



IDENTITY AND MARGINALISATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE: CASTE, CLASS, NATION, AND QUEER RESISTANCE IN *THE BOYFRIEND* AND *FUNNY BOY*

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Abstract

*This paper examines how contemporary South Asian literature represents identity and marginalisation through the intersecting frameworks of caste, class, ethnicity, nation, and sexuality. Focusing on R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, the study argues that both novels expose the limitations of dominant social structures by showing how queer subjects are shaped not by sexuality alone but by overlapping hierarchies of power. Rao's novel situates queer desire within the urban realities of Bombay, foregrounding caste, class mobility, masculinity, and the precariousness of belonging in public and private space. Selvadurai's novel, by contrast, traces a child's coming-of-age in Sri Lanka against the background of ethnic conflict, revealing how gender nonconformity and national violence become mutually illuminating. Taken together, the novels demonstrate that queer identity in South Asian literature is inseparable from broader histories of colonialism, communalism, and social exclusion. The paper further contends that both texts employ distinctive narrative strategies of resistance: irony, fragmentation, memory, and the defamiliarisation of normative institutions such as family, marriage, and nation. By reading these novels comparatively, the paper highlights the ways in which contemporary South Asian writing reimagines the margins not as sites of silence, but as powerful locations of critique, survival, and literary innovation.*

Keywords

Marginalisation, Queer Resistance, Identity, South Asian Literature, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Contemporary South Asian literature has increasingly turned toward the lives of those positioned at the edges of social legitimacy: women, religious minorities, caste-oppressed communities, migrants, and queer subjects. In doing so, it has challenged the fiction of a stable national culture by foregrounding conflict, exclusion, and uneven access to citizenship. Among the most significant interventions in this field are R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*, first published in 2003 by Penguin India, and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, first published in 1994 by McClelland and Stewart. Both novels emerged as landmark texts because they insisted that sexuality must be read in relation to other structures of power rather than as an isolated category of identity. Their importance lies not only in representing queer experience but also in revealing how sexuality is mediated by caste, class, religion, ethnicity, language, and nation.

This paper argues that *The Boyfriend* and *Funny Boy* should be read together because each novel reveals a different but related dimension of marginalisation in South Asia. Rao's Bombay is shaped by urban anonymity, public sexuality, caste hierarchies, and communal violence; Selvadurai's Colombo is shaped by family discipline, ethnic polarisation, and the slow destruction of domestic security. In both cases, the queer subject is neither merely individualised nor simply



symbolic. Instead, the queer figure becomes a lens through which the contradictions of the postcolonial nation are exposed. What appears at first to be a story of private desire or intimate difference becomes, on closer reading, a story about the limits of citizenship, the violence of respectability, and the fragility of belonging.

The theoretical framework of this paper draws on queer studies, postcolonial criticism, and intersectional approaches to identity. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and Jonathan Dollimore help explain how sexuality is socially constructed and normatively regulated, while postcolonial critics and South Asian scholars illuminate how colonial modernity, nationalism, and social stratification shape the experience of difference. Yet the significance of these novels lies in the fact that they do not simply illustrate theory. Rather, they complicate theory by situating queer life in environments where caste, ethnicity, and communal politics remain materially decisive. To read these texts carefully is to recognise that queer marginality in South Asia is not reducible to a universal narrative of visibility or liberation. Instead, it emerges within highly specific social worlds marked by unequal histories and competing claims to legitimacy.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology based on close textual reading and comparative literary analysis. The research design is analytical and thematic, focusing on how identity, caste, class, gender, nation, and marginalisation are represented in R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. The primary sources are the two selected novels, while the secondary sources include books and scholarly essays on queer theory, postcolonial studies, and South Asian literary criticism. The study uses a comparative design to identify both parallels and differences in the treatment of social exclusion in Indian and Sri Lankan contexts. Research quotations from the novels and from selected critics are used as textual evidence to support interpretation and strengthen the argument. These quotations are not treated as isolated references but as integral parts of the analysis that reveal narrative strategy, ideological tension, and the socio-political dimensions of literary representation. Thus, the methodology combines textual interpretation with theoretical application to produce a focused and academically grounded reading of both works.

Identity and Marginalisation in Contemporary South Asian Literature:

One of the central insights of contemporary South Asian writing is that identity is never singular. Literary characters are formed through multiple, often conflicting, social positions that shape both self-understanding and public perception. This is especially true in *The Boyfriend* and *Funny Boy*, where sexuality intersects with other categories of difference in ways that deepen vulnerability and complicate solidarity. Yudi in *The Boyfriend* experiences himself as a self-conscious gay subject, but his life is also structured by class privilege, urban education, linguistic capital, and Brahmin location. Milind, by contrast, cannot be understood apart from caste oppression, economic precarity, and the demands of masculine respectability. Similarly, Arjie in *Funny Boy* is marked by gender nonconformity, but his development takes place within an upper-middle-class Tamil family caught in the intensifying conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. In both novels, then, queer identity is produced through intersection rather than isolation.

