Funny Boy and Hegemonic Masculinity

Anshu Kiran[*] and Smarika Pareek
Chandigarh University, Mohali, India

Keywords: Funny Boy, Gender Narratives, Counter-Bildungsroman, Sexuality, Hegemonic Masculinity.

Abstract: This article emerges from the usual analyses of Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny boy*, which had focused on its potential meaning as a Western "coming out" bildungsroman or a memoir of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism's social strife. In this essay, this usual convention is further preceded and interpreted as "counter-bildungsroman" which weaves Hegemonic Masculinity theory into Arjie's narrative of gender and his queer awakening during the 1983 anti-Tamil violence in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Arjie playing "Bride-Bride" at the novel's start and wilfully misquoting British poetry at its end promotes heteronormative ideals and exclusive identity formations. Even though he is young, and the civil war symbolizes the internal conflict of erotic awakening, the Protagonist's sexual misdemeanors in heteropatriarchal school and home threaten the masculine populism that drove the coup attempt. Thus, R. W. Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity theory shows that the novel's narrative space mirrors Arjie's liminal sexual and gender identities.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite criticism, Hegemonic Masculinity has shaped gender studies in many fields. In the 1980s, masculinities and men's research refined and implemented the concept. Feminist theorists deny that masculinity is elitist or reified to address these main criticisms. However, gender-centered paradigms that use rigid typologies are flawed. Contemporary psychological models can improve Hegemonic Masculinity research, but conceptual adaptability has limits. Understanding Hegemonic Masculinity as a social reproduction mechanism requires accepting social battles in which oppressed masculinities influence dominant forms.

This viewpoint is a doctrine or set of practices that promote the idea that men are inherently superior and provide an excuse for prejudice, especially against women and the LGBTQ community. It's a way of thinking that aims to explain why patriarchal structures persist even in cultures where women and other marginalized groups have been historically excluded.

"Hegemonic Masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves concerning it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity. It was with this group, and to compliance among heterosexual women, that the concept of hegemony was most powerful. Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Abstract rather than descriptive, the suggestions quoted by Connell and Messerschmidt are expressed in the language of conventional patriarchal logic. As a result, they hypothesized that sexual politics was highly volatile and that gender roles could shift over time. Therefore, hegemonic masculinities that emerge under specific conditions are malleable over time. To be clear, it's possible that different ideals of masculinity will vie with one another to become the norm. There was a chance that a more understanding and liberating view of manhood would emerge as a result of the movement toward abolition.

Individuals who agree with the central tenet of feminism, namely, that unequal gender relations shape how society functions, theorists such as Connell and Messerschmidt offer the most frequently

767

cited definitions of Hegemonic Masculinity. Additionally, they noted patriarchy's shortcomings as an explanatory framework for this phenomenon. Connell substituted the idea of Hegemonic Masculinity for Patriarchy, which recognizes that men are also stratified against each other under the condition of Gender and Equality and that only a small percentage of men relish patriarchal advantages and power. It is because of how gender interacts with supplementary important factors, like socioeconomic standing and racial background. Messerschmidt elaborates,

"Hegemonic Masculinity is the culturally idealized form of masculinity in a given historical and social setting. It is culturally honored, and glorified-such as that the broader societal level (e.g., through the mass media) and at the institutional level (e.g., in school) and is constructed in relation to "subordinated masculinities" (e.g., homosexuality) and in relation to women" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Connell's primary illustration of Hegemonic Masculinity is best understood as a relational concept concerning the hierarchical sizing of male social interactions. Therefore, while there are a variety of masculine identities, they are not all created equal. The dominant or idealized form of masculinity in any given culture is typically associated with the elite. This becomes the gold standard that almost no other man can hope to reach.

