

Sexual/Textual Tendencies in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy**

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Abstract

The word “funny” is examined as it is used throughout Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* (1994) from the early chapters describing the family’s domestic life, to the ways in which language dominating public and textual discourses is rendered funny. Through an examination of the multivalent meanings of the words “funny” and “tendencies” in the novel, its intertextual references, and allusions to British canonical literature, this paper explores how the novel’s “critical funniness” negotiates such forces as imperialism and nationalism, seemingly stabilizing, but also violent and castrating. Critical funniness poses challenges to the history of British colonialism that frames modern Sri Lanka. This paper shows how the text of Selvadurai’s novel resists the essentializing discourses implied in the country’s national and sexual ideologies.

Keywords

Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, Sri Lankan Canadian literature, postcolonial theory, homosexuality, Henry Newbolt, British imperialism

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Introduction

Set in postcolonial Sri Lanka, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) tells the story of a young Tamil's (Arjie Chelvaratnam's) realization of his same-sex desire while studying at a school in Colombo modelled on English public schools and teaching colonial literary texts which promote British values. Arjie's affair with a Sinhalese boy becomes a critique both of his own ethnicity and of the nationalism that has driven rioters to destroy Tamil property, later breaking out into civil war. Such large-scale violence represents a re-enactment of the sexual and patriarchal intolerance within his Tamil family. The violence is heaped upon the narrator as a "funny boy." Colonial forces haunt the former colony to construct ideologies of sexuality and gender, defining heteronormativity within colonial discourse.

In this paper, I examine the word "funny" as it is used throughout the novel by exploring the ways language dominates textual discourses which are rendered funny, and comparing its usage in the family's domestic life with that in the public realm. Through an examination of another ambiguous word, "tendencies," in the novel's intertextual references and allusions to British canonical literature, this paper explores how the novel's critical "funniness" negotiates such seemingly stabilizing but violent and castrating forces as imperialism and nationalism. The novel poses challenges to the British colonialism which framed modern Sri Lanka. I attempt to show how *Funny Boy*, as a postcolonial text, resists the essentializing discourses implied in the country's national and sexual ideologies. Queen Victoria Academy, the school where Arjie studies before leaving Sri Lanka, can be seen as the nexus of these potent tendencies: the nationalist versus the separationist, the postcolonial versus the colonial, and the heteronormative versus the "funny."

Funny Boy, told in six "stories" according to the subtitle of the book, recounts Arjie's life before his family's relocation to Canada following the 1983 riots that presented a direct physical threat to the lives of the Tamil minority.¹ The novel opens in 1972, when Arjie is seven. The final chapter, "Riot Journal: An Epilogue," includes diary entries recording the historical communal riots in Sri Lanka. The Tamil/Sinhalese struggle appears as an ongoing cycle of events, culminating in the 1983 riots which end not only Arjie's memoir but also his relationship with his Sinhalese boyfriend Shehan. Triggered by a Tamil protest against the government's policy to officially recognize Sinhala as the national language of Sri Lanka, mass killings of Tamils were carried out by "some Sinhalese people" (*Funny Boy* 59) in

¹ Quotations are taken from Selvadurai, *Funny Boy: A Novel*, Harvest, 1997.

1958, in which Arjie's great-grandfather died (59), followed by the pogroms of 1971, 1977, 1981, and the outbreak of civil war in 1983 (*Funny Boy* 144, 156, 170, 279-305). Arjie's personal story about desire and sexuality is interwoven with politics and ethnicity in years of turmoil.

Critics have grappled with the intricate relationships between queerness, homosexuality, ethnicity, and postcoloniality in the novel. The subversive potential of Arjie's relationship with his boyfriend Shehan, for Senath W. Perera, is not their same-sex love, but that their friendship implies that "racial harmony can be achieved among the marginalized" (Perera, "Writing to Protest" 6). Maintaining that *Funny Boy* should be read as a diasporic text intervening in the politics of the modern Sri Lankan nation state, Tariq Jazeel shows how the negotiation of everyday spaces (the family home and the school) signifies an identity politics, arguing that the nation's "racially polarised geographies of difference" (244) are destabilized in the treatment of portraying how Arjie comes to terms with his same-sex desire. Andrew Lesk, on the other hand, maintains that the protagonist's gender and sexual "transgressions" do not challenge the nation state, and will not "subvert the overriding national project of self-harmonization, even in its most violent formations" (43) in what Prakrti calls "post-postcolonial" Sri Lanka (qtd. in Lesk 31); Lesk defines this as a country having moved from "colonialism to post-colonial sovereignty, and now to self-assertion" (31). On Arjie's "homosexuality," Robert Aldrich argues that it "seems a lesser sin than heterosexual violation of ethnicity, caste and religion and the consequences to status and bloodlines that such *mésalliances* engender" (210). Gayatri Gopinath, on the contrary, argues that *Funny Boy* "'queers' the space of Sri Lanka as 'home' by disrupting the logic of nationalism, which consolidates 'the nation' through normative hierarchical sexual and gender arrangements that coalesce around the privatized, bourgeois domestic space of 'home' as a site of sanitized heterosexuality" (270).

Shifting the emphasis from sexuality to a socio-economic analysis, Emily S. Davis argues that it is the effects of neoliberalism that shape Sri Lanka's "governmentality, consumerist fantasy, and global economic mandate" (222) in the postcolonial period. Neoliberal logic, as an economic ideology for development in post-independence Sri Lanka, exerts a subtler effect, which Davis calls the "betrayal of neoliberalism" (229), on all the marginalized figures, including Radha, Mrs. Chelvaratnam, and Jegan, not to mention Arjie. The power of neoliberalism eventually fails to protect Mr. Chelvaratnam, Arjie's father, from the violence against his endangered ethnic minority as a Tamil businessman in Colombo, however conformist and patriotic he is. Arjie's resistance to the oppressing system, for Davis,

should be understood as a rejection of neoliberalism, so the publication of *Funny Boy* as a postcolonial queer Sri Lankan Canadian autobiographical novel aiming to live up to Western LGBTQ identity politics without understanding its “geopolitical and economic context” (230) must instead be interpreted as a problematization of the commodification of the “gay coming of age story” (230).

