



## **‘Narratives of home’: Interrogating Selvadurai's Representation of Home in *Funny Boy*, *Cinnamon Gardens*, and *The Hungry Ghosts***

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### **Abstract**

'Home' as a multidimensional concept has been receiving increasing critical attention, especially, in Diaspora Studies. Shaped by a globalizing discourse, the word 'home' evokes multiple emotions and sentiments. Its signification not only changes when articulated from different locations but is also shaped by other determinants like ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. In *The Diaspora Writes Home: Subcontinental Narratives*, Jasbir Jain argues that when the diaspora decides to 'write home', 'location, space and time' disintegrates into multifarious discourses. Writing home is not simply a creative expression for them, but also a connectivity 'as if being called back answering a summon' (11). Drawing upon Jain's argument this paper tries to interrogate Shyam Selvadurai's representation of his home country Sri Lanka in his novels *Funny Boy* (1994), *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), and *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013). In doing so this paper tries to trace the trajectory of Selvadurai's shifting relationship with his home country, Sri Lanka and problematizes the use of memory, history, trauma and dislocation in his narratives.

### **Keywords**

home, ethnicity, representation, memory, trauma

The aim of this paper is to trace the trajectory of Shyam Selvadurai's journey as he tries to 'write home' in his novels *Funny Boy* (1994), *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), and *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013). When the diaspora decides to 'write home', 'location, space and time' disintegrates into multifarious discourses. Writing home is not simply a creative expression for them, but also a connectivity 'as if being called back answering a summon' (Jain 11). Selvadurai had to leave Sri Lanka in the wake of the anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka in 1983. He is currently settled in Canada. However, his novels mostly draw upon narratives of his home country, Sri Lanka. This paper aims to read the three novels of Selvadurai as a journey undertaken by the author. It attempts to analyze, how the author negotiates his shifting relationship with his home country, through his narratives. In doing so the paper tries to problematize Selvadurai's use of memory, history, trauma and dislocation. It also tries to read his representations in the light of his own personal, emotional and intellectual perception of the socio-political turmoil in his country.

Selvadurai's representation of Sri Lanka, writing as he is from a distance, as an expatriate in Canada, raises the obvious questions of cultural appropriation and of orientalization. His intention of revisiting the sites of ethnic conflict and violence is also called to question. Selvadurai himself is aware of the question of a western readership and the pitfalls in his writing that might lead to creating stereotypical images of his country and its people. He emphatically maintains that in revisiting the sites of riots and violence in *Funny Boy*:

I could not ignore the trap of catering to the notion of the east as barbaric and uncivilized. In order to avoid this trap I knew that I must thus keep in mind that I was addressing a Sri Lankan readership and hence how much and why it was necessary to discuss the violence in Sri Lanka. (qtd. in Jayasuriya 124)

The fact that the novel is written from exile and that the adult narrator is looking back at the events of his childhood from Canada is established by Selvadurai at the very onset. The rest of the story however is narrated through a flashback. Selvadurai takes recourse to memory and engages in the act of remembering in *Funny Boy* to present a picture of his country, as it had been, a part of his lived experience.

Selvadurai insists that *Funny Boy* is "a dialogue between me and the Sri Lankan reader on our common problem, our common tragedy, our common vision of a peaceful and tolerant society" (qtd. in Jayasuriya 124). It is perhaps this desire to have a dialogue with his own

countrymen that Selvadurai chooses a seven year old narrator to narrate his tale. As a 'naive narrator', to use Jayasuriya's words, is unable to comprehend all that he observes or experiences Selvadurai is able to narrate his story from a neutral standpoint.

The home that the seven year old Arjie first evokes in Sri Lanka is that of his grandparents, with its long dark corridors, high ceilings and walls lined with old photographs. Though nostalgic of the time spent there in mindless games and festivities with his cousins, from the very outset, Selvadurai presents the picture of a house divided by "territoriality and leadership" (3). The front garden, road and fields in front of the house belonging to the boys' territory and the back garden and kitchen porch belonging to "the girls". This home, that for a short span of time had allowed Arjie a potential for his 'free play of fantasy', however does not lend anchorage to the seven year old. Caught at playing his favourite game bride-bridge with his girl cousins, Arjie is labelled 'funny' by his own father and his behaviour is under constant surveillance of his family members. Yet unaware of the pervasive homophobia that prevails in a heteronormative society, it is with the word 'funny' that Arjie first comes to realize his difference from others.

