

REDEEMING QUEER IDENTITY AND TRAUMA IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S NOVELS

Mr. E.Lenin

Assistant Professor of English
Aditanar College of Arts And Science
Tiruchendur
Ph.D Research Scholar in English
Register Number:18222024011001
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
Tirunelveli-627012

Dr. X. Anita Arul

Research Supervisor
Assistant Professor of English
Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar College
Melaneelithanallur
Sankarankovil- 627953

ABSTRACT

Queer Literature in recent years has been accused of harbouring obsession with trauma. Queer Trauma Literature is centred in the queerness as a life of mystery or tragic plots and plenty of despair. This showed the structures of the world that provided gloom and unhappiness but these structures need to be changed. In other words the function of Trauma wasn't to traumatize but to critique.

ShyamSelvadurai is born in Sri Lanka to a Tamil father and a Sinhalese mother. His parents belong to the warring ethnic majority and minority groups in Sri Lanka. His novels deal with the themes of queer identity, immigration issues, sexuality, ethnic conflicts and gender issues. This paper entitled "**REDEEMING QUEER IDENTITY AND TRAUMA IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S NOVELS**" focuses on Selvadurai's protagonists' troublesome upbringing in a war – torn Sri Lanka. Their problems are confounded when they realize that they being gays in a conservative society, is at war with their innate sexual and ethnic identities, which in turn creates a sort of trauma and tension within the individuals. Selvadurai, by excessively dealing with queer identity, challenges the acceptance of bordered identity to transcend the borders of identity. Queer Trauma here is not used as a tension but as a redemption, an escape, and liberation.

Key words: queer, bordered-identity, trauma, redemption, liberation, escape, sexuality.

Michel Foucault opines in *The History of Sexuality*, homosexuality became " a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology"(41).

'Queer' the umbrella term represents the identity of the homosexuals. Queer literature has long existed. However, its history has not always been widely celebrated. Queer literature explores sexuality and gender issues which can overlap in multiple genres. It brings out concerns dealing with definition of man, women and sexuality. It questions the fixed paradigms on sexual identity developed on normal ideology of sex. It focuses on LGBT themes that encompasses a wide range of narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and explore diverse sexualities. As Ahmed points out:

Queer subjects, when faced by the comforts of heterosexuality, may feel uncomfortable...

Furthermore, queer subjects may also be 'asked' not to make heterosexuals feel uncomfortable by avoiding the display signs of queer intimacy which is itself an uncomfortable feeling, a restriction on what one can do with one's body , and another's body in social space. (148)

Queer literature in recent years, has been accused of harbouring an obsession with trauma. Queerness was in fact mortgaged to unhappiness. The queer trauma literatures cemented it as a life of misery with tragic plots and plenty of despair. It showed the structures of the world that produced

trauma, gloom and grief. These structures need to be changed to explore the cycles of history, to learn how one could tear the way out of them. In other words, the function of trauma wasn't to traumatize but to critique.

This paper entitled "REDEEMING QUEER IDENTITY AND TRAUMA IN SHYAM SELVADURAI'S NOVELS" focuses on how queer trauma, present in ShyamSelvadurai's novels, acts as a redeeming effect. Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan born Canadian diasporic writer, whose family migrated to Canada in the wake of ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka. He grew up in a war-torn Sri Lanka where displacement, ethnic and linguistic majority chauvinism were at its peak that forced him to write on the themes like bordered identity, immigrant issues, sexuality and multiculturalism. He speaks about ethno-religious chauvinism at the level of postcolonial civil society and individual traumas that fast caught up with national narratives. His complex narratives of queer desires unfold against the backdrop of civil war in Colombo.

Selvadurai's protagonists, be it ArjieChelvaratnam in *Funny Boy*, Balendran in *Cinnamon Gardens*, AmrithDealwis in *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* and ShivanRassiah in *The Hungry Ghost*, undergo queer identity traumas. But the manner in which these traumas are handled acts as a revelation that leads to freedom and liberation. All the above - mentioned protagonists are gays who consider the stifling of trauma, gender nonconformity, anxieties, sexuality, ethnic identity a liberation to escape.

Sri Lanka is no haven for so called LGBT. Same sex sexual secret relationships are treated unmanly and perverted. The extremists have established an unofficial death penalty for LGBT persons and activists making it tough for survival: "In 1996, the Sri Lankan gay group 'Companions on a journey' was established during its six-year existence it has faced assaults on its founders, death threats and attacks on its headquarters." (Prichard) *Funny Boy*, a bildungsroman novel, traces the growth of the protagonist Arjie's life from childhood to adulthood. He grows from a ridiculed funny boy to an intelligent, reflective teenager dangerously awakened by Shehan, his first love and rebellious schoolmate. The first trauma that Arjie experiences is his realization of being a gay.