1.1 Origin

In a deliberation over men's place in Australian labor politics, the conception of Hegemonic Masculinity was initially proposed in 1982 based on data collected from an analysis of social inequality in the country's secondary schools. Factual evidence of distinct gender, as well as class power structures intertwined with proactive gender-building programs, was uncovered in the aforementioned study of high school. These initial steps were sanctified in a paper labelled "Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity" (Carrigan, et al., 1985), that exhaustively criticized "male sex role" in literature and recommended a model of various power relations and masculinities. A full-scale social observation of gender was then updated to include this paradigm shift. This six-page essay on felinity and Hegemonic Masculinity made Gender and Power the go-to source for scholars studying the theory.

"The concept articulated by the research groups in Australia represented a synthesis of ideas and evidence from apparently disparate sources. But the convergence of ideas was not accidental. Closely

related issues were being addressed by researchers and activists in other countries too; the time was, in a sense, ripe for a synthesis of this kind" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

During the period, the term "hegemony" coined by Gramsci was popular among those trying to make sense of the establishment of stable class relations. Eisenstein's dual systems theory (1979) provided a natural framework for applying this concept to the corresponding gender dynamics issue. There was potential for a major miscommunication because of this.

In the end, psychoanalysis was the source of creativity for this concept. Freud's "Wolf Man" case study exemplifies how personal characteristics are a blueprint under stress, with repressed but not entirely extinguished mitigated (Freud 1955). Stoller (1968) coined the word "gender identity" and mapped the methods of how it generates differently in boys, especially in the direction of transsexualism. Friedman, Lerner, and Zaretsky's interest in men's authority, gender diversity, and the inherent conflict in traditional masculinities stems from their exposure to psychoanalysis.

1.2 Construction

"What emerged from this matrix in the mid-1980s was an analogue, in gender terms, of power structure research in political sociology—focusing the spotlight on a dominant group. Hegemonic Masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic and lateralized masculinities differed. Hegemonic men were statistical outliers. Typical. It was the modern standard of masculinity, the standard by which all men were expected to measure themselves, and the ideological justification for the universal subordination of women. Men who profited from the patriarchy's laxity may be complicit. This group and compliant heterosexual women dominated. Despite force, culture, institutions, and persuasion established hegemony.

These abstract concepts were defined by patriarchy. Historical gender hierarchies could change. Thus, hegemonic masculinities emerged in specific circumstances and allowed historical exuberance in a bleak theory. As gender roles were dismantled, manhood could become more empathetic and less repressive.

1.3 Solicitation

These definitions of Hegemonic Masculinity were quickly adopted. Conferences, textbooks, and academic journals all flourished in the late 1980s, "journals, and a rapidly expanding research agenda across the social sciences and humanities" helped establish men and masculinity research as an academic field (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). A hegemonic lens was used in studies of education to better understand classroom dynamics like bullying and boy resistance. It looked into questions of curriculum and gender-blind teaching methods. It examined physical education teachers' strategies and identities.

Professionals practiced talking about men and boys through this concept. Male psychotherapy, youth violence prevention, and emotional training for boys are illustrations. Nonetheless, it was also a topic of conversation in the fields of law, geography, art, and male chauvinism/feminism. "The analysis of multiple masculinities and the concept of hegemonic masculinity" research on gender, men and masculinity did replace frameworks like categorical patriarchy and the sex-role concept (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Gender orders create multiple masculinities, according to global research. Much research suggests that masculinities change. Adjustments to hegemony challenges are common. Young men are creating a "pragmatic egalitarianism" because they expect women to repudiate patriarchal shared and social relations.

From a theoretical framework, Hegemonic Masculinity with a "limited empirical base to a widely used framework for research and debate about men and masculinities" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) from the 1980s mid to the commencement of the 2000s. The model was applied to many cultural and practical issues. The idea is widely criticized. I'll use Selvadurai's human condition map to connect gender nonconformity, queer sexuality, and political turmoil and violence. Selvadurai's Tamil boy protagonist Arjie embodies these constitutive bonds that link mass violence to household strife in *Funny Boy*. Before trying gay sex with Sinhalese boy Shehan Soyza, Arjie fantasizes. Sexually engaging with Shehan violated gender, sexual, religious, and national laws.

