

Narayanamoorthy Nanditha

Prof. Joerg Esleben

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Lost and Found: Multiple Identities in the Tamil Canadian Diaspora

A comparative study of *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai and *The Strike* by Anand Mahadevan

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DEDICATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Diasporas have come to represent more than the exile and persecution of Jewish and Greek communities. The term ‘diaspora’ stems from an ancient Greek term that is associated with ‘scattering’ and ‘dispersal’. Today, the term represents a community of people who live outside their shared country of origin or ancestry and still live in a built network around the world. Accordingly, the Tamil diaspora consists of people of Indian and Sri Lankan origin who have settled in other parts of the world. Instead of a shared country, this diaspora’s identity is rooted in an ancient heritage of a rich Tamil language and literature and a vibrant culture that transcends national borders. Perhaps the greatest change that has impacted the idea of a ‘Tamil identity’ has been the formation and recognition of an international Tamil diaspora in recent decades that was primarily a result of the departure of Sri Lankan Tamils during the civil war (1983-2009) in that country. Detached from any one land, contemporary Tamil identity is necessarily hyphenated. Canada is home to one of the largest diaspora Tamil populations from South India and Sri Lanka around 200,000 in number with a large concentration based in Toronto.

The objective of this research is a close reading and a comparative discursive analysis of two novels authored by writers who belong to the Tamil diaspora in Canada: *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai published in September 1994 and *The Strike* by Anand Mahadevan published in 2006. The aim is to determine how the South Asian writers construct multiple identities through the characters in their novels. The research seeks to understand the construction of complex diasporic identities using postcolonial, queer and cultural literary theories. Although

neither of the novels takes place in the host country that is Canada, this research refers to the term ‘diasporic’ with regard to the authors, who are part of the Tamil diaspora in Canada. The country, in this sense, is a “diaspora location that remains peripheral” according to Jenni Ramone (181). The term “diasporic” here differentiates between the identity of the authors and that of the characters in the novels. However, it is important with regard to the nostalgia that the authors portray towards India and Sri Lanka from the vantage point of Canada. Furthermore, Canada becomes a space where the identities of both writers have come to be accepted and expressed and a place from where they can freely discuss the nostalgia for their homeland and culture. Another objective of this research is to understand how cultural identity differs in both novels since the two authors have origins in different countries but share a common culture and heritage. That is, Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan and Mahadevan is from South India. This comparison contributes to a further understanding of the differences and similarities in the diasporic identities in the Tamil diaspora.

The research contributes a literary perspective to the study of the Tamil diaspora, which has so far only been studied and analyzed in its cultural, political and anthropological aspects. Through the use of various literary theories like postcolonial and queer theories to compare the works of two Tamil diaspora authors, this literary study of the Tamil diaspora will provide new insights into what it means to be Tamil and to reinforce the same through literature. This research will also help gain further knowledge on Tamil authors writing in English. While Selvadurai has been the object of a great deal of literary research, Mahadevan’s works have yet to be studied in depth. Therefore, this project aims to contribute to the growing body of research into the works of Tamil writers.

Shyam Selvadurai is a novelist born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1965. He belongs to a mixed Tamil and Sinhala heritage and he immigrated with his family to Canada at the age of 19 following the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka. Selvadurai's first novel, *Funny Boy*, won several awards in Canada, including Canada's First Novel Award and the Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Men's fiction.

Funny Boy is at once an innocent and frank depiction of Arjie Chelvaratnam's happy, harrowing and confused childhood. *Funny Boy* is a Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story of a boy against the backdrop of his country's disintegration. Growing up in a middle class Tamil family, Arjie tries to come to terms with his homosexuality. As a child, the only highlight of his months are the blissful 'spend-the-days' at his grandparents' house, where he longs to indulge in his love for dress-up and participate in the 'bride-bride' game along with his female cousins instead of joining the boys to play the 'masculine' sport of cricket. However, the glorious 'spend-the-days' come to an abrupt halt due to society's repressive rules and he is forbidden from dressing up. His life is shattered by a deep identity crisis in the same manner that the country is shattered by catastrophic events and ethnic tensions. In the first chapter, we are introduced to Radha Aunty, his father's sister who has returned from the United States for her arranged marriage to another Tamil. However, her flirtation and affair with a Sinhalese man brings about, for the first time, an awareness of the ethnic tensions between the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Ultimately, Radha Aunty bears the brunt of the ethnic strife and marries the Tamil instead of her Sinhalese lover. Later, in the story, Arjie is privy to the knowledge of the return of Amma's old flame, Uncle Daryl, whose death awakens both Amma and Arjie to the civil strife around them. Selvadurai captures the undercurrent in the Tamil- Sinhala relationships. In the latter part of the book, Arjie's father takes in Jegan, a friend's son, as his own surrogate

son, who first awakens Arjie's sexuality. His father, fearing his blossoming homosexuality, sends Arjie to a colonial and aristocratic English school in hopes of 'curing him' of the 'disease'. However, it is at the Victoria Academy that Arjie has his first sexual encounter with Shehan Soyza, who helps him understand his true identity.

This book deals with characters that exhibit several identities- namely postcolonial, queer and cultural- that I will discuss and elaborate on. The narrator or protagonist himself is a member of the Tamil Canadian diaspora who reflects on his childhood in Sri Lanka. This novel will be analyzed in light of the construction of multiple identities from the perspective of a Tamil Canadian writer.

Anand Mahadevan, by contrast, is a Toronto-based Canadian writer was born in Chennai in Tamil Nadu, India in 1979 and immigrated to Canada in 1996. He was awarded an Honour of Distinction from the Dwayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBT writers in 2013. His debut novel *The Strike* was published in 2006. Like *Funny Boy*, this novel is also a Bildungsroman that is partly set in the author's region of origin, Southern India, in the state of Tamil Nadu. Hari, the child protagonist, is the personification of a culture clash, who rebels by choosing to speak in Hindi and English instead of Tamil. The book also deals with his growing feelings for another boy. Mahadevan weaves a tale of complex ethnic and simmering cultural tension, sexual awakening and the status of women in South India.

The Strike begins in the city of Nagpur, and Hari travels by train over the holidays to meet with his Thatha, his maternal grandfather's family. His preference of Hindi and English over Tamil in South India leads to an angry graffiti by the servant's son, Vishu, against his family. Angered at being accused of theft, Vishu sexually abuses Hari at his Thatha's house to threaten him. It is, therefore, at the hands of Vishu that Hari has his first sexual encounter that

leads to confusion over his sexual identity. The entire novel is structured as a 'nostalgic' train journey, and Hari finds himself trapped in a train on its way to Madras when the death of a star politician and film actor, MGR, leads to protests all over the state of Tamil Nadu. On this journey, he makes numerous friends including Mukund and the eunuch Radha before things take a turn for the worse.

The choice of these two novels stems from the fact that they are both extremely similar yet very different, as both protagonists belong to the same heritage and are both Tamil but their stories are set in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, a significant array of research has been carried out on *Funny Boy* written by Selvadurai in relation to postcolonial as well as queer theories. I will utilize this past research in order to apply its results to the novel *The Strike* by Anand Mahadevan. Additionally my project incorporates Tamil cultural identity, which has not been studied in relation with these novels in the past. This study all represents the first time that these novels have been studied together in a comparative context.

I employ two different methodologies in this research to demonstrate the multiple identities in the Tamil Canadian diaspora. The primary methodology I employ is a comparative analysis of both novels by close reading to determine the construction of the various diasporic identities in both novels. The second methodology is a discourse analysis where I analyze the written as well as the spoken words by the characters in the novels to demonstrate postcolonial authority and its impact on queer and cultural identity.

II. PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Diaspora in general has been the object of intense interest for researchers, particularly with respect to literature. This allows writers the space to reconnect with their homelands and create positive or negative memories. Early research into the term ‘diaspora’ has sought to redefine its meaning from displacement based only on exile and persecution to “a longing to return home” (Cohen 1997; Sheffner 1986). Since the notion of a diaspora is deeply entrenched within the idea of cultural identity, my discussion of the diasporic Tamil cultural identity builds on Cohen’s idea of a travelling transnational diaspora (Cohen 135). The term has become equally associated, particularly in literature, with the nostalgic voice of a writer and with significant power (Tololyan 2007, 649). Ever since the examination of the term began, scholars have also attempted to understand the concept of diasporas with respect to identities. Diasporas have been studied in relation to all three key aspects and applied in the comparative analysis of several notable works of literature by diaspora writers. My project aims to apply this research to the study of postcolonial, queer and cultural diasporic identities in the two chosen novels.

With regard to postcolonialism, in the book *Key Concepts of Postcolonial Studies*, the writers argue that the study of “diasporas can never really be separated from the aspect of colonialism” (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin 1998). The relationship between the diasporas and colonialism can indeed be very complex. Some other authors, like Appiah in the *Dictionary of Global Cultures*, discuss the case of Jewish diasporas exclusively, wherein they make the connection between the notion of diasporas and a strong sense of national identity (Appiah, Anthony and Gates 1996).

The writers argue that this connection creates a tension that eventually fragments the Jewish sense of national and cultural identity. Gilroy, in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, has stated that there is a “fatal junction between the cultural and national identity” (2). Cohen, in his reflection on the postmodern transnational element when defining diasporas, argues in his book that the identity of the diaspora is positioned between a physical and spiritual sense that falls outside the nation’s space and time (135).. Some studies on Sri Lankan politics and the notion of a postcolonial identity and its relation with the idea of nationhood are very specific to *Funny Boy*, since, as discussed below, significant research on the novel from the perspective of various literary theories has already been undertaken. The results can be employed to compare and analyze the same in the case of *The Strike*, which remains to be introduced as an important element to the study of Tamil diasporas. Earlier research on postcolonial identity and the idea of nationhood stems from the importance of nationhood and the Sinhala identity in *Funny Boy*. According to Gairola, this national identity in the narrative becomes even more important than the linguistic or ethnic identity (2014). Although the Tamils and the Sinhala have different views of nationalism, Scott Mitchell indicates that both concepts of nationalism were constructed on the basis of being the ‘Other’.