Even in his first novel, Selvadurai does not 'remember home' as an ideal space. His sexuality already locates him at the margins. It is from the margins that he comes to observe the adult world and achieve an understanding of its workings. *Funny Boy* is narrated in six episodes and in each episode Selvadurai seems to mourn a loss. While 'Pigs Can't Fly' seems to mourn Arjie's loss of innocence, 'Radha Aunty' brings out the intolerance between ethnic communities that crops up from a history of atrocities inflicted on one community by the other. When Radha Aunty falls in love with a Sinhalese, Ammachi is against the relationship as she is tormented by a past where her father was the victim of an anti-Tamil riot. The failure to forgive renders all further associations impossible. In the third episode 'See No Evil, Hear No Evil' the intolerance spills over and is no more restricted within the boundaries of Arjie's family. The personal now encompasses the national and political. When Amma's friend Darly Uncle comes visiting, trying to investigate the war going on in Jaffna, the narrative takes a new turn. Words like torture of 'home grown variety' with 'chillies and large red ants' 'freedom of press', 'Prevention of Terrorism Act', and "tool for state terrorism" intrude Arjie's tranquil world. With Darly uncle's murder Selvadurai bemoans the breakdown of law and order in his beloved homeland.

The fourth episode 'Small Choices' presents a picture of how the political impacts the personal and the impossibility of escape. Arjie's father is forced to let go of Jegan, his friend's son, because of his former ties with the Tamil Tigers. Despite knowing his innocence Arjie's father has to bend to the wishes of his Sinhalese staff and rival businessmen.. Not only does unease prevail at home it spills over and encompasses his home country as well. It pervades all aspects of life and the state as well as its institutions are enwrapped within its enfolds. Interestingly enough, Selvadurai has presented 'school', as a site for the development of ethno-national discourse in a strife ridden Sri Lanka in 'The Best School of All'. Instead, of uniting it only serves in reinforcing differences. On the very first day at Victoria academy Arjie is made aware of his Tamil identity and his outsider status: 'We don't want you here ' Salgado said, and he stood in front of the doorway. 'Go to the Tamil class' (215). Thus, the nostalgia for home, that ideal originary sacred space of refuge is already marked with tension and Selvadurai's narrative splits open and lays bare the underlying disjunctures that do not acknowledge the multiple identities an individual can possess.

Sri Lanka, home to diverse communities can no longer bind its entire people in one language of love and the seven year old Arjie is sensitive to the challenges which speaking a different language bears upon its speakers. Selvadurai's evocation of the 'Sinhala Only Act' seems to question the intentions of the state and strives to find the reasons for its pandering to a dominant groups discourse. Language serves as an important agent of ethnic difference in *Funny Boy*. Minoli Salgado has observed that the:

The segregation of education in Tamil and Sinhala streams after the 'Sinhala Only' Act effectively narrowed lines of communication between the two communities, and the novel replicates the process by moving from '[a] situation of linguistic multiplicity and syncreticism ...to a situation of increasing linguistic segregation between individuals. (122)

It is in the despotic, divisive and regulated atmosphere of the Victoria Academy that Arjie has his first sexual encounter with his Sinhalese friend Shehan Soysa. However in a society hell bent on maintaining norms, where homosexuality is considered illegal, where intermixing and miscegenation are considered sinful, trying to forge relationships outside the accepted codes of conduct only prove fatal.

The home of Arjie's childhood is increasingly marked by internal divisions and tensions and culminates with the last section titled 'Riot Journal-An Epilogue'. Written in the

very thick of the anti-Tamil riots that broke out in Colombo in 1983 the journal entries made by Arjie evoke the murderous rage and hatred that left a country blood soaked for generations to come. They record the atrocities and inhuman treatment that results when all dialogues are broken down between two ethnic groups. As 25th July gradually unfolds the Chelvaratnam family is seen to move from unease to anxiety to fear as reports of trouble in Colombo are announced to them. When Ammachi and Appachi are burnt alive, Arjie's father finally decides to leave Sri Lanka 'It is very clear that we no longer belong in this country' (304). It is this sense of un- belonging, of being an outcast, of being forcefully uprooted from home and in turn home country that marks the beginning of an unending journey for Arjie, and perhaps in turn for Selvadurai himself.

