

Funny Boy and the Pleasure of Breaking Rules: Bending Genre and Gender in “The Best School of All”

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Introduction

“The Best School of All,” which is the fifth of the six stories that constitute Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, can be read independent of the novel. Apart from one fleeting reference to past events—“I was reminded of things I had seen happen to other people, like Jegan, or even Radha Aunty, who, in their own way, had experienced injustice”(FB 274)—“The Best School” is a self-contained story. The pleasure in reading “The Best School” independent of the novel is to discover in it the familiarity of the school story, one of the most popular subgenres in children’s literature. The pleasure of identifying a generic code lies in observing how the expected end is reached or subverted; and “The Best School” from the very outset instigates this curiosity. I shall argue the importance of locating “The Best School” in the tradition of the generic school story, and identifying the departures from it; the departures signal the emergence of a dialogic text, as opposed to the predominantly monologic form of traditional school stories as pontifical conduct books targeting children. When located within the tradition of this colonial genre, “The Best School” engenders a discourse of resistance from within, not only as an exemplary postcolonial diasporic text, but also as a disruptive queer narrative that effectively transcribes the homoerotic onto a site of *approved* homosociality. “The Best School,” therefore, not only breaks rules by transfiguring an overtly masculinist genre to accommodate queer desires; it also opens up a dialogic space by confronting authoritative discourses on a colonial system of values perpetuated through the educational institutions, compulsory heterosexuality, and ethnocentric nationalism of the postcolonial nation-state. Although the ending of the novel is far too dystopic to sustain the pleasure of the subversive ending of “The Best School,” Selvadurai’s revisiting of the English school story invests the genre with a disruptive potential, unknown to its original form.

The “Great Tradition” of the English School Story and “The Best School of All”

In her dissertation, “‘Play Up, Play Up, and Play the Game’: Public Schools and Imperialism in British and South Asian Diasporic

Literature” (2015), Miriam R. Murtuza, developing the ideas proposed by Smith (1972) and Richards (1988, 1989), explores the intersection between British imperialism and public schools, the ‘man-making’ sites where English boys were tutored for imperial service. Murtuza, unlike Smith and Richards, also looks at South Asian colonies where imperial education had a significant role in shaping the ideologies of the new colonial bourgeoisie. The colonial counterparts of British public schools, fusing influences of “religion, government and the military” (12), began to emerge in the middle of the nineteenth century to produce a race of mimic men who would be, to quote Macaulay, “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (n.pag). Murtuza devotes an entire chapter to *Funny Boy*, particularly the novel’s intriguing engagement with colonial pedagogy in its penultimate story “The Best School of All.”

Borrowing Richards’ tripartite categorisation of school story writers as ‘conformists,’ ‘innovators,’ and ‘rebels,’ Murtuza classifies writers of school stories as ‘idealists’ and ‘realists’: the idealists are those who “avowed that imperialism was a noble pursuit and that public schools were the perfect training ground for imperial personnel, while others, [the] realists, challenged these views” (6). In Murtuza’s classification, Selvadurai is a realist who critiques the effects of colonial education in the formation of the postcolonial Sri Lankan nation-state. Analysing in detail the historiography of colonial education in South Asia, Murtuza elucidates how:

In *Funny Boy* Selvadurai proposes a causal relationship between British imperialism, as symbolized by British-modeled Sri Lankan schools, and the country’s bloody civil war. Selvadurai illustrates how Sri Lankan cultural identities have been damaged by colonialism; how both Sinhalese and Tamil communities have constructed essentialist identities in order to repair this damage; and finally how Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists have inherited the authoritarian structure and violence of the colonial government and education systems. (49)

My argument in this paper builds on Murtuza’s dissertation; while mostly agreeing with the drift of her argument, my primary focus is on how Selvadurai, the postcolonial Sri Lankan-Canadian queer writer, engages in genre-bending by interpolating the predominantly masculinist genre of the British school story with a queer narrative. Selvadurai’s revisiting of the genre is firmly located within the discourse of sexuality and sexual-identity politics which has gained considerable momentum during the last few decades. This discourse was not available to the early twentieth-century realists such as E. M. Forster or G. F. Green (their novels, *The Longest Journey* and *Maurice*, and *In the Making*, could well be ‘pre-texts’ to *Funny Boy*) in the way it is available to Selvadurai. A vibrant homosexual subculture had emerged in late seventeenth-century England and acquired a political dimension at the *fin de siècle* (Sedgwick 1985, Mosse 1996, Haggerty 1999), but this subculture grew into a counterculture after the Great War, and more significantly after the Stonewall Riots in 1969. In the Introduction to an anthology revealingly titled *Pages Passed*

from Hand to Hand: The Hidden Tradition of Homosexual Literature in English from 1748 to 1914 (1997), Mitchell and Leavitt write:

Imagine yourself ... a homosexual reader in the year 1914. You are standing in a vast, shadowy library, and you want to read something ... well, something about two men, or two women, who form a possible erotic bond: something that speaks to your experience, or to an experience of which you dream. Where do you begin? There is no catalogue to guide you. Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* has not been written; nor has James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, nor Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, nor Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* ... *Maurice* will be finished this year—a quiet revolution in Weybridge—but it will not see the light of day until decades after you died. ... Today the study of pre-1914 homosexual literature is still a matter of pages passed from hand to hand. (xvi-xvii)

It would not be incorrect to speculate that the Colombo British Council Library which Arjie and Shehan visit would also not have a catalogue on 'gay' writing as it is termed today; in South Asia, the LGBTQ movement did not pick up momentum until very recently, years after it was already a phenomenon in the West. But Selvadurai, well acquainted with global queer politics thanks to his international exposure, brings, in his representation of these two queer boys, this comparatively new knowledge system of sexuality, sexual identities, and desires.

My article, drawing its theoretical framework from Bakhtin and Jameson's reflections on genre, examines the process of *queering* a traditionally masculinist genre of the English canon. Relating the concepts of genre and the nation, I also show how Selvadurai's bicultural identity and his dissident sexuality underwrite not only his transgression of classical genre theory's emphasis on purity but also his vigorous disapproval of the postcolonial nation-state's fierce attempts at preserving its ethnic homogeneity. In the final analysis, however, "The Best School," besides its putative concerns with ethnic and sexual politics, pleases as a romance, transcending the delimiting boundaries of the school story and templates of compulsory heterosexual coupledness. The pleasure of reading "The Best School," I suggest, lies in recognising the rule-breaking that takes place not only at the narrative, but also at the generic level.

Genre Theory and Dialogism

Although Bakhtin never developed a sustained theory of the genre, reflections on the genre are scattered throughout his writings. Countering the Russian Formalists' understanding of genre, the Bakhtin circle (in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*) points out that delineation of genre "as a certain constant, specific grouping of devices with a defined dominant" is erroneous; for genre could not be mechanically seen "as being composed of devices" (129), rather, changes in generic forms must be understood in relation to social change. Therefore, a "genuine poetics of genre can only be a sociology

of genre” (135). The following passage contains the crux of the Bakhtinian idea of genre:

A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre. Therefore even the archaic elements preserved in a genre are not dead but eternally alive; that is, archaic elements are capable of renewing themselves. A genre lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development. (“Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,” 106)

Expressing his admiration for Bakhtin’s idea of the genre, Jameson extends it further into a methodological construct:

[T]he dialogical then allows us to reread or rewrite the hegemonic forms themselves; they also can be grasped as a process of the reappropriation and neutralization, the cooptation and class transformation, the cultural universalization, of forms which originally expressed the situation of ‘popular,’ subordinate, or dominated groups . . . this operation of rewriting and of the restoration of an essentially dialogical or class horizon will not be complete until we specify the “units” of this larger system. . . . This larger class discourse can be said to be organized around minimal “units” which we will call ideologemes. (86-87)

Jameson’s redefinition of the ‘dialogical’ as a tool that can be deployed for the purpose of ideological analysis in a Marxist perspective, may also be applied to gendered readings of genres, especially events of inserting oppressed sexual subjectivities into pre-eminently masculinist forms.

Jameson also stresses the importance of history as ‘an absent cause’ in structural analysis of genres; it is the third variable, besides the ‘manifest text’ and ‘the deep structure’ (132). He explicates that

the deviation of the individual text from some deeper narrative structure directs our attention to those determinate changes in the historical situation which block a full manifestation or replication of the structure on the discursive level. (133)

However, it would be incorrect to relate the historical situation to the text as ‘causal’; rather, history *allows for* certain manifestations and generic reformulations, cancelling out a “number of formal possibilities available before” and opening up “determinate new ones,” which “may or may not be realized in artistic practice” (134-35). In this model of interpreting generic mutations, exploration of the “a priori conditions of possibility” (135) of the emergence of a text and its generic form becomes mandatory.

