

THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF GENDER, SEXUALITY, ETHNIC AND CLASS BINARIES IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S FUNNY BOY AND CINNAMON GARDENS

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Abstract - Shyam Selvadurai's novels have contributed significantly to Sri Lankan English literature. The author highlights sensitive areas such as gender, economic classes and racial issues as well as subjects considered as taboo in Sri Lanka, such as sexuality. The author's portrayal of characters and issues in *Funny Boy* (1994) and *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998) are therefore essential in the analysis of his subject matter. Set against the ethnic riots of 1983 and the pre-independent Ceylon respectively, the texts highlight gender, sexual, racial and class issues of the times. Existing research presents gender and sexuality of *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* in the light of power structures and networks of power. Moreover, critics argue that these power structures are constructed as binary oppositions. However, these binaries highlight the power structures in antagonistic perspectives. Nevertheless, reading closely, the two texts exemplify the interdependencies of these binaries in their exercise of power. Therefore, this study focuses on the interdependence of the binary power structures according to the portrayal of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class of the two texts and the two eras in concern. A variety of literary theories have been used to expose the binaries and to show how certain aspects of these theories will be challenged as the binaries are viewed in the light of diversity and interdependence.

Keywords- Sri Lankan Literature, Shyam Selvadurai, Binary Oppositions

I. INTRODUCTION

Shyam Selvadurai's novels have contributed significantly to Sri Lankan English Literature. He highlights sensitive areas such as gender, economic classes and racial issues as well as subjects considered as taboo in Sri Lanka, such as sexuality. The author's portrayal of characters and issues in *Funny Boy* (1994) and *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998) are therefore essential in the analysis of his subject matter. Set against the ethnic riots of 1983 and the pre-independent Ceylon respectively, the texts highlight gender, sexual, racial and class issues of the times. Existing research presents gender and sexuality of *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* in the light of power structures and networks of power. Moreover, Ransirini (2001) argues that these power structures are constructed as binary oppositions:

“His final comprehension of the figures of power predicates a rather severe binary: the powerful vs. the powerless. This understanding undeniably forecloses the subtle nuances and complementary and interpenetrative nature residual to power relations... It is evident that the novel in its exploration of the networks and construction of power unconsciously contests Arjie's realization of power as binary” (Ransirini, S., 2001, p.109).

Per the analysis of Ransirini (2001), these binaries highlight the power structures in antagonistic perspectives. Nevertheless, reading closely, the two texts exemplify the interdependencies of these binaries in their exercise of power.

Born to parents of an inter-cultural, inter-ethnic marriage, Selvadurai experienced the national and ethnic conflict and the pressures of Sri Lankan society on the basis of sexual orientation and race. Moreover, his works highlight themes such as gender and sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, class demarcations and self-identity. Thus, it is understood that he allows the interdependence of binaries that he has experienced in his own life to manifest in his works as well.

Therefore, this study focuses on the interdependence of the binary power structures according to the portrayal of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class of the two texts and the two eras in concern. A variety of literary theories have been used to expose the binaries and to show how certain aspects of these theories will be challenged as the binaries are viewed in the light of diversity and interdependence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The two texts in concern herein, are perhaps the writer's most famous works, however, *Funny Boy* has come under the spotlight as a revolutionary novel, given Sri Lanka's generalized view on the topic of homosexuality and as a first effort by the author. As a result, there seems to be more literature and criticism available on *Funny Boy*, than on *Cinnamon Gardens*.

Ransirini's "Power, Gender and Sexuality: A Perspective on 'Funny Boy'" (2001) is one such work that explores the power structures of the text which is one of the focal points of this paper. Ransirini highlights the power dynamics at play as a result of gender and sexual differences among characters, highlighting at all times the superiority of one character over another. Moreover, Scarborough's paper on "Romantic Hardships of Ethnic and Sexual Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*" (2016) explores the relationships between three sets of lovers – Radha and Anil, Nalini and Daryl, and Arjie and Shehan to highlight how Selvadurai as an author "develops these narratives that display how the relationships all face similar adversities due to the identities of the partners involved and the societal divisions between people of

those identities" (Scarborough, 2016). Consequently, it is evident that critics explore the power dynamics according to the normative powerful / powerless binary, in reference to their relationships with each other.