In *Funny Boy* Selvadurai, in the vein of prototypical diaspora presents his characters being coerced to leave home following personal trauma and loss. He also restricts his story to the memory of a time and space with which he personally had an active association. However, the journey of the diaspora is not a static one. After mourning comes a time when there rises a need to understand, question and deconstruct the past and forge new ways of remembering. For this Selvadurai turns to history and locates *Cinnamon Gardens* in the 1920's Sri Lanka. History, however, in his fiction is not, 'sequential time', 'seeking to establish serial, causal connections.' Rather he presents a slice of the pre-colonial era, which reflected from the multiple perspectives of gender, ethnicity and class, serves to undercut the nationalist discourse of a homogeneous people. Selvadurai's hyphenated identity, his homosexuality as well as his minority status in his home country all come into play in *Cinnamon Gardens* as he responds to the political turmoil in Sri Lanka.

In the novel Selvadurai evokes the life of upper class elites, who live in the lush tropical Cinnamon Gardens, a residential enclave of the wealthy Ceylonese community. The novel explores how the life of this community is affected by the socio-political changes brought about by the end of an era of British colonialism in Sri Lanka. Set in the critical period of pre-Independence 'nationing', *Cinnamon Gardens* depicts the country's deeply entrenched class and caste divisions along with the growth of labour unions, emergence of feminism, and the rise of ethnic-centred nationalism. The narration meanders through the lives of two characters – Annalukshmi, a young and free spirited school teacher and her uncle Balendran. Balendran, in his younger days, was forced to abort his homosexual relationship with his friend Richard Howland, by his father Mudaliyar Navarathan. Selvadurai depicts Balendran as the obedient son of a domineering patriarch, whose comfortable life with his

wife in Sri Lanka is threatened by the arrival of Richard Howland, his former lover from England. Minoli Salgado comments that "The parallel narratives of Balendran and Annalukshmi are enacted within the prescriptive logic of colonial discourse and emergent nationalism, revealing the fundamental collusion between these two discourses" (123). The overarching grand narratives of both colonialism and nationalism however fail to encompass the complex multiplicity of identities and emotions that the word 'home' evokes.

'It is the challenge of understanding home, 'that subject country', that greater hurt as Naipaul (2000) called it' (Lal and Kumar xi), that perhaps goads Selvadurai to represent the newly emergent Sri Lankan nation in the throes of its birth pang. Neluka Silva's has very pertinently observed that in postcolonial nations:

Political decolonization and the ensuing celebration of freedom, however momentous, do not by themselves inaugurate a new history, but call for a ceaseless endeavour to project a 'pure identity'...As a result, those people outside the privileged groups become the focus of a denigratory rhetoric. (20)

Selvadurai reflects this gradual disintegration and rising hostility between ethnic communities at the national level through the personal trials and tribulations of his characters who are entrapped within the normative frameworks and discourses of class, gender, sexuality and cannot escape it. As Selvadurai indulges in the act of remembering and revisits the sites of history his narrative seems to open up the gaps and loop holes through which the grand narratives of nationalist discourse can be undercut. Haunted by a sense of loss, of persecution, he seems to question the fabrication of a nation along ethnic lines where the interests of a dominant majority are established at the cost of other minority groups. Had not Ceylon been home to a diverse people for thousands of years? What then pushed this country into bigotry and orthodoxies? *Cinnamon Gardens* seems to pertinently raise these issues. It also investigates the role of the elites whose greed for power and personal advancements only leads to ethnic polarisation and violence.

The changing political dynamics of the time is presented by Selvadurai through the character of Mudaliyar Navaratham. The sudden change in his political affiliation and his commitment towards the Ceylon Tamil association reflects the unease, and unrest in the political atmosphere of the country. The fear of British Raj being replaced by a Sinhala Raj, of distrust and persecution looms like a dark cloud at the backdrop of the novel. The impact of changing political affiliations and growing unease among former friends is well manifested by

the various guests invited to Mudaliyar Navaratham's birthday. In addition to the faithful members of the Queen's set and the Ceylon National Congress, members of the Ceylon Tamil Association are seen to join the Mudaliyar on his birthday. During the evening as discussions turn into heated debates, the social gathering in Brighton comes to represent in microcosm the situation at the national level and bears foreboding of an eminent rift between the warring parties. In unravelling a history which is resonant with a polyphony of voices, Selvadurai seems to question the grand narratives of ethnic hatred and segregation that so rampantly colours Sri Lanka's political discourse at present. Through the sane voices of Balendran and Sonia, Selvadurai seems to unravel spaces where ethnic amity had indeed prevailed at a previous time. *Cinnamon Gardens* is self-reflexive and self-questioning. Here Selvadurai raises pertinent issues on nation formation and goads his countrymen to think of other possibilities, where a nation could have perhaps been imagined into being in a different more inclusive manner.