The ‘a priori conditions’ facilitating Selvadurai’s re-appropriation of the generic form of the school story are manifold. The global LGBTQ movement demanding legitimisation of homosexuality, increasing availability of queer cultural texts in the public domain, and escalating visibility of self-identified queer people and community solidarity based on deviant sexualities—all of these opened up the possibility of the emergence of “The Best School” or *Funny Boy* as a whole, produced within a culture in which homosexuality is still a

criminal offence. In his *naturalisation* of queer desires, Selvadurai speaks back to a draconian law that criminalises homosexuality on the grounds that it is ‘against the order of nature.’ The then Sri Lankan President read the novel and his response opened up a national debate on the necessity to repeal anti-sodomy laws in the country (Salgado 7). *Funny Boy* became a ‘cause’ novel whereof.¹

By deviating from the expected narrative progress of a traditional genre—young boys’ unquestioning cooptation into school rules, their deference to authorities and their emergence as law-abiding, conformist citizen-subjects—Selvadurai introduces an element of unpredictability which surprises and pleases. Subscribing to a genre and then breaking its rules has disruptive potential, which may be elucidated by the analogy of ‘playing’ games. In “Understanding Genre,” Supriya Chaudhuri (basing her argument on Nietzsche’s view that art fulfils the anarchic potentialities of ‘play,’ Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘carnavalesque’ that underlines art’s connection to the transgressive elements of ‘play,’ and Derrida’s notion of writing as ‘play’) suggests an intriguing connection between games and genres. Chaudhuri expounds that, just like genres, games have a fixed set of rules, and they please us eternally by repeating the same structure. The transgressive potential of play, as Plato claims (*Republic IV*), is contained and regulated by games performed within those rigid rules:

If we think of genres as fixed structures whose successful deployment depends upon the acquisition of *competence*, that is, knowledge and skill, it is easy to think of them as games that writers play. (Chaudhuri 10; emphasis in the original)

Similarly,

[T]he regulatory and repetitive structures of genre are constantly disrupted by the anarchic tendencies of writing as play: the game can never be re-played in the same way, and the rules are always being changed. The writer plays with the genre, rather than playing the game of genre. (Chaudhuri 12)

The end result of a game is always unpredictable, although it is played following the same preset rules. This unpredictability makes a game interesting and pleasurable. Similarly, the transfiguration of a genre, the ‘play’ in which the writer engages, often surprises but also pleases the seasoned reader acquainted with the generic codes. In “The Best School,” Selvadurai, as I shall argue, engages in an anarchic ‘play’ with the genre of the school story. In doing so, he seems to suggest the possibility of disrupting the monologic discourses of authoritative voices and of the emergence of a dialogic space, which is, however, foreclosed by the state-sponsored pogrom that forces the protagonist to emigrate.

Breaking Norms

“The Best School” introduces a deep apprehension about the British-modelled public school, as Arjie’s father insists on getting him admitted to ‘cure’ him of his perceived ‘funniness’—a boy who likes

to dress up like girls and has no interest in cricket. When Arjie demands an explanation as to why he is being taken out of St. Gabriel's, his father, Chelva, replies: "The Academy will *force* you to become a man" (*FB* 210; emphasis added). Arjie's brother Diggy adds a note of caution: "Once you come to The Queen Victoria Academy you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other boys will look down upon you" (211). No traditional school story explicates the gendered agenda of the public school; rather, they project such agenda, without naming it, as obligatory.

"The Best School" begins with disturbing pictures of those in positions of power: if the principal, Black Tie, is notorious for the corporal punishments he mercilessly metes out to the students, the vice-principal, Mr. Lokubandara, who aspires to take over the school, is a silent killer, "a snake in the grass" (213). The impression Arjie acquires of the school, even before he steps into it, is that it is an insidious detention zone terrorized by vicious authoritative figures. This school, from the very outset, seems to project itself more like a repressive state apparatus as underpinned by Chelva's emphasis on 'force.'

Selvadurai's critique of the Victoria Academy disrupts the colonial exaltation of the public school, challenging its monologism: Arjie's distrust of the school and its method of functioning not only defies Chelva's authoritative position (a homophobic father sending his queer son into a corrective cell to make a man out of him), but also the repressive apparatus of the school, represented by the despotic Black Tie. While most commentators on *Funny Boy* have noticed this, I believe it is important to reflect on the cultural discourses that *enabled* Selvadurai to conceive Arjie's rebellion against the establishment of the public school. The dialogic potential of "The Best School" is fully realised when the 'a priori conditions' of production of the text are examined. As Robinson observes:

A dialogical work constantly engages with and is informed by other works and voices, and seeks to alter or inform it. It draws on the history of past use and meanings associated with each word, phrase or genre. Everything is said in response to other statements and in anticipation of future statements. (n. pag.)

