

PORTRAYAL OF MARGINALIZATION IN DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY

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ABSTRACT: *Marginalization is experienced in different forms by many people around the world, due to several reasons such as language, religion, ethnicity, sexuality etc. The point from which the power is exerted is unknown and hidden, however it is hovering above, making the marginalized, powerless, and struggling. This critical literature review, which is part of an on-going critical discourse analysis based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, examines the studies carried out on Funny Boy and aims to discover how the critics have recognized marginalization embedded in the discourse of the novel. Shyam Selvadurai in Funny Boy presents the story of "Arjie", a young boy who goes through a journey to find out his own sexuality, while facing the reality of the world in a war-torn country and the story transcends to portray how war as well as societal norms can shake the life of an individual. An ample number of studies carried out on the novel were reviewed to identify how the discourse of Funny Boy portrays marginalization. Findings of the review indicate that many critics consider the novel as portraying multiple marginalization; the protagonist being marginalized and exiled from many social spheres due to sexual identity and ethnicity. This review concludes that Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy is viewed in studies as a piece of discourse that presents multiple marginalization experienced by the protagonist.*

Keywords: Marginalization in Discourse, Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy, Multiple Marginalization

1. INTRODUCTION

Marginalization is a condition and a process that pushes an individual or a group to the margins of a society, inhibiting access to power, cultural stability, and economical and social welfare. Due to language, religion, ethnicity, skill, age, occupation, sexuality etc., thousands of people around the world experience marginalization. According to Burton and Kagan (2003), the lives of the marginalized are mostly controlled by the dominant groups and their access to the resources is also difficult which ultimately creates a vicious circle and make them further isolated in the social structure. As a result of the marginalization wielded by the dominant groups, the subordinate groups are excluded from the so-called mainstream society and made to live at the margins (Schatz and Schiffer, 2008). The place from which power is exercised is often hidden, '[y]et we know that this phantom centre, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways that we think about it' (Ferguson, 1990, p.19, quoted in Howitt, 1993, p. 6).

Funny Boy is a novel written by Shyam Selvadurai, first published by Jonathan Cape, UK in 1994. Selvadurai was born in Sri Lanka, left the country after the July Riots in 1983 and settled with his family in Canada. *Funny Boy* portrays the story of “Arjie”, the seven-year-old young Tamil boy who grows up and realizes his different sexual identity, while facing the bitterness of war torn Sri Lanka. The novel is narrated in six emotive chapters which skillfully showcases the growing ethnic tension in Sri Lanka while pre-setting the trauma felt by “Arjie” due to his sexual orientation in a narrow-minded socio-cultural system he belonged to. Being gay, being Tamil; “Arjie” the individual who is double marginalized, portrays the plight of a minority community, striving hard to survive in their own country. Thus, it is evident that this is not a simple coming-of-age tale of a young boy, but a larger picture of a country’s unravelling turmoil and trauma and its impact upon its people.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research is carried out as a critical literature review to examine how the critics have recognized the textually constructed marginalization embedded in the discourse of the novel, *Funny Boy*. This paper is based on an on-going PhD study that is based on Norman Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (1989). The Faircloughian model is a fusion of three different dimensions that are interconnected: text analysis, processing analysis, and social analysis. This analytical framework considers text, how the discourse is produced, and the socio-historical settings that have an impact on this process.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to evaluate eight randomly selected studies carried out on the novel to identify how its discourse portrays marginalization, published between 1997 and 2020 and expects to ascertain a pattern in the way multiple marginalization is identified in different studies carried out on the novel.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Funny Boy by Shyam Selvadurai is the story of Arjun Chelvaratnam (called “Arjie” by his family and friends), a seven-year-old young boy from a mixed Tamil/Sinhalese family, who goes through a journey to find out his own sexuality, while facing the reality of the world in a war torn Sri Lanka. As Jayasuriya (2012) describes, by the use of this Tamil, young, gay boy as the narrator who was dwelling in a ‘heteronormative and ethnically polarized society, and by conflating the personal with the national, Selvadurai emphasizes that the personal is the political in this novel’. As a novel written on a young boy who finds himself tangled in a narrow-minded society due to his homosexuality, the story transcends to portray how ethnic and political conflicts can shake the lives of people and marginalize them inordinately.

