Issues of Gender Identity Formation with Reference to ‘Funny Boy’ by Shyam Selvadurai

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Abstract

There is always a struggle to accept the difference one feels in oneself as far as gender is concerned. Because society conceptualizes the terms as per the arising needs. Not just conceptualizes but generates possibilities to how one should behave as a particular gender, which then stereotypes a gender. The developments in this regard take time to percolate into the minds of the people in society. Less of a discussion leads to less acceptance of anything different from the normally accepted binary. This paper analyses this process that an individual goes through trying to understand one’s gender, the difficult situations that one has to go through while one displays one’s gender. Arjie struggles to understand himself in the first place. Arjie only through and at various stages of his life understands himself and without taking the effort to convince others, lives his life. The process of convincing others would anyway lead to a dead end. At the time when Shyam Selvadurai wrote and published the novel i.e. 1994, society wasn’t ready to learn about different genders or sexuality for that matter. Therefore, this novel stood apart and won Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction. Shyam Selvadurai presents Sri Lanka and its slow but steady Sinhala-Tamil tensions leading up to the 1993 riots. So alongside the character, Arjie had to deal with his ethnic identity and sexual identity which wasn’t easy for Arjie. The paper also presents the psychological development especially during the process of his ‘coming out’ and the ‘invitation in.’

Keywords: Gender, Homosexuality, Identity, ‘Coming out’, ‘Invitation in’

Introduction

When the society bombards Arjie with different ideas of gender he tries to assimilate and come to the realization of his sexuality. The paper discusses the struggle of Arjie in the light of establishing that homosexuality is not a mental illness or an aberration. The struggle therefore does not just end in the formation of the identity it begins with more momentum after one ‘comes out’ as homosexual. Is coming to the realization of one’s sexuality enough or ‘coming out’ to society also important? But what will ‘coming out’ do? The paper will also focus on the difficulties that Arjie as a homosexual faced and the probable aftermath of his ‘coming out.’

Homosexuality is Not a Form of Pathology

Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud were of the opinion that homosexuality is not a disease. In the early twentieth century,
Havelock Ellis said that homosexuality is inborn and not immoral. Sigmund Freud might have differed a bit from this viewpoint as he said that every human being is innately bisexual. We become heterosexual and homosexual as we grow depending on our experiences with the people around us. But he too agreed with Havelock that homosexuality is not a form of pathology. Psychologists and intellectuals from other sciences also argued whether homosexuality is a mental illness or not. But they were coloured by their homophobic thoughts and biases. American Psychological Association (APA) which had a long debate whether homosexuality is a disease, declared that it is not a disease and that, homosexuals shouldn’t be pejoratively looked upon.

**Defining Arjie’s Stage of Psychosocial Development**

After more than 20 years of this declaration, Shyam Selvadurai published ‘Funny Boy’ in 1994. But homophobia, toxic masculinity, condemnation of homosexuality and antigay violence continued. Therefore, we see the protagonist of the novel Arjie growing up and is between the ages of seven and fourteen. In the story, Arjie is juggling between the fourth and the fifth stages of Erik Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development. Erik believed that personality develops in a particular order and at a certain age one forms one’s identity and sense of self. Arjie is at that point, where there are inferiority and lack of self-esteem. He is also looking for approval in his peer group. It is a stage where one is usually in a psychosocial crisis of identity and role confusion. One tries to understand the virtue of fidelity during this stage and age.

**Arjie’s Quest in Identity Formation**

Arjie when visits his Ammachi and Appachi’s home for spend-the-days, he plays with his female cousins a game called, “bride-bride.” He enjoys their company and wants to be identified along with them. But soon when his cousin Tanuja enters the scene, Arjie is denied the opportunity to be the bride. Arjie is called ‘funny’ by his uncle and is restricted from playing with his cousins by his mother. The reason is not specified but it is highly an evidence of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. A boy should behave like a boy and a girl like a girl. A boy should play games that boys play and the girls likewise. Arjie is now in role confusion. Young that he is definitely doesn’t understand the gender non-binaries or the spectrum at which all of us behave. He is assimilating these experiences and trying to create his identity.