Robinson echoes Foucault:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full-stop, beyond its internal configuration and in its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node with the network. (25)

Selvadurai's critique of the Victoria Academy (modelled on real life counterparts, namely Trinity College in Kandy, St. Thomas College in Mount Lavinia, and Royal College in Colombo, the author's *alma mater*²) is embedded in a network of 'other books, other texts'—Forster's, Kipling's, G. F. Green's, or Orwell's—written by Englishmen who have been vocally critical of the tyranny and shortcomings of public schools. For instance, Forster's "The Notes on the English Character" (1920):

Just as the heart of England is the middle classes, so the heart of the middle classes is the public school system. ... With its boarding-houses, its compulsory games, its system of prefects and fagging, its insistence on good form and on *esprit de corps*, it produces a type whose weight is out of all proportion to its numbers. (3-4)

Kipling's "The Brushwood Boy" (1898) and *Stalky & Co.* (1899), which also upbraid British public schools, corroborate Forster's ideas to some extent. Although Kipling is popularly viewed as "the most creative builder of the political myths which a colonial power needs to sustain its self-esteem" (Nandy 1983: 37) within postcolonial discourses, the aforementioned fictional works do advance a realistic view of the English public schools (See Murtuza 130-140). However, the spirit of "The Best School" comes closest to Orwell's musings on his schooldays in "Such, Such Were the Joys" (1952). Written almost simultaneously with *1984*, its indictment of the English boarding school is as intense as Orwell's denunciation of totalitarianism in the novel. Quinn quotes Orwell's friend George Woodcock:

Just as Orwell earlier saw the resemblance between the condition of animals and that of oppressed people, so now he saw the resemblance between the child facing the arbitrary rules of an adult world and the bewildered individual locked in the equally arbitrary system of a totalitarian society. (5-6)

In fact, the manner in which Arjie deals with Black Tie (and indirectly with his father, who is no less totalitarian in his ideas of gender and sexuality) seems to be directly inspired by Orwell's words: "the weak in a world governed by the strong" needs to "break the rules, or perish" (334). The weak, therefore, have "the right to make a different set of rules for themselves" (362-363). A strong instinct to survive is essential, or defeat is inevitable: "[T]here were the strong, who deserved to win, and there were the weak who deserved to lose and always did lose, everlastingly" (361).

This is a lesson which Arjie learns from Shehan. In the British Council Library he is particularly struck by Shehan's ability to show disdain for all that is upheld as sacrosanct in the manner he ridicules Newbolt's poems. He understands that this is precisely how Shehan derives his power. Arjie begins to imbibe from him this power ("I was content ... to think of Shehan and the relief and pleasure we had shared in holding up the Victoria Academy for ridicule," *FB* 242), first manifested in his decision to invite Shehan home, despite his awareness that Diggy and his father would not approve (255). His attraction for Shehan, which soon develops into physical intimacy, on the other hand, slowly brings him to terms with that which his father fears is "wrong with [him]" (255) but refrains from naming.

Selvadurai's critique of the colonial school is best manifested in the mocking dismissal of Henry Newbolt's poems, canonical texts celebrating the spirit of English public schools. Forster's sarcastic jibe at Englishmen remembering their school days "as the happiest of their lives" underwrites Arjie and Shehan's mockery of "The Best School of All" and "Vitae Lampada." While reading "The Best School of All,"

three images—Newbolt, Black Tie and Mr. Chelvaratnam—fuse into each other in Arjie’s mind when he reflects upon the poem even more deeply: “This was how my father must remember [the school] washed in the coral pink of memory” (273). Although Arjie cannot explain this fusion, nor is he mature enough to realise its implication, it is intriguing how a British poet glorifying the English school, a Sri Lankan school headmaster upholding the colonial legacy of education and Arjie’s father, a beneficiary of colonialism, merge in Arjie’s consciousness. What becomes apparent in this conflation is the uninterrupted perpetuation of certain notions of masculinity, discipline, obedience, morality, and righteousness, handed down from the coloniser to the colonised— notions which could only be challenged by a queer individual, such as Arjie, who could confront the establishment (in this case the School) by refusing to submit to its repressive structure.

The second poem, “Vitae Lampada,” draws another interesting observation from Arjie:

“Vitae Lampada” was about cricket, but not the way I understood it. It said that through playing cricket one learned to be honest and brave and patriotic. This was not true at the Victoria Academy. Cricket, here, consisted of trying to make it on the first-eleven team by any means, often by cheating or fawning over the cricket master. Cricket was anything but honest. (227-8)