The aim of my research is to offer a new analysis of the concept of postcolonial identity in the Tamil diaspora both in the Indian and Sri Lankan contexts. Although a significant amount of research has been undertaken in the past with respect to Indian diasporas in relation to postcolonialism and in a general sense, particularly through the works of notable writers, diasporic theory has never been applied exclusively to the Tamil diaspora. Regarding past research on cultural identity, scholars like Vijay Mishra have only covered authors in the Indian

context, including Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri, and have attempted to locate the Indian diasporic experience. Vijay Mishra examines the meaning of Indian diasporas in the postcolonial context using literary theory and explains how “every diaspora is unhappy in its own way,” meaning that every diaspora is different (Mishra 2007). My research, in contrast, focuses solely on the study of identities in diasporas through literature, unlike past research that only focused on the Tamil political, religious and anthropological aspects and particularly so to represent Sri Lankan Tamils. The three decades of ethnic war that brought endless suffering and loss permeates most of the Sri Lankan writing in Tamil. Some of the examples of research that stems from these aspects are the books *Pain, Pride and Politics* and *A history of Tamil Diaspora Politics in Canada*, which deal with the displacement of the Sri Lankan Tamils from their homeland to Canada due to the breakout of the Civil War. Most scholars who study the South Asian diasporas have sought to define the term by categorizing the different elements of diasporic studies. Some attempt to study diasporas along religious lines that suggest the existence of a Tamil diaspora that is separate and different from the Hindu and/or Indian diaspora (Axel 2001).

Some studies have already covered Tamil diasporic identities particularly in the Canadian context. Santishree Pandit has written about Tamils in Toronto who identify themselves on the basis of language and culture more so than religion and politics, which many other sources discuss. She suggests an individual Tamil identity instead of a larger Hindu community that seeks to bring together different Indian diasporas (Varma and Seshan 2003). *Being Human: Being Tamil* is another work in this field that is concerned with the multiple ways of being Tamil. The essays explore what it means to be Tamil with respect to Tamil language, literature, dance and the construction of gender for the Tamil diaspora. In her chapter, Glynis

George writes about the Tamils in Toronto and their suffering and celebration at the crossroads.. Another essay, namely “Gender, Language and the Quest for a Tamil Identity,” enables the discussion of Tamil identity in *The Strike*, and how the protagonist rebels against linguistic rules by speaking Hindi instead of Tamil. Appadurai Muttulingam, considered one of the finest short story writers from Sri Lanka, juxtaposes in his story “Horoscopes” a tight little community held together by a set of customs, rituals and superstitions with a scattered, worldwide diaspora from Toronto.

The third and final literary theory involves the identity of queer diasporas. My analysis of queer identities builds primarily on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. The central concept of the theory is that one’s gender is constructed through one’s own repetitive performance of gender. The structure or discourse of gender for Butler is bodily and non-verbal and her theory does not accept a coherent gender identity. She states in *Gender Trouble* that the appearance is by itself a constructed social identity: a performative accomplishment of the mundane social audience, including the authors themselves, who come to believe and to perform the gender. Wilkie-Stubbs explores in her book *The Outside Child, In and Out of the Book*, the ways in which gender appears as a performance in *Funny Boy*. My research aims to understand how both protagonists in *Funny Boy* and *The Strike* display or better ‘perform’ their gender in what Wilkie-Stubbs calls “hidden, queer spaces” (62). Also relevant to this research is the concept of the ‘gaze’ as the primary factor in the process of pleasure and prohibition as the gaze of the ‘other’ towards the queer influences the protagonists towards accepting their identity. These ideas form the basis for my argument about the ‘other’ and how the child protagonists create the identity of the ‘queer self’ against an ‘other.’

Scholars regard queer diasporas and their representation in literature as an attempt to challenge nationalist ideals that are considered to be fundamental in the construction of diasporas. Furthermore, a queer diaspora challenges the hierarchical construction of a nation that is seen as superior, while the diaspora is constructed as an inadequate copy (Gopinath 7). Most scholars regard the queer diaspora as categorized into black diasporas or South Asian diasporas. Anne-Marie Fortier in her *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies* argues that the relationship between queerness and diasporas occurs with the creation of queer spaces within ethnically defined diasporas (183). In her work, Meg Weslin adds that “queerness disrupts gender normativity like globalization disrupts sovereignty.” (37)

One of the most important works on queerness and South Asian diasporas, *Impossible Desires* by Gayatri Gopinath (2005), introduces multiple identities through postcolonial, feminist, queer and diasporic critiques. Her queer reading of the novel *Funny Boy* is particularly interesting as she employs and interweaves distinct theories together describing those in the Tamil diaspora who live under an ‘impossible space’ of identities (194). Rather than evoking a positive imaginary homeland, she argues that the queer diasporic desire belongs to a past time and place rife with contradictions and the violence of multiple uprooting, displacements and exile (4). Furthermore, she relates the notion of queerness with that of nationalism. Gopinath writes about a “carefully inscribed space of gender play and the act of entering a space of gender conformity” and explores spaces that are impossible for the existence of a queer desire and subjectivity (474) and occasionally integrates the gay male along with the female queer as the victim of patriarchy. Where most scholars discuss primarily the separate and restricted institutionalized spaces for the queer in the novel, she positions her work in an interdisciplinary context that seeks to interconnect various literary theories, including postcolonial and feminist

theory with queer theory. One may wonder whether postcolonial, queer and Tamil cultural identity can be separated in the study and analysis of both novels. With respect to *Funny Boy*, Gairola creates an in-between and liminal space for gender and queer identities. The author also argues that the trauma of the civil war can be interpreted as a metaphor for the ‘inner turmoil of sexual awakening’.

Andrew Leek and Prakriti write about emasculation and patriarchy as synonymous in their study... [title]. They suggest that Selvadurai challenges and subverts the notion of postcolonial patriarchy by highlighting the gender equation and the oppression at the hands of certain people who control the state and therefore, the notion of masculinity of men (32). This study will explore whether the same could be said of *The Strike* since the political situation in the South of India is considerably different than in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, I seek to understand how cultural identities or, specifically, the Tamil identity in the novels affects or is affected by masculinity or gender roles, in accordance with Andrew Lesk’s article “Ambivalence at the sight of Authority”. Additionally, a Masters’ research thesis by Holly Simpson Fling that explores *Funny Boy* in detail is based on the construction of a parallel of the colonized and the queer. Her research traces the cultural Tamil-Sinhala tensions back to the colonial period and studies the novel at the intersection of postcolonial and queer theories.

John Stephens [title] explores the aspect of masculinity and queerness in children’s literature and seeks to answer the important question of what normative masculinity is and what signs of resistance we see in the cultural production of the young. In *Ways of Being Male*, Stephens, with respect to *Funny Boy*, primarily discusses how “postcolonial and queer theory intersect in their explorations of hybridity and states of becoming” (167). The work argues that although different narratives examine postcolonial cultures, they posit queerness in a different

socio-cultural context. While scholars like Raewyn Connell have also worked in the field of masculinities, Stephens has come to associate the primarily discusses the question of masculinity in association with queerness and as a homophobic concept. Does this research on masculinity relate directly or indirectly to the notion of the ‘other’? Scott Mitchell argues that both Tamil and Sinhalese concepts of nationalism were constructed in opposition to those who were seen as the ethnically and sexually ‘Other’ (76). In his doctoral research, the author discusses the ‘alienating’ and the ‘Othering’ effects of the western colonial discourse in the readings of the authors discussed in the dissertation. Mitchell also argues that although western discourse continues to alienate others, Selvadurai illustrates through his novel that there is a space for relationships with the ‘Other’.

Does the creation and construction of such identities in the novels, perhaps suggest an act of rebellion by the authors against their homelands? In other words, could it be considered as a negative imagining and nostalgia of the homeland? Scholars like Gilroy propose the notion of diasporas as a memory and a nostalgic expression of identity (Gilroy 1993). He proposes that instead of seeking origins and traditions, we need to consider the aspect of a common experience. In one particularly seminal essay, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities”, Avtar Brah discusses the concept of diaspora space and borders with respect to how they play out in various power axes and seeks to define ‘diasporas’ all the while relating to the concepts of ‘home’, ‘homeland’ and ‘borders’. She specifically talks about the aspect of a diaspora home that can be a place of terror and safety, which is useful in my analysis of the novels with respect to the cultural identity that the characters face (631).

In his *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses the cultural production of contemporary diasporas. He has situated diasporic identity in a third space, or the ‘space of the

beyond,' as he names it. In other words, diasporic identities belong to a completely different space that alienates them from their host culture. He calls diasporas the 'connective tissue between fixed identifications' and claims that diasporas do not have any fixed identity. Both child protagonists in the novels at the center of my study find themselves institutionalized, categorized and at cross roads in their societies, unable to belong within the confines of a single identity and representing the 'other' in every aspect. If this is true, perhaps Canada for the diasporic writers could be equally considered as a 'safe haven' and a kind of a 'third space' in itself, meaning a space where both authors have been able to merge their multiple identities in a completely separate and different place geographically and institutionally. It becomes a space where they can embrace their Tamil cultural and queer identity.

The construction of identities in the two novels is, as his study will show, fluid in nature. In other words, it is impossible to study the postcolonial, cultural and queer identities as separate elements in either novel as the various elements are juxtaposed and interwoven. For the novel *Funny Boy*, Daniel Coleman argues that the character's identity development hinges on many axes of difference including "gay and straight, Tamil and Sinhalese, upward and downward mobility and colonial subject and postcolonial agent" (10). However, for analytical purposes I will be dividing my comparative study of *Funny Boy* and *The Strike* into three parts: postcolonial, Tamil cultural, and queer identities . Although there is a distinct analytic separation in the study of identities in this research, some examples may be applied across several or all aspects of identity.

III. MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN THE TAMIL CANADIAN DIASPORA

1. Postcolonial Identity

A postcolonial nation provokes the question of an identity of the people where they must define themselves in the context of a changing society. Both *Funny Boy* and *The Strike* are based in a postcolonial setting as former British colonies. Does the differing backdrop of two different countries with a similar historical context bring about the same kind of postcolonial identity crisis for the characters in the novels? I have compared and analyzed the same in three subcategories: nationalism and patriarchy, the English language and hybridity in language.

a. Nationalism and patriarchy

In *Funny Boy*, with Sri Lanka as the backdrop, there is ample evidence of strong nationalistic tendencies of characters after independence. Heavy tensions between the two groups of Tamils and Sinhalese indicates a deep ethnic divide that is the legacy of the British ‘divide and rule’ policy. Each group regards the other as different and *Funny Boy* bears witness to the fact that being Sinhalese is essential to be able to identify oneself as a Sri Lankan. Furthermore, this nationalism and its sense of identity is deeply embedded in the notion of patriarchy in Sri Lanka. Narvadhya Salaye argues that “in Sri Lanka portrayed in *Funny Boy*, males have more power and status than women and homosexual persons and that the influence of this patriarchy causes a dislocation of female and gay characters who fall into a minority group within patriarchy” (56). This combination of nationalism and patriarchy results in a “heteronormative queer phobic codified as nationalist masculinity” (476). Nationalism with the sense of identity it creates as well as the presence of patriarchy thereby represent in the novel an ‘imitation of colonial oppression’ against the homosexuals and the women, both spheres that the child protagonist,

Arjie, inhabits. I argue that in this society, the father and the state weave control separately over Arjie throughout the novel. *Funny Boy*, therefore, ultimately becomes a story of a young boy battling dual oppression in a heteronormative society. A striking example of this is the game of Bride-Bride played by all cousins in the backyard during the spend-the-days that is described by Gayatri Gopinath as the space of “non-performativity of masculinity” (140).

