

6ET04 A LEVEL ENGLISH  
LITERATURE COURSEWORK

FOLDER THREE

## Coursework

Crossing Boundaries in Shyam Selvadurai's "Funny Boy" and "Cinnamon Gardens"*"Why...Because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly"*

Aol Boundaries are norms set by society to keep our behaviour in check. They are the shackles society places on us. If we conform we are model citizens. If we transgress, we are in danger of being outcasts. Boundaries are not tangible or clear cut; therefore, we as human beings transgress boundaries everyday varying from when a child enters into adulthood, to when people of different nationalities get married. Written in the context of South Asian patriarchal society, both Shyam Selvadurai's novels *"Cinnamon Gardens"* and *"Funny Boy"* are distinctive as they deal with the crossing of many boundaries whether they be racial, ethnic or gender based; the texts also help readers to understand that there are consequences to such actions. Both novels were written within separate periods of conflict taking place within Sri Lanka and due to this fact, the novels increase in significance as the country has just survived the conflict, thus making them more poignant to me. This essay will then explore the various boundaries exhibited and go into depth on the consequences. ✓

Aol In both novels, Selvadurai bases his protagonists in an upper class society, and in doing so he illustrates the various constraints placed by society at that time. Within their conservative society, women would have been viewed as vessels for social norms as it was women who would reproduce and nurture children. They thereby became *"reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/ national groups"* [Yuval- Davis and Anthias 8-9, 1989], and in this case women play a vital role as a cultural device which would explain why in *"Funny Boy"* Arjie's father blames his mother for his difference by saying *"If he turns out to be funny...it'll be your fault"* [Selvadurai, 1994, p.14]. Simone de Beauvoir argues that *"One isn't born a woman, one becomes one"* and that patriarchal society imposes femininity upon young women to make them believe that *"the chosen standards of femininity are natural..."* [Beauvoir, 1980] A term that can be used to describe gender based boundaries would be biological essentialism. Biological essentialism is more or less a concept prevalent in society that men and women possess certain characteristics that separate them from one another and should adhere to such differences. In this context, both Selvadurai's novels challenge these biological rules as Annalukshmi (and Arjie as this essay will go onto display) transcend biologically essentialist boundaries to the extent that she considers herself to be a *"new woman"* [Selvadurai, 1998, p. 5] who *"was not going to let herself be stopped by the ridiculous conventions of society"* [Selvadurai, 1998, p. 9], but openly defy them. From the beginning of the novel, Annalukshmi chooses not to conform to the biological laws of society but transgress as she is an educated woman with a *"wilful, careless nature..."* [Selvadurai, 1998, p. 4] who chooses to argue and ride bicycles which were not considered feminine qualities. Her very career as a teacher was thought to be *"her greatest crime"* [Selvadurai, 1998, p.3] to her family members. These characteristics were often associated with men during that time which shows her clearly crossing a gender based boundary. However, as mentioned before, there are consequences to the crossing of such boundaries as Anna

Lukshmi would have broken the chain of culture being passed down thereby women costing her family their reputation, made it harder for her sisters to wed, and her sister Kumudini had to play the elder sister as she was considered the *"model of propriety"* [Selvadurai, 1998, p.7] by their family. In terms of *"Funny Boy"*, within each chapter Arjie is constantly crossing the boundary from childhood to adulthood as he is constantly being befriended by an adult. Due to this fact he is continuously dragged *"from the safe harbours of childhood to the precarious waters of adult life"* [Selvadurai, 1994, p. 5] Some examples would be when Radha aunty drags him into her relationship with Anil, when his mothers uses him in her affair with Daryl and when Jegan takes him jogging as a cover-up for his illegal activities. The consequence of Arjie's involvement is that he loses his childhood innocence and his faith in adults as they appear more vulnerable and hypocritical rather than figures of security that children normally associate with adults. As mentioned before, both texts tell the story of an upper class society and, especially in terms of *"Cinnamon Gardens"*, class boundaries are crossed when Balendran's father has an affair with a servant woman and Arul marries a servant girl. The consequence of Arul's actions would be that it cost him his relationship with his family and he broke a sacred social boundary as his son, Seelan, would then be an outcast and be banished. ✓