In Arjie’s analysis there is more truth than he himself realises. He might not be aware of cricket’s polemical relationship with the colonising project³, but Selvadurai certainly is. In fact, the perspective from which he makes Arjie view cricket, during his incarceration in the cricket field, as a punishment for playing ‘Bride-Bride’ with his female cousins, substantiates this. Arjie discovers that cricket is not as democratic as it is made to appear; rather it is a game in which the powerful always dominate the powerless, mostly determined by physical strength, gaming expertise, and also perhaps, age. He notices that the boys have designed an intricate system to determine batting order, with the pretence of maintaining democracy; but, “the older and better players always went first, the younger cousins assenting without a murmur” (26). Incidentally, Arjie’s name comes up first, and given his inexperience, Diggy volunteers to take his place. But Arjie refuses to yield to Diggy’s command: “You can’t ... Muruges always goes first” (27). While his other younger cousins would have given in, Arjie does not. Unable to talk him out of it, Diggy resorts to violence—“I had gone too far. Diggy ... howled as he realized how he had been tricked. Instead of giving Muruges the bat, he lifted it above his head and ran towards me” (28). This episode anticipates the climax of “The Best School” when Arjie retaliates, although more strategically. Newbolt’s exaltation of cricket as “honest, brave and patriotic” is a complete antithesis to Arjie’s real-life experience of the game. This realisation in turn reveals the hollowness of colonial ideals represented by the Victoria Academy and Black Tie—ideals which are just there, but never practiced. Murtuza notes: “Like Forster’s ‘Turtons and Burtons,’ Selvadurai’s Black Tie represents all that is wrong with the

legacy of British public schools and imperialism, for the principal is a man of misguided principles” (249).

The School Campus and Homoeroticism

Funny Boy is not only ‘informed by’ the critique of colonial schools instated by a group of Englishmen disillusioned with the system; the book is also a product (as well as a producer) of the discourses of hidden queer lives that flourished on ‘all boys’ school campuses. In this sense *Funny Boy* is an event in the cultural phenomenon of opening the closet which began with the rediscovery of lost queer lives (see Aldrich). Since the turn of the century, these lost lives began to be retrieved, whereby a historiography of friendship and homoeroticism emerged. *Funny Boy* is only a ‘node’ in this complex dialogic ‘network’ of literary texts, histories, memoirs, biographies, songs, television series, and cinema which have been instrumental in producing a cultural consciousness about queer lives and their ‘precarity’ (to use Butler’s term).

Sedgwick writes:

[T]he deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that, like Wendy in *Peter Pan*, people find new walls springing up around them even as they drowse.... for many gay people [the closet] is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (1990: 68)

For Arjie the ‘closet’ is an everyday reality, underscored by the furtiveness of his act of cross-dressing during the ‘Bride-Bride’ game: he plays it with his female cousins at the back of the house, without the knowledge of the family, as opposed to cricket which is played in the field into which the main entrance to his grandparents’ house opens. Gairola notes:

[Cricket’s] highly visible spatial articulation is normalized through public performance as it inevitably pushes queerness and other non-heteronormative gender performances into hidden spaces in the inner abode of domesticity... (72)

And when Arjie is found out, a particularly insensitive aunt embarrasses him by exhibiting him as an object to look at in the family living-room. The tag ‘funny’ which one of his uncles mockingly attaches to him provides a classic case of shaming the sexual non-conformist (*FB* 13-14). Ahmed, writing about the feelings of being queer in a pre-eminently heteronormative society, observes:

one’s body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled ... the sense of out-of-place-ness and estrangement involves an acute awareness of the surface of one’s body. ... Furthermore, queer subjects might also be ‘asked’ not to make heterosexuals feel uncomfortable by avoiding the display of signs of queer intimacy, which is itself an uncomfortable feeling, a restriction on what one can do with one’s body, and another’s body in social space. (148)

Arjie undergoes similar feelings, when his parents put him under strict vigilance in order that he gives up on his peculiar ‘tendencies’ (*FB* 166). To save themselves from further social humiliation, they decide to put him into a correctional cell—the Victoria Academy. Ironically, the very reason for which Arjie is sent to the Academy is defeated; for, it is on the campus of the school that Arjie gradually awakens into a realisation of his sexual *difference*, once he falls in love with Shehan. The homoerotic energy underlying “The Best School” is best appreciated when it is read as advancing a historiography of homoerotic malebonding, which was inaugurated by Edward Carpenter’s *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship* (1902), in Britain.

Arjie develops an immediate interest in Shehan on the first day in school, when the latter comes to his rescue. While his desire for Shehan mounts, Arjie is distraught by the irresistible attraction he feels, unable to comprehend whether it is right to feel that way, for Diggy constantly cautions him against this growing intimacy: “That Sozra could easily lead you down the wrong path” (*FB* 256). But as if by instinct Arjie knows that Diggy is not right, for he has always felt that he is *different* from others, and Shehan ‘shares’ that *difference* with him: Arjie’s physical as well as mental connection with Shehan attributes to the former a power which actually makes him feel *normal*. But eventually, after they make love in the garage, Arjie is persecuted by a nagging sense of guilt and surprises Shehan by his melodramatic show of disgust: “I wish to God I had never done that ... I’ll never do it again” (265). Shehan, deeply hurt, rebukes him for his pretence: “That’s what you say now. Tomorrow you’ll come begging.” He adds to it a serious insult: “I know your type. You and the head prefect and others like you. Pretend that you’re normal or that you’re doing it because you can’t get a girl. But in the end you’re no different from me” (265).

