



Towards a Sri Lankan Future: Interethnicity and Homosexuality in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

Guhan Priyadharshan P.

Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, West Bengal, India &
Government Polytechnic College, Coimbatore, India

● <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0583-4963>

Abstract

Shyam Selvadurai's 1994 novel, *Funny Boy*, set before the Civil War, alludes to two complicated issues in Sri Lanka pertaining to the burgeoning interethnic conflict and the stigmatization of homosexual practices and behavior. Though it has been three decades since the novel's publication and the Civil War has ended, the two issues persist. In addressing them, this paper, firstly, establishes colonialism as the reason for these issues and links them in a continuum with the Sri Lankan state; secondly, to overcome these issues and envision a Sri Lankan future, this paper employs a metapolitical reading of the novel through the lens of Badiou's emancipatory politics. Thus, this paper connects the Sri Lankan past with the present to offer a future premised on the logic of universal emancipation. Additionally, the notion of colonial tropicality, which is intertwined with colonial legacies that presuppose tropical states as incapable of stable governance (which is then historically legitimized by interethnic conflict and civil war), is disproven as the engendered future offers a state with a vision of universal emancipation at its core.

Keywords: colonial tropicality, Alain Badiou, queer fiction, Sri Lankan futures, interethnic homosexuality, postcolonialism, Shyam Selvadurai

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a beautiful, mango-shaped island in the Indian Ocean. I have heard it described as pear-shaped, which, for the literal-minded, is probably more accurate. For me, however, and for many Sri Lankans, our nation has the shape of our favourite fruit, the mango. And so it does.
—Tharmathurai, 2019

Marco Polo described Sri Lanka as the island paradise of the earth. The British used to call it the 'pearl of the Indian ocean'.
—Balasingham, 1983, p.5

Sri Lanka “is sometimes described as the ‘teardrop’ of the subcontinent,” which occupies “a strategic-enough swath of earth and Southern Indian Ocean” that it was colonized by three European forces (Meis, 2012, p. 243). The island nation, formerly called Ceylon, is multiethnic with a Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority, along with several other ethnicities, including Burghers and Muslims. The country descended into interethnic conflict, which further escalated into a full-scale civil war in 1983 between the Sinhala majority-backed Sri Lankan government and the armed insurgents representing the Tamil minority. The war ended in 2009 with the victory of the former. However, the divide caused by the civil war continues to persist as no formal reconciliation has worked (Keethaponcalan, 2019). The nation’s political division in terms of ethnicity is further accentuated by its ethnic geography, with the minority Tamils concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the island and the Sinhalese majority occupying the southern areas. For Rajah (2022), reconciliation is premised on the “(r)ecognition of the extensive history of the Tamils in the north and east of the island,” but the Sri Lankan state is “not even in its infancy in commencing this process towards peace and between communities in the island” (p. 172). Moreover, an analysis of the results of the presidential elections after the end of the civil war reveals how the nation is fractured electorally and politically in terms of ethnicity. The present political reality of Sri Lanka is that it is a deeply divided nation-state in terms of ethnicity, and the end of the civil war did not organically culminate in the erasure of interethnic issues. This is reflected in the election results as recently as 2024, in which the voting patterns in Tamil areas did not align with those of Sinhala majority areas (Srinivasan, 2024). What Senanayake (2024) calls a regional divide, in referring to the 2024 presidential election results, is, in reality, the ethnic divide. Political parties have capitalized on this ethnic divide. For example, the fascist rhetoric underpinning the majoritarian agenda, which was explicitly against the minority Tamils and Muslims, helped Gotabaya Rajapaksa to win the election in 2019, which DeVotta (2021) calls a return to ethnocracy. This implies that democracy in Sri Lanka is fractured and plays into the hands of politicians who continue to divide the nation primarily based on ethnicity.

This post-colonial history of Sri Lanka, blemished by interethnic conflict and civil war, along with its post-war reality that lacks reconciliation among communities, has led to the positing of Sri Lanka as a “tropical” space antithetical to the “temperate” West. In other words, Sri Lanka continues to be analyzed through a colonial notion of tropicality. Besides the fact that Sri Lanka is physically a tropical space as rendered geographically in terms of latitude, as argued by David Arnold, the tropics is also a “conceptual space” (1996, pp. 142-143). The iteration of “tropicality” at this juncture parallels the notion of the “orient” as showcased by Edward Said (1978). Tropicality,¹ like Orientalism, is a discourse through which the Western colonizers constructed “the tropical world as the West’s environmental other and has been deeply implicated in colonialism and Western dominance” (Clayton, 2012, p. 1). Among the two prevalent and intertwining tropes of tropicality, one conjures paradisiacal scenes, while the other invokes the tropics “as a torrid zone” that is “wild, primitive, unconquerable, inhospitable and pestilential” (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 3). It is this Western construction of the tropics that is reiterated during the event of civil war. For the British sociologist Benjamin Kidd (1898), the natives of the tropics were not capable of stable governance: “There never has been, and never will be, within any time with which we are practically concerned, such a thing as good government, in the European sense, of the tropics by the natives of those regions” (p. 51). He also notes that “there will be no development of the resources of the tropics under native government” (p. 53). This indicates that the colonial discourse of tropicality undermines the possibility of the tropics having functioning governments. Though it is easy to emplace the post-independence civil war of Sri Lanka within this old discourse of colonial tropicality and attest to Kidd’s view, this paper, instead, problematizes the colonial logic behind such imaginaries, alongside the narratives of island-ness, the state formation in the island, the rise of ethnicity-oriented cultural nationalisms, and the penal history and criminalization of homosexual practices.