Shamara Ransirini states that *"to be born male or female is one's biological sex"* and that society and culture help to instil social codes that *"naturalizes 'masculine' and 'feminine'"* [Ransirini, p110]. What she is essentially saying is that society dictates the characteristics of men and women making it a biologically essentialist concept. With Homosexuality being a prominent theme in both novels as Arjie and Balendran both transgress gender boundaries, Selvadurai is once again criticising the idea given above as instead of conforming to sexual differences, both characters transcend sexual boundaries. In terms of Arjie, instead of playing sports with the boys, he chooses to wear a saree and play *"bride-bride"* with the girls as he was able to unlock his imagination and *"ascend into [a] more brilliant, more beautiful self"* [Selvadurai, 1994, p. 4]. His presence is embraced by the other girls and he is said to be the *"bestest bride of all"* [Selvadurai, 1994, p.10]. However, a turning point occurs once *"her fatness"* enters and places the statement before him that *"A bride is a girl...A boy cannot be a bride..."* [Selvadurai, 1994, p.11] Arjie still continues to play the game, and by crossing this boundary he faced the consequence of being ridiculed by his family and he soon realised the loneliness of being different as he says *"I would be caught between the boys' and girls' world, not belonging or wanted in either."* [Selvadurai, 1994, p.39] From Arjie's experience, one can grasp the idea that as a child, we aren't as exposed to this concept of boundaries but rather retain this innocence as Arjie and believe there is nothing wrong in wanting to be yourself, however, it's once one crosses a boundary, as Arjie has done, do we recognize that it is there but by then we would already have to pay the price. Therefore as Arjie embraces his sexuality, he is further separated from his family and fails to find a place in society. Arjie finally accepts and progresses into his sexuality once he meets Shehan, however, as he transgresses away from society he is no longer able to maintain a consistent relationship with even his mother as he states *"I was no longer a part of my family...I now inhabited a world they didn't understand and into which they couldn't follow me."* [Selvadurai, 1994, p.285] Arjie would continue to be marginalised and labelled as *"Funny"* throughout the text for not adhering to the biological rules of society. In terms of *"Cinnamon Gardens"*, Balendran's situation differs from Arjie's as Arjie stays true to his sexuality while



A03
 Balendran gets married and tries to suppress his homosexuality despite his relationship with Richard. Balendran's indecisiveness puts a large strain on his marriage with Sonia, while his relationship with Richard remains unresolved. In this way, although both characters cross sexual boundaries, Arjie grows to embrace who he is by the end of the novel while Balendran conforms once again. However, things had changed by the end as Balendran was able to experience closure with who he was and his family, to the extent where he says "Now they stood apart from him and they had...become strangely sweeter" [Selvadurai, 1998, p.386].

