

Revisiting the Violence of Sri Lanka's Civil War: A Study of Apocalypse as Portrayed in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

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Abstract—This study analyses the ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka after gaining independence as portrayed in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. The aim is to determine if the violent acts committed against the minority group can amount to apocalypse. This research examines the concept of ethnic conflict and the apocalypse depicted in "*Funny Boy*" by Shyam Selvadurai. The analysis focuses on how ethnic conflict is portrayed in the novel. This study explores the thematic elements described in Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*, which provides a narrative account of the 1983 July riot in Sri Lanka. The novel vividly illustrates the anti-Tamil pogrom during the 1983 Black July riot. It also explores the struggles and violence of Sri Lankans during the war. Furthermore, it analyses the remnants of violence and the apocalypse destruction of the Jaffna library in 1981. This study addresses the civil war between the Sinhalese government and Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.

Index Terms—apocalypse, race, Civil War, Ethnic Riot

I. INTRODUCTION

Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan-Canadian author, is highly regarded as one of Sri Lanka's most esteemed literary figures. His impressive debut novel, *Funny Boy* (1994), has firmly established his status as a significant contributor to the country's literary scene. Selvadurai was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1965. In 1983, when he was nineteen, his family moved to Toronto, Canada, after experiencing a racial riot. *Funny Boy* has been translated into different languages. Some of Shyam Selvadurai's notable works are *Funny Boy* (1994), *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005), and *The Hungry Ghost* (2013). He edited an essay where he expressed his feelings of alienation.

In civil states, ethnic conflict emerges when two groups from different ethnic backgrounds hold divergent views on various aspects, including language, religion, culture, and other variables. Typically, this conflict arises between a majority ethnic group and a minority ethnic group.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Manda (2022) states that Arjie's quest for identity is set within the context of the socio-political upheaval in Sri Lanka. This study examines a turbulent journey of a young boy as he confronts familial and societal pressures while grappling with his homoerotic desire. Examines how the personal and the political intertwine with each other and affect the lives of individuals in ways that are often detrimental to the pursuit of individual desires.

Saraswathi's (2017) article suggests how the ethnic crisis revolves around the novel through the characters, mainly Sinhalese and Tamils. It has ethnic conflict as its backbone.

Sanuri Helmini Wanninayake's (2013) article analysis of the role of the ethnic conflict and its level of victimisation has been examined, and it also argues that both refugees and terrorists can be considered victims of the trauma engendered by the ethnic conflict. The study hopes to benefit the areas of terrorist and refugee psychology and studies of war-related trauma.

Tariq (2019), in his article he analysis, exposes the horrors of ethnic conflict and simultaneously accounts for the gradual sexual awakening of its young protagonist. It also explores the themes of confusion, alienation and loneliness in the novel through the study of characters.

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III. OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to investigate the apocalypse, Violence and struggle of Sri Lankans during the Ethnic Conflict as portrayed in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. For the analysis, primary texts regarding the Sri Lankan war are used to expose the horrors, catastrophes of Sri Lankans during the Civil War.

1. What are the underlying factors contributing to the subjugation, exploitation, and apocalypse experienced by minority groups in Sri Lanka perpetrated by the prevailing majority group?
2. Is the status, apocalypse, violence and problems associated with ethnic conflicts universal?

IV. BACKGROUND OF *FUNNY BOY*

The novel *Funny Boy* focuses on Arjie (Arjun) Chelvaratnam, exploring his journey of self-discovery and evolution. In this novel, Shyam Selvadurai, a writer of Sri Lankan origin, portrays his life experiences. The text comprises a fusion of autobiographical and historical narratives. The novel *Funny Boy* comprises six memorable narratives that revolve around the experiences of Arjie Chelvaratnam, a young boy. During his formative years, the author examines the progressive intensification of racial violence. Despite being born into a privileged Tamil family, the family's socio-economic status is drastically diminished to that of refugees due to the 1983 riots. They abandoned their belongings and sought refuge in Canada to preserve their lives. The novel adeptly depicts the traumatic events of Black July through the relatable character of Arjie, who serves as a survivor of that era.