Taking these ideas as a starting point, this paper probes the word “funny” in *Funny Boy* to show that meaningful criticism relies not on a close reading of the *character*, but rather on the *text* itself. The former approach would result in further reinforcing the notion of a fixed identifiable subject, however marginalized it seems, whereas the latter underscores a radical position engineered at a textual level which criticizes by making fun of a power structure that sides with nationalism, imperialism, and neoliberalism. The title of this paper alludes to Toril Moi’s monumental study of feminist literary criticism, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). On the one hand, I attempt to follow her thesis of examining the relationship between sexual politics and textual politics in literary criticism, searching for a possible subversive reading afforded by the marginalized (“woman” in Moi’s feminist project, the “funny” in mine). On the other hand, I aim to demonstrate that the novel’s critical dimension relies on the reading of the sexual and textual fluidity of the writing itself, a position taken up by Moi.

The word “funny” does not only imply otherness and the comical, but also carries political connotations. Following Edward Said’s influential thesis in *Orientalism*, the colonized is feminized by the colonizer: “The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien” (207).² Colonial discourse categorizes the native, the Other, as “funny,” but in the novel it is not colonial discourse that describes the narrator as “funny,” but postcolonial (or, in the historical context of *Funny Boy*, neocolonial) discourse, which perpetuates the language of colonialism. The culture that Arjie reacts to is dominated by patriarchal power. The novel shows how queer sexuality critiques the national identity-building of modern Sri Lanka. But since nationalism is partly induced by the Sinhalese forces, as opposed to the Tamil minority seeking autonomy, that critique comes from a double marginalization: from a position which is “homosexual,” not heterosexual, and Tamil, not Sinhalese (Hawley 124). Colonial history under the British, the Sinhalese/Tamil split in postcolonial Sri Lanka, and the clash between two major religions (Buddhist/Hindu) threaten to shatter the nation by creating the civil war that

² See also Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, Routledge, 1996, and Rana Kabbani, *Europe’s Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule*, Macmillan P, 1986.

appears in full force at the end of the novel. There have been attempts to read the text as a “gay novel,” or even as one about “coming out,” but homosexuality understood as subjectivity, I argue, only imposes another form of violence by giving closure to the text.³ Instead of forging a single identity for the nation and the individual, the concept of funniness subverts the idea of a unified personal and national identity.

We may start with a disclaimer about Arjie’s “homosexuality”: calling him homosexual is problematic, not only because the term comes from a Western, Christian, medical discourse which is hostile to same-sex acts, but also because labelling an adolescent “homosexual” essentializes homosexuality. The term is never used in *Funny Boy*, but the idea is described and implied in the words “funny” and “tendencies.”⁴ Perera takes Arjie’s transformation into a “funny boy” while at school as confirmation that his “latent homosexual tendencies” emerged in childhood (“Some Responses” 258), assuming the sexual connotation of the word “funny.” Lesk asserts that Arjie’s “sexual identity . . . earns him the ascription ‘funny’” (35), without questioning its plural meanings. He notes that the Sri Lankan equivalent for homosexual is “*ponnaya*,” and that Arjie “strangely, never uses the word” (Lesk 44). Although Lesk argues that “Arjie does not have the language to access what his desires might mean” (44), there is unfortunately no further exploration of what the word “funny” means. Interestingly, “*ponnaya*” is indeed used in Selvadurai’s 2005 novel *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, but the English word “homosexual” is never mentioned. Unlike Arjie, who seems to be more affirmative about his sexuality in *Funny Boy*, Amrith de Alwis, the protagonist of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, struggles to face his same-sex desire. Despite being alone in front of his mother’s tombstone, Amrith cannot bring himself to articulate the word “*ponnaya*,” but only “I am . . . different” (*Swimming* 267; ellipsis in original). It is necessary to start with what Lesk leaves out, examining what the word “funny” could imply.

³ For “coming out” fiction, and for a theoretical exploration of “queer identity” in autobiographical writings, see Anderson (68-83). For a comparative study of the notion of Western *Bildungsroman* and its applicability in South East Asian texts featuring a child’s point of view, see Singh (13-14). While R. Raj Rao takes it for granted that *Funny Boy* is a *Bildungsroman* (126), Rahul Gairola goes as far as arguing that *Funny Boy* is a “counter-bildungsroman” which “de-centres hegemonic traditions in contrast to the European *bildungsroman*” (477). *Funny Boy*, maintains Gairola, “merges autobiography with fiction and history” (486) by combining “the political and the personal” (486) in telling a story interwoven with “the twinned violence of masculinist nationalism and marginalised, ‘queer of color’ narratives” (486).

⁴ The word homosexuality is avoided in the most explicit discussion concerning foreign men “coming back to the hotel” with local “young boys” (*Funny Boy* 166). Jegan Parameswaran asks Appa, “Is what is happening what I think is happening?” (166). In response to Jegan’s query, Appa claims that the boys are Sri Lanka’s “natural resources” (166-67) crucial for the tourist industry. Arjie does not seem to understand the sexual connotation in the conversation.

The Nine Instances of Funny and Their Insistence

The word “funny” appears nine times in the novel, including in the book title. The first instance occurs when the family discovers Arjie’s cross-dressing during “bride-bride,” a children’s imitation game of playing the wedding couple; Cyril Uncle cries out “jovially” to Appa, Arjie’s father, “looks like you have a funny one here” (*Funny Boy* 14). “Funny” here, as in all other instances in the book, is ambiguous in meaning. It is the description of the tone of Cyril’s comment as “jovial” that illuminates the meaning of “funny,” steering the signification of the word to the first definition given by the *OED*: “affording fun, mirth-producing, comical, facetious.” Arjie nonetheless does not know what his uncle means. It is not necessarily the cross-dressing that interests Arjie, because in his innocent mind what he desires is “to wear makeup and costumes and dance around” (52) like the child actor in the play *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, probably a dramatization of Robert Browning’s poem.

That evening, Cyril’s diction is repeated in the second instance of the use of the word by Appa, who warns his wife Amma, “If he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughingstock of Colombo, it’ll be your fault,” and “You always spoil him and encourage all his nonsense” (14). Through the off-stage “Rankotwera boy,” the Chelvaratnams communicate with each other. Everything in the word “funny” depends on its euphemistic force, which is powerful and determining because of its lack of definition. The differences between Cyril’s usage of the word (“a funny one”) and Appa’s (“turns out funny”) are suggestive. Cyril’s exclamation implies that Arjie is already “funny,” whereas Appa sees a potentiality in Arjie’s behavior—“if he turns out funny.” The first is accompanied by Cyril’s laughter, so Arjie’s funniness is already being laughed at, but Appa’s statement is a warning against Arjie becoming a “laughingstock,” which is not “funny” at all. The two instances of “funny” are different in their usage.