A04
 Annie Mc Clintock argues that it is within nations that boundaries are established to distinguish genders [Mc Clintock, 1997, p. 89]; if that be the case then the same can be said about races. Shyam Selvadurai is a well known post colonial and migrant writer, therefore there would emphasis on the ethnic tension within his novels; "*Cinnamon Gardens*" was written just before independence and by this time Tamils wanted a place in the government as they were afraid of being a minority, while "*Funny Boy*" was written during the early stages of the ethnic conflict. In this way one can see that within "*Funny Boy*" the crossing of racial boundaries would have had harsher consequences. Within "*Funny Boy*", Radha aunty and Anil's relationship illustrates the crossing of racial boundaries in terms of inter-communal marriage as she is a Tamil woman in love with a Sinhalese man. With society the way it was, the safest and conventional decision would be to "*marry their own kind*" [Selvadurai, 1994, p.54] due to the fact that, as Mala aunty states "*you have to live in the real world*" [Selvadurai, 1994, p.78] and a relationship of Radha's kind was considered fantasy. However, by choosing to have a relationship with Anil, Radha transgresses conventional society and becomes more involved in the political situation by becoming the victim that she does as a consequence of her decision. Shamara Ransirini argues that because Radha is a woman who has chosen to defy society she would have to cross both social and political boundaries to have an inter-communal marriage [Ransirini, p.111]. Ultimately she conforms to social norms after being attacked due to the fact that, as she now understands "*most people [do] marry their own kind*" [Selvadurai, 1994, p.54]. In situations where ones race is severely questioned, race becomes closely linked with identity, therefore, in terms of Radha aunty; she not only defies society but appears to reject her Tamil heritage to the rest of her family. Another character who is severely affected by racial boundaries would be Jegan. Through the novel, readers learn that in his past Jegan had crossed a racial and political boundary by joining in the LTTE movement, however, he conforms to society by abandoning his ties with the group and gains a job at Arjie's father's hotel. This doesn't alter his position as he still isn't accepted into society even after bending to their rules, instead he is framed and readers are never truly aware of what happens to him. What Selvadurai shows is that once you transgress from the rules of society you are never truly able to find your place within society again, you become an outcast. In terms of Jegan, his past prevents him from having a future, however, Jegan didn't completely conform as he did maintain violent dispositions which he would have had in the past, and this is evident when he tears a Sinhalese poster from the hotel wall [Selvadurai, 1994, p.168]. Whenever there is racial tension, the boundary between personal and political becomes blurred; in terms of Radha aunty, the political situation invades her relationship and she gets attacked while it invades Jegan's life and he isn't heard from. This eventually results in both characters losing their faith in their people and country.

Unlike in *"Funny Boy"*, the racial tension hadn't taken place yet within the time period of *"Cinnamon Gardens"*, instead there was evidence of religious boundaries being crossed. At the start of the novel we are given background into the lives of Annalukshmi's parents, we become aware that her father had converted from Hinduism to Christianity and eventually married her mother. Their union did leave a trail of consequences in their future as firstly, Murugasu was said to be *"too newly Christian"* [Selvadurai, 1998, p.48] as he never gave up his old habits and *"refused to give his daughters Christian names"* [Selvadurai, 1998, p.48]. Therefore he crossed a boundary away from his old society and wasn't accepted in the new one. *"It was Murugasu's reversion to Hinduism that was the final blow to their already crumbling marriage."* [Selvadurai, 1998, p.42] By trying to arrange Annalukshmi to marry his sister's son who was a Hindu he had shown complete rejection of the life stepped into and he continues to form a bond with his sister and abandon his wife which was evident when he turned to his sister for comfort once their father died [Selvadurai, 1998, p.49]. Once again, this is a clear example of the mistakes of the older generation as it interferes in the lives of the younger generation to the extent that Kumudini crosses a racial boundary by marrying Muttiah and their marriage turns out to be a failure as well [Selvadurai, 1998, p.354]. The consequences of inter-religious relationships invades Nancy and Vijith's relationship as well, despite the fact that her mother Miss Lawton is perceived as a liberal woman. She states that she didn't *"bring [Nancy] up a good Christian"* [Selvadurai, 1998, p.327] to have her be with a Buddhist. One can then argue that no matter how liberal members of society can be, there are still boundaries or conventional views that will be maintained. ✓

Arjie's father stated that *"As a Tamil...The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous."* [Selvadurai, 1994, p. 173], however, he contradicts himself by crossing a socio-economic boundary when he manages a hotel during a time when Tamils weren't able to maintain successful businesses. During the time of the conflict Tamils were rather encouraged to stay under the radar and not aspire to reach socio-economic boundaries that were considered too large and dangerous for them. However, Arjie's father doesn't appear to share the same view but sees himself as a Sri Lankan who deserved to continue his business. By choosing not to *"play the game"* [Selvadurai, 1994, p. 173] the conventional way, it results in his employees rebelling, his business collapses and he and his family eventually have to migrate which results in a loss of identity. ✓