Prateek (2014) further evaluates Selvadurai's approach to the text and its content in the light of queerness. He elucidates that "One can extend the Freudian idea of heterosexuality to homosexuality and claim that homosexuality is also a love drive that is invented to serve as a binary opposite of heterosexuality, and perhaps its emergence is directly connected to the middle class morality. Challenging this middle class morality for the sake of same sex love has been one of the agendas of Selvadurai's novel." (Prateek, 2014). This, perhaps, is a rare instance in which the critic engages the idea of binary opposites to highlight the contrastive elements such as heteronormative behaviour and homosexuality. However, given the social conditioning of sexualities in Sri Lanka, this binary may also be viewed as a binary opposition based on power dynamics; heterosexuality being the more powerful sexual orientation. In terms of binary oppositions with regard to queer ideology, Jaiswal (2015) also expounds the masculine – feminine play of gender as a subversion of patriarchy that is evident within the text. For instance, he comments that Selvadurai "very subtly critique[s] the value charged hierarchical masculine-feminine gender equation.... This object is all the more ground breaking in that the text subverts the existing patriarchy by highlighting the oppression experienced by males (Arjie and Shehan) at the hand of patriarchy through the constructed norms of masculinity" (Jaiswal, 2015). Thus, while Jaiswal associates the text as a subversion of patriarchy, highlighting the archetypal masculinity and femininity known to the characters, he has not necessarily identified the co-relation and the collaborative existence of these binary oppositions. With reference to ethnic and sexual otherness, Saraswathi (2017) elaborates the apparent binary oppositions between ethnic, language and sexual representations in the text; "If Sinhalese is represented as the language of masculinity and power, Tamil becomes the unspoken language associated with an unarticulated sexuality" (Saraswathi, 2017). Saraswathi has identified similarities between certain language groups, sexualities and performances of gender based on their power dynamics. She attempts to display the authority and power with which certain languages are understood, similar to the understanding of sexuality and gender performances. However, Selvadurai's narrative displays instances in which these two polarities depend on each other, irrespective of the power dynamics.

Nevertheless, these critics have attempted to display the apparent binary oppositions in the texts and how they exist antagonistically with each other.

Thus, it is evident that the existing gendered and sexuality approaches to the text deal mainly with binary oppositions as they are, and not as a subverted form of its normative beliefs. Inspired by this apparent criticism of *Funny Boy* and the lack of substantial literature on *Cinnamon Gardens*, this paper aims at appropriating the idea of binary oppositions to edify the collaborative and interdependent existence of these power structures in the light of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class in the two novels.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research is based on two novels and a number of critical theories. The primary texts, *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens* will be critically analysed and findings from the primary texts which are relevant to the research title will be supported and justified via critical theories. The critical theories are drawn from feminist, Marxist, postcolonial and queer theories to support the understanding of how gendered, sexuality, ethnic and class binaries are interdependent. Therefore, the primary and secondary texts will be analysed critically to highlight the play of binary oppositions as interdependent markers through methods such as;

- a) content analysis, which will perceive the significance of words, phrases and ideologies critically;
- b) critical discourse analysis, to understand how the texts are positioned, resultantly what interests are served and how discourse is implicated in relation to power, and;
- c) narrative inquiry which will present both narrative structure and mechanisms by which the narratives are consumed.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study's primary focus is to investigate the relationships between a number of different binaries which function throughout the two texts. Evidently, it is understood that most binaries discussed herein are interdependent, thus

posing a challenge towards the normative understanding of binaries, which is that one party is almost always superior to the other.

A. Binaries of Gender

The male / female gender binary is perhaps one of the most explicit binaries in the two texts. "For the man / woman relationship to be maintained with the male hierarchy there should be a traditional internalization of the male as the dominant sex by the female" (Ransirini, S., 2001. p.110). In *Funny Boy*, the binary oppositions are brought out through the marriage of Nalini and Chelva. As Ransirini (2001) has identified, in the traditional sense, Chelva seems to be more dominant in the relationship. Resultantly, he accuses Nalini for the ways in which she brings up Arjie and undeniably expects her to obey his instructions. The latter is evident when he instructs her to organize parties to host his business associates. However, the interdependence of Nalini and Chelva is also evident throughout the novel; Chelva relies on Nalini to bring up the children and to host elaborate parties in order to secure a good name, whilst Nalini also depends on Chelva for financial stability, highlighting the interdependence of binaries. Moreover, the boys who play cricket and the girls who play bride-ride also juxtapose and contribute to the binary social genders whilst depending on each other both to enjoy their games and to maintain their winning streak. Diggy depends on the girls to keep Arjie away from cricket which helps his team to maintain their scores whilst the girls depend on Arjie's creativity to play bride-ride. Cricket is viewed as the more dominant and masculine activity by the household as they occupy the front garden and the girls and Arjie occupy the back verandah. Moreover, the parents insist that Arjie plays cricket because he is a boy and boys engage in cricket which is inevitably considered more masculine and dominant, hence complimentary to his gender and expected social norms of gender.