Arjie’s cousin Tanuja, who has just arrived at his grandparents’ house from London, desires to be included in the game. Chafed that Arjie is the only member with the privilege of becoming the bride, she argues with the cousins: “‘But he’s not even a girl. A bride is a girl, not a boy.’” She then directly accuses Arjie of having a queer identity: “Her Fatness looked at all of us for a moment and then her gaze rested on me. ‘You’re a pansy,’ she said, her lips curling in disgust. We looked at her blankly. ‘A faggot,’ she said, her voice rising against our uncomprehending stares.” (11) The above passage demonstrates that Arjie, as a young boy, is a victim of a dangerously queer phobic discourse including name-calling like the “funny one” or the “faggot” and “pansy” because he has, according to Gopinath, infiltrated the domain of the submissive. It is interesting to note that when his female cousin Meena joins the young boys to play cricket, she never feels uninvited, nor is she banned from partaking in the sphere of ‘men’. It is apt, therefore, to consider that Arjie faces a societal bias because he is a ‘young man from Sri Lanka’ who is expected to act like a man. This further proves why the ‘cross-over’ for Arjie might be construed as a conscious act of rebellion against the rigid system of identities created for men and women in his society. In this regard, Andrew Lesk argues that Arjie leads the girls’ spaces because he himself is aware of the submissive role of women in Sri Lankan society and that he would not be able to carry forth such a role in a masculine space. I agree with Lesk’s argument in that Arjie is conscious of a dominant system in place that he seeks to not only

uphold but also to exploit. Therefore, it is possible that Arjie attempts to manipulate the feminine space with his masculinity and stands out, as a result. He appears to wield control over this space.

The second example of the control wielded by society is the indirect form of patriarchy that both Radha Aunty and Amma face throughout the novel. Radha is married off to an upper caste Tamil, Rajan Nagendra, and is forbidden from pursuing her romantic encounters with Anil, a Sinhalese. Gairola reads her marriage as a narrative of a “heteronormative nationalist attempt on both sides to curb transgressive behaviors like an interethnic marriage” (480). Similarly, Amma was in a relationship with Uncle Daryl, a *burgher* who belonged to a mixed ethnic heritage, neither white nor Sri Lankan. Both women had been directly or indirectly forced to marry into their own ethnic Tamil group but choose to defy the constraints at the beginning. Although it is clear they are forced to accept their submissive roles in society, Gairola states that the men they chose “did not match the racial or ethnic ideals of their community” and therefore, he portrays them as “funny girls” since they seek to emasculate the societal constraints (8). In this manner, it is apparent that characters struggle against the control and oppression of patriarchy and the nation state. It is equally ironic, however, that Amma oscillates between the roles of victim and perpetrator. She orders Arjie to play cricket with the ‘boys’ and declares that the masculine and feminine roles are fixed in society and that individuals have to comply with them: “And, I too cried out, ‘I don’t want to play cricket. I hate cricket! Why do I have to play with the boys?’ ‘Why?’ Amma said. ‘Because the sky is so high, the pigs can’t fly, that’s why.’” (18) The above quote demonstrates that although Amma has suffered oppression in the past due to the rigidity of social structures in society, she becomes the oppressor with respect to Arjie. She realizes that Arjie becomes ‘feminine’ in the eyes of the world around him and therefore

seeks to enforce his 'masculinity' and thereby the respect that a man commands in Sri Lankan society. A number of characters in the novel display a streak of rebelliousness but ultimately adapt to the social constraints that dictate their lives. The characters in the novel display not just a desire to adhere to nationalistic tendencies but their lives are equally a constant reflection of the position of both colonizer and colonized at any given point in the narrative. Frustrated, defenseless and powerless, they ultimately decide to uphold the rules and the values of society in order to 'feel' dominant and in the 'place of the colonizer'.

The father, as an important figure of masculine authority in the story, is adamant about transforming his son into a 'Sinhalese' young man who will embrace the Sri Lankan identity as his own. When he fears that Arjie is different and 'funny', he tries to reinforce masculine authority by enrolling him in the British Victoria Academy that is the very symbol of state control mirroring colonial rule. His father wishes to indoctrinate him into accepting a heteronormative attitude and behavior (Lesk 151). He admires Jegan and treats him as his own son primarily because Jegan embodies the masculinity and therefore the representation of authority that the father desires in his son Arjie. "The Academy will force you to become a man" (205) evidences an extremely patriarchal discourse that submits Arjie to a heteronormative quasi-colonial supremacy. The father's idea of a man is also one who belongs and complies with the traditions of the nation that Arjie clearly defies. He attempts to raise his son to speak Sinhalese, which again connects the two concepts of a national identity and a colonial patriarchy. The Victoria Academy, which Gairola appropriately calls "the Convent with the production of manly students schooled by British colonial education," is indeed Selvadurai's way of bringing to attention the vestiges of a colonial way of life in a postcolonial setting (481). The school principal, also known as Black Tie, is the ultimate symbol of a heteronormative white colonial

ruler that governs with an iron fist. His method of “disciplinary punishments and severe violence used to enforce masculinity” (481) to create docile students creates in Arjie a desire to question the notion of power and control held in some hands. This is when Arjie realizes that indisputable power is indeed held by certain individuals in society who are capable of making the decisions for the rest of the community. It is ironically at this very institution that dictates ‘masculinity’ as an unspoken rule that he meets Shehan in his first homoerotic encounter, who directly forces him to question and counter the right and the wrong in society. He wonders who makes the rules that the society has to comply with.

Right or wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were. I thought about Shehan and myself. What had happened between us in the garage was not wrong. For how could loving Shehan be bad? Yet, if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble...How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who held power and who didn't. If you were powerful like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. If you were like Shehan or me, you had no choice but to follow what they said. (Selvadurai 273-274)

This pivotal moment in the narrative proves that Arjie becomes conscious of the fact that he will remain powerless in society if he refuses to follow the ethnic, linguistic or nationalistic attitude lauded by the state and the Academy. I read the above as a conscious effort on the part of Arjie to dismiss and to refuse to subject himself to a heteronormative and patriarchal control.

A final example that demonstrates the blatant masculine display of patriarchy is that of Daryl Uncle, who clearly does not belong anywhere and is considered to be an outsider and a ‘white man’ by both communities in Sri Lanka. He disappears looking for information of

corruption by the Sinhalese officials in the country. He stands as a 'white man' who directly opposes the system and thereby the nation in his attempt to expose the truth. His disappearance and most certainly death represent the punishment meted out by the state in order to blatantly display their authority and control against someone who doesn't belong to their community and specifically to their nation. I read this as their response to the colonizer they see in Daryl Uncle in the narrative.

Contrary to *Funny Boy*, *The Strike* deals with regional tensions instead of national ethnic tensions. The novel takes place in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and parts of the novel are also based in the city of Nagpur further north in the country. Therefore, I will be employing the term 'state' in a regional sense instead of implying the Indian nation. Further, there is no single sense of an Indian identity, and I read the train journey from Nagpur to Tamil Nadu as one way of showcasing the changing landscape and views on self-identity. While no one forces anyone to be part of a greater India in the novel, it is apparent that there are volatile ethnic and linguistic constraints, particularly in the southern state of Tamil Nadu that serves as the crux of the narrative. The strong regional sense of belonging manifests in the form of implicit linguistic rules. Be it the state of Tamil Nadu or its people, the community as a whole stands together and decides to fight to protect their language and therefore their identity in the form of the Tamil movement after independence. The characters seem to work on the creation of their own new identity through their language, and Hari, the child protagonist, is discriminated against because he speaks English and Hindi. Forcing someone to adopt their language, according to the Tamil crusaders in the novel, is the only means for the Tamilians to display their regionalism and state identity.

There are glaring differences in the way that Arjie's father and Hari's grandfather view the postcolonial setting they live in. Where Arjie's father forces his son to adopt the language and the ways of life of a typical Sri Lankan, Hari's grandfather mourns the departure of the British. While looking at a slum construction in the center of the city of Nagpur while on the train, he observes, "Back in the days of the British, they would never allow it" (Mahadevan 26) and in the process places the British on a higher ground of moral responsibility. This signals that the characters take a different approach in their point of view and attitude towards colonialism. Kollu Thatha, Hari's grandfather, evidently considers the British to be better rulers in their days than the current Indian government. In his regard, India was 'better-off' in the hands of the colonizers and there is certainly a remaining positive nostalgia and fondness associated with the former colonizer. It is also true that the characters take on the role of the colonizer in the same way as the Sinhalese do in *Funny Boy*. Patriarchy in this novel can be likened to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Similar to the case of Radha Aunty and Amma in *Funny Boy*, there is evidence in the narrative of *The Strike* that women have a specific submissive role in society and that they are not meant to disregard the space assigned to them. A number of characters display the subtle patriarchal discourse in the narrative. For example when Hari says:

"I can do that. I'll be in the kitchen anyway, because I have to learn to cook."

"Learn to cook?" "Thatha, you are not listening. I want to go to America, and if I am going to study there, I should know how to cook." "Oh!" Hari's Thatha said. "Don't worry, we will send a nice wife with you so she can cook for you. That way you can pay attention to your studies." (Mahadevan 60)

This passage can be read as a demonstration of a hierarchy in society in Tamil Nadu. It proves that men and women occupy different places in society and that it is possible to draw a parallel between oppressed and the oppressor in a colonial as well as the patriarchal setting with respect to the role that the characters play in the novel.