Through the Arjie-Shehan love story, Selvadurai revisits a secret of English public schools, a secret which was not too well-kept. English public schools of the late-nineteenth and twentieth century were hubs of homosexual liaisons, a reality which the colonisers tried their best to hide. G. F. Green’s school story *In the Making* (1952) dramatising the pleasures and pains of young boy Randal’s growing desire for his charming senior Felton is one of the first English novels to unveil the secret. Vern and Bonny Bullough write:

We believe most of the English upper class males who attended these schools accepted ... homoerotic attachment as not only natural but desirable. They, however, preferred not to publicly acknowledge such affairs ... Many of the friendships established in the schools continued in adult life, some of them developing into adult homosexual partnerships. These were also tolerated both by law and by custom as long as they did not become public. (261)

Dr. Arnold had introduced the prefect system with the intention of giving “the boys the experience first of being ruled, and then eventually of ruling others, a concept that fitted in with Arnold’s concept that boys learn by doing” (Bullough and Bullough 262). This system gave birth to the practice of ‘fagging,’ whereby younger boys were expected to run errands for older boys, mostly the prefects; this

often led to the former granting sexual favours to the latter. However, sexual favours were known to be solicited, not forced, and the younger boys were understood to relent. This is exactly the kind of relation Shehan shares with the head prefect, as Diggy informs Arjie (*FB* 232). It is, therefore, not hard to speculate on why the word ‘fagging’ turned into a much-(ab)used slang for homosexuality in common parlance.

Same-sex love affairs were commonplace, and role-players in the sexual act came to be identified as Bloods and Tarts. C. S. Lewis, the eminent *littérateur* and Christian apologist, in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy: Shape of my Early Life* (1955) explains what these labels imply:

A Tart is a pretty and effeminate-looking small boy who acts as a catamite to one or more of his seniors, usually Bloods. The Tarts had an important function to play in making school [what it was advertised to be] a preparation for public life. They were not like slaves, for their favours were [nearly always] solicited, not compelled. Nor were they exactly like prostitutes, for the liaison often had some permanence and, far from being merely sensual, was highly sentimentalized. Nor were they paid [in hard cash, I mean] for their services; though of course they had all the flattery, unofficial influence, favor, and privileges which the mistresses of the great have always enjoyed in adult society. That was where the Preparation for Public Life came in. (qtd. in Bullough and Bullough 264)

Several diaries, which began to be published in the twentieth century, disclose details of a highly sexually-charged campus life, when the boys did not necessarily identify themselves as ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’ but engaged in intimate physical relationships with friends, which often developed into lifelong affairs. Many of these men went on to hold very important positions in the British Empire later in life. Military barracks in the outposts of the Empire, which became hothouses of homosexuality, were an extension of this male-to-male homoerotic bonding that originated in public schools. Tamagne, in a historical study of homosexuality in Europe, writes:

The friendships created in the trenches were built on a different logic of male societies welded together by a code of honor and shared experiences. Most of the homosexual friendships on the front were established between young officers and their men. J.B. Priestley notes that it was largely members of the upper classes or of the well-to-do middle class, who had been prepared for such passions in their public schools, who welcomed the completely masculine way of life, freed of the complications associated with females. These passionate friendships, idealized and devoid of physical contact, were inspired by the youth, the beauty, the innocence of a young man, often an aide-de-camp or a soldier assigned to serve an officer. It was under such circumstances that Somerset Maugham met the young ambulance driver, Gerald Haxton, who was to become his companion. J.R. Ackerley noted that his couriers and servants were selected on the basis of their looks; in fact, this desire to have the best-looking soldiers in one’s service was common with many officers. (22)

Besides, the nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of literature centering on homoerotic desires. Noted British authors, namely Tennyson, Symonds, Swinburne, Pater, Carpenter, Housman, Hopkins, and Wilde, wrote on same-sex love; at times openly, at other times euphemistically. Ironically enough, while colonial discourses often identified the colonies as the breeding grounds of homosexuality,

corrupting the white man (See Aldrich and Naphy), counter-discourses culled from diaries, personal memoirs, and literary works quash such allegations.⁴ However, the colonies became an escape resort for men with homoerotic leanings once homosexuality was criminalized and, most significantly, after Oscar Wilde's incarceration. In order to preserve their hyper-masculine self-image, the British went to every possible extent to shove narratives of same-sex desire underground. The positive effect of Wilde's imprisonment, however, was that more and more people began talking about homosexuality. Bullough and Bullough write:

Once rumors of homoeroticism began to publicly surface, the English reacted with a great hostility and any public claim of homosexuality was grounds for dismissal. Valuable information about these reactions can be found in Victorian diaries and memoirs, some of which are finally beginning to be published. (265)

In "The Best School," Selvadurai revisits this discourse of same-sex love that originated in 'all boys' schools, drawing his cue from the existing narratives of such friendships available in European literature. Shehan's accusation that Arjie or the head prefect is acting like a hypocrite in not accepting that they have a *different* sexual preference carries in it a bitter critique of Victoria Academy's pretensions of hyper-masculinity and dismissal of homosexuality as *abnormal* and therefore *funny*. The Arjie-Shehan story exposes a lie, perpetuated by colonial discourses and unquestioningly adapted and perpetrated by the postcolonial nation-state. It takes time, but Arjie ultimately comes to construe the label of sin stuck to the kind of desire he feels for Shehan as a huge sham.

But before arriving at such a realisation, Arjie undergoes a terrible phase when he feels he is living in sin. His repulsion at the sexual act he engages in with Shehan in the garage arises from the agony of alienating his family. He suddenly feels like a stranger at the family dining hall when they come in for lunch immediately after the act (*FB* 262). Gopinath assesses the moment thus:

[T]he initial sexual encounter between the two boys takes place not in the house itself but in the garage at the edges of the family compound. The literal and figurative remove of queer sexuality from the family scene is forcefully brought home to Arjie as he and Shehan rejoin his parents for lunch ... As he looks around the table at the faces of his parents, he realizes with horror that the act in the garage has opened up an unbridgeable distance between him and the rest of his family. (172)

This sense of un-belonging in the family is metaphoric of the nation-state's complete invisibilisation of queer desires and criminalisation of individuals with different sexual preferences—the family and the nation are, by default, unavailable to non-heteronormative subjects.

Arjie's eventual acceptance of his *difference* has the political edge of 'coming out'—if not to the world, to himself. What Arjie realises in time is that by giving in to Shehan's sexual advances he has, indeed, triumphed over his father, who had conjectured rightly about what "was inside [him]." Arjie jubilantly declares to himself that "[what] I had done in the garage had moved me beyond his hand" (262). After

he outgrows his sense of guilt, Arjie reflects: “With the terrible regret of a realization come too late, I saw that I had misjudged what we had done in the garage. Shehan had not debased or degraded me, but had rather offered me his love. And I had scorned it” (269). While Arjie warms up to Shehan, he also realises that the confidence Shehan exudes comes of his knowledge of himself. This knowledge attributes a sense of power which Arjie must also wield: “I felt amazed that a normal thing—like my friendship with Shehan—could have such powerful and hidden possibilities”(256). This sense of power that he acquires enables him to put Black Tie to shame at the school function. Perera, in a recent article on *Funny Boy*, quotes Howard McNaughton who holds that “*Réalisation* through role-breaking asserts the power of the oppressed” (2015: 6), and argues that Selvadurai endorses this view in his representation of Arjie. By *naturalising* Arjie’s queerness, and attributing to him a certain degree of anarchic power, Selvadurai successfully *queers* and *renews* the overtly masculinist genre of the traditional school story. The real power of the novel lies in the dialogic relation it establishes with other cultural texts, whereby a Sri Lankan Tamil queer boy’s story is linked with the global corpus of queer narratives.

Genre, Gender, Nation and the Queer Diaspora

Interestingly, classical genre theory’s emphasis on structural purity and hierarchy is analogical to the postcolonial nation-state’s increasing alignment with race and maintenance of racial purity. This idea is reinforced by Roudiez in the translator’s note to Kristeva’s *Nations without Nationalism*:

When Julia Kristeva came to Paris she held a doctoral fellowship in French literature; the topic she investigated ...was the emergence of a different genre (or text, as she preferred to call it) out of the interweaving of other pre-existing genres (or strands of texts). With hindsight, I can see a similarity with the way new nations are born, out of the commingling of individuals and groups of individuals with different cultural, religious, and political backgrounds. (x)

This analogy is particularly useful in analysing generic school stories dedicated to inculcating nationalist and religious ideologies in young citizens. Selvadurai’s manoeuvring of the genre does not really challenge the interpellative function of the school story; rather, by re-appropriating the genre he shows how the postcolonial nation *ought* to be imagined—by acknowledging differences, sexual or ethnic, and not in monolithic, homogeneous terms. While generic boundaries of the school story are collapsed, through an effective transcription of the homoerotic onto the homosocial site of the school, coercive heteronormative nationalist monologism is fervently challenged as well. By advocating the necessity of initiation of dialogue between the majority and minority groups, Selvadurai enunciates the importance of confronting Sinhalese majoritarian hegemony and subjugation of Tamil minorities.