Hegemonic Masculinity queerphobia enshrined in law as nativist masculinity catalyzes and surges violence in this novel, which many academics have interpreted as a coming-of-age "bildungsroman" or a story about the Sri Lankan civil war. Arjie, the novel's most sexually transgressive, "queer" character, will prove my point. Arjie's transgressions cause communal violence that destroys his family's home at the book's end. Arjie's colonial school has ethnic strife. Arjie's life narrative is queer. This queer plot challenges domestic and methodological principles that voice exclusive authenticity formations and heteronormative ideals, undermining supervisory gender norms consolidated by heteronormative, institutionalized settings.

A deep reading of the novel's sexuality and violence themes goes beyond allegory. It shows that tensions from multiple physical and ideological proclamations of violence and sexuality before and after the 1983 pogrom drive discourse. It widens the gap between academic research and gender violence and queer identity books. The novel portrays political animosity between the majority of Sinhalese and minority of Tamil in a space once called home as alienation and ethnic genocide.

"Funny Boy further extends and complicates the concept of a 'counter-bildungsroman' by staging the coming out/of age story in a web of violence located at several sites: the economic, the institutional, the physical, the verbal, the religious, the linguistic, and the gendered. In other words, the novel operates as a counter-bildungsroman as a strategy of skirting articulations of 'fictive ethnicity' as they surface in and through coming-of-age stories and/or previous studies of this novel that limit their hermeneutical scope to the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese" (Gairola, 2014).

1.4 Application of the Theory

"The novel introduces us to Arjie, a sexually transgressive, Tamil adolescent caught in the heteronormative world of the family in the troubled landscape of urban Colombo. The narrative chronicles tensions that erupt in the mid-1980s between the Tamil minority in the north and the Sinhalese-dominated south, and that set the backdrop against which Arjie similarly experiences social conflicts pre-figured by spatial relations" (Gairola, 2014).

In the opening chapter, location affects peripheral people's self-image. Arjie's life is marked by sudden changes from one domestic setting to another in *Pigs Can't Fly,* culminating in his upheaval after Black July and his eventual move to Canada. Thus, Arjie's nonheteronormative development is intricately linked to space and the underlying reasons why space is categorized by nationality, gender, and queer identity. Arjie must negotiate his growing queer identity

within the heteronormative rules of the Tamil lifestyle and the Sinhalese nationalist hooliganism in the home and private school due to the lack of queer clubs and organizations. Indeed, the novel's prologue takes place in a family's home, foreshadowing community violence and establishing heteronormative, Tamil kinship. "Violence of everyday living under the powerful discourses that regulate both gender and ethnic norms initiates the careful negotiation of identity and a new strategy of language" for the protagonist (Jayawickrama, 2007).

Henri Lefebvre claims that "Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. Their underpinning is spatial [original emphasis]" (Lefebvre, 1991). From the very beginning of *Funny Boy*, it is evident that heterotopic space is of utmost importance, and that it is connected to a wide variety of violent acts. Whenever the outdoor playground becomes a location for enforcing gender norms among youngsters, *Pigs Can't Fly* explores the uncomfortable conflict that arises between male and female gender regimes.

Arjie, Sonali, and their female cousins prefer playing Bride-Bride in their grandparents' backyard to cricket in the open backyard where their male relatives and cousins play. Until a second cousin named Her Fatness returns from overseas travel, this teen gender nonconformity contest is going well. Kanthi Aunty, the girl's mother, shames Arjie's parents and indoctrinates him with words he's never heard and heterosexuality because his cousin is angry that Arjie and the other children won't let him play The Bride. She drags him into the drawing room and forces him to sit down. Gayatri Gopinath writes some very perceptive things about this book in her analysis of it. "The pleasure Arjie takes in this activity [dressing in a sari with accessories] causes intense embarrassment and consternation on the part of adults, who decree that henceforth Arjie is to play with the boys. Arjie's eventual traumatic banishment from the world of the girls and his forced entry into proper identification are figured in terms of geography and space, of leaving one carefully inscribed space of gender play and entering one of gender conformity: Arjie is compelled to leave the inner section of the compound inhabited by the girls and enter the outer area where boys congregate" (Gopinath, 1997).