A similar kind of discourse throughout the narrative serves as a constant reminder that women occupy separate spaces in society. Another example stems from the comparison between both mothers in both novels, who are perpetrators and victims of this kind of oppression, with the only difference being that *The Strike* offers a comparatively subtle aspect of the same reality. Hari's mother during the train journey questions a young girl on her future ambitions and when told that she plans to pursue future education, advises,

“Wait, wait... Yes, I know all about that, but you have to listen to me. Listen, it's very nice that you want to do these things, but you must think of your family. Your brother is supporting your education and wants you to be independent... a laudable sentiment. What will happen if he decides to change his mind and become one with your mother?” [...] “Just be reasonable. We women cannot have everything we want.” (Mahadevan 120)

Savithri, Hari's mother, is equally and acutely conscious of her role in society and is aware of the place she holds. She tells the young woman on the train that women have a certain place and play a submissive role in society. It is therefore not possible for her to be independent. Savithri, aware of her own place, also submits willingly to the Tamil traditions. During the train journey, she looks at Kollu Thatha and says,

“It's not even five in the morning and we have barely settled into the math” she said, afraid to contradict the elder. Hari's father shrugged and pulled a cotton

vaishiti out of his suitcase to clothe himself for the dip. Savithri sighed, *powerless*, and held Hari's hand. (Mahadevan 36; emphasis mine)

Yet again, Savithri feels powerless, perhaps oppressed and without any authority with her husband and other male figures around her. In this case, she does not have a *voice* literally and metaphorically and is afraid to question Kollu Thatha's and Hari's father's authority.

A fragment of the colonial way of life with respect to control and authority is equally evident in the hierarchy displayed by the characters. Kollu Thatha is a retired railway official, and towards the end of the narrative, when it is evident that Hari has been responsible for the deaths of multiple persons, he uses his power to make the decisions to cover up the same using covert methods, constant delays, and the loopholes in the Indian judicial system. This is once again comparable to the control and authority that Black Tie and the father wielded in *Funny Boy*, but in this particular narrative of *The Strike*, it is yet again literally and figuratively a very subtle and covert manner of displaying the same power. Unlike Black Tie, who makes it apparent that his rules have to be followed and exerts his control in a bolder, more 'masculine' way, Thatha's manner is indeed a less transparent way of showcasing the power he holds in the society: the power to make or to sway decisions on behalf of other people.

Yet another important aspect to consider in the novel, *The Strike*, is the postcolonial gaze of nearly all the characters in the narrative. They might feel a certain fondness for the bygone colonial era but they do not, by any means, respect the 'white'. A 'white' for them will always remain the 'Other' they can admire from a distance but never integrate as a part of their culture they fiercely guard. The 'white' bride to be certainly creates an uproar in the family and is somehow made to feel different from everyone around her. Thatha reasserts this truth when he says, "What?! Otherwise you'll get married to a memsahib, like Mani did; and your grandmother

will have another heart attack” (Mahadevan 60). However, there is no evidence of an apparent feeling of superiority or a ‘colonizer’s lens’ in the discourse but a mere feeling of difference. I believe that this stands in opposition to the example of Daryl Uncle in *Funny Boy*, where there is an extreme display of hatred for the ‘Other’.

b. Language in Postcolonial Identity

i. English

In this section, I will argue that the English language is an important legacy in any postcolonial nation formerly colonized by the British and that Selvadurai’s Sri Lanka and Anand Mahadevan’s India are no exceptions to the rule. In the novel *Funny Boy*, it is apparent that the language itself does not have an immense presence in the narrative since the ethnicities in the story are based only on the two national languages. It is equally clear that there is little respect for the ‘white man’ or the colonizer in the novel. Regarding the Burgher people in Sri Lanka, Simpson Fling states that Daryl Uncle is, in fact, a hybrid who inhabits different spaces and who is a blend of many different cultures at the same time (38). However, the Sri Lankan community, whether it is the Sinhalese or the Tamil people, regard him as ‘white’. Daryl Uncle explains in the book regarding the English language and Burgher people, “When the government made Sinhala the national language in the nineteen fifties, many of them left because they only spoke English” and that people treated them as if they were English (Selvadurai 120). This proves that the ‘white’ who spoke English was not welcome in the country as a part of the community. However, it is an interesting paradox that the English language still remains an integral part of the postcolonial society. There is a certain respect for the ‘British’ or the ‘correct’ way of speaking the language. English also became the language alongside Sinhala and Tamil to be

taught in schools. I argue that although the whites speaking the language are not welcome in the society, the language is employed to practice colonial superiority. For example, when Arjie in the text pleads with “Her Fatness” and says, “I want to play bride-ride, please” (29), A. Suresh Canagarajah notes the remnants of “Babu English”, a disparaging term used for Indian English, stylized by its formality despite being full of errors, and argues that the same version “serves the purpose of a subaltern” in the novel (1620, 1628). Therefore, in the above quote, it can be inferred that members of the community who do not speak perfect British English—in this case, Arjie—tend to feel inferior to those who can. Another example of the same is Tanuja or “Her Fatness”, who uses the English language as a weapon to strike Arjie with words like “pansy” and “faggot”. I argue that this discourse takes a superior colonial tone and manifests yet again as a form of control over the ‘Other’, who in this case is Arjie.

Language is also employed to wrest power away from those who have traditionally held it. For example, when Arjie realizes he is in control when Black Tie needs him to recite a British poem in front of a large assembly, he decides to publicly humiliate his principal and attempt to save Shehan from his clutches. In the words of Gairola, he plots a diabolic plan (483): “Confuse them (the poems), jumble lines, take entire stanzas from one poem and place them in the other until the poems were rendered senseless” (Selvadurai 44). This diabolical plan hatched is not only an indication of a literal act of shredding of the English language, the language of the colonizer, but an act against colonial authority, against discipline and patriarchy.

The Strike has several similarities compared to Selvadurai’s novel. Similar to *Funny Boy*, the ‘white’ is not easily accepted as part of their culture. The bride to be or Hari’s “American aunt” feels unwelcome and different in the Tamil Brahmin household. However, to Hari, who belongs to the younger generation, the English language and his white relatives are considered to

hold great prestige and a sense of pride. He thinks to himself, “He had an American aunt and no one to share the news with. Unlike his mother who seemed apprehensive about having an American for a relative, Hari was quite pleased with the news” (Mahadevan 58). In this respect, there was a definite respect for relatives of Hari and his family who had settled abroad in Canada and the United States and for their ability to speak perfect English. Unlike Arjie, Hari could converse in perfect English and therefore, contrary to the other novel, the protagonist in this narrative feels superior to the ‘other’ who cannot converse well. “Hari’s heart sank. Mukund did not speak English. So what if he was good-looking. He could not understand English. Hari’s affection for him ebbed away. How could he not have noticed?” (Mahadevan 116). This passage demonstrates that Hari holds his English speaking abilities in high regard. Furthermore, there is an inherent tendency to dismiss a person who cannot speak the language, thereby proving the existence of the colonial superiority of the speaker. The non-speaker is perpetually regarded as the inferior ‘other’ and the English language in *The Strike* proves, not unlike in Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*, to be an integral part of society. Mostly, it is used as a colonial tool to demonstrate a certain superiority and presence that mirrors the colonizer’s attitude and behaviour in the speaker.

ii. Hybridity

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, hybridity can be defined as any "mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance between two different linguistic consciousnesses separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (Young 1995:20). With regard to the postcolonial context, Homi Bhabha explains that hybridity is symbolized by “the moment in which the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip

of meaning and finds itself open to the trace of the language of the other, enabling the critic to trace complex movements of disarming alterity of the colonial text” (1990:22).

Both *Funny Boy* and *The Strike* are novels written completely in English but narrated from the perspective of characters that might not speak the language as their native tongue or in their immediate environment. Both authors employ various techniques to integrate their own native language of Tamil into the narratives. Use of sentence fragments, proverbs, certain expressions and names of familial relations create the perspective of a narrative where characters are not completely comfortable with the English language. *Funny Boy* contains a number of Tamil words and expressions that are very specific to the Tamil culture and might even be considered untranslatable. With the use of words like *aiyo*, which seeks to convey a number of meanings and feelings of pain, sympathy and annoyance, and *thali*, which is a literal and figurative symbol of a married life for a woman in Tamil culture, Selvadurai ensures that the reader is keenly aware of Arjie’s Tamil upbringing.

In the case of *The Strike*, even the names of the chapters are given in Tamil and explained in English. I believe it is Mahadevan’s attempt to reassert his Tamil identity in the novel. Moreover, the names of the chapters including *Acai* (desire), *Kodumai* (cruelty), *Pacam* (attachment), *Etrittal* (opposition), *Patukappu* (protection) and *Paruttal* (ripening) indicate an emotional connection that the writer feels with his cultural heritage and can be read as diasporic nostalgia connected to his homeland.

Mahadevan’s novel goes one step further than Selvadurai’s in incorporating and imparting a feeling of ‘Tamil-ness’ in the text, and the author tries to bring to light his own culture through another language. It is also true that he has partially ‘metamorphosized’ the English language to the extent that we begin to question if it is, in fact, English. Throughout the

narrative, he sprinkles sentences with Tamil words, sounds and metaphors that seem to have been deliberately translated in a literal fashion. However, it is also true that he uses the colonizer's language. The following passage demonstrates how Mahadevan constructs a hybrid language using a Tamil version of the English language and further gives the impression that the Tamil used by the family members has been literally translated into English. In this passage, Hari and his mother are having a conversation about the wedding soon to take place in their household.

“All I can say is, thank God my youngest sister Kalyani got married before this nonsense. Otherwise who knows what might have happened.” [And Hari replies] “But Kalyani- chitti and Ramesh chittappa live in Toronto, why would they care if Mani mama married an Indian girl or not?” (58)

The above example demonstrates that the writer uses the Indian and more particularly a Tamil brand and version of English. A Tamil speaker can easily gauge, even in the absence of Tamil words, that the conversation is between Tamil speakers. This can be attributed to the numerous Tamil words that are employed along with English that make it distinctly a Tamil version of Indian English.

This can be read as an important aspect of postcolonial writing in general. Can a postcolonial non-native writer use English as a means to creative expression or as a world language? Is there a possibility that he, in fact, seeks to humiliate, manipulate or subvert the ‘Other’ and to use the weapon of his own culture to infiltrate and destroy the language of the colonizer? This is perhaps one of the most difficult and unanswerable questions posed in postcolonial literature.

At first, the above example can be interpreted as one of mimicry as proposed by Homi Bhabha. Mimicry as defined by him can be considered to be the colonized society imitating the language, cultural attitude or the politics of the colonizer. It plays an important part in postcolonial literature because one mimics the more powerful and seeks access to power oneself. Can we ascertain that both Selvadurai and Mahadevan use a language that defines an act of mimicking and imitating the white man? Language is primarily a political and social construct. Therefore, any postcolonial writer who chooses to write in a different language accepts to be a part of that hierarchy and tradition. This is an argument that can be applied to all postcolonial writings and therefore to *Funny Boy* and *The Strike*. However, Bhabha also describes mimicry as an unintentional subversion of the colonizer's culture and language.