Likewise, in *Cinnamon Gardens*, Balendran, Murugasu and the Mudaliyar are more dominant and powerful over their wives. However, they too depend on their wives to maintain their family name and to produce a generation to carry forth their name which is ultimately a sign of patriarchy. The Mudaliyar depends on Nalamma and Sonia to organise parties and to host guests, whilst Balendran and Murugasu depend on Sonia and Louisa to bring up children, respectively. The women are also dependent on the men for financial stability. It is apparent

that in the patriarchal context in which the novels are placed, “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (Habib, M.A.R., 2011). In both texts, other than for Radha of *Funny Boy* and Annalukshmi or *Cinnamon Gardens*, all the female characters are viewed as the Other, in relation to their male counterparts. This highlights the fact that men are the Subjects and the women in the narratives are viewed in relation to men. However, by the dependency of men on women as illustrated above, Selvadurai challenges the idea of the Other, highlighting that women are as equally essential as men.

According to Helene Cixous, “her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear” (Cixous, H., 2001, p.2044), thus unheard and perhaps even ignored. It is apparent that the male is the dominant party of the gendered binary in the normative understanding of binary oppositions. However, even though Cixous’ argument is mainly on women writers, she points out that this “sexual opposition” is “a historico-cultural limit” (Cixous, H., 2001, p.2046) which Selvadurai’s narrative challenges through his portrayal of women and their contribution in a perversely male-dominant gender binary. For instance, Annalukshmi is forced to marry and settle down by her father Murugasu. Yet, similar to Virginia Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare (Woolfe, V., 2001, p.1022), Annalukshmi is a learned woman who is independent and has aspirations of her own, which she succeeds in achieving unlike Judith Shakespeare. Hence, it is evident that as critics argue, power structures are portrayed through gendered binaries, which are nevertheless interdependent.

B. Binaries of Sexualities

The heterosexual / queer binary is also a dominant opposition in Selvadurai’s texts. The texts in concern portray “a celebration of homosexuality” (Ransirini, S., 2001, p.108) thus challenging the “culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 2001, p.2496). The portrayal of heterosexuals is culturally dominant and powerful whilst the portrayal of homosexuals in the texts is otherwise. Judith Butler explains the state of being cast out from the dominant gender performance as “abjection” (Butler, 2001, P.2494). She elaborates on how whatever that is expelled becomes the Other, resulting in it becoming the repulsive subject’s

object. For Butler, it constitutes “a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject.” (Butler, 2001, p.2547). However, as Selvadurai presents the “abject(s)” (Butler, 2001), he portrays the dependence of the powerful on the powerless in this binary as well.

The heterosexuals in the novels, such as Chelva and Diggy in *Funny Boy* and the Mudaliyar in *Cinnamon Gardens* demand a “performative construction” (Butler, J., 2001) of gender from Arjie and Balendran, respectively, thus emphasizing on the need for “gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality [coined by Adrienne Rich]” (Butler, J., 2001, p.2495). However, in *Funny Boy*, the interdependency of these binaries are brought out by Selvadurai as Nalini depends on Arjie for advice on fashion, and the girls and Black Tie depend on Arjie’s skills to enjoy their playtime and to display a positive outlook on the intolerably heterosexual school. In the case of *Cinnamon Gardens*, the Mudaliyar’s dependence on Balendran to maintain the family name and property and Balendran’s dependency on the Mudaliyar for financial security highlight this phenomenon. Furthermore, Chelva of *Funny Boy* also depends on the queer community as much as the Mudaliyar of *Cinnamon Gardens* for economic and political gain. The former, ignores the homosexual activities in the hotel for the sake of maintaining his clientele, whilst the latter approaches Richard, his son’s former same-sex partner to maintain his power in pre-independent Ceylon by requesting Richard (an influential individual) to speak to the authorities on his behalf. Therefore, it is understood that the power structures also exist among binaries of sexualities, but, similar to the interdependence of gendered binaries, are interdependent on each other.

C. Binaries of Ethnicities

The ethnic and racial binaries are key concepts in the texts as they justify power relations and the networks of power. In both texts, the Tamils are against the Sinhalese and vice versa, whilst in *Cinnamon Gardens*, there is also an apparent antagonism between the Western and the Eastern worlds in a pre-independent colonial setting. However, it is understood that each group relies on the other.