To elaborate on Gopinath's analysis, Arjie's transition will be described from one gendered space to another as he is orally interpellated. His neighbor addresses him as a "faggot" (Gairola, 2014; Selvadurai, (1994)). "The word "funny" and Arjie's howling relatives in the drawing room condemn his gender insubordination, prefiguring his imminent ejection

from the feminized space of both the rear yard and the cricket ground in the front yard where the boys illustrate athletic masculinity" (Butler, 1999).

1.5 Climax of the Novel

In the novel's denouement, the Convent's strict gender norms and British colonial schooling's masculine characters are compared. Sir Henry Newbolt's poem *The Best School of All* titles the book's final chapter. Arjie's father in a hope for him to mature and become a man sends him to boarding school at The Queen Victoria Academy. Abeysinghe, the school's principal, has earned the boys' scornful nickname "Black Tie" for enforcing a strict code of conduct to mold them into responsible men. Black Tie's punishment resembles domestic violence and war and riot zones. To create docile bodies that can be exploited, manipulated, and improved, the Academy canes and punishes. Adjectives such as illness and burden are used for a boy if he has long hair, winks, or licks his lips. Selvadurai's Academy is a disciplinary institution where Sinhalese and Tamil boys must study together.

In response to the Academy's macho culture, which mirrors the culture of their parent's homes, Arjie and Shehan establish a few intimate resistance gestures. In front of the class, Black Tie slaps Shehan when he sees him trying to cover up his long strands of hair by pinning them up, and eventually giving Shehan a buzz cut. Arjie feels compelled to comfort a distraught Shehan when they meet in a deserted classroom, "I stood watching him, and then, without quite realizing what I was doing, I reached out and touched his head. He moved away as if my hand had stung him, and I quickly lowered it, embarrassed by my involuntary gesture" (Selvadurai, 1994). The fact that Arjie can reclaim the classroom thanks to his involuntary gesture and at the same time place it thoughtfully beyond the sexual preference ideologies of honest and truthful subjects devotedly generated by imperial pedagogical approaches is instructive in and of itself.

"The gesture moreover undermines the hegemony of the institutional space of the school at the same time that it silently speaks back to the violent demonstrations of masculinity" (Gairola, 2014). Social transgression teaches Arjie not to identify his action in queer identity affirmation grammar. The boys run to the floor after escaping Black Tie's balcony where Shehan joyfully swirls Arjie and "did a most unexpected thing. Quickly, before I [Arjie] was aware of what was happening, he kissed me on the lips. My mouth must have opened in surprise

because I felt his tongue against mine for a brief instant. Then it was over" (Selvadurai, 1994). This violation of normative masculinity frees Arjie's erotic imagination, allowing him to reenact the kiss's sensuousness in the family home, a place where he is strictly forbidden to act in a gender-nonconforming manner.

"The novel's opening mediation of heteronormative and queer spaces results in multiple exiles of Arjie where he re-appropriates heteronormative spaces with queer gestures. This re-appropriation and transformation of space shifts from the subtle to the explicit as Arjie radically 'disidentifies' with the colonial hetero-normativity and communal violence symbolized by the Academy and Black Tie's pro-Tamil agenda at the Academy" (Gairola, 2014).

Arjie uses the term "disidentification," coined by Jose Esteban Muoz, to refer to a process "descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz, 1999). Therefore, Arjie's method of disassociating from his identity is to openly and blatantly blabber the poem, which is an outstanding example of imperial aesthetics, which might have otherwise confirmed his submissiveness.