Both novels manipulate and subvert English by creation of a hybrid language that seeks to serve the characters' postcolonial hybrid identities. Each seeks to create its own version of English as a tool to subvert and manipulate the language of the colonizers. Their novels create a postcolonial discourse in their language that criticizes, questions and undercuts the dominance of the former colonizer. The use of a hybrid English can also be attributed to the desire of both authors to bring their Tamil identity to the fore. The above-cited example from *The Strike* demonstrates that the manipulation of English is subtle all the while serving as a postcolonial tool and one for identifying with the culture of the protagonist. In contrast, the manipulation and 'rebellion' against English as the former colonizer's language is more blatant, outright and direct in *Funny Boy*. When Arjie reads the English poem aloud on the stage, it becomes a literal representation of the protagonist's postcolonial stance and his sabotage of the language. When he is on stage, he says: "I took a deep breath and began my recitation. I kept my eyes fixed on the back wall, not looking at anyone, my ears attuned only to my voice as it mangled those

poems, reducing them to disjointed nonsense.” (Selvadurai 281) This passage represents a direct rebellion against the former colonizers and their language. Arjie jumbling and shredding the poem to pieces is emblematic of what Selvadurai attempts in his entire narrative. It is the author’s way of not only using hybridity to subvert English but also to directly “shred” the language into “disjointed nonsense” to reemphasize his postcolonial identity.

In sum, in both *Funny Boy* and *The Strike*, the authors attempt to consciously subvert the language and thereby the former colonizer. However, Mahadevan focuses more on bringing out the Tamil identity of the characters in the narrative whereas Selvadurai uses the language itself as a form of direct manipulation to invalidate the former colonizer.

2. Tamil Cultural Identity

As Younger expresses in *World Without Walls: Being Human, Being Tamil*, Tamil identity, the Tamil diaspora and the issues surrounding it are being played out in many different places in the world and in many different ways (157). For example, in Sri Lanka, the entire Tamil community has come to be represented by a political movement, which has come to define the community’s identity (157). On the other hand, the Tamil diaspora that originates in South India has resulted in linguistic movements to protect and preserve their language and thereby their identity. The central objective of this research is to locate the ‘Tamil-ness’ of the characters and the linguistic identity crisis they face in both *Funny Boy* and *The Strike*. The primary difference between the linguistic setting of both novels is that Selvadurai’s is based in Sri Lanka, where war and ethnic violence against the Tamil community dictates their identity and association with the language, whereas Mahadevan’s novel takes place in South India, where no such ethnical, national or

linguistic strife exists. How does the Tamil identity differ in two different settings where the language is spoken and how do the characters in the novels express the same?

a. Tamil language and identity

Funny Boy evidences an ethnic divide between the Sinhalese and the Tamils that translates directly into a linguistic divide as ethnic identity is based on the language of each community. The novel takes place against a backdrop of a war between the communities and it is this strife that eventually leads to a subordinate position accorded to the Tamils and their language. The postcolonial nation of Sri Lanka, enveloped in its nationalistic fervor, opted for Sinhalese as the national language, and Tamil was therefore seen as a threat to the existence of the Sinhala community and language. As Gairola notes, the backdrop of a civil war provoked the Sinhalese national government to “suture the notion of a true national identity to an ethnic or linguistic identity in order to legislatively institute ethno-religious chauvinism at the postcolonial level” (476). One of the key ways of studying Tamil identity in the novel is through violence as this is how the characters come to terms with their linguistic and ethnic identity.

Radha Aunty’s affair with a Sinhalese man was looked down upon and she was therefore sent to the ‘Tamil’ region of Jaffna in Sri Lanka. However, the novel describes the violence inflicted on the Tamils during her return on the train back to Colombo. After her arrival, Diggy explains: “‘You’ll never guess what! Radha Aunty’s train was attacked. Because there was trouble in Jaffna. People attacked the Tamils on the train. Radha Aunty was hurt and everything’” (Selvadurai 86). Radha’s experience changes her viewpoint on how both Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka are considered to be equal. She therefore starts to completely ignore Anil, her Sinhalese friend, because of her epiphany of the existence of this division. After

her return, she remains in shock following the catastrophic events and Arjie understands that “her relationship with Anil was over” (Selvadurai 97) and he describes a certain “sadness grow in him” (Selvadurai 97) that slowly allows him to ponder questions of ethnicity and language, and its hold on love.

All nationalistic violence throughout the novel is directed towards the Tamil community. The severity of the linguistic divide is evident at the end of the narrative when the Sinhalese community “brutally torch” (Gairola 486) the homes of all the Tamils to strike out at the community. This discourse in action acts as a way to create an altercation with the language: since the identity of the community is based on their language, it can be considered as a literal conflict over language and struggle for domination in the Sri Lankan community. The irony in Arjie’s character is that he is unaware of the linguistic differences between the communities until he observes elements that surround him and the behaviour of members in either community that prove the existence of constant strife and discord in the society. Scott Mitchell argues that Arjie has “no awareness of divisions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils” (83):

Those spend-the-days, the remembered innocence of childhood, are now colored in the hues of the twilight sky. It is a picture made even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them. By all us having to leave Sri Lanka years later after communal violence and forge new homes for ourselves in Canada (Selvadurai 5).

The innocence of Arjie directly translates into a complete lack of awareness of the internal strife. The paragraph also demonstrates that Arjie has come to the realization later in the novel and gradually begins to observe the world around him through a ‘linguistic lens’. The words “innocence now coloured in the hues of the twilight sky” indicate that he understands the

differences and discrimination that exist in society. This paragraph juxtaposed with the forced marriage of Radha Aunty with an upper caste Tamil demonstrates that Arjie gains consciousness of the differences in the ethnicity and therefore his identity. He realizes he is Tamil and that his ethnicity and language make him different from the 'other'. The ethnic divide translates directly into a linguistic divide in the Sri Lankan context for the characters. Radha Aunty, not unlike Arjie, understands the same ethnic divide after the violence and attack that she suffered at the hands of Sinhalese groups. Both characters are forced to grow out of their cocoon of innocence.

For Arjie, as it was for Radha, the realization came in the form of love he found with Shehan, a classmate at his Victoria Institution. At first, not unlike his Aunt, he remained blissfully unaware of the differences between him and his friend in terms of their ethnic identities. Once again, it is violence against the Tamils that Arjie witnesses which makes him conscious of a difference. In the final chapter and the epilogue of the novel, Arjie describes the devastating consequences of the civil war and the attacks against the Tamils. His grandparents are murdered and his house is burned. When Shehan attempts to cheer him up after the burning of his family home, Arjie feels "that something occurred to me that I had never really been conscious of before – Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not. This awareness did not change my feelings for him; it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him" (Selvadurai 295). He begins to see Shehan through a thin veil of difference. It is the traumatic pillaging of their houses and the attempt at their lives that finally makes him consider the fact that Shehan is Sinhalese and he is Tamil. At the beginning of the narrative, Arjie rejects the idea of a Tamil identity, never having spoken the language or associated with the term. The irony regarding Arjie's upbringing is that it had a direct role to play in the unawareness of the political situation in Sri Lanka. Arjie has been raised Sinhalese and could not speak Tamil. He

identifies with being Sinhala in society and his entire education has been Sinhala-centric. His father has attempted to eradicate the ‘Tamil-ness’ in his son so he doesn’t feel isolated in a Sinhala community. The father ensures a completely Sinhalese education for his son so he would feel like part of the nation. He studied in the Sinhala classroom as opposed to the Tamil one during his entire childhood.

The language-based cultural conflict impacts on Arjie’s family as a whole. Mitchell discusses the case of Arjie’s grandmother as well as other characters in the novel as complex cultural identities (87). The grandmother puts her “pro-Tamil” discourse into practice only when she realizes that Radha Aunty is involved with Anil, a Sinhalese (87). Just the fact that Radha chose to be seen with a Sinhalese man in public becomes a humiliation for the family, because whereas everybody pretends to be Sinhalese for their survival in society, an affair with a Sinhalese can be seen as dishonorable to the Tamil community. Ammachi, the grandmother, has a conversation with Radha when she returns home with Anil: “‘Haven’t done anything?’ Ammachi cried, unable to control herself any longer. ‘You flaunt your illicit relations in public and dare to say you haven’t done anything.’” (Selvadurai 76) This quotation shows that her cultural ‘Tamil’ heritage and the desire to protect it becomes evident only when there is a need to prevent an ‘inter-mixing’ of both ethnic communities.

I argue that all the characters in the novel become acutely aware of these differences, and although they ‘camouflage’ themselves to sound and behave like their Sinhalese counterparts, there is an inherent desire to conserve their Tamil identity. However, it is equally true that Arjie does not speak Tamil himself. In this context, Mitchell questions whether Arjie is indeed a Tamil (87). According to him, only ancestry determines his Tamil identity and not the cultural and linguistic Sinhala values that he was raised on. In contrast, I suggest that Arjie had the choice to

be a Sinhala or a Tamil. Although he did not speak or identify with the language or associate with the Tamil community in general, it is apparent that towards the end, he chooses to consider himself Tamil. He comes to understand that he is the ‘other’ and he accepts that he is Tamil although his identity now has nothing to do with the language he speaks. Therefore, it is not only ancestry, as Mitchell suggests, that creates his identity but also the fact that he chooses to adopt a Tamil identity as his own. Even when he realizes the existence of the invisible veil between Shehan and himself, he understands and comes to recognize that he is Tamil. Gairola names this tendency the “disidentification tactic” (483) on Arjie’s part. Since Arjie cannot identify with the Sinhala community and their culture, he chooses to identify himself as the ‘Other’. Although the identities of the narrator Arjie and the writer Selvadurai should not be conflated, one may wonder why Selvadurai, who is of mixed parentage born to Sinhala and Tamil parents, chose to represent his character as distinctly and uniquely Tamil. Perhaps, not unlike the narrator Arjie, Selvadurai felt alienated, estranged and chose to identify himself as the ‘Other’. The Tamil language itself in the novel is treated as inferior. More broadly, it is apparent in the novel’s context that Tamils and their language will be doomed due to the war between ethnic communities and their struggle for power and dominance (Simpson Fling 82).