Radha Aunty is the next person he is highly in relationship with. He believes in love and the whole fairy tale wedding. He assumes that Radha Aunty would marry the love of his life, i.e. Anil Jayasinghe but due to the impending conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, she as a Tamil has to resort to marrying Rajan Nagendra. Arjie has to relearn his concept of marriage based on the ethnicity and the conflict that he is part of. This experience too becomes a part of his conflicted identity.

The affair between Daryl Uncle and his mother is the next in line to create a distortion of relationships and identity. Arjie at first knows the relationship of his parents. He knows that they ought to be faithful to each other. But the entry of Daryl Uncle and his relationship with his mother, and her reciprocation in so much so that she reacts to everything that happens to Daryl Uncle astonishes Arjie. Arjie is now tackling with relationship queries which in turn affect his identity.

The time when Arjie meets Jegan is the time when he feels that he is a homosexual. But there is continuous schooling of toxic masculinity that happens. His father admits him to Victoria Academy to force him to become a man. Perhaps he has a distorted definition of masculinity. Nevertheless, that is where Arjie gets attracted to Shehan. They have an intimate time with each other, but Arjie at times feels ashamed. And it could be because he was always taught to be a certain way to be a man. He feels ashamed because he has not adhered to the norms of society. He feels that he has broken
the trust of his family. Arjie is still a confused child and so are we as readers. The more we know of gender and orientation, the less it is. Gender is a complex term but it can be understood when we are ready and willing to accept that there are gender non-binaries too. And that gender is fluid.

Recognizing Difficulties and ‘Coming Out’

Our behaviours alter according to the situation we are faced with. We are sometimes masculine or feminine or at times do not display any gender. We basically work on a spectrum. That is the beauty of it. The Indian society is far from understanding this fact and therefore the people who identify to be different are faced with umpteen issues, homophobia being the most prominent. Homophobia is a dislike against gay people. The moment you identify as gay and come out, there are people ready and waiting to yell at you and treat you like you do not matter to the world or is a burden to the world.

There is a fear of gay people because we are literally fed everyday by media or perhaps the literature that is around us, that there is just a gender binary; male and female and that there is nothing else that exists. When we are fed with these ideas every single day, we are conditioned not to believe otherwise. We do not become aware of the fact that there is non-binary gender as well. We do not even include them in our normal conversations. If we do not have conversations, how will we be able to negotiate with the fact that there is a possibility of a different gender that we do not identify with? Arjie met with such fate because there were no conversations of this sort happening. His parents were conditioned to the age-old idea of gender binary. And they were just reacting to that which was introduced to them. Therefore, concluding that Arjie is ‘funny.’

Heterosexuality is glorified to the extent that any other union is not accepted in society. A union between two people of the same gender becomes a taboo for some. Homosexuals, therefore, undergo a lot of stress and depression. And suicide seems to be the option majority of the times they resort to. The allowance of homosexual marriages has proved better mental health in homosexual people. It has also shown that there are fewer suicides as they are given an opportunity to take the option they always preferred.

Toxic masculinity on the other hand has suppressed all other genders. It has condemned homosexuality as they feel threatened. Toxic masculinity believes that there is just one way to be a man. You cannot be a man who cries, fragile, and meek. You need to be bold, emotionless and aggressive. This looks more of a prototype that one has to adhere to. Not fitting the requirements would lead to ostracism or stigma or simply violence. Patriarchy, therefore, thrives on toxic masculinity and that needs to be changed. Arjie and Shehan had no other option than to be intimate but keep it a secret. Arjie was growing up but he couldn’t be sure of his identity as a homosexual and accept it. He felt ashamed of himself leading to further complications.