The oxymoronic nature of the word is noticed by Arjie. After the Cyril Uncle incident, Amma prohibits Arjie from seeing her change clothes, attempting to transform him into a “normal” male. Frustrated, Arjie contemplates,

It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn’t comprehend. I thought of what my father had said about turning out “funny.” The word “funny” as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression “That’s funny.” Neither of

these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone. (17)

Arjie realizes that the meaning is not in the spoken word, but in the paralinguistics of the affect people show when speaking. Minoli Salgado asserts the significance of the ambiguity of the word “funny,” arguing that Arjie is not called “gay” or “homosexual” because “funny” implies the “instability of his subject-positioning” (“Writing Sri Lanka” 11). But such a potentially dangerous position is directed toward something laughable.

Laughter serves the function of protecting the laughing subject, giving them a sense of superiority over those who are being laughed at, as illustrated in the case of Cyril’s laugh. Laughter creates a hierarchy over the “abnormal,” as implied by Thomas Hobbes’ definition: laughter is a “sudden glory,” implying a feeling of superiority, which “is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called Laughter” (6.125; emphasis in original). Laughter “is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them” or “by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (6.125). For Hobbes, those who laugh at others feel superior because laughter constructs normality by marginalizing “deform[ity].” People who laugh are “conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity” (6.125). Pusillanimity here, the opposite of Aristotelian *megalopsuchia* (magnanimity), means mediocrity, meanness, and a lack of generosity. The act of laughing at what is constructed by the pusillanimous as “funny,” and desiring to fix funniness, are both reactions to a crisis of identity, instanced in the case where the colonizer laughs at the colonized (Billig 51). When the colonizers find someone or something “funny,” the non-specificity and the implied pusillanimity are caused by what Freud calls “*Verleugnung*” (disavowal or denial) (“Fetishism” 353). Its mechanism is similar to his formulation of fetishism (355-56), which is paraphrased best in Octave Mannoni’s title “*Je sais bien, mais quand-même*” (“I Know Well, but All the Same”). The fetishist disavows or disregards what is seen in reality, saying what is there when it is not, or turning what is absent into presence. *Verleugnung* is stronger than “*Verdrängung*” (repression) because it denies an external reality (“Fetishism” 353). Nietzsche argues that the lack of spontaneity promoted by Christian culture in modernity yields what he calls *ressentiment*, an affect of rancor, bitterness, and envy (472-75, 480-82). While pusillanimity is bound up with *ressentiment*, Hobbes would say *ressentiment* is veiled

within laughter which involves the disavowal of the laughing person's lack of spontaneous being. Colonialism produces pusillanimity, which translates into *ressentiment*, showing itself in heteronormativity.

The fourth use of "funny" in the novel appears in chapter 2, "Radha Aunty," when Radha, a Tamil woman engaged to a man of the same ethnicity, is allegedly having an affair with Anil, who is Sinhalese. Radha's mother, Ammachi, confronts her over this disrespectful act:

"You think this is funny?" Ammachi said after a few moments. I could tell she was really trying to control herself.

"No," she replied brightly. "I think it's very serious."

"Let's see how serious it is when Amma [mother] puts an end to your acting in *The King and I*," Kanthi Aunty said. (74)

"Funny" is contrasted by Radha with her "serious" love toward Anil, who does not fit into Arjie's childish idea of a lover because he was "not serious enough" (66). But even so, Anil is not regarded as "funny." Radha's response to her mother's question plays upon the binary opposition of serious/funny. Radha deliberately exploits the double meaning of the word "funny" in Ammachi's rhetorical question, managing to announce her anti-traditional attitude towards the cross-ethnic relationship. Radha's ability to exploit language's ambiguity allows her to temporarily resist that dominating power.

When Arjie's other aunty asks Radha if she is in love with "this boy" Anil, Radha replies, "No . . . I don't know," and "The funny thing is I never thought of him like that [as a lover] until Amma started to make a fuss. It was only after she went to speak to his parents that I began to see him differently" (76; ellipsis in original). This fifth "funny" connotes a sense of irony in cause and effect. Radha's first reaction is negation, and the indicator for being in love is that apart from her fiancé, she is "thinking of Anil as well" (76). Life's strangeness arrests Radha, confronting her with the oddity of relationships: love is activated by a third party and denial of love itself.

Hobbes describes people laughing at deformity, but such an attempt to affirm normality is outdone by life's strangeness. This appears in the next passage (the sixth example of the word "funny"), where Aunty Doris warns Radha not "to make the same mistake" as she did: "Life is a funny thing, you know. It goes on, whatever decisions you make. Ultimately you have children or don't have children and then you grow old. Whether you married the person you loved or not seems to become less important as time passes" (79). It is life that could be called the "funny boy": heterogeneous, or "curious, queer, odd, strange," (the early eighteenth-century

meaning of “funny,” as indicated by *OED*). Life, as Doris’s third sentence suggests, robs situations from signifying any single meaning.

The seventh instance appears in “The Best School of All” (ch. 5), when Arjie asks his brother Diggy why he must be sent to the ex-British colonial school, Queen Victoria Academy. Diggy says that Appa “doesn’t want you turning out funny or anything like that” (205). Arjie feels “a flush rise into [his] face,” and he refuses to meet Diggy’s accusing gaze when the latter asks, “You’re not, are you?” (205). Arjie’s flush is a sign of shame and desire. It suggests shame, as though he is being looked at by an imagined internalized authority, creating desire, signaled in a flush, or in Norman Brown’s words, as “a mild erection of the entire head” (194). For Michel Foucault, normative desire and disgust are produced discursively. The function of confession is to produce a split subject: the more a subject confesses, the more developed and more vulnerable his subjectivity becomes (62). The word exists in discourse with the power to define and marginalize, as Foucault suggests that language always does, but its power is its imprecision, that it is not clear whether someone is funny or not.

The eighth use of the word “funny” appears when Black Tie cuts Shehan Soyza’s hair as a punishment in Queen Victoria Academy. Arjie says:

“It’s not fair. He can’t get away with this.”

Soyza studied me with mock pity. “You poor thing,” he said, “you really are fresh meat, aren’t you.”

“Stop joking,” I cried at him. “It’s not funny.”