The Strike differs from *Funny Boy* in that linguistic identity does not, by definition, translate into ethnic or nationalistic violence. The novel lays emphasis on the Tamil language by demonstrating its *regional* importance. Hari, the protagonist, belongs to the Tamil culture and it is apparent throughout the narrative that he uses the language with his family and in his immediate environment. However, growing up in a part of India where the language is not widely used makes him associate less with his mother tongue. Not unlike Arjie, who grew up speaking Sinhala, Hari in *The Strike* is more comfortable speaking in Hindi and English. He asks

his great grandfather in English: ““Kollu Thatha, why do people come to the Ganges to wash themselves clean when the river itself is so dirty?””, to which his Kollu Thatha replies in chaste Tamil ““When we drink water, it cleans us from the inside and when we wash, it cleans us from the outside purifying us completely”” (Mahadevan 38-39). This exchange demonstrates that Hari chooses to employ English even with his great-grandfather and that he makes a conscious choice to avoid speaking in Tamil. This choice stems from not having ever identified with the Tamil language and culture. The paragraph above also evidences the fact that his Kollu Thatha expects and wishes him to choose to communicate in the language. Contrary to *Funny Boy*, the characters in *The Strike* claim a certain pride in their language and culture, and anyone who doesn't speak their language or belong to their culture is treated with disregard:

Outside the gate, on the cream-coloured walls that faced the street, someone had splattered red paint and written some words in the curvy noodle script of Tamil. Hari, having grown up in central India, was familiar with Hindi and its Devanagari script but illiterate in his mother tongue. “Thatha, what does it say?”

“Here live Hindi speakers,” Thatha read. (Mahadevan 69)

This paragraph is important in that it showcases a type of regional linguistic discourse, which is violent in its own terms. This particular type of discourse is reserved in Tamil Nadu for members and non-members of the community alike who refuse to speak in Tamil. The novel is set in India during the Tamil Language Movement's struggle against the law seeking to establish Hindi as the national language in the country. Linguistic fervor was relatively strong in India regarding the Tamil language during this time. Similar to the Sinhala-Tamil tensions in *Funny Boy*, there are visible tensions in this narrative between Hindi and Tamil speakers. The above passage can be read as a type of violent discourse directed at speakers of Hindi and showcases the same

tensions although, contrary to *Funny Boy*, they are purely linguistic in nature. Furthermore, most of the characters feel a certain pride in being Tamil. This is in direct contrast to the identity crisis in *Funny Boy* where the characters only chose to be identified as Tamil because they remained in the sphere of the ethnic and linguistic Other. In *The Strike*, the manner of forcing the Tamil language on the Hindi speaking population is apparent when Hari's Thatha's house is smeared with paint that reads "Here live Hindi speakers" (Mahadevan 69). This is part of the violent discourse in which Tamil speakers place the linguistic Other. Furthermore, contrary to *Funny Boy*, where Arjie's father wants him to be raised Sinhalese and speak their language, Hari's Thatha believes it is important to learn to speak Tamil in order to survive and hold a place in society. Thatha is upset when he realizes what the hateful messages are because Hari gives the impression of a Hindi speaker from North India. Hari says, "Thatha is mad because I speak Hindi" (Mahadevan 69). Hari's Thatha says, "Yes, you can speak English and Tamil, but I would prefer it if you just spoke Tamil, all right?" (70). Thatha, in this passage, speaks out of a fear of the violent linguistic rhetoric of the movement. Hari himself ironically never desires to identify himself as Tamil speaking. He understands that both his Kollu Thatha and his maternal grandfather want him to speak Tamil but unlike Arjie, Hari never strongly affiliates himself with this identity. Instead, *The Strike* offers a narrative behind the Tamil Language Movement where members of the Tamil society become comparable to the Sinhalese community in Selvadurai's novel.

Funny Boy and *The Strike* express contradictory views on being Tamil. In *Funny Boy*, the Sinhala language becomes an essentializing factor for identity and the members of the Tamil community choose to define themselves as Sinhala in order to survive in a Sinhala-dominated society. Arjie initially does not associate with the Tamil label. However, he ultimately willingly

identifies with being a Tamil and considers and sees himself as the Other. In contrast, while Hari considers himself Tamil in his own home, when he visits his relatives and his state, he rebels against the same identity by deliberately speaking Hindi and English, thereby rejecting being Tamil. There is a certain ambiguity in their cultural identities throughout both novels that alternates between complete acceptance and rejection for both Hari and Arjie.

Neither Hari nor Arjie are able to converse in Tamil. Is this a deliberate attempt by the writers to portray the ways in which language could indeed become our identity either by choice or by circumstance? Perhaps it can be inferred that both Arjie and Hari's identities are woven around being Tamil. It may not matter whether either speaks Tamil but for Arjie, it becomes a matter of choice when he accepts his Tamil identity while Hari rejects it. However, it becomes an important part of who they are as society brands them either as Tamil or betrayers of Tamil.

In both cases, Tamil becomes more than just a language that unites or separates its characters in the novels. It becomes an identity, a way of life and way of navigating where Arjie and Hari belong in the world.

b. Tamil as the 'Other'

Whether for the community that speaks the language or the language itself, Tamil represents the 'Other' that Arjie, in particular, identifies with in *Funny Boy*. Although this crisis potentially affects everyone in the Tamil community, the young child feels isolated among the Sinhalese and dislikes the 'Tamil' label, particularly because he has grown up as a 'Sinhala'. Arjie is faced with hostility for being a Tamil admitted to a Sinhala class in Victoria Academy. According to Gairola, language in Sri Lanka becomes an essentializing marker for admission into the Sinhalese majority (483). Discourse analysis of the Sinhala community in the novel evidences a

violent hatred towards the Tamils, even among children. This can be viewed primarily in Arjie's new school where the existence of animosity is apparent between Sinhalese and Tamil children. Furthermore, it is evident that the entire community is treated differently and with contempt. Arjie is stopped by his Sinhalese classmate, Salgado, from entering his class on his first day of school in Victoria Academy:

“How come you're in a Sinhala class?” Salgado asked me. “My parents put me in a Sinhala class from Grade 1 because they wanted me to learn Sinhalese,” I said. My voice sounded anxious and I wondered if they had noticed it. “We don't want you here,” Salgado said and he stood in front of the doorway. “Go to the Tamil class” (215).

Salgado gives an authoritative command directed at Arjie all the while asserting a dominance that stems from his ethnic and linguistic advantage. He is a proud Sinhala and meets the Tamil Arjie with considerable hostility. Salgado's authority comes from a dual place of masculinity and superiority, and in the above passage he regard both Tamil speakers and the language with condescension and contempt. It is also true that Arjie tries to explain the situation to Salgado instead of being indifferent to his taunts and authority as an expression of awareness of belonging to a submissive place of the 'Other'. Arjie, not unlike Diggy and his father, has to continuously excuse and explain himself since he is expected to accept his inferior role in society. Being Tamil later becomes an act of rebellion for him against the superior 'Other', and against masculinity and postcolonial nationalism that gave rise to a new form of colonial authority.

Learning to accept life as a Tamil in the narrative of the novel means to concede control. The father understands that Tamils are a minority and seeks to reason rather than rebel. When

wealthy westerners use the luxury hotels that Appa manages in Colombo as sexual tourists, he is powerless and attempts to reason and comply with the rules already in place. He advises Jegan, ““But we are a minority and that’s a fact of life...As a Tamil you have to learn to play the game. Play it right and you can do very well for yourself. The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous. Go around quietly and make your money and don’t step on anyone’s toes”” (Selvadurai 173). In this passage, Appa essentially explains the life of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and the game he refers to is that of survival as the ‘Other’ in the Sinhala terrain. He does not seem to want to usurp control, defy or even question the authorities. This passage explains what Chelva the manager says about the owner of the hotel: the rich man who owns most of the hotels is very anti-Tamil and had done terrible things to Tamils (Selvadurai 168).

It is not only the Sinhalese who look at the Tamils as the inferior and the ‘Other’ but also the Tamils who regard themselves as the subordinate subaltern other. This is how the power dynamics are maintained in favor of the powerful and the ‘linguistically and ethnically relevant’. In a similar vein, Black Tie, who is the headmaster of the Victoria Academy, finds it extremely difficult to assert control and power. This stems from the fact that he is a Tamil and favors an institution that could be used by both Tamil and Sinhalese speakers. He cannot fight for an institution that is solely Tamil, hence he does so for one that can accommodate speakers of both languages. When Arjie does not wish to recite an English poem on stage owing to Black Tie’s cruel cane beatings, Mr. Sunderalingam, another schoolteacher explains: ““Chelvaratnam, are you aware of the dispute that’s going on between our principal and the vice principal? I have reason to believe our principal is losing the battle, and if he is overruled, Tamils like us will suffer. Our loyalties must therefore be with him.”” (246) The passage above shows that Black Tie was fighting a losing battle against the Sinhala. Furthermore it is true that even a Tamil in

such a powerful authoritative position as that of a principal is regarded as inferior and as the subordinate. It is also apparent that Black Tie needed to rely on a British poem in order to maintain harmony between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Here, Black Tie, not unlike Arjie, understands his position in society as a Tamil.

Arjie gradually grasps why his father wanted him to learn to speak Sinhala instead of Tamil. It is because Sinhala was going to be the “real language of the future” (Selvadurai 61) and life as a Tamil speaker who did not adhere to the Sinhalese rule could become potentially dangerous. Radha Aunty suffered at the hands of the Sinhalese on her journey back from Jaffna along with a family friend and “he managed to save her because he spoke good Sinhalese and the men had believed he was Sinhalese” (Selvadurai 89). This clearly demonstrates that Sinhalese becomes a tool for survival and protection from violent discourse and physical punishment for being Tamil.

Contrary to *Funny Boy*, *The Strike* displays an opposing view of the ‘Other’ in the narrative. In Tamil Nadu, particularly during the Language Movement, anyone speaking Hindi or English was considered to be ‘Other’. It did not matter to the community which part of India the individual belonged to; it was important to learn to speak the language of the region, which in this case is Tamil. This belief is aptly portrayed in the narrative when Hari and his father are having a conversation about the Tamil heroes and politicians. Joseph, who takes part in the conversation, says: ““You know, MGR, the biggest hero in Tamil cinema, he’s not Tamil either”” (Mahadevan 110). This exchange demonstrates that anyone succeed in Tamil Nadu if they speak Tamil and that even long standing politicians and big heroes worshipped in the state were once non-speakers of the language. However, MGR and other leaders learned that the key

to success in Tamil Nadu was through learning of Tamil. Therefore, linguistic identity becomes the only concrete identity of the Tamils during the movement in South India. The Tamils could belong to any community, live in any part of the world but were united solely by their language. Their identity is firmly associated with their language and therefore any person who does not speak Tamil is automatically isolated and ridiculed. Mukund desires to become a star in South India and is curious about what it takes to 'make it big'. When told that MGR himself was a Malayali, originating from the state of Kerala, he asks, "So you don't think that language will be a problem?" "I don't think it will be," Joseph replies. "I mean, you should try to learn to speak Tamil, of course..." (Mahadevan 111) This passage expresses the need to learn Tamil in order to survive and protect oneself in Tamil Nadu: Joseph believes that there will be no problem as long as one learns the language. This is in direct opposition to Selvadurai's story, where birth and ancestry matter above all in the decision of the fate of all the characters. Arjie, Appa or Radha Aunty could not choose to be a Sinhala just because they learned the language and achieved fluency. In *The Strike* a more liberal attitude allows non-speakers of the language the freedom to choose their linguistic, and therefore Tamil, identity. The irony, however, in the story is that although Hari is born Tamil, he gets labeled as 'Other' just because he chooses not to speak the language. The walls outside his Thatha's house are spray painted with Tamil words that accused him of being a Hindi speaker. Hari becomes the 'Other' because of a conscious choice he makes. It is at this juncture that he realizes the importance of the Tamil language in his immediate surroundings. He ultimately decides to follow Thatha's orders and his desire for Hari to learn and speak Tamil.