*Cinnamon Gardens*, presents us with fragments of history. It is this fragmentary nature that adds greater resonance to the narrative. One such fragment, that Selvadurai records, is the arrival of the Donoughmore Commission in Sri Lanka. However his representation is free of the historically inflected register of both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. The impact of the Commission's arrival is aptly summed up by Balendran's friend F.C. when he compares it to a 'gold rush'. "Everyone is running to stake their claim to carve out their piece of land" (68) and "[d]ivisions are appearing where I didn't even know there were any" (68). The personal and the political constantly intermix and intermingle in *Cinnamon Gardens*. The arrival of the Commission is important for the Mudaliyar at a political level, so much so, that he asks Balendran to resume ties with Richard Howland, in an effort to influence the commission. For the Mudaliyar the decisions of the Commission are tied with his retention of power and social status. For Balendran, however, its arrival is important at a personal level, as he meets with his ex-lover Richard. By resuming his relationship with Richard, Balendran almost throws away the life of social respectability, which he had worked so hard to achieve. In trying to come to terms with the historical forces of a past that had such a profound impact on the politics of his home country Selvadurai questions the cultural memory that was passed on to future generations and provides counter-points to it as well.

The novel ends with indecisiveness and unrest. Annalukshmi declines the marriage proposal from her cousin, Selan, but is painfully aware that she can never achieve her aspirations of becoming Headmistress of the Girls School, as she is entrapped within the

patriarchal and colonial power structures. Balendran too in giving up his love for Richard succumbs to the pressures of a homophobic society. The Donoughmore Commission also fails the people of Sri Lanka in the novel. The members of the Congress are left disappointed as self-government had not been granted. The minority groups are also disappointed for all the members of the legislature would be territorially elected. Balendran on a cool November day reads the recommendations of the Commission and foresees the disappointment and unrest it would leave in its trail. Thus, Selvadurai's attempt to understand home brings to the fore, the rampant and all pervasive influence of hegemonic discourses that only frustrates individual aspirations and forces ethnic groups and communities to build unyielding boundaries over time. In *Cinnamon Gardens* Selvadurai unfolds what Kobena Mercer calls a "critical dialogism" which "challenges the monologic exclusivity on which dominant versions of national identity and collective belongings are based" (Brazier and Mannur 5). Selvadurai, here seems to mourn the lost opportunity for national unity. His critique of the powers that be, and the disappointment evoked by lost possibilities perhaps are to a certain extent conditioned by the collective memory of loss and persecution.

As observed by Salgado, the problem of negotiating the relationship between history (as factual event), historiography (or the discursive construction of the past) and literary writing is especially pertinent to the critic of Sri Lankan writing in English. It is so because here we have an emergent literature whose very terms of affiliation are being subject to contestation at the very moment of its evolution (2). Selvadurai's representation of 'home' and in turn of home country is also subject to interrogation. His representation of home as that place of belonging and safe refuge is always marked with a tension, a collision of his subjectivity with the prevailing value systems, as he had always existed at the margins of a heteronormative society. Even before his departure from Sri Lanka, Selvadurai perhaps was never 'at home'. Sharanya Jawawickrama aptly sums up Selvadurai sense of alienness when he refers to Bells Hooks pronouncement that, "At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations" (Jayawickrama 57). That craving for the safe, protected boundaries of homeland is now replaced by what Avtar Brah calls a 'homing desire'.