“Why not? I think it’s extremely funny.” (219)

“Funny” here functions like the reply which Radha makes, as the opposite of “serious”: Arjie does not like being called “fresh meat,” which has sexual implications, nor that Shehan has had his hair cut. It is not clear what Arjie protests against more, Shehan’s hair or being called fresh meat. The joke may be on him as vulnerable (fresh meat) or on Shehan, who thinks “it” funny. “Funny” may be read beyond Shehan’s sense, meaning that Arjie’s response shows his “funniness”—his affection toward Shehan, which makes “funny” positive. Sharanya Jayawickrama maintains, “The word ‘funny’ that is initially used derogatively to refer to Arjie’s identity is reclaimed by the end of the novel when he himself initiates laughter that proves redemptive of his position” (133). It seems to recognize otherness, or marginality. So, Shehan’s claim “it’s extremely funny” indicates that he accepts the marginal place they share, but such an acceptance can only be achieved by

maintaining equivocality. Being disingenuous becomes a form of politics, enabling a plurality of meanings.

Lastly, the word “funny” appears in the title *Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories*. “Pig Can’t Fly,” the first chapter, was first published as a short story in *The Toronto South Asian Review*, and was also collected in the “gay stories” anthology *Meanwhile, in Another Part of the Forest*. The title *Funny Boy* simultaneously unifies by giving a sense of identity (however ambiguous and plural the word is) to the protagonist, and fragments the chapters of which the novel is composed, because the subtitle suggests that the six stories may be read as separable and independent works. Their protagonists, while all called Arjie, are not necessarily one person; or if they are one person, the assumed homogeneity of personhood over different stages is challenged. The separating tendency in funniness is already installed in the novel’s title.

“Funniness” betrays Arjie when the ambiguous nature of the word is denied and its signification fixed, expelling not only him, but also those who are “funny”: anyone who is not regarded as “proper” within the dominant ideology is banished simply by labelling them “funny.” Such violent expulsion accumulates not as a direct force, but within repeated forward and backward steps. In this “Novel in Six Stories,” each chapter begins with what Freud calls “the return of the repressed” (“Repression” 154), and ends with a compromise, or a further repression. This structure can be illustrated through the fourth “story,” “Small Choices,” which gives an example of repression in the father, both sexual and political. The chapter opens with the unveiling of a childhood friendship followed by a series of events which reveal Appa’s potential sexual funniness; it ends with political oppression, intolerance to a Tamil, and ethnic “funniness,” which Appa refuses to admit. Arjie’s suffering and the family’s exile are actually both caused by the repeated repression of some version of funniness. At the beginning of the chapter, Appa reads aloud an unexpected letter from the widow of a childhood friend:

Dear Mr. Chelvaratnam, I am writing to request a favor in memory of my late husband. My son, Jegan, is a qualified accountant. He’s twenty-five years old and has spent the last year as a relief worker for the Gandhiyam movement, but, due to recent problems, I removed him from the organization. He is currently unemployed. Would you be able to find him a post in your business? I am sure his skills will be useful to you. Yours truly, Grace Parameswaran. P.S. I found the attached

document among my husband's belongings, and I am sending it to you as a souvenir of your friendship with him. (151-52)

The letter implies a repression, starting with the old “yellowing piece of paper” (152), followed by the appearance of Jegan, the son of “Buddy Parameswaran,” and then with him being sent away. The parallel between Buddy and Mr. Chelvaratnam (Appa)'s relationship, as separated close childhood friends, with that of Arjie and Shehan opens up the possibility that Arjie's undefined funniness may be derived from the father, suggesting that the entry into patriarchy depends on the repression of something homosocial or homoerotic, of tendencies which cannot be acknowledged. When Arjie's father first discovers Arjie in bridal dress, everyone laughs except Appa, who “pretended he had not heard [the laughter] and, with an inclination of his head, indicated to Amma to get rid of me” (14). The father's reaction may suggest his repression. He cannot laugh at his son, not just because he dislikes the cross-dressing, but also perhaps because it reminds him of his own “funniness,” his own “tendencies.” Whereas the text suggests that Arjie's life is a repetition of Appa's, reoccurrences of words such as “funny” and “tendencies” in the novel can be understood as what Lacan calls *l'instance* in “*L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient*” [“The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious”]. For Lacan, *l'instance* means both the instance and insistence. “Funny” belongs to such literality of language, which “insists” through the specific language of repeated generations. The tendency (or “insistence”) of the word “funny” is to accrue non-specific but marginalized meanings, and to “insist” in the unconscious, tending to create a history that the conscious self is unaware of.

Tendencies Toward a Tendency

Arjie's “tendencies” are first manifest in his being drawn to associate with his female friends as a young child. In his grandparents' house, described in “Pigs Can't Fly,” spaces are explicitly divided to demarcate sexual difference:

Territorially, the area around my grandparents' house was divided into two. The front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys, although included in their group was my female cousin Meena. . . .

The second territory was called “the girls,” included in which, however, was myself, a boy. It was to this territory of “the girls,”

confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch, that I seemed to have *gravitated naturally*, my earliest memories of those spend-the-days always belonging in the back garden of my grandparents' home. (3; emphasis added)

John C. Hawley sees ethnic (Sinhalese/Tamil) and gender (boy/girl) binary oppositions as metaphors for each other (124). National identity requires an identification of "proper" ethnicity and "normal" sexuality. But the quoted passage destabilizes the categories of boy and girl, making the situation "funny": the young Arjie has a tendency to enter the girls' territory. As if pulled or stretched (*tendre* in French) by gravity, Arjie "naturally" belongs to the territory of "the girls." His cross-gendered acts are treated as signs of being "funny," but he is proud of being the bride. Arjie's tendencies are characterized as natural, even though the word "natural" itself is problematic because the notion of naturalness is largely ideological.

It does not take long for Arjie to realize that his "funniness" places him in a liminal space. After being barred from "the girls' world," he foresees being "caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (39). Stuck in an imagined space, he loses any sense of gender, any sexual, ethnic, or national identity. Arjie's liminality robs him from possessing any single subjectivity. A slippage in language always misrepresents: there is no way of describing a boy who is different from other boys that does not risk defining or implying that he belongs with the girls. Understanding gender in terms of a binary opposition of boy and girl offers no place for Arjie, just as language's power to name deprives him of a proper space.

It is precisely the apparent plurality of the word "tendencies" that makes it a crucial term in the construction of homosexuality as a single thing within the text. "Tendencies" first appears as a plural when Appa talks about his worry of something emerging in Arjie:

"From the time he was small he has shown certain tendencies."