3. Queer Identity in the Tamil diaspora

Within a literature on queerness with diverse definitions, my analysis of *Funny Boy* and *The Strike*, defines the term as desire and behaviors that exist beyond a heteronormative mindset and the presence of rigid structures within both societies (King 2004). That is to say, both Arjie and Hari have desires that differ from the heteronormative mindset of their respective communities and that could be considered 'queer'. In order to understand and accept their 'queerness', they need to battle the same mindset and the rigid structures that shape their societies.

a. Queer Identity and Gender Spaces

The queerness in *Funny Boy* and the queer identity of Arjie himself are exemplified by the wider segregation of gender spaces in the novel. The Sri Lankan postcolonial heteronormative setting disallows the idea of a fluid nature of gender and rather places it in two distinct and rigid categories of 'male' and 'female'. The idea that Arjie does not belong to either of these gendered spaces is apparent from the first chapter "Pigs can't fly" and is central to his different and 'Othered' identity in the narrative. The narrative suggests that he has been different from birth, existing between genders; as Salaye suggests, by "deconstructing primitive and traditional gender roles in society, the novel explores the in-between space of Arjie's sexuality" (46). The protagonist frequently spends his childhood spend-the-days playing 'Bride- Bride' with his female cousins whereas his male cousins play cricket in the backyard. Gender finds itself physically and geographically separated and these spaces take on the role of the traditional masculine and feminine. Girls are essentially banned from entering the masculine space of the backyard for the game of cricket. However, the gendering or 'shuttling' of spaces becomes even

more pronounced for young boys who are barred from entering the female space by an unspoken heteronormative decree. The identity of individuals is dictated by an essentially queer-phobic society that places extreme bearing on the notion of masculinity and its relationship to their national identity. Arjie becomes conscious of the gendering of spaces in his surroundings at a young age. He describes this segregation of spaces between girls and boys that he observes during his spend-the-days:

Territorially, the area around my grandparents' house was divided into two. The front garden, the road, the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys, although included in their group was my cousin Meena. In this territory, two factions struggled for power, one led by Meena, the other by my brother, Varuna. The second territory was called the "the girls", included in which, however, was myself, a boy. It was to this territory of the girls confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch, that I seemed to have gravitated naturally, my earliest memories of those spend-the-days always belonging in the back garden of my grandparents' home. The pleasure the boys had standing for hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun, watching the batsmen run from crease to crease, was incomprehensible to me. For me, the primary attraction of the girl's territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagination, I was selected as leader. (Selvadurai 3)

Arjie seems to be aware of the territorialization of girls and boys in his grandparents' house but fails to understand why he needs to follow the rules for these gendered spaces. He declares that playing cricket is incomprehensible to him and that he would rather choose to play Bride-Bride since it evokes a creative side in him. Perhaps the protagonist at this point is not able to perceive

the consequences of his actions and the ‘seriousness of his crime’ in his refusal to identify with the territory for the boys. This can be read as a refusal to identify with the ‘masculine’. However, he also seems to acknowledge his difference in the ‘girls’ group when he says he ‘naturally gravitates towards them’ and that the playing with girls held a certain ‘attraction’ and ‘fantasy’. In other words, he is aware that his place is different yet he chooses to play with the girls. This is another conscious acknowledgement and choice of a different identity. He finally understands the seriousness of this difference and its significance in society with the arrival of Tanuja, his cousin. Tanuja directly challenges his authority and masculinity by demanding to take the position of the bride from Arjie. It is also true that she makes him aware of his ‘in-between’ identity by using discourse that is insulting at best. In disgust, she calls him a ‘pansy’, a ‘faggot’ and a ‘sissy’.

As Gairola observes, the insults catalyze his exile from queered spaces in his backyard to a heteronormative queerphobic space in his grandparents’ house where he is branded the “funny one” by his cousin’s mother (479). She uses her language to insult Arjie in calling him a ‘funny one’ because he does not belong in either of the two defined gendered spaces and therefore to neither identity. The protagonist is therefore forced to enter the area where the boys play and is banished from the world of the girl play (Gopinath 171). Arjie becomes an outcast, a reflection of the ‘Other’ that his society does not comprehend. In order to force him to accept his masculine identity, he has to follow the code of Gopinath terms the ‘geography and spatialization’ of gender spaces. According to his elders, being in the boys’ territory would simply force him to become a boy while enforcing punishment would cure him. Gairola likewise discusses the presence of such gendered normative spaces throughout the novel, well hidden in a cloak of domesticity. For example, Radha Auntie’s and Amma’s bedroom becomes a domestic

abode for the ‘girlie-boy’ Arjie. These are spaces he has the privilege of entering in the beginning before he was accused of being ‘funny’. His mother prohibits him from entering her room after he is forced to quit playing ‘bride- bride’ with his female cousins. He naturally gravitates towards Radha Auntie’s room where he is allowed to create his own identity and is free to try the makeup she owns. The Victorian Institution, the school that Arjie is enrolled in, can be regarded as the epitome of a masculine space in the novel, yet it becomes the very space of rebellion for Arjie where he dares to have a sexual encounter with a fellow male classmate. Is it perhaps because Arjie needs to maneuver his way through various such strict gendered spaces throughout the narrative that he begins to assert his own queerness consciously (Lesk 13)? Although Arjie, having at first imbibed society’s gendered codes, feels disgust after his first sexual encounter with Shehan, his classmate, he still seeks to consciously assert his queerness and thereby his difference from the norm throughout the novel. He does this by rebelling against the same gendered codes by means of subsequent sexual encounters with Shehan. He realizes he is different and ‘funny’ but doesn’t attempt to adhere himself to social structures.

In *The Strike*, spatialization and territorialization of gender, although present, are not glaringly apparent. Most of the gendered spaces are traditional and linked to domestic roles of male and female characters in the narrative. When Hari has a conversation with his Thatha, it is in the “tool shed in the back garden where Hari would clean and oil the garden tools while his grandfather would sharpen his shears” (Mahadevan 59). On the other hand, the women of the family, prior to the arrival of Mani Mama, “worked themselves to a frenzy in the out-kitchen and backyard along with a professional cook to prepare sweets and savories” (Mahadevan 65). Therefore, it is evident that there exist separately allocated spaces for both genders although in a more covert or subtle manner. Another instance where the domestic gendered space can be seen

is when Hari declares he needs to learn how to cook because of his desire to study in America and Thatha answers: ““Don’t worry, we’ll send you a nice wife with you so she can cook for you. That way you can pay attention to your studies.”” (Mahadevan 60). This passage reiterates the fact that cooking and the kitchen space is not suitable for the masculine and that Hari, who will grow up to be a man, will not be allowed to enter that space solely reserved for women. In another part of the text, Anamika becomes a woman and when Hari enquires his father as to why Anamika is crying, he dismisses it clearly into ‘women’s territory’. ““Appa, what happened?” Hari asked. ‘Nothing,’ Girish said, looking at the dye on his clothes from grabbing the two boys. In a futile gesture, he brushed the coloured stains with his hand. He sighed, ‘Just women’s business.’” (Mahadevan 49). It is Hari’s mother who pulls Anamika away and creates a ‘feminine space’ where the entry of boys is prohibited. Hari and his friend try to infiltrate the space although they can only stay outside and satisfy their curiosity regarding the significance of ‘a woman’s business’. Unlike *Funny Boy*, *The Strike* does not create a link between masculinity and national pride. That is to say, a postcolonial heteronormative society is represented in both novels although the rigidity in gendered spaces and identity is minimal in the latter. Spaces are strictly traditional in nature: Hari is allowed to play with both Mohan and Anamika unlike Arjie, who is completely barred from such spaces after being called funny.

With respect to his queer identity, Hari seems to be an unconscious spectator in his own quest for sexuality. Not unlike Arjie, he is both disgusted and embarrassed after having ‘felt good’ after his first sexual encounter with a man. “Vishu grabbed him by the crotch. Hari sucked in his breath and yelped as Vishu squeezed his genitals, a quick short squeeze followed by a longer harder crush. Vishu stood up and snickered at the bulge in Hari’s shorts. ‘Look at you, aroused by a man’s touch’ he spat to one side.” (Mahadevan 76) Hari is navigating through his

sexuality while painfully unaware of his feelings and his identity. When Vishu grabs him violently, he feels aroused and is therefore ridiculed. This makes it even clearer to him that it is wrong to 'feel good' with a man's touch. The second sexual encounter, however, is not completely rejected by Hari as a misconstrued part of his sexuality. Hari and his friend Mohan watch a movie together in a theatre and Mohan's hand is on Hari's thigh:

His attention was divided between the film and the warmth of Mohan's palm on his thigh. He squirmed a little in his seat and the hand moved higher until it touched the hem of his shorts. An unnamed desire swelled through him and Hari felt his penis stiffen within his shorts. Hari sat up to hide his excitement but Mohan's fingers gently brushed over the bulge in Hari's shorts as he withdrew his hand to the armrest. (Mahadevan 94)

Although in this passage, Hari does not feel outright disgust, he remains unaware of his sexual identity. Unlike Arjie, he does not openly entertain the idea that he may be queer and therefore different, nor does he completely accept or reject the idea. He seems to be relaxed about the happenings around him.

The key difference between the two novels as Bildungsroman lies in how the two protagonists come to terms with their queerness. For Arjie, accepting his sexuality and his queerness are extremely important to navigating through his surroundings and growing up to understand himself. His queerness becomes his central identity and the only way to make sense of the world around him. Hari, on the contrary, is not bogged down by a need to understand his queerness. Despite the fact that he is a part of a society that values traditional masculine and feminine roles and spaces, he does not feel compelled like Arjie to accept and embrace his otherness. One reason may be that Arjie's queerness, and thereby his otherness, are open to the

eyes of the world. That is to say, most of the characters in the narrative realize that he is different and he therefore feels oppressed. Hari, on the other hand, is the only one who is aware of the changes in his body owing to the sexual experiences he has had, making his difference much less pronounced than those of Arjie.