Such a framework resists any simplistic celebration of identity politics. Rao's novel repeatedly shows that the category "gay" does not erase caste, class, or language. Selvadurai's novel similarly shows that gender variance does not unfold outside history; it is shaped by domestic expectations, school discipline, and national crisis. The margin, therefore, is not a single location. It is a layered condition. To be marginalised in these texts is to occupy multiple unstable positions at once: one may be protected by class yet endangered by sexuality, privileged by family status yet alienated by ethnicity, visible within the household yet excluded from the nation. This complexity is



what gives both novels their analytical power and their continuing relevance in South Asian literary studies.

Caste, Class, and Social Exclusion in *The Boyfriend* and *Funny Boy*:

The Boyfriend offers one of the most direct literary examinations of how caste and class mediate queer relations in urban India. Yudi and Milind do not meet as abstract representatives of desire; they meet within an unequal social order. Yudi is older, educated, financially stable, and capable of navigating the city with a degree of confidence unavailable to Milind. Milind, a young Dalit man, enters the relationship carrying the burden of caste degradation and economic need. Rao refuses to romanticise this asymmetry. Their intimacy is marked by exchange, manipulation, tenderness, shame, and dependency all at once. What makes the novel distinctive is its insistence that queer desire does not transcend caste society. Rather, caste returns repeatedly to structure intimacy, self-worth, and the imagination of the future. The relationship between Yudi and Milind is therefore not only a love story; it is also a study in how inequality reproduces itself even within marginalised communities.

Bombay itself functions as an important social text in Rao's novel. Public toilets, railway stations, parks, trains, and clubs become sites where class boundaries blur temporarily but never disappear entirely. Urban space permits contact, yet it also exposes vulnerability. Queer survival depends on secrecy, improvisation, and coded movement through the city. Rao's portrayal of public sexual culture is not merely documentary; it reveals how the city produces fleeting possibilities of freedom while sustaining structural inequalities that prevent durable belonging. The novel's irony lies in the fact that those excluded from heteronormative society do not automatically create egalitarian alternatives. Instead, the social world of queer men remains haunted by caste prejudice, economic coercion, and masculinist hierarchies.

In *Funny Boy*, class works differently but no less powerfully. Arjie belongs to a relatively privileged Tamil family, and that privilege initially shelters him from direct forms of deprivation. Yet the novel gradually shows that class security cannot protect a minority community from ethnic violence. The Chelvaratnam family's education, urban refinement, and middle-class aspirations do not prevent their social world from unravelling under the pressure of nationalism. Selvadurai also exposes the disciplining function of class respectability within the home. Arjie is repeatedly corrected, watched, and redirected because his behaviour threatens the family's ideal of propriety. Thus, while *The Boyfriend* foregrounds caste and cash relations more explicitly, *Funny Boy* demonstrates how bourgeois domesticity polices gender from within. In both texts, social exclusion is not only imposed by the state or the crowd; it is also reproduced by intimate institutions such as family, work, and marriage.

Gender, Nation, and Migration in Modern Indian and Sri Lankan Fiction:

Gender nonconformity in both novels is inseparable from questions of nation. In *Funny Boy*, Arjie's refusal to embody normative masculinity parallels the instability of the Sri Lankan nation-state. His childhood games, school experiences, and affective attachments expose the arbitrary nature of gender rules, but they also anticipate the violence through which ethnic majoritarianism polices belonging. The movement from domestic reprimand to public riot is not accidental. Selvadurai suggests that the same desire to regulate bodies, roles, and boundaries animates both heteropatriarchy and ethnonationalism. Arjie's body becomes a site upon which the family seeks to enforce order, just as the nation seeks to enforce ethnic purity. The personal is therefore not separate from the political; it is where politics is first learned.

The final movement of *Funny Boy* toward displacement and migration deepens this connection. The family's departure from Sri Lanka is not represented as a triumphant beginning but as a painful consequence of state failure and communal terror. Migration in this context is both



escape and loss. It reveals the nation not as a natural home but as a fragile and exclusionary construction. Selvadurai's treatment of exile also anticipates later queer diaspora criticism, which argues that queer subjects often inhabit home and migration in contradictory ways. The desire to leave may arise from persecution, but departure also intensifies questions of memory, attachment, and fracture. Scholarship on the novel has noted precisely this entanglement of queer adolescence, ethnicity, and postcolonial modernity.

In *The Boyfriend*, migration operates less as physical relocation than as internal exile. Yudi inhabits Bombay, yet he is repeatedly distanced from the normative scripts that organise urban life. Marriage, family continuity, and reproductive citizenship remain available to others but not fully to him. Milind's eventual movement toward marriage marks not liberation but submission to a social order that rewards heterosexual conformity. If Selvadurai's novel ends with geographic displacement, Rao's text dramatises social displacement from within the nation. Together, the novels show that migration need not always be across borders. It may also take the form of estrangement within the home, language, caste location, or kinship structure.