The novel "*Funny Boy*" by Selvadurai depicts the life of its protagonist, Arjie Chelvaratnam, from beginning to end. The story occurs between 1977 and 1983, a crucial moment in Sri Lankan history. In the novel's opening narrative, Shyam Selvadurai recounts Arjie's exile. The second part of the narrative novel revolves around Radha and Anil. The third narrative revolves around the character of Mr. Daryl, who travels back to Colombo from Australia intending to uncover the truth surrounding the Sri Lankan government's alleged torture of Tamils. It also covers the LTTE's (Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam) struggle for a separate state in Sri Lanka. The arrival of Jagan Parameswaran marks the commencement of the fourth narrative. The narrative culminates in a confrontation between Sinhala groups and Tamil communities. In this section, Jagan articulates his discontent with people from his ethnic community. Political issues become more significant in the fifth narrative. The concluding chapter serves as an epilogue wherein the narrator proceeds to chronicle the occurrences of the preceding section within the confines of his diary. Shyam Selvadurai has analysed the 1956, 1977, and 1983 events in Sri Lanka (Kaur, 2019, p. 294).

The author provides a detailed account of the extraordinary occurrence within the narrative. The Gal Oya pogrom of 1956 marked the initial occurrence of an anti-Tamil pogrom in post-independence Ceylon. In the years 1958, 1977, and 1981, events of anti-Tamil pogroms occurred, during which Sinhala mobs engaged in acts of ransacking, looting, and arson, targeting residential dwellings, commercial establishments, and office spaces as they engaged in violent activities throughout Colombo Street. The Sinhala Only Act, implemented in 1956, is widely regarded as a substantial factor contributing to the conflict, with allegations of atrocious intent associated with its enactment. The implementation of this policy led to a simultaneous decline in the Tamil sector, which had been a crucial source of support for the Tamil population in the northern region since the colonial era. Although it originated as a peaceful demonstration, it rapidly transformed into a relentless account of retribution. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the 1958 riot and the 1981 Black July riot on the characters in the novel. Apart from the introductory section, nearly all the significant narratives in *Funny Boy* portray the intensifying ethnic strife between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities. The first chapter of the description, entitled "Pigs Can't Fly," describes Arjie's enthusiastic recollections of his joyful childhood experiences while visiting his grandmother's residence. Nevertheless, his most cherished days became remote recollections after the Black July incident.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *Sinhala Only Act – 1958 Language and Racial Riot*

The Ceylon, which was under British rule, achieved independence in the year 1948. Following the attainment of Independence, the government, predominantly composed of the Sinhala majority, enacted numerous laws that exhibited discriminatory tendencies towards the minority population. In 1956, the government introduced the Sinhala Only Act, establishing Sinhala as the country's official language. This resulted in widespread riots and sectarian bloodshed, paving the way for conflict and establishing a state of emergency in 1958 (Veerasamy, 2019, p. 535).

The language policy, namely the "Sinhala Only" regulation, is portrayed in *Funny Boy*. It concentrates on how ethnic conflicts affect the daily lives of people. The narrative "Radha Aunty" takes place within the context of the language riot that occurred in 1958. The underlying factor contributing to the issue can be attributed to the Sinhala Only Act, implemented in 1956, which is widely regarded as a significant contributing factor to the conflict, with allegations of genocidal intent. The implementation of this policy led to a corresponding decrease in the Tamil sector, which had been a crucial source of livelihood for the Tamil population in the northern region since the colonial era. Although it originated as a peaceful demonstration, it swiftly transformed into a relentless account of retribution. Events in 1958

resulted in a deterioration of the mutual regard that existed among each community. This study aims to thoroughly examine the repercussions of the 1958 riot on the development and portrayal of the characters in the novel.

