



Selvadurai, Shyam (b. 1965)

by Deborah Hunn

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Shyam Selvadurai.
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Although the literary output of Sri Lankan-Canadian gay writer Shyam Selvadurai has been relatively modest thus far, the style, wit, and perspicacity of his three novels, *Funny Boy* (1994), *Cinnamon Gardens* (1999), and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005), insure his place as a significant figure in post-colonial and gay writing.

Selvadurai was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the son of a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, members of conflicting ethnic groups whose troubles form a major theme in his work. Ethnic riots in 1983 drove the family to immigrate to Canada where Selvadurai studied creative and professional writing as part of a Bachelor of Fine Arts program at York University.

Upon graduation he produced work for magazines and television before scoring success with his first novel, *Funny Boy*, published in 1994, which won the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada first novel award and the Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Men's Fiction.

Funny Boy traces the story of Arjie as he grows from ridiculed "funny boy" more content to dress up as "bride-bride" with his female cousins than play cricket with the males, to an intelligent, reflective teenager dangerously awakened by his first love, rebellious schoolmate Shehan. The novel gives a brilliant portrait of the anxieties aroused by gender nonconformity, especially in patriarchal societies. Arjie's father is especially concerned by his son's "tendencies."

Arjie's sexuality is crucial both to the coming-of-age story and, in terms of the anxiety it provokes in others, to the political conflict against which it is presented. The protagonist's journey toward awareness parallels the journey of Sri Lanka itself towards the social upheaval and violence in which the book culminates.

As the Sri Lankan critic Prakrti has noted, Selvadurai's particular gift is to understand how such factors as ethnic tensions and the legacy of British colonial rule are interweaved with dominant ideologies of sexuality and gender. Thus Arjie, "as he grows from childhood into adolescence while simultaneously struggling to come to terms with his homosexuality, demystifies the oppressively-rigid typecasts or straight jackets that boys and men are forced to 'fit into' especially within the colonial-type schools in present-day Sri Lanka," which are modeled along the lines of English public schools, and celebrate athletes and other macho boys while ridiculing sissies.

Told in six independent yet carefully interlocked stories, the novel advances its narrative toward an inevitable yet profoundly moving conclusion, as Arjie achieves maturity and discovers heartbreaking truths.

While Selvadurai does not overtly address issues of lesbian sexuality, his second novel *Cinnamon Gardens*, published in 1999, deploys parallel narratives to link the oppression of women with that of homosexual men. Set in the 1920s in the well-heeled suburbs of (what was then) Ceylon, the novel exposes the stifling conformity that is the price of acceptance in the wealthy precincts of Cinnamon Gardens.

Middle-aged Balendran, settled with a wife and son, is destabilized by the arrival of Richard, his English lover from his youthful Cambridge days. Years ago Balendran had abandoned Richard, an advocate of Edward Carpenter, under pressure from his domineering father, the Mudaliyar. Meanwhile, Balendran's young cousin Annalakshmi struggles to pursue a vocation as a teacher, defying family pressure to accept an arranged marriage.

While both Balendran and Annalakshmi are presented sympathetically, they are also subtly criticized for their failures to be true to themselves, especially Balendran. After all, his brother had the courage to pursue his love for a servant girl, though at the cost of his father's displeasure and disinheritance.

In conforming to social and sexual expectations by entering into a sexually unfulfilling marriage, Balendran reveals himself as a decent but weak individual, racked by the guilt he feels for neglecting his wife and for having betrayed his feelings for Richard. By the end of the novel, however, Balendran is able to see through the hypocrisies and deceptions of his society and, though remaining bound by his marriage and family, acknowledges his love for Richard.

Selvadurai's third novel, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, was published in 2005, and targeted to Young Adult readers. Set in 1980 Sri Lanka, the novel chronicles a fourteen-year-old Sri Lankan boy's falling in love with his visiting Canadian cousin.

Amrith's storm-tossed infatuation is played out against a school production of *Othello*, and the play's powerful theme of jealousy provides the backdrop to the teenager's angst. Selvadurai explores the pain and exhilaration of first love with unusual clarity and humor.

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea was a finalist for Canada's most prestigious literary award, the Governor General's Awards, in the category of children's literature. It was honored with a Lambda Literary Award in the same category.

Selvadurai has also edited a collection of short stories: *Story-Wallah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* (2004), which includes works by Salman Rushdie, Monica Ali, and Hanif Kureishi, among others. He is represented in the anthology by "Pigs Can't Fly," the first of the six "stories" that comprise *Funny Boy*.

Selvadurai's works are informed by meticulous research and a haunting evocation of Sri Lanka, which remains vital in his imagination despite his having lived in Canada for so many years. He clearly has a deep engagement with his country of birth and its troubled history, but he is also aware of how impossible it would be for him to live there.

While Sri Lanka's ethnic clashes may have led to Selvadurai's family's emigration, the country's homophobic attitudes, as expressed in anti-homosexual laws, have intensified his embrace of his country of adoption.

In his essay "Coming Out" in *Time Asia's* special issue on the Asian diaspora in 2003, Selvadurai provides a powerful account of the discomfort he and his partner, Andrew Chapman, experienced during a period spent in Sri Lanka in 1997. Selvadurai notes that "in this country that I still considered my home, I could never be at home." In contrast, he revels in the comfort of feeling at ease in the home he shares with Chapman in Toronto.

Selvadurai takes seriously both the effect his books may have on other young gay Sri Lankans and his position as a role model for other gay Asians in North America. In explaining his decision to be openly gay, he remarked, "I remembered how it was for me feeling there was no one out there who was a role model of any sort. When I decided to be out in public, I was really thinking of that version of me in Sri Lanka who would read my book and feel relieved to not be alone. If I decided not to be out, I would be sending a

message to that young person that I was still afraid and ashamed."

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