Both Arjie and Hari belong to an in-between or a ‘third space of identity’, which I define as a space where both protagonists are considered as ‘others’ who will not be accepted as a part of either gender or their respective space. Thus, they are both ‘other’ for the masculine and the feminine, thereby instigating a need to create their own queer third space of in-between-ness where they feel they can express their own different identity. As both narratives end with the departure of the protagonists to Canada, the country becomes a physical ‘third space’ for both Arjie and Hari. Canada becomes a place where the rigidity of the gendered spaces disappears and translates into the creation of a new space for their in-between identity.

b. Gender performance

Judith Butler, in her influential work *Gender Trouble*, attempts to deconstruct what social categories entail and how gender functions in society. She argues that the rigidity of societal structures of the male and female is not essential. She believes that “gender is fiction”, meaning that it has to be created and that “gender is indeed a performance” (Judith Butler 25), where performing and mimicking creates gender roles to be played in society. She provides the following succinct of gender and its attributes:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within highly rigid frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is

successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.

(Butler 1999:45)

The game of bride-ride in *Funny Boy* marks an important transition from merely desiring femininity to the act of creating and ‘performing’ the most feminine role in society: that of a bride. Arjie wants to completely dominate the feminine space and he does so by taking on the most important role in the fantasy game. He desires to ‘become’ the feminine and his performance as a bride wrapped in a sari emboldens his vision of himself as a woman. The following passage demonstrates the transfiguration he undergoes while playing bride-ride:

The dressing of the bride would now begin and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki’s cracked full-length mirror- by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes. I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, around whom the world represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palu, seemed to revolve. It was self-magnified, like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema. I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested. (Selvadurai 4-5)

Arjie undergoes both a physical and a psychological transformation where he views himself as “a graceful, beautiful icon for the eyes of the world”. He describes in detail his desire for femininity with an elaborate sketch of himself with his makeup. With the lipstick, rouge and the

veil on his head, he feels as if he ‘transcends’ into another world. This for him becomes the world of the feminine and his reenactment of being a bride in the game reinforces the image of himself as a woman. Although he imagines a parallel universe with a different identity, I argue that he not only ‘feels like’ but also ‘becomes’ a woman and a bride. That is perhaps the primary reason why he chooses to be the bride, who is the essence of femininity in the game. Like Butler’s concept of “gender is fiction,” Arjie creates his fiction, his story. He accepts the role of the feminine, performs it and in the act is completely transformed by a performance every spend-the-day. A similar transformation takes place in Radha Aunty’s bedroom, another gendered feminine space, where Arjie is free to apply makeup and yet again ‘become’ a woman whose identity he so desires. He is content in the in-between space; a space where he belongs to the masculine yet is allowed to desire the feminine and to be the ‘other’.

Hari, on the other hand, does not feel the need to perform gender since the narrative depicts him as content to be playing the masculine. However, there is an example of gender performance in the novel that demonstrates Butler’s idea that gender as a social construct that can be acquired by engaging with our surroundings. Radha is a eunuch who was born as a man, but his performance as a woman has transformed him and allowed him to consider himself a woman. Although the narrative does not explain the identity crisis that Radha faces, parallels exist between Arjie’s and Radha’s stories and the potential for gender being conceived of as fluid and changeable rather than fixed..

When Hari first noticed her, he stepped back as he realized that she was a eunuch. Her disguise was so perfect; he had failed to notice the man in the pretty woman. Here was a man more feminine than masculine, more dark than fair, more comely than muscular, and despite all this, he found her rather pretty. (Mahadevan 107)

While Hari calls a man dressed in a woman's clothing a 'disguise' that can be considered as an impersonation of an identity, it can be read as a form of complete transformation on Radha's part. While on the train, Radha removes "a lump of cloth shaped like a breast" from under her sari and throws it at Hari. Hari asks her "So you don't have real breasts?" She answers: "What did you think?" Radha tugged at the empty pocket of her blouse. 'I am a hijra, not a woman. Three years it has been and still they refuse to grow, what can I do? It's my fate.'" (Mahadevan 133). Radha explains her story to Hari claiming that "No one is born a chakka: you have to be selected to become one" (Mahadevan 135). According to Radha, you have to be 'chosen' to become a woman and being born into a certain gender does not necessarily entitle one to a fixed gender identity. She goes on to tell the story of how she was a lonely and lost boy in the big city of Bombay and how she was adopted by a family of eunuchs and 'transformed' figuratively and literally into a woman. According to Radha, she was merely selected to play the role of a different gender. This evidences Butler's theory that gender is indeed a performance.

During the train journey, Hari directs his questions at Radha. Hari asks, "But you were still a boy then...?" 'Of course I was still a boy ...well, a man by then, you know'" (Mahadevan 137), Radha responds with respect and talks about when she had the transformation surgery performed. Radha goes on to discuss her surgery to permanently become a woman: "Hours passed and I began to lose consciousness as I drank more and more alcohol and then just before the first ray of the dawn sun hit the sky, Chinnamma took out this long knife and slick.' She gestured a swift blade swiping through air." (Mahadevan 138) Radha was born a boy and became a man in a violent transformation. Her accidental yet fated meeting with the eunuch family fundamentally changed the way she sees herself. The narrative shows that Radha considers herself a woman and she has contently accepted the feminine role that she 'performs'

in society. It was not the surgery that completely transformed her but the ‘enactment’ of the feminine and her performance that, not unlike the bride Arjie plays, enables her to become a woman.

Both novels explore gender performance and its effect on the queer identity. Arjie is able to freely maneuver his identity between the two worlds or in a third space. Radha was a boy once but did not continue to be one. Although, she was forced to undergo the surgery to ‘become’ a woman or to ‘unbecome’ a man, it could be argued that Radha as a eunuch could occupy either or neither of the masculine and the feminine. Both Radha and Arjie belong, therefore, to certain third space where their identity is fluid. At the same time, both Arjie and Radha live in societies where they have to be either a woman or a man in rigidly gendered spaces.

Although gender identity or ‘queerness’ is in a conscious ambiguous state for Arjie in *Funny Boy* and in an unconscious ambiguous one for Hari in *The Strike*, the social restrictions and the heteronormative queer phobic tendencies are exhibited by both cultures. Radha is consciously aware of her gender but has been given a clear fixed identity by the society. Therefore, both Tamil societies, Sri Lankan and South Indian, have a similar perspective with respect to the rigidity of both gender spaces and a fixed gender identity.

IV. CONCLUSION

The objective of this research was to analyze and compare *Funny Boy* and *The Strike*, novels by two Tamil Canadian authors, in order to study the construction of multiple diasporic identities.

Comparison of both novels in the dual contexts of postcolonial Tamil culture and queer culture highlights the ambiguity and complex identities of the characters. In *Funny Boy*, the characters in the novel are enveloped in a metaphorical and literal war that seeks to crystallize a single 'national' identity by according more importance to the Sinhala ethnicity and language. To become Sri Lankan post colonization is to become a 'Sinhala man' who conforms to nationalistic and patriarchal rules of the society. On the other hand, *The Strike* showcases in certain parts a nostalgic reverence and mimicking of the colonial era and in certain others, a regional linguistic fervour to eliminate the colonizer's language. Although the White, whether revered or discriminated against, is always the 'Other', identifying as Tamil is wrought with ambiguity for both protagonists. Although ultimately Arjie accepts his Tamil identity while Hari refuses to associate with it, it is the ambiguity that defines both characters. The constant back and forth of rejection and acceptance, rebellion and conformity marks a fluidity in their identities. Likewise, gender identity in both novels is equally confusing for the protagonists. Both Hari and Arjie consciously or unconsciously accept and even embrace their queerness but in different ways. The point of convergence in both novels is a shared cultural context where both the , Sri Lankan and South Indian communities function as heteronormative and queer-phobic societies that seek to enforce their patriarchal rules on the protagonists. The values of the community remain fixed and rigid while the identities of the characters evidence an 'in-between-ness'.

This ambiguity in identities can itself be considered part of a ‘third space’ inhabited by both the narrators and the diasporic authors who look back at their lives in Sri Lanka. *The Strike* becomes a literal and metaphorical journey for both the author and the protagonist to understand their identities, wherein the journey culminates in Canada. On the other hand, *Funny Boy* is where the diasporic writer presents his own and Arjie’s metaphorical journey of coming to terms with, and understanding, their identities. Both authors represent the Tamil diaspora where ‘being Tamil’ has shaped their identities, whether they chose to accept or reject them. Canada becomes a meeting point for two authors who belong to the same Tamil diaspora originating in the two completely different cultural backgrounds their novels depict.

Both Shyam Selvadurai and Anand Mahadevan construct the identities of characters differently. Selvadurai constructs a strong national pride and a need to dissociate from colonial rule in his characters whereas Mahadevan’s characters possess a nostalgic pride for colonial rule and seem to regard it in a favourable manner. Although they belong to the same diaspora and speak the same language, they come from two different countries with a different postcolonial settings and narrative backgrounds. The same cultural difference brings about dissimilarity in the way their language, Tamil, is regarded in their societies. Although Selvadurai’s characters feel ‘different’ and ‘submissive’ because they are Tamils, their language brings pride and becomes a symbol of Arjie’s queerness with respect to the Sinhala ‘others. However, Mahadevan’s characters are attached to their language but Hari chooses to dissociate from the same. Both authors may portray Tamil identity differently but demonstrate that the refusal and acceptance of this cultural identity stems from a similar rebelliousness against conforming to social constraints in both protagonists. Further, comparison of queer identity demonstrates that neither culture in

the Tamil diaspora has yet accepted the 'queer' and both try to force a heteronormative existence in their societies.

This study signals the presence of multiple identities in the Tamil diaspora, both collective and individual. These different identities link the authors as diasporic writers to their host country and homelands. Although they belong to more than one nation and different roots, the creation of multiple diasporic identities translates to nostalgia for their homelands, however unfavorable, and to being Tamil.

My research primarily compares the diasporic identities set in postcolonial contexts in fictional situations through the characters in *Funny Boy* and *The Strike*, where queer identity in particular can be considered as solely an individual identity in both novels. Both Shyam Selvadurai and Anand Mahadevan represent the idea that heteronormative masculinity is often a key ingredient of a postcolonial nation. The authors demonstrate that it is important to let individuals voice their own identities different from that of others; to be able to carry an individual consciousness in a collective setting.

In order to expand on this research, it would be fruitful to study further dimensions of social identity such as caste or class differences or differences in educational level in the Tamil communities in both novels. Additionally, study of diasporic aspects of memory, consciousness and how characters in the novel connect to India and Canada could allow for the expansion of ideas of a complex Tamil diasporic identity.

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