Marginalization is ‘both a process and a condition that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life’ (Alakhunova *et al.*, 2015, p. 8). Castle (2019) describes how marginalized people feel when they are considered powerless and unimportant; they feel as if they are the ‘notes squeezed into the margins of society. Scrawled. Practically unreadable. Small’. As explained by

Schatz and Schiffer (2008, p. 5), social exclusion and marginalization of 'individuals and groups are a reality in virtually every society and in every period of human history'. Thus, Selvadurai in the novel, showcases the multiple level marginalization experienced by the protagonist and how it affects him as an individual in the social sphere. As Schatz and Schiffer (2008, p. 6) describe, marginalization is the 'position of individuals, groups or populations outside of 'mainstream society', living at the margins of those in the center of power, of cultural dominance and economical and social welfare'. Marginalization is a topic which is discussed under different types of it. Thus, it is perceptible that all those types are interconnected and interrelated. Social marginalization which occurs in a social setting can take place due to number of factors. Some groups acquire marginalization from birth, being physically impaired or being born to marginal castes, tribes or even nations in the society and unfortunately their suffering is almost lifelong. Political marginalization occurs when some people are not granted the democratic participation in decision making and are deprived of political, social, and economic opportunities. Generally, the groups who are deprived of political empowerment are women, minority ethnic communities, people with impairments, migrants, elderly people etc. Even in a globalized modern world, the reality of political marginalization is practically visible. Kanbur (2007, p. 2) describes economic marginalization 'as a process relates to economic structures, in particular to the structure of markets and their integration'. Some groups of the societies are not justly amalgamated to the economic structures. Ethnic marginalization occurs when an ethnic minority of a country is marginalized by the dominant majority; a minority group is considered as a sociological group that does not make up a politically dominant voting majority. A minority status of a community is not always decided based on the numerical value, and it can be any group who is regarded less by a dominant group based on political power, education, occupation, social status, money etc.

The novel contains six chapters and the first few depicts the childhood of "Arjie" and the reader is introduced to his whole family through the described incidents and characterization. Rest of the chapters show the gradually developing ethnic tension in the country while "Arjie" slowly understanding his sexual orientation. Through the eyes of "Arjie", the reader is shown how unfairly this War treats innocent souls like him, who barely have an idea of what ethnicity is. The incidents as well as the discourse in the novel show the mistrust and the tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, a war fought over belonging, and how each group believes in the impossibility of coexisting. *Funny Boy* shows how the War has made "Arjie" and his family foreigners in their own country, made them sub-citizens and grabbed away their national identity. It is evident that it is not just a coming-of-age tale of a young boy but a story that depicts 'a bigger picture of a country's unravelling turmoil and a young boy's own sexual awakening in the midst of prejudice and the fear of being different' (Elliott, 2012).

There are number of studies carried out on *Funny Boy* and this research specifically selects the studies that examine marginalization, exile, expatriate writers' perspective, diasporic views along with homosexual marginalization. Dutta (2020, p. 10681) explores 'Selvadurai's position as a political exile who transgresses borders and boundaries' and suggests that when an emigrant writer is writing the home and nation, the discourse of her/his national space and the displacement experiences

faced by her/him do intersect. It is further argued that Selvadurai's 'experience of exile places him in a convenient position to narrate the past and his former homeland' (Dutta, 2020, p. 10681). In "Imaginary Homelands", Rushdie (2010) also indicates that an expatriate writer's position is vital as she/he writes from "a double perspective", in other words 'he is at once insider and outsider in society' (Rushdie, 2010, p. 19) and there are also moments when the writer 'straddles between two cultures' (Rushdie, 2010, p. 15).