It is this 'homing desire' that perhaps drives the diaspora to forge new ways of writing and as Safran has recognised, the 'harder notions of homeland' now yield to a softer notion of 'a found home' in the diaspora' (Cohen; 12). Home now comes to encompass a whole range of meanings it is:

the place of origin, or the place of settlement, or a local, national or transnational place, or an imagined virtual community (linked, for example, through the internet), or a matrix of known experiences and intimate social relations (thus conforming to the popular expression that 'home is where the heart is'). (Cohen 10)

In his latest novel *The Hungry Ghosts* Selvadurai represents the 'homing desire' of his characters who inhabit multiple locations and constantly move to and fro across boundaries. In *The Hungry Ghosts* he engages with the host societies, its prejudices, its culture, its practices in a way that was curiously missing in his earlier novels. His characters constantly move from Sri Lanka to Canada, to Vancouver, to America and permeate boundaries and fixities. The journey undertaken by them is never final. A need to escape and the need to return are constantly put into tension as the ideas of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship and immigration are put to test. In doing so he also tries to come to terms with his own 'multilocality'.

In this novel, the love-hate relationship of Shivan with his grandmother is perhaps symptomatic of Selvadurai's own complex relationship with Sri Lanka. Shivan's grandmother Daya, the matriarch of the Ariyasinghe household is a commanding presence in Shivan's life. Her disdain for her daughter (who had married a Tamil), her attempt to take complete control of all those who are dependent on her, her possessive love for Shivan whom she takes under her wings, all serve as a strangle hold for Shivan. He wants to wriggle out of her stranglehold. The anti-Tamil riots provide Shivan an opportunity to escape his grandmother. He uses it as an excuse to move out of Sri Lanka by forcing his mother to apply for immigration. Shivan's flight from his grandmother's home however is not forced upon him by the political turmoil in the country, as the power and influence of his grandmother would have provided him the necessary safeguards. Selvadurai here depicts Shivan's flight as sheer opportunism on his part, a need for freedom and escape.

The home that Shivan forges in Canada, with his mother and sister, that imagined space of freedom, however offers little respite to them. The damp and dingy basement in which he is forced to live, his limitations in access to employment opportunities, his limited success at socialization, all create a restlessness in him. His mother and sister Renu also meet with limited success in achieving a sense of belonging and begin to fraternize with other Sri Lankans in Canada. The ties back home are also never fully severed. Shivan cannot escape its call and returns to Sri Lanka after his grandmother has her first stroke.

The return to that refuge of familiar sights and sounds, the attempt to re-establish relationships on erstwhile terms however is not a simple one and Shivan realizes this immediately on his arrival to Sri Lanka. "Everything about the landscape was familiar and strange at the same time; that odd disjunction of coming home to a place that was not home anymore" (150). As relationships are exposed to the 'traumas of deterritorialization' family and friends try to negotiate their 'mutual understandings and aspirations' in 'fractured spatial arrangements' (Appadurai 42). This can put a severe strain on the most intimate of relationships like the one Shivan shares with his grandmother. It proves fatal not only for the diasporic, who is no more in touch with the ground realities of his home country, but also for the people back home, who fail to come to terms with his alienness. The return of the native, with his newfound sexual liberty only ends up with the murder of his boyfriend Mili, by his grandmother's thug Chandralal and ends up scarring Shivan for life. The failure of the diasporic to accommodate and successfully negotiate the cultures of his home country and his adopted hostland only leads to a catastrophic outcome and creates a permanent rift between Shivan and his grandmother. The rest of the novel is marked by angst, alienation and failed attempts at reconciliation.

*The Hungry Ghosts* seems to revolve around the theme of forgiveness and redemption. Selvadurai narrates the Buddhist story of the tormented souls of the perethayas, the hungry ghosts, who suffer because of bad karma and can only be redeemed by the good deeds of their future generations. Selvadurai seems to speak not only to his countrymen but to the entire human civilization and focuses on the need to break this cycle of bad karma, to forgive and reconcile.

Jasbir Jain insists that the diaspora 'writes' home to fulfil 'its many psychological, emotional and historical needs; it also feels free to comment on the political or religious happenings that push the nation into orthodoxies'. He also writes to gain visibility in the host culture and establish a two-way connectivity. Not only that he also writes for the future, but the constant self-questioning becomes for the writer 'a simultaneous habitation of plural spaces' (26). Selvadurai too seems to grapple with these plural spaces that he calls home. He questions and critiques both the closed and so called open spaces of his home and hostland and nudges human consciousness. He tries to bring forth the consequences of normative values, traditions, stereotypes, and nationalistic discourses. Through his characters in *Funny Boy*, *Cinnamon Gardens*, and *The Hungry Ghosts* he undertakes a journey that perhaps will foster the creation of 'homes' which will indeed permit a 'free play of fantasy', subjectivity, sexuality and identity.

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