"What do you mean, tendencies?" Jegan asked.

"You know . . . he used to play with dolls, always reading."

. . .

"I don't think there's anything wrong with him," Jegan said.

For as long as I could remember, my father had alluded to this "tendency" in me without ever giving it a name. (162; 1st ellipsis in original)

This cross-generation conversation shows how “homosexuality” is (not) discussed in the novel. Appa is “embarrassed” (162), and the “name” he gives is misnamed: “tendencies” is understood because it does not tell. What do these “tendencies” tend toward? The answer is omitted yet understood, or misunderstood, like the word “funny.” If the word “tendencies” is a substitute for “homosexuality,” identity becomes nothing but a chain of catachreses, like Arjie’s using “tendency” to name “tendencies.” The plurality and complexity which Appa and Jegan talk about become a singular “tendency” when Arjie contemplates its meaning, bringing a sense of closure to the word in an attempt to fix his own identity as defined by a single tendency.

One euphemistic but now archaic meaning of “tendencies,” particularly in middle-class Britain, is “tendencies toward homosexuality” (“Tendency, n.1d,” *OED* n. pag.). Though it is unstated, this is likely the reason behind Eve Sedgwick’s use of the title *Tendencies*, a book analyzing different “gay” texts. The citations which the *OED* gives are from 1938 and 1958, years which would roughly correspond to the period in which Appa had his college life in Britain (152). The *OED* draws on English literature: first from the British Poet Laureate John Betjeman’s *Oxford University Chest*, in which “Someone who has ‘tendencies’ as an undergraduate, will in ten years time be settled down to married life” (qtd. in “Tendency” n. pag.). The second is by Lawrence Durrell, who was himself arguably born a colonial subject but became a British establishment figure. Durrell writes in *Balthazar*, “Now the Egyptians, they don’t give a damn about a man if he has Tendencies” (qtd. in “Tendency” n. pag.). Plural tendencies mean a single thing, possessing the power to break down a binary opposition.

Did Arjie’s father pick up the word “tendencies” at Oxford, or whichever university he attended in Britain? Did he pick up actual “tendencies”? And did he understand the meaning of the word, or would it have been a case of the outsider not being able to understand an “in” word, the use of which shows a “sudden glory” (Hobbes 6.125) over someone who cannot and who is unable, on account of colonial embarrassment, to ask? Does the word then carry colonial implications, being the language of a parent-culture not sufficiently understood by its Sri Lankan user? Or did Appa understand the word perfectly, and is he now trying to talk like a British subject in a postcolonial context? Is homosexuality to be defined by the colonial power, especially through its literature, and if so, to what extent does the colonized figure know this? And what of the knowledge of Arjie? Does the author try to make tendencies into a singular tendency? Selvadurai’s deliberate emphasis on changing

the plural to the singular exposes the weirdness, or “funniness,” of assigning one meaning, that of homosexuality, to “tendencies.”

Jegan’s reply to Appa is no less ambiguous: his answer could mean that there is nothing queer about Arjie, if Jegan understands what “having tendencies” means; or, that there is nothing wrong with Arjie even if he is homosexual. Jegan’s attitudes toward sexuality and national identity are conflicting, for he belongs to a political activist organization aiming to divide Sri Lanka by turning the northern and eastern territories into a monoethnic Tamil independent state. To split the country into two according to ethnic difference is not to recognize the queerness of national identity. To read *Funny Boy* as a “coming-of-age novel” (Hawley 117) or “a tale of sexual coming-of-age” (Aldrich 210) is potentially reductive, because it is impossible to know what “funny” means, and it is an act of reducing plural tendencies to a fixed, single quality. “Small Choices” ends with the betrayal of Jegan, whom Appa has promised to protect for the sake of Buddy, Jegan’s father, and with a fake referendum organized by the anti-Tamil government, which suggests that sustained state violence will soon be under way. Shocked by the brutality of these injustices, Arjie feels he has no alternative but to stay with his father, “sharing his silence” (*Funny Boy* 203). Their mutual silence covers over Appa’s own ethnic and perhaps sexual “funniness” unveiled by the Jegan incident, but the temporary understanding implied in the shared silence does not prevent Appa from insisting on reducing Arjie’s “tendencies” into a masculine, single subject. Arjie’s tendencies lead him to a position of liminality, a situation Appa insists on rectifying by transferring him to a prestigious boys’ school.

Critical Funniness: Making Fun of the Imperial Canon

We have traced moments when Arjie’s funniness is mentioned or referred to, in non-verbal or literary ways. Canonical literary language “insists,” particularly in public school discourse as well as in the cultural references to which the author is exposed. Postcolonial discourse subtly modifies this language of literature, showing that there is something funny within it. In the last story, realizing that leaving Sri Lanka is a reality for him, Arjie recalls his childhood excitement—“what fun it would be to go abroad” (302)—when his imagination was fuelled by books he had read: “Those Famous Five books, and then *Little Women* and the Hardy Boys” (302). Given the prestigious education that Arjie received, we could assume that apart from reading these popular children’s adventures or *Bildungsroman* at home, he must have picked up the colonial literary canon at school, though he is not necessarily able to distinguish the British “Famous Five” from the American *Little Women* and “Hardy

Boys” series.⁵ Such a literary tradition is also implied in Selvadurai’s *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, a tale set in 1980s Colombo (the same time and place as *Funny Boy*), in which the young protagonist Amrith studies English literature including *Romeo and Juliet* (*Swimming* 49), *Othello* (61), George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (54) and Rudyard Kipling’s “If” (164).⁶ Though not referred to in *Funny Boy*, Thomas Hardy is another example of a writer Arjie may have known because of his post-colonial education.

Allusions to literary classics in Selvadurai’s world fuel the novel’s “tendencies,” silently cancelling out the violence that excludes “funny boys” (all those who are regarded as others). The allusions also offer resistances to the dominant power that splits the nation, symbolized in the family’s house at the end. When Appa decides to leave for Canada, Arjie is “glad” because he does not “feel at home in Sri Lanka any longer” (*Funny Boy* 297). But leaving Sri Lanka means he must also part with his boyfriend, Shehan. Their last encounter is recounted in Arjie’s last diary entry dated 27 August 1983, which also ends the novel. Arjie writes, after the last time they have sexual intercourse, “I glanced up at the mirror and saw that he [Shehan] was watching me. For a moment our eyes met, then I turned away and continued getting dressed” (303). It is followed by a parting scene invested with such literary motifs as torrential raining, loud weeping, and a compulsion of “turning back and look[ing]” at the house destroyed by “Black July” rioters:⁷

I wheeled it [my bicycle] to the gate, staring straight ahead, not wanting to look at the house again. I didn’t bother to close the gate as I left. There was no reason to protect it against the outside world anymore.