B. *Ethnic Distinctions*

Arjie hears the term "racist" for the first time, which his father explains to him (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 60). The protagonist Arjie discovers that his forefather experienced a heart-wrenching demise amidst the racial upheaval that occurred in the 1950s. Until then, Arjie's sole recollection of his great-grandfather was limited to a photograph that occupied a significant place among other pictures in his grandparents' hallway. According to the evidence given by Janaki, the domestic worker, he cannot establish a personal connection with the deceased individual. He is witnessing the unfolding of the history of the Tamil-Sinhala struggle. Arjie learns from his father about the reason for the 1950s rebellion that murdered his great-grandfather. His father informed him about the cause of the 1950s rebellion that resulted in the death of his great-grandfather (Dutta, 2020, p. 10684). Arjie becomes aware of a linguistic dispute between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. He is informed about the presence of the Tamil Tigers in Jaffna.

In the aftermath of the event, Arjie develops an awareness of the political turmoil within the nation and vocalises his concerns about it "From then on, I began to listen carefully to the adults' conversation to discover more about the quarrels between the Sinhalese and the Tamils" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 61).

In the novel *Funny Boy*, the character Sonali, Arjie's sister, demonstrates the influence of racial awareness and heightened ethnic consciousness. Sonali, a person of Tamil descent, expresses a desire to identify as either Sinhalese or foreign, as she believes such an identity shift would contribute to a life devoid of panic. Sonali admits: "Sometimes I wish I was a Sinhalese or a foreigner" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 196). Another notable occurrence is that Arjie experienced significant anxiety upon learning about several sporadic incidents. He recollected the statements made by his father regarding the conflicts that transpired in the 1950s between the Sinhalese and Tamils, resulting in significant casualties among the Tamil population. As a member of the victim's ethnic group, he experienced substantial fear regarding the possibility of enduring a comparable destiny as his Great-grandfather.

During another occurrence, in the 1983 riot, Arjie became aware of the racial disparity between his companion Shehan and himself, a realisation that had previously eluded him. During the hazardous escape of Arjie and his family, Shehan provided a source of comfort and hope during the dire situation. Arjie, as a member of the victimised community, contemplated the factors that contributed to his friend Shehan's ability to lead a tranquil existence, juxtaposed with their inability to secure safety within the nation.

The novel extensively depicts ethnic conflict as the predominant catalyst for forming ethnic identity, as evidenced by the detailed narrative of ethnic riots between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. These riots serve as significant empirical evidence supporting the existence of distinct racial groups. Another essential aspect that should be considered when analysing this novel is the explicit effort made by both Sinhalese and Tamils to establish their ancestral ties to Sri Lanka. The issue of race came to his attention, prompting him to recognise the ethnic distinction promptly. Upon this incident, Arjie's consciousness was awakened to the reality of racial inequality during the conflict.

C. *Description of the Egregious Race Riot*

Ajie's aunt, Radha, was returning from Jaffna. Nevertheless, an egregious riot ensued during her return journey from Jaffna to Colombo. Ammachi was informed of an incident where Sinhala extremists perpetrated an assault on the Tamil community on a train, resorting to hurling stones and bottles at the train. Mr. Rasiah, an acquaintance of the family, who assisted Radha during a highly tumultuous riot, proceeded to elucidate the entire sequence of events. Radha, who sustained injuries during the riot, experienced profound astonishment. The author has ingeniously crafted the character of Mr. Rasiah to elucidate the most severe riot and its consequential effects on the surface of Radha (Goswami & Kar, 2021, p. 93).

Mr. Rasiah provided an account of the incident in which she was subjected to an assault by two Sinhala race individuals wielding a stick. At the same time, the others had a belt in their possession. Additionally, the individual recounted their successful rescue operation, attributing their success to their proficient command of the Sinhalese language, which led the mob to perceive them as fellow Sinhalese. Ajie provides a vivid account of the profound nature of the unprovoked assault on his aunt through his observation of her countenance.

Radha Auntie walked slowly, her hand resting on Mr. Rasiah's arm. She was wearing a scarf and she kept her head bent. When she was close to us, she lifted her head and we all stared at her in horror. (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 88).