Pradhan (2019) identifies the narrator of the *Funny Boy* as multiply exiled and suggests that the multiple displacements depicted throughout the novel illustrate how the narrator's ' "home" has been alienated by the multiple "intersectional" strands of social, cultural, sexual, political and personal narratives and their clashes' (Pradhan, 2019, p. 193). "Arjie" endures multiple losses and displacements end exiled from many spheres: little "Arjie" who loved the girls' world was thrown out from it, then his family and school cut him off, next he lost his love and lastly was uprooted from his home and homeland. It is this multiply exiled narrator, emigrated to a faraway land who is narrating the recollections of the lost home, clouded by nostalgia and Selvadurai subtly 'shows what the queer diasporic subject in exile must negotiate through in their quest for lost homes, desires, and loves' (Pradhan, 2019, p. 202).

Oswal (2020) explores Selvadurai's selection of a child's perspective to narrate the story as a seven-year-old to make the 'readers question the ingrained hypocrisy in the very foundation of knowledge and cultural learning' (Oswal, 2020); the absurdity of the manmade, pre-assigned norms and standards of the adult world is shown through the fresh mind of the seven year old. It is indicated how an individual is conditioned by society when growing up and through "Arjie", the reader sees the discomfort felt when these societal norms were forcefully imposed on him. It is explained how the political chaos, ethnic tension and fight for survival can affect 'people individually as well, and in the worst cases leaves them personally, emotionally and economically shattered (Oswal, 2020).

Even in Jayasuriya's (2012) analysis, *Funny Boy* is identified as a writing from the viewpoint of exile and indicates that this simple looking coming-of-age tale 'also brings with it the baggage of exile, including a sense of loss, nostalgia, and mourning'. The sexuality of the protagonist of the novel is described as a revolutionary intervention of the author as it emphasizes the 'interrelatedness of oppression in all its forms by calling into question all discourses of purity, whether it applies to race, sexuality, or any other determinant of identity' (Jayasuriya, 2012). Goswami (2017) analyses the representation of "home" in Selvadurai and describes that '[w]hen the diaspora decides to 'write home', 'location, space and time' disintegrates into multifarious discourses' (Goswami, 2017, p. 25). It is argued that for a diasporic writer, writing home is not an easy expression of art but a well thought out discourse which would be crafted based on her/his 'memory, history, trauma and dislocation ... [her/] his own personal, emotional and intellectual perception of the socio-political turmoil' (Goswami, 2017, p. 25) in the homeland.

Rao (1997) studies *Funny Boy* from the perspectives of race, sexuality, and gender against the political backdrop of Sri Lanka and indicates that a 'subaltern identification exists between minorities in the three groups, who constitute the "other" of the male fanatical self' (Rao, 1997, p. 117). It is also discussed how there can be individuals who are empowered and who are not in these spheres of race, sexuality, and gender and the notions of "maleness" and the chauvinism (irrational or aggressive patriotism) are explored in these domains, while formulating 'the phrase "male fanatical self" to explore the notion of the self as empowered, the other as disempowered' (Rao, 1997, pp. 117-118). Salgado (2007) suggests that the writings of Selvadurai are read both by the Sri Lankans as well as the international readers 'as a diasporic reflection on migrant sexuality'. *Funny Boy* is described as a novel which has clearly identified the prohibited spaces and allowed zones for the writer to wander, while focusing on the 'negotiation, invasion and violation of politicized, gendered and socially-stratified spaces, mapping the larger struggle for territorial control in the country' (Salgado, 2007).

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, it is apparent that the novel *Funny Boy* textually constructs marginalization in its discourse and subtly showcases how the protagonist is marginalized in multiple levels. As a result of marginalization, an individual or a group is prevented from fully partaking in political, social, and economic life. It is generally the dominant groups of the society that control their access to resources which ultimately creates a vicious circle and make them further isolated in the social structure. Although marginalization can be described under different types such as social marginalization, economic marginalization, political marginalization, ethnic marginalization etc., it is evident that all these types are interrelated and occur almost simultaneously. When examining the various studies carried out on *Funny Boy*, it can be identified that almost all the critics view multiple marginalization portrayed in the discourse of the novel.

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