I began to ride up the road, and the rain suddenly started, falling in great torrents, as it does during the monsoon season. When I reached the top of the road, I couldn’t prevent myself from turning back to look at the house one last time. For a moment I saw it, then the rain fell faster and thicker, obscuring it from my sight. (305)

⁵ In an interview, when asked about his target readership, Selvadurai uses Enid Blyton’s *The Famous Five* as an example of a book that addresses only the child reader, but not the adult who reads it to the child. Selvadurai’s own novels aim to “double address” both the Sri Lankan and the non-Sri Lankan readers (Salgado, “Autobiographies” 56).

⁶ For a discussion of Kipling’s production of colonial discourse of heteronormativity, and the irony of Amrith’s recitation of “If” as a (failed) means to control his queer sexual desire in *Swimming*, see Bakshi (184).

⁷ For an account of the history of the riot and the ensuing 26-year civil war in Sri Lanka, see Winslow and Woost, especially chapter 1. On the “Black July” riots of 1983, see Davis (220-22).

Arjie may be too young to have read Hardy or Shakespeare, but the adult writer must have read the British canon. The parting between Arjie and the burnt, ruined house in the midst of “great torrents” in *Funny Boy*’s ending evokes the familiar imagery of a lover’s departure in the rain, as in Hardy’s poem “At Castle Boterel,” with the “I” bidding farewell to a vision of his dead wife:

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,
I look back at it amid the rain,
For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,
And I shall traverse old love’s domain
Never again. (Hardy 169)

These motifs of the visual senses (“look,” “see,” and “look back”) in Hardy’s poem and the compulsion of looking in *Funny Boy* suggest that although it is the “last look” that the poet and narrator have, they nonetheless revisit the scene in writing. Hardy’s poem is a farewell to his dead wife, but what receives Arjie’s look is the now decimated house that embodies his identity, his past, and his Sri Lankan national identity. Whereas Hardy’s dead wife diminishes as he moves away from the gate, Arjie’s house is gradually obscured by the downpour. The two texts both end in rain, suggesting a sense of disillusionment.

Motifs of rain, gates, segregation, and funniness evoke not only Hardy, but also Shakespeare. In *Twelfth Night*, Feste the clown laments over knaves being ostracized from a house:

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day.

But when I came to man’s estate,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
‘Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,
For the rain it raineth every day. (5.1.388-95)

The figure of the “funny boy” is a conflation of Shakespeare’s “little tiny boy,” “knaves and thieves,” and Feste the clown. Moreover, we witness the same image of

this figure being expelled in the rain in the closing scene of *Funny Boy* and in *Twelfth Night*. In the latter, the clown is not funny anymore. He is lamenting the mistreatment of his kind by nobility and society at large. Arjie and his kind, be it a Tamil or a homosexual, are pushed out of their own house. If Arjie is funny, the cultural root could be traced back to an early-modern tradition that “boys are compared to women, or said to be effeminate” (Sinfield, *Shakespeare* 126) instanced in *King Henry VI, Part 1* in which Gloucester accuses the Bishop of Winchester of preferring “an effeminate prince, / Whom like a schoolboy you may overawe” (1.1.35-36).

These effeminate “schoolboys” in the textual “faultlines” (Sinfield, *Faultlines* 9) are reminders of an unresolvable “third gender” in Shakespeare. Commenting on Shakespeare’s theatre, Stephen Greenblatt maintains that individual manhood was formed by excluding one gender in adolescence, since “boys” played female roles on stage.⁸ The subversive dimension to Arjie’s “tendencies” in *Funny Boy* can be traced back to Shakespearean theatrical practices. Such a subversive dimension in representing the “third gender” is also hinted at in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, in which this theatrical transvestism is doubly practiced by the single-sex schools—where female roles are played by juniors in the boys’ schools, and male roles by seniors in the girls’ schools—in the Inter-School Shakespeare Competition held in Colombo (*Swimming* 49). Having won The Best Female Portrayal from a Boy’s School playing the heroine in *Romeo and Juliet* the previous year (49), the 14-year-old Amrith is first offered the role of Desdemona in *Othello* (220-21), but is then dispossessed of this female lead and instead given the part of Cassio (222-23). He is being made fun of—“Ah, Michael Cassio, waiting for your darling Iago to pick you up?”—a reference to Iago’s lie about Cassio’s dream of kissing him (223; emphasis in original; *Othello* 3.3.416-28). Even though the complexity of Iago’s psychology, that is to say, his own fantasy about Cassio as manifested in his imagined oneiric erotic encounter, is certainly missed by the boys (who “don’t know the first damn thing about Shakespeare” [224], according to Mrs. Algama, the director of the Drama Society), the subversive elements of the strangeness in Shakespeare’s theatrical practices are exposed in the Sri Lankan single-sex public school.

While Hardy and Shakespeare are literary allusions in Selvadurai’s writings, *Funny Boy*’s subversive tendencies can also be found in two explicit textual references to poems by Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938): “The Best School of All”

⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, on cross-dressing in Renaissance theatre, instanced in the twins in *Twelfth Night*, argues, “[Shakespearean] plays insist upon the chafing between the two sexes and the double nature of individuals, but the theatre reveals, in the presence of the man’s (or boy’s) body beneath the woman’s clothes, the ultimate sexual reality” (52).

(1899), which Selvadurai uses as the title for the fifth chapter of the novel, and “Vitae Lampada” (1892), which Arjie is forced by the principal Mr. Abeysinghe (Black Tie) to recite in the prize-giving ceremony (*Funny Boy* 231). The fictional Queen Victoria Academy can be regarded as representative because of the significance of the name: there are schools founded by the British during the colonial era in Sri Lanka such as Victoria College in Chulipuram, and Royal College (formerly Royal Academy, established in 1835) in Colombo. Black Tie, a product of such an education, always dresses himself in outmoded outfits, a “carefully pressed white suit,” and a “sola topee,” or “white domed hat” (209) that reminds Arjie of a British colonial ruler. Arjie’s response to the privileging of a colonial mentality through the teaching of poetry of little artistic or literary value like Newbolt’s might position the doubly marginalized protagonist as what Perera calls a “resisting reader,” realizing “the hypocrisy inherent in the school,” “the anachronistic nature of its values,” and the “injustice resid[ing] in the patriarchal world” of modern Sri Lanka (“Some Responses” 259). Defiance of postcolonial authority aside, I contend that it is a critical funniness in the text itself, and not Arjie’s, that allows *Funny Boy* to challenge the values promoted by the former colony’s imperial British “master.”