While coming to terms with his sexuality, Arjie becomes increasingly aware of the “Sinhala-Tamil thing” (FB 219): he is witness to Radha Aunty’s breakup with Anil when the family disapproves of Anil’s Sinhalese identity; Jegan’s predicament when his possible connection with the Tigers is revealed; and the territorial division of the school into Sinhala-Tamil classes. A poignant moment in the text, which brings together Arjie’s doubly marginal status as a queer Tamil boy, is a dream sequence: Arjie dreams of a sexual encounter with Shehan where “every time [he] spoke to him [Shehan] he answered in Tamil, knowing that [Arjie] didn’t understand” (242). Later, when Arjie kisses Shehan for the first time, his tongue becomes “a silent language that urged [him] to open [his]mouth” (258). Jayawickrama observes:

If Sinhalese is represented as the language of masculinity and power, Tamil becomes the unspoken language associated with an unarticulated sexuality, yet one whose power is emergent. It is significant that it is only in the space of a dream that Tamil is spoken and more so that it is the Sinhalese Shehan who speaks Tamil to an uncomprehending Arjie. (131)

Although Arjie would soon learn the predicament of being Tamil in a Sinhalese-dominated state the hard way, his rebellion against Black Tie, the rationale behind which has been frequently debated (Murtuza; Perera; Lesk), does not seem to have a clear political agenda:

I was not sure that, as a Tamil, my loyalties lay with Black Tie. I thought of Mr. Lokubandara and the way Salgado and his friends assaulted that Tamil boy. I thought of the way Black Tie had beaten both Shehan and me. Was one better than the other? I didn’t think so. Although I did not like what Mr. Lokubandara stood for, at the same time I felt that Black Tie was no better. (FB 247)

Jazeel observes that neither Black Tie, a custodian of colonial values, nor Lokubandara, representing “post-independent ethnic absolutism,” is of any help to a queer Tamil boy like Arjie (243). But political or not, Arjie’s rebellion gives pleasure because it is successful in discomfiting an oppressive totalitarian authority, notwithstanding what he represents. In his representation of Arjie, in his victimisation and triumph, it is not hard to see that Selvadurai deploys the popular stereotype of the oppressed child. The pleasure the reader derives from his triumph over Black Tie is the same kind of pleasure derived from seeing the underdog, the weak, the oppressed, rising and triumphing over their oppressors.

In conclusion, it may be noted that in his dismantling of the predominantly masculinist discourses contained within the genre of the school story, Selvadurai brings to “The Best School” the “positive charge” (Wettstein 47) of the queer diaspora, as both Jazeel and Murtuza have observed. Selvadurai’s hyphenated identity, Sri Lankan-Canadian, is analogical to his dissident sexuality, an in-between-ness which he celebrates. Wesling observes:

[Q]ueerness constitutes a mobile resistance to the boundaries and limits imposed by gender, and that resistance *is the same as* the migrant’s movement through national and cultural borders. Put simply, the analogy is this: queerness disrupts

gender normativity like globalization disrupts national sovereignty. (N.pag; emphasis in the original)

Located in a transnational space, Selvadurai could extricate himself from the state monitoring at home, and address issues of both sexual and ethnic minoritization, with a certain power which might not be available to local writers from Sri Lanka in the early 1990s. Selvadurai is certainly more privileged than many, having access to western academia, world literature, and global LGBTQ politics. “The Best School” could not have been written without a comprehensive knowledge of the English canon and its gender politics. Borrowing an established English genre and collapsing its ‘boundaries and limits’ to narrate the reality of a queer Sri Lankan Tamil boy definitely has in it the political charge of the queer ‘empire writing back’; but it cannot be denied that one of the ‘a priori conditions’ of the possibility of emergence of the text is Selvadurai’s privileged class position and its associated advantages. Nonetheless, it pleases when its dialogical potential is recognised and appreciated.

Notes

1. Noted theatrician Sugathapala de Silva’s translation of the novel into Sinhalese is worth mentioning in this context.

2. See Perera 2000.

3. See Brookes and also Nandy, 2000.

4. This is ironic because several postcolonial nations branded homosexuality as a western import and alien to their own cultures. This blame game continues to this day. The colonisers blame it on the colonised, and vice-versa. When Rosanna Flamer-Caldera, the Sri Lankan queer activist, was asked about religious opposition to gay rights, she replied: “The Nationalistic Sinhala Buddhist movement thinks that homosexuality is a product of the West. So, no matter how hard you try and prove to them that homosexuality is natural and indigenous, they will think and act according to their will.” See Flamer-Caldera, Interview by Udayan.

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