In terms of the structure, both *"Funny Boy"* and *"Cinnamon Gardens"* consist of a series of short stories that are placed in chronological order; however, Selvadurai uses two separate narrative styles to tell the stories. Throughout *"Funny Boy"*, we are told the story from Arjie's point of view, and by using a child's perspective as a narrative tool, the reader gains a greater insight into the protagonist. It can also be said that children are associated with innocence which makes them more trusting to adults and thereby grants them access into the adult world: this is essentially what happens to Arjie which is why he is always associated with an adult in each chapter. Neloufer de Mel offers another theory which is that when an author, for example Selvadurai, who has passed into the threshold of adulthood writes from a child's perspective, his old views from his childhood become the *"other"* causing his narrations to be different than if he were writing them as a child [Mel, 2002]. Selvadurai also crosses a literary boundary at the end of the novel by having diary entries which he used to create a sense of urgency in the given



situation thereby making it more personal. In terms of *"Cinnamon Gardens"*, he varies between two narrators thereby incorporating multiple themes. This technique has been criticised though for being "crowded" [Alexander, 2006], however, these narratives give us further insight into the characters and the themes do correspond with each other to show how boundaries are crossed from one to the other. Selvadurai went further to incorporate terms of Sri Lankan English such as "aiyo". However, the use of this technique didn't limit its accessibility to a foreign audience as stated by a reader from Canada.

Thiru Kandiah believed that Sri Lankan creative writing made headway during times of the ethnic conflict because the conflict would have "awoken the writers need to discover the nature of their contemporary identity" [Kandiah, 1995] which is clearly where Selvadurai played his strengths in both novels. In a personal discussion with Shyam Selvadurai on "Funny Boy" he told me that a recurring question he received was about his accounts on the ethnic tension. Sri Lanka has just come out of a war but there are still accounts of the events surrounding it that do affect the people of the country. Not many people would fully agree with the novel as Shyam himself stated that right extremists would have criticised the book for being biased and humanising the Tamil tragedies [Deonandan, 1996]. However, from speaking to readers of the book I learned that, people weren't horrified with the fact that these events were in a book and one lady observed that the book always reminded her of that time of suffering and people shouldn't be ignorant that it happened. With homosexuality being a prominent theme within the novels, Selvadurai expected to receive heavy criticisms from Sri Lankan people, however, when the book came out it was very popular (much to his surprise as he says) [Deonandan, 1996] as people were gradually getting accustomed to the idea of homosexuality.

In conclusion, Shyam Selvadurai has managed to take situations that are so closed to the hearts of the Sri Lankan people and illustrate the various conditions of society at that time. In my personal opinion, the novels haven't made me feel victimised due to its account of the events that took place but rather help me as the reader to be able to relate to the characters and their predicaments. Shyam Selvadurai has been able to take typical situations that everyone faces in Sri Lankan society and give them meaning so that when parents say "Why...Because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly" [Selvadurai, 1994, p.19] we understand that they are saying this because that is the way society survives and we can either choose to follow it or move on from it.

"Life is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them" [Selvadurai, 1994, p.20].

114 The candidate has engaged quite well with the texts and displays a thorough understanding of concepts and links them with her arguments. However, the flow of arguments are sometimes disjointed as there is a rapid change in ideas within the same paragraph.

P70

Word count= 460

Total Word Count= 2896

A02  
(12) The Candidate looks at structure and form to a certain extent but does not analyse language in depth. Her arguments in this section, however, are well thought-out.

A03  
(15) Effective comparisons are made between the ~~two~~ two texts and interpretations display depth of thought. There are however, some typographical errors. Still, arguments are well-made and sustained.

A04  
(15) The Candidate shows a deep awareness of the context in which the texts are written. Arguments are well-grounded in these contexts and are linked to audience interpretations within them.

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