The British imperial values that Queen Victoria Academy promotes are manifest in the discourse of literary language and everyday disciplinary practices. The word “game” repeated in “Vitae Lampada” signifies such aggressive activities as physical training, bullying, cricket matches (the British national sport), school policy power struggles, and imperial war.⁹ As described in Newbolt’s “The Best School of All,” Black Tie also “tanned the hide” (line 25) of his students, evoking a sense of sadism, while the “pride” (line 27) gained by the masters in the fourth stanza is most likely erotic. This sadomasochism contributes to the making of the masculine subject, the “funny boy,” the boy with “tendencies,” and yet the school is a feminine figure—the word “her” recurs three times in the first stanza. The refrain of “Vitae Lampada” is “Play up! play up! and play the game!” The school boys’ homosociality implies an unconscious homoeroticism in Newbolt’s canonical but far from refined poem. The “game” they play is remembered in the second stanza when the narrator is fighting in a war, requiring him to “play up,” evoking the “game” played by the protagonist of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901).¹⁰ Meanings that “the game” can take

⁹ See also Bell (257-58).

¹⁰ Edward Said calls *Kim* “a master work of imperialism” (“*Kim* as Imperial Novel” 349). He writes, “The device invented by Kipling, by which British control over India (the Great Game)

up range from cricket, war, and colonialism, to, in *Funny Boy*, homoeroticism and homosexuality.¹¹ The title, and the phrase “torch of flame” in the third stanza, are taken from Lucretius, but they also evoke the blindfolded woman’s lit torch depicted in the “small sketch in oils” in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899).¹² Patric Dickinson quotes Newbolt on the First World War, which “like life itself, is a game or else a brutality worse than bestial. . . . I have come to believe that the best thing we can do is to kill the accursed and that isn’t a job to rejoice over. To win a game makes the pulses leap” (Introduction 22). In this context, to “play the game” is to fight a war. Using the colonial and literary rhetoric of fighting a war as “playing the game” also allows, because of its fantasy, for what happens in Sri Lanka’s civil war. Newbolt’s “playing the game” refrain also appears in Appa’s tip to survive as a member of minority, that “as a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game. Play it right and you can do very well for yourself. The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous” (*Funny Boy* 169). Knowing how to “play the game,” however, does not protect Arjie’s father from the violence in 1983, however hard he tries to “go around quietly” and “[not to] step on anyone’s toes” (169). The rhetoric of “the game” insists in the unconscious, producing pogroms, which are embarked on in game-like tendencies.

The treatment of Newbolt’s poems in *Funny Boy* implicitly criticizes British imperialism. Perhaps Newbolt’s Jewishness made his patriotism more emphatic, as if he felt the need to assert it out of a sense of marginalization.¹³ Arjie repeats the first two lines of “The Best School of All” and moves into the last stanza of “Vitam Lampada” when Black Tie demands that he recite the former in a rehearsal for the ceremony speech. Arjie’s inability to recite under Black Tie’s over-masculine sadistic threat becomes ironic and comic at the same time. Reciting “The Best School of All,” Arjie goes, “It’s good to see the School we knew, the land of youth and dream, / This

coincides in detail with Kim’s disguised fantasy to be at one with India, is a remarkable one precisely because it would not have occurred without British imperialism” (349-50).

¹¹ “The game,” according to the *OED*, means “lovemaking,” “amorous sport or dalliance,” or denotes “sexual intercourse” (“Game, n.4a,” *OED*), instanced in Ulysses’s disapproving description of women like Helen and Cressida, “set them down / For sluttish spoils of opportunity / And daughters of the game” (*Tro.* 4.5.62-64). Ironically, Arjie’s father sends him to play the game of cricket, wishing to turn him into a man, but Arjie instead plays “the game” with his boyfriend whom he meets in school.

¹² Robert Hampson suggests that while the goddess of Justice is often represented as blindfolded, and Liberty bearing a lighted torch, the blindfolded woman with a torch is “more disturbing and less easily interpreted” (Conrad 135). For Hampson, Kurt’s image is a combination of English explorers who bear “the torch” and, like the Romans in Africa, “men going at it blind” (20).

¹³ Dickinson (11-27). See also Susan Chitty, *Playing the Game: Biography of Sir Henry Newbolt*, Quartet, 1997.

is the word that year by year, while in her place the School is set, / Every one of her sons must hear and none that hears it dare forget . . ." (*Funny Boy* 231; ellipsis in original). At the very moment when Arjie enunciates the warning by the colonizer not to forget the lesson taught, his mind goes completely blank. There is a latent criticism of violent imperialist force exerted onto a colonial subject when the very reaction is to violate the rule so set forth. Coming out of Newbolt's education policy, Black Tie, a colonial subject dressed up as the colonizer, punishes Arjie for his failed rehearsal by "continu[ing] to cane me until he felt the vice of falsehood had been banished from my being" (232). The mocking tone and Arjie's jumbling up of Newbolt's poems work together to intensify the criticism of colonial violence, both Newbolt's and the imitator Black Tie's, offered by Arjie's unintentional "critical funniness."

Following this episode, Arjie and Shehan make fun of Newbolt when looking for his poems in the British Council library. Shehan, after reading the poems, says, "this fellow really loved school" (235);

Now we were chuckling, and it was a relief to be able to hold up for ridicule all that was considered sacred by the Queen Victoria Academy.

"I bet you anything," I said, "that he was cricket captain, rigger captain, and tennis captain all in one year."

"And don't forget leader of the debate team and chairman of the English Literary Association," [Shehan] Soyza added. "Otherwise, how else could he know such big words?"

He peered at the book, then held up his finger authoritatively and read in a sonorous voice, "'Qui ante diem periit: Sed miles sed pro patria.'"