The profound impact of the aggressive assault by the Sinhalese mob is evident in the notable shifts observed in Radha's act. Being a victim, she exhibited a heightened awareness of racial distinctions. The concept of race is extensively explored from multiple perspectives. The novel contains several sections that explore the idea of race and its associated aspects through various incidents.

D. *1981 Racial Riot and Apocalypse*

In 1981, Sinhalese mobs initiated a resumption of their forceful attacks targeting Tamil insurgents. Mr. Daryl, a man from Australia, has arrived in Colombo intending to investigate the alleged involvement of the Sri Lankan government in perpetuating torture against Tamils. His ultimate objective is to reveal the truth and ensure justice is served.

Additionally, it encompasses the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE)'s endeavour to establish a separate territory in Sri Lanka. Arjie gains consciousness of the prevailing social and political volatility within Sri Lanka after the inadvertent demise of Daryl Brohier in the region of Jaffna. The disappearance and subsequent murder of Daryl illustrate the discriminatory practices and terrible treatment that minority populations experience within the jurisdiction. Arjie's mother was worried about the disappearance of Daryl (Dutta, 2020, p. 10684).

In 1981, Sinhalese mobs recommenced their violent assaults against Tamil insurgents. The troops were instructed to march towards Jaffna and smash the Tamil movement. They aimed to prevent Eelam from gaining independence and limit access to it. Jaffna has transformed a region known for its militancy and occupation. Arjie's mother was waiting in school for Arjie. Arjie states, "I saw the expression on her face and felt afraid" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 122). Arjie, from the expression of his mother, learned about the burning of the Jaffna library.

"The Jaffna library was burned by the police this morning. Ninety-thousand books were set on fire" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 122).

Burning the Jaffna Public Library in 1981 was an essential incident in Sri Lanka's civil war. Sinhala mobs' burning of the Jaffna Public Library was considered cultural destruction. On June 1, 1981, Sri Lankan security forces and state-sponsored mobs set fire to the Jaffna Public Library. The act mentioned can be described as a severe offence against the cultural heritage of the Tamil minority. Sinhalese mobs resumed their brutal attacks on Tamil insurgents in 1981. They were instructed to march to Jaffna and destroy the Tamil insurgency to prevent independence and access to Eelam. Jaffna was turned into a militant and occupied region. The destruction of the Jaffna library sparked the Tamil Tiger insurrection. According to Matulewska and Gwiazdowicz's Statement, the act of extracting and vandalising books, artworks, sculptures, and other cultural artefacts. Furthermore, it caused significant damage to archival materials as cultural genocide. (Matulewska & Gwiazdowicz, 2022). The act of setting fire to the Jaffna library was widely regarded as an instance of cultural destruction with significant implications for the Sri Lankan Tamil community. After the devastating destruction of the Jaffna library that many of the Tamils commenced advocating for or engaging in nonviolent resistance (Kumarathasan, 2022). The event held enormous emotional significance for the Tamil community, catalysing the emergence of the Tamil Tiger insurrection.

E. Apocalypse 1983 Riot – Traumatic Event of Black July

The month of July in 1983, commonly referred to as "Black July," marked a distressing period in Tamil history characterised by the perpetration of violence against Tamils by state authorities and Sinhalese vigilante groups resulting from ethnic tensions. In the July Riot of 1983, Arjie became aware of an alternate realm characterised by violence, horror, injustice, and assault. Despite having been exposed to various instances of ethnic violence since his early years, it was the 1983 riot that significantly disrupted the tranquillity of his existence. In due course, it resulted in his family being rendered refugees. Upon the eruption of the riot, he harboured no anticipation that it would ultimately transpire as the most severe riot in the nation's annals. The news of the riot in their community shocked him when his father informed him about the conflict. In addition, his father clarified that the riot was instigated by Sinhalese extremists who wanted revenge for the Tigers' recent killing of thirteen soldiers. Following the funeral, Sinhala mobs expressed their anger by engaging in a violent and destructive episode, utilising objects such as sticks, clubs, tires, and petrol (Wanninayake, 2013, p. 31).