"The final chapter of the novel is titled *Riot Journal: An Epilogue*, and effectively binds together multiple articulations of violence and competing masculinities through Arjie's eyewitness account. The horrifying climax of the novel details the events that lead to Arjie's and many other Tamil homes and businesses being incinerated, Sinhalese mobs immolating Tamils in the streets of Colombo, and the sad, but necessary, decision to flee to Canada as refugees seeking political asylum" (Gairola, 2014).

This episode marks possibly the utmost insightful disidentification that the protagonist endures during as well as after his narrative of gender and queer confirmation with his lover Shehan, as it presages the family's impending move to a different country and Arjie's capability overcome any emotional ties to Sri Lanka. Despite the horror of it all, Arjie is only able to critically examine his queer attraction to Shehan after going through what he has. The novel is a rude awakening for Arjie's parents, who have disciplined her according to gender roles.

2 CONCLUSION

This essay suggests that *Funny Boy*'s stories are about masculinity and socio-political violence. The Chelvaratnam house and Victoria Academy solidify masculinity with disciplinary gender roles, heteronormative marital rituals, religion, ethnicity, languages, etc. In this interdependent web of personalities and weighted assumptions, Amma, Arjie, and Radha Aunty risk their erotic desires. Selvadurai's novel mirrors the Black July pogrom's nationalism and masculinity. Arjie's family home's horrific arson attack but also his grandma and grandpa's public murders demonstrate the primary method of suppressing the minority of Tamils by the government in power which is attack. Sinhalese mobs destroy Tamil lives, property, and businesses as displays of nationalist manhood, which the government condones. This novel challenges heteronormative power structures by redirecting its praise. Despite Selvadurai's denials, the book may reflect his nomadic past.

The novel concludes by demonstrating that a violently forged masculinity in a particular geographical/ethnic setting frequently results in terrible genocides that are reminiscent of Western imperialist pasts. In addition, this suggests that Shyam's LGBT characters have to get over the hurt they felt when they left and moved to make peace with their old communities. Ironically, the need to leave and the protection of exile allow crossing identities that the government pathologizes to express themselves. The inflammatory narrative of Shyam Selvadurai links ethnic cleansing, governmentality, deviant sexualities, and organizational discipline. A counter-bildungsroman, the novel mixes fiction, autobiography, and the past to show "that social expressions of gender and sexuality can, and should, be as tenuous as the boundaries that would confine *Funny Boy* to a single way of narrating the" intertwined brutality of white supremacist ideology and marginalization (Gairola, 2014).

REFERENCES

Butler, J. (1999, September 1). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Theatre Arts Books. https://doi.org/10.1604/9780415924993 Carrigan, T., Connell, B., & Lee, J. (1985, September). Toward a new sociology of masculinity. Theory and Society, 14(5):551–604. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00160017

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity rethinking the concept. In Gender and Society. 19(6): 829–859. SAGE Publications Inc. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Freud, Sigmund. (1955). From the history of an infantile neurosis. Complete psychological works. Vol. 17. London: Hogarth.

Gairola, R. K. (2014, August 4). Limp wrists, inflammatory punches: violence, masculinity, and queer sexuality in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy. South Asian History and Culture, 5(4):475–489. https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2014.936206

Gopinath, G. (1997, May 1). Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion. Positions: Asia Critique, 5(2):467–489. https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-5-2-467

Jayawickrama, Sharanya. (2007). At Home in the Nation? Negotiating Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy. In Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature: 45–60. Delhi: Pearson Longman.

Lefebvre, Henri. (1991). The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. (1999). Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Newburn, T., and E. A. Stanko. (1994). Just boys doing business? Men, masculinities, and crime. New York: Routledge

Selvadurai, S. (1994, September 17). Funny Boy. McClelland & Stewart. https://doi.org/10.1604/9780771079504