The expression on his face, as if he understood what he was saying, made me laugh. (235)

Newbolt's imagined achievement in sports (which, like "game," means wars and British imperialism) and as a man of letters (his 1921 report on education) supplement the criticism of his patriotism and English language education after the war. Shehan misses the beginning ("*Qui procul hinc*") of these "big words" in the "legend" written on the "yonder brass" in Newbolt's poem "Clifton Chapel" (1908), a reference to Clifton College, Newbolt's alma mater, which he considered the "best school of all." In "Clifton Chapel," a father addresses his son, buried in a "frontier-grave" (ll. 30),

possibly in the Boer War, comforting the young man by affirming that he was a good soldier who died for his country. He praises his son who must “love the game beyond the prize” (ll. 10), and “honour, while you strike him down, / The foe that comes with fearless eyes” (ll. 11-12). Though Newbolt’s complete poem is not given, the mocking way Shehan reads the half line dismisses the values promoted by the poet. Homosociality (“brotherhood”), masculinity, masochism (“count the life of battle good” [ll. 13]), and patriotism are part of the imperial “game.” The subversiveness of their laughter becomes more powerful as the speaker is unaware of its implications—“as if he understood what he was saying.”¹⁴ Criticism of Newbolt offered by Shehan and Arjie’s laughter is best described by Terence Hawkes, who argues that the policy of teaching English in England in the 1920s as part of a liberal education was a political act, aiming to bring “social cohesion in the face of potential disintegration and disaffection; and nationalism, the encouragement of pride in English national culture on a broader front” (325-26). The person behind the education policy was none other than Newbolt, who worked in the War Propaganda Bureau, and was knighted in 1915.¹⁵ The power of the radical “chuckles” (*Funny Boy* 235) resides in criticizing Sir Henry Newbolt, his British imperial values, and the implied hypocrisy of his education policy.

The boys’ subversive laughter in the British Council library is the beginning of a subtle criticism of British colonial power which had attempted to achieve cultural superiority. It is followed by Arjie’s realization that Newbolt’s poetry is full of “foolish lines” (267), and then his “revenge” plan against Black Tie to take Newbolt’s two poems as representative of English literature, and to “confuse [them], jumble lines, take entire stanzas from one poem and place them in the other until the poems were rendered senseless” (270). The poetry recitation serves a political function. The new vice principal, appointed by a cabinet minister, plots to transform the existing “too British” (215) school, which allows multi-ethnicity and multi-theology, to a Buddhist one, which will result in a monolingual Sinhala-speaking education.

¹⁴ Shehan’s missed Latin clause *Qui procul hinc* means “[those] who [died] far away from here.” Miriam R. Murtuza argues that Shehan’s omission is a powerful irony commenting on the violence in post-independence Sri Lanka. She writes, “British soldiers are no longer dying ‘far away’ in Sri Lanka; instead, ‘those who died before their day’ are Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese, ‘soldiers’ and innocent civilians, including Arjie’s Tamil grandparents” (Murtuza, “Play Up” 257). The criticism offered by the “funny” boys’ laughter operates on various levels. For a condensed version of her discussion of *Funny Boy* in the PhD dissertation “Play Up,” see Murtuza, “‘The Best School of All’? British-Modelled Education in Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*,” *Phoenix: Sri Lanka Journal of English in the Commonwealth*, vol. 12, 2015, pp. 101-14.

¹⁵ For a full analysis of Newbolt’s poetry and how his public school education policy promotes British imperialism, see Murtuza, “Play Up” (50-84, especially 52-54).

Inheriting British colonial values from the old principal of Queen Victoria Academy, Black Tie tries to win over the cabinet minister, who is also an alumnus, with a speech based on Newbolt's poetry. Arjie is involuntarily dragged into a conflict between an inclusive but colonial school policy and an exclusive but national one. As an ethnic minority, Arjie should side with the more inclusive side, but he chooses to destroy Black Tie's plot out of his love for Shehan. The result is a distorted speech and a "tired and defeated" Black Tie whose words are "buffeted" "by laughter and coughs" (276). Arjie's action fragments the school as it is taken over by Sinhalese power harmful to him as a Tamil.

Conclusion

Arjie's "critical funniness" includes the carnivalization (turning upside-down) of the colonial order, and the exposing of Newbolt's ideology and his double role as an educator promoting British literary superiority and an advocate of imperial wars. Arjie's laughter is not pusillanimity, but a spontaneous critique of colonial discourse, with its normalizing tendencies which may be dependent on a secret and disavowed homosexuality. Read that way, Arjie and Shehan's same-sex acts could be performative, a never completed "coming out" process unveiling the double standard towards homosexuality that British colonialism implemented because same-sex acts remain officially illegal in contemporary Sri Lanka. According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity "erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of [dominating] cultures" (58), and its power is desired in postcolonial cultures and subcultures. Arjie's creation of himself as a "funny boy" by making fun of the recitation requires him to concede to the Sinhalese nationalist discourse that destabilizes him in terms of national identity. Katherine Bell defends Arjie's jumbling up Newbolt's poems during the prize-giving ceremony as a crucial act of resistance and revolt instead of merely an unwitting self-sabotaging revenge against his own ethnic alliance because "even if it [the poetry recitation] takes place on a singular level, [it] is intrinsically *engaged* with public life" (273). This is because "when Arjie refuses to be a temporal and emotive signifier and publically bows out of the literary encounter to which he had been subjected, he leaves generative space for dialogue" (272). Enlisting Julia Kristeva's *Intimate Revolt* (2002), Bell argues that Arjie's action could be classified as a revolt, which, "instead of imposing new values, questions and displaces the past by bringing to light its conflictuality" (272). She asserts, "*Funny Boy* should not be seen as a failure of traditional *Bildung* philosophy but, rather, an opening for and insistence upon a more pluralist ethos" (273). Such an

opening is not merely done through Arjie's actions, but also, more subtly and more powerfully, by the insistence of the text, which is installed by Arjie's very act of writing his own memoir. Critical funniness operates on two levels. First, creating funniness within the novel with Arjie as the central figure, his six stories allow spontaneous laughter criticizing discourses which promote fixed subjectivity, including sexuality, nationalism, and imperialism. Second, through conscious or unconscious literary allusions to the English canon, the textual tendencies of the memoir, a postcolonial text written in yet another former British colony, Canada, complicate and criticize dominating and oppressive cultures by making them "funny." Arjie's unfortunate stories are told in a text with funny tendencies, offering resistance and challenges to discourses promoting homogeneous subjectivity. Though Arjie may be expelled from Sri Lanka, his narrative's radical funniness nonetheless insists on returning through the sexual/textual tendencies, mocking the notion of any single subject position, be it national, ethnic, sexual, or gendered.

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