial problems – in these novels, the theme of queerness remains a primary concern. The concept of being queer in the conventionally rigid Sri Lankan society in the 1980s is problematized through the characterization of the adolescent protagonists. The queers are being closeted in these novels. They are forced to stay confined by social norms, which is evident in gay characters like Q.C. Appadurai, Lucien Lindamulage, and Shehan Soyza. Their queerness has been pejoratively referred to as ‘scandal’ (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 139) and ‘illegal’ (Selvadurai, 2005, p. 59). They are denounced as ‘ponnaya’ (60). This kind of public humiliation that these queers suffer makes these teenage boys not to come out of their closets, as both Arjie and Amrith are afraid of being insulted for their sexual orientation. This implies they are confined to their world, hiding from the judgemental social and familial structures.

The confinement, here in these novels, is performed at two various levels. One is by society – educational institutions – which constantly monitor individual lives. The other one is the family, which operates as an internal tool to regulate individual lives. Arjie and Amrith are ridiculed for their ‘tendencies’ (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 166) in schools and Arjie’s family especially his father tries hard to get him out of such tendencies as he “doesn’t want him turning out funny or anything like that” (p. 166). Furthermore, this confinement also operates itself through the inner space. Arjie is confused and disgusted by his desire for Shehan. He is angry with himself for having such sexual thoughts yet he cannot suppress those feelings. Amrith on the other hand is frightened by the realization of his love for Nireesh. But he is convinced that none of the others knows about his sexuality. Both the gay protagonists are therefore closeted.

Both Arjie and Amrith are unaware of their queerness from the beginning even though the people (some of them) around them have a sense of their sexuality. They remain oblivious as Arjie does not know how to respond to the unfamiliar words ‘faggot’ and ‘sissy’ (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 11) and Amrith is clueless when Suraj referred to Cassio and Iago’s physical intimacy scene in *Othello* (Selvadurai, 2005, p. 53). But they eventually know about their homosexuality. Likewise, they gradually start to accept their homosexuality as a part of their being, despite their initial contempt for it. Shyam Selvadurai writes in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* as follows

“He would have to learn to live with this knowledge of himself. He would have to teach himself to be his own best friend, his own confidant and guide.” (Selvadurai, 2005, p. 205)

Arjie also expresses “I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn’t understand and into which they couldn’t follow me”, with the same sense of self-content (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 284).

This gradual development in acknowledging one’s self can be considered as character development. From their childish attitude, Arjie and Amrith evolve into mature boys who know better to be at peace with their new knowledge of their physiology. Selvadurai’s gay characters are closeted not only in terms of their sexuality but they are also internally confined to themselves. Because they identify themselves as the other, in their own words they are ‘different’ from the conventionally normal people around them (Selvadurai, 2005, p. 205).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The exploration of queerness in *Funny Boy* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* unveils a rich tapestry of human experiences, resilience, and self-discovery. The protagonists, Arjie and Amrith, navigate the tumultuous waters of adolescence and homosexuality, finding solace and challenges in the embrace of mother figures and the world of literature and art. The novels intricately weave societal and familial expectations, exposing the external and internal confinements that force the protagonists into the shadows. As Arjie and Amrith evolve from confusion to self-acceptance, their journeys mirror the broader struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in a conservative Sri Lankan society as Gayathri Gopinath states “non-heteronormative sexualities travel within and away from the space of home, and transform the very meanings of home in the process” (1998, p. 139). The study emphasizes the significance of representation and empathy, recognizing the impact of literature in fostering understanding and acceptance. Shyam Selvadurai’s narratives not only reflect the societal attitudes of the 1980s but also resonate with contemporary discussions of queerness, identity, and the perennial quest for authenticity in the face of adversity. The literary landscape – “it is not a merely marginal space in the periphery but a space that is central” (Panchalingam, 2009, p. 69)– is enriched by these narratives, urging readers to contemplate the profound nuances of human experiences and the imperative of embracing diversity.

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