In *Funny Boy*, the author highlights antagonistic relationships between people of different races. A Sinhalese – Tamil binary is at play at school, at the hotel and in the relationship between Radha and Anil, whilst

a Tamil – Burgher binary is evident in the relationships of Aunty Doris and her husband, and Nalini and Daryl. Nevertheless, these binary oppositions also work in collaboration with each other, thus creating an inevitable interdependence; Sena and Chelva as business partners, and Chelva (a Tamil businessman) and his Sinhalese employees depending on each other to both develop the business and to be provided a livelihood. Moreover, Arjie's family is dependent on their Sinhala friends and neighbours for protection from extremist groups. More interestingly, Diggy and Arjie are enrolled in the Sinhala medium class in school, thus projecting Homi Bhabha's view that "... an inter-national culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity... by exploring this hybridity, this "Third Space", we may elude the politics of polarity." (Bhabha, H.K., 1995). By educating the children in the Sinhala medium (perhaps for security reasons), Chelva and Nalini create a "Third Space" (Bhabha, H.K., 1995) for them which assists the children to escape extremism and as Bhabha states, the politics associated with this binary opposition.

In terms of the British / Ceylonese binary, "colonialism sees that it is not within its powers to put into practice a project of economic and social reforms which will satisfy the aspirations of the colonized people" (Fanon, F., 1995. p.153). This is manifested in the aspirations and achievements of Annalukshmi as an educator under a British administrator who relies on her largely yet is reluctant to promote her due to ethnicity and nationality. Resultantly, as the novel ends, Annalukshmi is said to fulfill her aspirations by shifting schools and doing so with the experience she gained under her British principal in the missionary school. Hence, as both texts highlight ethnic and racial binaries as a means of manifesting power relations, they also justify the interdependence of these binaries to co-exist in a hybrid setting which cancels out the politics of ethnic polarity.

D. Binaries of Classes

In both *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens*, there is a disparity between the rich and the poor, paving way to a Marxist interpretation of the texts even though the class binaries may not be the most evident polarity. In *Funny Boy*, it is the hoteliers Chelva and Sena versus the employees under them, as well as Ammachchi versus Janaki. In *Cinnamon Gardens*, it is Arul and Pakkiam the servant, and Balendran and Ranjan who was a militant.

As Marx and Gramsci ascertain, the supremacy of a social group manifests in its dominance (Gramsci, A., 1998, p.210). In the aforementioned binaries, the former are the more dominant and powerful, whereas the latter are the powerless and the dominated. Moreover, these oppositional social classes are also in antagonistic relationships. However, in the context of the two texts, the author depicts a sense of interdependence of classes, in terms of business, domestic help, romance and sexual pleasure, respectively.

In *Funny Boy*, Sena and Chelva are dependent on their employees to run a successful business whilst the employees are dependent on the business duo for their own livelihood. Similarly, Janaki's and the three-wheel driver's loyalty to Ammachchi and Ammachchi's dependence on their loyalty and help in household work and in maintaining her family also edify the interdependence of different social classes.

In *Cinnamon Gardens*, the sexual interdependence between different social classes is brought out through the marriage of Arul, the Mudaliyar's son and the servant Pakkiam and the sexual relationship between the Mudaliyar's son, Balendran and the militant, Ranjan who in return for satisfying Balednran's sexual needs is given money. Moreover, when Balendran provides his nephew, Seelan an inheritance, it highlights the emotional and abstract interdependence between two classes. Whilst Seelan is unwilling to receive monetary support from Arul's family, Seelan depends on the financial support provided by Balendran, and this act provides Balendran solace, knowing that he is able to provide for his disinherited brother's family. Therefore, these binaries further justify the interdependence of social classes and the breakdown of oppositional relationships between different social classes.

V. CONCLUSION

In discussing the play of binaries as interdependent variables it becomes apparent that in the process of justifying their interdependency under particular binaries such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class, some binaries may border on other forms of binaries as well. For instance, the interdependency of the Mudaliyar on Richard makes it both interdependent binaries of sexuality and ethnicities, given the fact that Richard is a British homosexual whilst the Mudaliyar is a Sri Lankan

heterosexual. Conversely, Arul's and Pakkiam's marriage as an interdependent binary of class may be challenged since Arul is disinherited by the father. However, the fact that he was still heir to the Mudaliyar's wealth and property by the time he eloped with Pakkiam reserves the marriage as an interdependent binary of class.

In conclusion, it is evident that whilst binaries appear to be a combination of weak / strong markers, such as man / woman, heterosexual / homosexual, Sinhalese / Tamil, and rich / poor, in the context of *Funny Boy* and *Cinnamon Gardens*, binaries are not necessarily juxtaposed and are subtly interdependent.

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