‘Coming out’ when one is ashamed of one’s gender or orientation for that matter becomes difficult. It rather turns out to be stressful because you need to explain a whole lot of emotions to the other who doesn’t know anything you are going through. Probably ‘coming out’ would become easy when the other is receptive and understanding enough. Not all are like Dr. Vijay Mehta who accepted his son Parag Mehta and his partner Vaibhav Jain when they ‘came out.’ Dr. Vijay Mehta gave the most trending speech on their wedding day. He happens to be an inspiration to many fathers in our country and the world. Many homosexuals want him to be their father for the fact that he has an open mind and is ready to take up the challenge that the society will pose for him in the future.

So accepting one’s gender whatsoever it might be, should be the first step towards ‘coming out.’ ‘Coming out’ should be done in a manner that one is sure of one’s security and safety. And there is a lot that society must do to accept the non-binary gender. Because it is through the society that one
is affirming one’s identity. Arjie was observant of the society in which he lived. He was influenced by it. Sometimes, the society offered him situations that broke his bubble and sometimes it offered him fantasies that he believed in. Arjie wasn’t retaliating he was just assimilating all this while.

He did what he felt made him happy. Just like Cheeni, the character in Paatal Lok. Cheeni was orphaned at a very young age and her nasty uncle left her in a train under deception. She, fortunately, meets another boy who accepts her as she is. Cheeni goes through testing times; insecure and harsh. But she doesn’t give upshe works hard and achieves great height until she is employed to commit a murder that she is not aware of. Cheeni did what made her happy, whether it was wearing the saree and flaunting her beauty infront of the mirror or beautifying her face with the makeup. Arjie enjoyed the same. Whether it is Arjie or Cheeni both of them deserve respect.

Arjie was made fun of by his uncle. His cousin Tanuja was nasty to him as well. She emphasised on the fact that he shouldn’t dress up as a bride and that he should quit the game. If there were examples where there was no association made to a particular gender when it came to dressing or any behavioural trait. Things would have been better or different for Arjie.

Beyond Gender Identity Formation and ‘Invitation In’

Understanding that ‘coming out’ as a homosexual puts a lot of pressure on them in comparison to heterosexual or cisgender. We are thus required to ‘inviting them in.’ An invitation in means that they do not have to repeat their stories a zillion times. An invitation in means that we make a change, we relearn what we have learnt so far. We accept and understand that what we know is too little and that there is a lot to know more about gender. In the process of asserting our gender unawares we might have hurt the other, we also become aware of that fact. And from then on real change and invitation in is plausible.

An invitation in will start the process to eradicating stigma towards the homosexuals. It will give the homosexuals a reason to breathe freely. Because when they are accepted they will no more be questioned now and then about their orientation. Perhaps, children like Arjie will no more be confused as to what their identity is if the society is inviting in and is ready to accept people as they are. One will not become vulnerable to violence and hatred anymore. One can proudly walk as a different or normal human being.

A society with an open mind would make gender identity formation simple. But that is far from reality. Religions and religious leaders, politics and politicians, judiciaries, and all those responsible in power must help in breaking stereotypes and rigid mentalities. The only way out is to be ready and willing to accept the other and see the common good being reasonable. When one thinks of the common good irrespective of whatever gender the other person professes to be, it wouldn’t hurt us. We wouldn’t be violent, we would be accepting. We would save more lives. We would save persecution and harassment that homosexuals or the non-binaries have to undergo because of the staunch patriarchy. We would be kind human beings.

For Arjie, it would have been a better world if the above happened. Despite the exterior conflicts in the state, he would have accepted his identity and be happy with being homosexual. He wouldn’t need to ‘come out.’ His parents would have accepted him and invited him in. Although, we are not told about the future of Arjie, but we can assume, if the society is more considerate giving up toxic masculinity, giving up too much emphasis on heterosexuality and giving up homophobic thoughts. Then for Arjie being and doing what he did will not make him feel ashamed. Although it sounds utopian, Arjie would have a bright future. And that should be our aim to achieve; a world that is a peaceful dwelling place for everyone.
References