Postcolonial Identity and Social Stigma in R. Raj Rao and Shyam Selvadurai:

Both Rao and Selvadurai write from postcolonial contexts in which colonial laws, moral codes, and classificatory systems continue to shape the present. The stigma attached to queer desire in South Asia cannot be understood outside this longer history. At the same time, these writers resist the simplistic claim that non-normative sexuality is merely a Western import. Instead, they show that colonial modernity intensified older structures of hierarchy while introducing new vocabularies of deviance, regulation, and respectability. Their fiction thus performs a double critique: it interrogates nationalist claims to cultural authenticity while also challenging Eurocentric models of queer liberation that assume a linear movement from repression to visibility.

In Rao's work, stigma emerges through ridicule, danger, and the constant threat of exposure, but it is also refracted through caste ideology and communal politics. The novel's backdrop of the 1992–93 Bombay riots widens its social field by showing how minority vulnerability is distributed unevenly but recursively. Queer marginality appears alongside religious violence and caste hostility, creating a bleak but incisive portrait of the postcolonial city. Selvadurai, meanwhile, reveals stigma through a child's perspective. Because Arjie does not yet possess the full vocabulary of sexual identity, the novel captures the process by which shame is learned. Adults, schools, and institutions teach him what counts as proper behaviour, thereby revealing stigma as a social pedagogy rather than a natural response. This narrative choice is one of Selvadurai's greatest strengths: it makes prejudice visible in its ordinary forms before it culminates in national catastrophe.

The postcolonial subject in these novels is therefore never whole. Identity is fractured by competing affiliations and by the demand to present a coherent self to systems that reward conformity. What these novels make legible is not simply suffering, but contradiction. Yudi is both vulnerable and privileged; Arjie is both sheltered and endangered. Such complexity prevents the reader from treating marginalisation as a single-axis experience. Instead, both writers insist on a relational understanding of power in which stigma moves across different institutions and scales: body, family, neighbourhood, city, and nation.

Narrative Strategies of Resistance in Contemporary Queer Literature:

If these novels diagnose exclusion, they also imagine resistance through form. Rao's prose relies heavily on irony, abrupt tonal shifts, and unsentimental observation. This style is politically significant because it refuses to convert queer pain into melodrama. By withholding easy consolation, *The Boyfriend* compels readers to confront the social systems that produce intimacy as both necessity and trap. Its urban settings, coded interactions, and satirical treatment of respectability expose the fragility of all supposedly natural identities. Resistance here takes the form



of irreverence and demystification. The novel disenchant's caste purity, masculine certainty, and romantic idealism alike.

Selvadurai's strategy is different. *Funny Boy* is structured through linked stories that track Arjie's development over time, producing a form that is both episodic and cumulative. This fragmented architecture mirrors the instability of identity itself: the self emerges through discontinuous encounters rather than a single revelation. The child narrator's perspective further destabilises normative authority because it renders adult rules strange and often absurd. What adults call proper behaviour appears arbitrary when seen through Arjie's sensibility. Selvadurai also uses memory as resistance. By narrating childhood retrospectively, the novel preserves experiences that official histories often erase: small humiliations, forbidden pleasures, domestic tenderness, and the early signs of political danger. In this way, literature becomes an archive of feelings and perceptions excluded from national narratives.

Both novels also resist by reimagining institutions. Marriage, family, school, religion, and nation are not treated as stable foundations but as contested structures that organise inclusion and exclusion. In Rao, marriage appears as a social script that redirects desire into respectability while leaving emotional contradictions unresolved. In Selvadurai, school becomes a disciplinary space where gender and nationalism are rehearsed. The family, often idealised in nationalist discourse, is presented in both novels as ambivalent: it can nurture, shelter, and remember, but it can also discipline, silence, and expel. By exposing these contradictions, the novels create a counter-discourse in which the margin speaks not as a victim alone but as an analyst. Resistance lies not only in surviving stigma, but in narrating the systems that produce it.

Conclusion:

A comparative reading of *The Boyfriend* and *Funny Boy* shows that identity and marginalisation in contemporary South Asian literature are best understood through intersection rather than isolation. Both novels reveal that queer life is shaped by more than sexuality alone: caste, class, ethnicity, language, religion, and nation all determine the conditions under which subjects seek love, safety, and recognition. Rao's Bombay foregrounds the brutal intimacy of caste and class within queer urban culture, while Selvadurai's Sri Lanka reveals the entanglement of gender nonconformity with ethnic conflict and displacement. Together, the novels challenge any universal narrative of queer emancipation by insisting on the specificity of South Asian histories.

At the same time, these texts do more than document oppression. They generate critical methods for reading the postcolonial present. Through irony, fragmentation, memory, and comparative social vision, they show how the margins can produce powerful critiques of dominant institutions. Their enduring value lies in this dual achievement: they make visible the injuries of exclusion while also affirming literature as a space where those exclusions can be named, analysed, and resisted. In contemporary South Asian literary studies, *The Boyfriend* and *Funny Boy* remain indispensable precisely because they refuse simplification. They compel readers to recognise that the struggle over identity is also a struggle over history, belonging, and the imagination of more just futures.

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