His father's accusation of Arjie's funny behavior like tying a saree, playing with girls, taking the role of a bride in the bride-ride game, his segregation from both girls and boys indicate that Arjie himself occupied the third space in between these two worlds, but that third space is only defined as funny. He becomes more aware of his growing attraction to men. He is torn between his desire and the shame fostered by his conservative society. Radha Aunty and Jegan are the two people who accepted him as he is, but ultimately leave him. The trauma mounted on Arjie when he was separated from his lover Shehan, who is a Sinhalese, through him Arjie learns to embrace his own sexuality. However due to the escalating tensions of Civil War, Arjie was forced to leave Shehan and Sri Lanka altogether. Arjie's defiance and his conformity to not confirming to the societal norms is expressed thus:

How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't ... If you were like Shehan or me you had no choice but to follow what they said. But did we always have to obey? Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? I thought about this, but no answer presented it to me. (FB274)

Selvadurai's second novel, *Cinnamon Gardens* set in the 1920s Ceylon, does not excessively address the issue of sexuality but centres on the parallel narratives to link homosexuality with the oppression of women. The protagonist, Balendran settled with his wife and son is traumatised by the arrival of Richard Howland, his English lover from his youthful Cambridge days. In conforming to the social and sexual expectations of his family, he enters into a sexually unfulfilling marriage. But racked by the guilt he feels for neglecting his wife and for having betrayed his feelings for Richard. The novel ends with Balendran's acknowledgement of his love for Richard, despite the deceptions and hypocrisies of his society, and being bound in his marriage and family. As he puts it:

Yes, Appa", Balendran said with gathering strength, "but I might have been truly happy." He took a deep breath. "I loved Richard. That would have been enough... He had come looking for his nephew's freedom and, unwittingly he had achieved his own. (CG 368)

Balendran's cousin Annulukshmi is another character who undergoes gender pressure, when she struggles to pursue her vocation as a teacher. In colonial Sri Lanka, being a teacher is a crime because "a career as a teacher was reserved for those girls who were too poor or too ugly to ever catch a husband." (4) Both Balendran and Annulukshmi are presented quite sympathetically, but they also struggled against all odds to see redemption in their lives, one rebel against his patriarchal father to be his own man and the other defying the family pressure to accept an arranged marriage, to pursue her goal as a teacher.

Swimming in the Monsoon Seaset in 1980s Sri Lanka, narrates the life of a fourteen year old boy named Amrith Dealwis, falling in love with his visiting Canadian cousin Niresh. Amrith's loss of his parents in his early life and his infatuation for Niresh at his adolescence storm-tossed his life like an unexpected monsoon. His obsession for Niresh is played out against the school production of Shakespeare's *Othello*, and the play's powerful theme of jealousy provides the backdrop to the teenager's angst. In Amrith's case, the situation is further complicated by the implication of incest in his growing desire for his cousin Niresh. Amrith is in a double-bind: he neither should have love a man nor should have loved someone who is a close-blood relation. He is therefore overcome by a profound sense of guilt. The rest of *Swimming in the Monsoon* dramatizes how Amrith rises above his sense of guilt and accepts himself. After much reflection he finally visits his mother's grave and strikes up a conversation with her imaginary spirit. He has to share the most fundamental truth about himself with the person he has loved the most. He confessed, "I did not know this thing within him, where to turn, whom to appeal for comfort. He felt the burden of his silence choking him... he whispered ..., I am I am different." (SIMS 266, 267) Thus the final reunion with his soul is achieved and he was at complete peace with himself.

Another significant moment of realization about his innate sexuality in the text occurs when Amrith is introduced to a particular statue of Lord Buddha. The androgynous nature of the statue of Buddha gathers new meaning in the world of *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. By merging the male and female in the same body, the statue destabilizes rigid gender categories based on biological sex. The introduction to this Buddha's statue helped Amrith to accept his sexuality and shed the overbearing sense of guilt that has been haunting him so far. At another level, this moment in the novel also sees its protagonist travelling across ethnic borders: a Tamil Christian seeking solace at the feet of an androgynous statue of Buddha.

The Hungry Ghost explores the coming of age of Shivan Rassiah, the protagonist, who boarded up in his grandmother Daya's mansion, the matriarch of Ariyasinghe's family, wants to groom him as a heir to her vast and corrupt empire. Her commanding presence in Shivan's life whom she takes under her wings, serves as a strangle-hold on him. Her grandmother was showing the future mapped out for him. But she miscalculated Shivan's power as an individual. As Shivan points out, "I understood that she was so confident of her dominance. She did not fear my judgement. Yet she had miscalculated her power over me. For that was the moment, as I now recall it, when my betrayal of her began." (THG13) The karmic trauma repeats itself in Shivan's life when his homosexual affair with Mili, a charming young handsome social justice leader from his school days in Colombo, come to a tragic end when Daya was not able to stomach his grandson's non-heteronormative affair. Since Shivan was half Tamilian and half Sinhalese i.e his mother was a Sinhalese and father was a Tamilian, he has to migrate to Canada because of the civil unrest. The trauma of immigration, sexuality, alienation, and ethnicity are put to test through the characters in the novel. Shivan's scholarship winning sister trying to wriggle out of the gender issues faced by her. Their mother goes through gender and identity issues because her deceased husband was a Tamilian. As an escape they all migrated to Canada. His characters constantly move from Sri Lanka to Canada, to Vancouver, to America and infiltrate boundaries and tries to come to terms with their own multi-localities.

Selvadurai's novels seem to revolve around the theme of forgiveness and redemption. By presenting the traumas of sexuality, desire, immigration, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, and LGBT issues, his aim was not to present the tension and trauma experienced by the gay community, but rather to escape and to liberate them towards their normative space and celebrate the queer identity. This escape is to create multiple identities and a space which is not 'oppositionally defined gender identity' but to co-exist with heterosexuality. The newly created space is the acceptance or

willful co-existence of multiple identities that do not come in treating each other in a special way but to be 'indifferent' to differences.

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