The author provides an extensive portrayal of a severe communal riot and the narrative of a representative Tamil family's struggle for survival, as depicted through the lens of Arjie's family. The individuals were informed that many Tamil-owned establishments had been subjected to arson, resulting in the looting of their contents by unruly crowds. Additionally, the Arjies family, after receiving information that the mobs were identifying Tamil households through the electoral list, the mother firmly believed that the government was responsible for the riot. Arjie states that "At first I didn't comprehend the reason for the electoral lists, but now I have thought about it and I understand. Since the mobs have electoral lists, they know which houses are Tamil and which houses aren't. This means that we have no chance of escaping if the mob comes down our road" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 289). July riot of 1983 resulted in the tragic loss of lives, including that of their grandparents.

In *Funny Boy*, the author deftly depicts how a select group of Sinhalese people helped Arjie's family amidst severe civil unrest. This tumultuous period is characterised by the rampant destruction of shops and residences and the targeted violence against Tamils, resulting in the tragic loss of innocent lives. Mr. and Mrs. Perera, notable individuals of Sinhalese descent, protected Arjie's family from a hostile mob by hiding them in their storage facility for extended periods. During their violent rampage in the streets, the Sinhala mobs engaged in destruction, targeting residential properties, commercial establishments, and office spaces. "The Tamil shops had been set on fire and the mobs were looting and burning" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 291). Similarly, The Arjie family has received information that a mob has demolished Arjie's residence and his grandmother's.

I try to remind myself that the house is destroyed, that we will never live in it again," he says, looking at his shattered house (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 298). Arjie's family received the news "3:00 P.M. We have just heard the news about Ammachi's and Appachi's house. It, too, has been destroyed (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 298).

During the 1983 riots, Sena demonstrated great courage by endangering his life to provide refuge for Arjie's family. The Sena had encountered violent threats from members of his community due to his assistance to a Tamil family. One noteworthy occurrence involved the reception of an anonymous telephone communication wherein Sena was accused as

a traitor for protecting Tamil descent. Arjie indicates that “Sena Uncle has received an anonymous phone call. The caller knows that we are here. He called Sena Uncle a traitor for sheltering Tamils” (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 299). Shyam Selvadurai vividly depicts the terrible incident by portraying Sena's character. Sena had witnessed the mob engaged in the act of setting the car on fire, with the inclusion of both Arjie's grandparents. “The mob had set the car on fire with Ammachi and Appachi inside it” (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 306).

Arjie recounts the extent of casualties and property damage inflicted upon the Tamil community by Sinhala mobs engaged in violent acts during the 1983 riots. While exhaustive accounts of the violence remain scarce, the narrator recalls instances where Tamil-owned establishments were subjected to looting and arson, resulting in the tragic loss of lives, including that of their grandparents. “The mobs had set the car fire with Ammachi and Appachi inside it” (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 306). Arjie recounts the violence that occurred during the riots.

VI. CONCLUSION

Arjie, the protagonist in the novel "Funny Boy," recounts the experiences of conflicting emotions of apprehension and sentimentality as he confronts the necessity of departing from his native land amidst the backdrop of ethnic turmoil. The detailed portrayal of ethnic riots between the Sinhalese and Tamils, which serves as compelling evidence of their racial identities, shows that the novel provides an exhaustive account of ethnic conflict as the primary determinant of race. An additional aspect that warrants attention during the examination of this novel is the conspicuous presence of Sinhalese and Tamils, both striving to assert their ancestral claims to Sri Lanka through distinct methods. Arjie recounts the significant loss of life and destruction of property inflicted upon the Tamil community by Sinhala mobs during the 1983 riots. The author examines the tragic loss of life during the ethnic conflict. Detailed accounts of the violence remain scarce. Shyam Selvadurai illustrates the incidents involving the looting and arson of Tamil-owned establishments during the conflict. To conclude, the narratives presented by the authors provide evidence suggesting that the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, along with the state-sponsored riots of 1958 and 1983. This study analyses the civil war between the Sinhalese government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.

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