Taking up the present political situation of visible societal division (upon which colonial tropicality is superimposed), this paper attempts to find a solution to it through a reading of Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* (1994). The novel is set before the 1983 pogrom, referred to as Black July—a subject of exploration in many literary works about Sri Lanka. *Funny Boy* is the coming-of-age story of its protagonist, Arjie, who belongs to a minority Tamil family and shows signs of divergent sexuality, for which he is reprimanded by his parents and coerced to become “normal.” The novel begins by depicting the interethnic tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese by following the

¹ I have used the term ‘colonial tropicality’ in this paper to articulate this older idea of tropicality, which is still prevalent. However, it should be noted that recent scholarship on tropicality subverts the colonial premise of the notion. In a decolonial move, recent scholarship points out that the material ecology of the tropics is crucial to studying a tropics in which humans are entangled with the more-than-human world. This is a queering of tropicality. (See Benitez & Lundberg, 2022; Lundberg et al., 2023; Benitez et al., 2024 a & b).

character of Radha, Arjie's aunt, before it shifts to Arjie at his new boys-only school, where he becomes involved in a same-sex affair with Shehan, a Sinhalese boy—as the political environment begins to become hostile to Tamil minorities. This led to the emigration of Arjie and his family to Canada at the onset of the 1983 Black July pogrom.

The novel's queer narrative, set alongside interethnic conflict and the civil war, allows a reading of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* not just as set in the past, but as relevant to present and future Sri Lanka. There is a continuum between the past as narrated in the novel and the present societal and political affairs of Sri Lanka—non-heterosexual acts remain criminalized, and ethnic disquiet continues. In exploring how to overcome the existing logic of the nation-state that is entrenched in distending existing ethnic divisions and subjugating the queer population, it is necessary to bring these two problems, which seem unrelated, into analysis to demonstrate how they are, in fact, interrelated due to the country's colonial history.

This paper traces the two factors of ethnic disparity and homosexual discrimination to coloniality, which implies that the event of decolonizing, as Mignolo & Walsh (2018) state, "has left the logic of coloniality intact" (p. 124). This does not imply that the paper takes a "decolonial" turn *per se*, but rather, it critiques the state as a continuum of coloniality. It does this by exploring how the novel's narrative articulates resistance and subverts the hegemonic logic that underpins the interethnic discontent and the subjugation of homosexual people.

British Colonial Legacy—Interethnicity and Homosexuality

Two pressing aspects in *Funny Boy* are the impending interethnic civil war and the criminalization and non-recognition of homosexual practices: both trace their origin to the legacy of British colonial rule on the island. Hamid Dabashi (2019) notes that "European colonialism may have ended here and there, but the condition of coloniality continues—not just economically, but also culturally, epistemically, morally, imaginatively" (Introduction, para. 4). To what extent Sri Lanka decolonized itself after becoming free from colonial rule is debatable even though the nation chose to erase its colonial legacy by changing its name, Ceylon, after it became a republic in 1972.

Interethnic disquiet is a complex problem that has been analyzed from various perspectives. The civil conflict between the Sinhalese majority-backed Sri Lankan government and the ethnic minority Tamils has been linked to the linguistic disenfranchisement policies of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. Härting (2006) notes that:

...in Sri Lanka global civil war has been a permanent, everyday reality since the country's Sinhala Only Movement in 1956, and become manifest in the normalization of racialized violence as a means of politics since President Jayawardene's election campaign for a referendum in 1982, which led to the state-endorsed anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983. (p. 7)

However, in arriving at the above-quoted conclusion, the societal dynamics of colonial times have been ignored. Dower et al. (2017) trace the origin to a British colonial legacy. They point out how the British inherited the island from Dutch rule and failed to promote English education, instead continuing with the Dutch arrangement of vernacular education. Nevertheless, working knowledge of English of the Indigenous Bourgeoisie was required to administer the island. This is in line with (Lord) Macaulay's (1833) statement that the role of English education was to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" for administering the Indian subcontinent. As Brutt-Griffler (2002) observes:

there was a strong effort by the British colonial authorities to keep English out of the reach of the vast majority in each colony. The reason for this policy lay in the desire to maintain the perceived linguistic conditions for colonial exploitation of the working class. (p.220)

In this educational scenario, the Tamils benefited disproportionately over the Sinhalese from English education owing to their closer proximity to American missionaries. Dower et al. (2017) note that "the minority Tamil population gained a significant economic advantage over...the Sinhalese majority during colonial rule" (p. 442). They further opine, "Regardless of whether the British efforts purposively sowed these divisions in society, the disparities brought about by the colonial linguistic policy clearly were factors in the conflict" (p. 442). This was coupled with the changes made to the democratic system through constitutional reforms (Wickramasinghe, 2012). Bandarage (2009) notes how the elections that took place after the reforms inverted the power dynamics:

This extension of parliamentary democracy signified the beginning of what came to be seen as a 'reconquest' of power by the Sinhala Buddhist majority who had been marginalized during 400 years of colonial domination and a diminution of the power of minorities, especially the Sri Lankan Tamils who had 'benefitted' from colonial rule. (p. 36)

According to Barron (1988), the reforms were “condemnation of communal electorates...[which] went against nearly 100 years of political practice in Ceylon.” In turn, the ethnic divisions and the removal of the communal electorate coincided with the development of a unitary state (Ananthavinayagan, 2019, p. 58).

Further, it is significant to examine the colonial historiography of Sri Lanka. Though the island was not unified as a single territory until the arrival of the European colonial powers, in the discourse of colonial historiography, the island was constructed as a singular political entity in the work of Knighton (1845). Tennent (1860), like Knighton, constructed the island of Sri Lanka as a singular political entity while calling the political condition at that time “deplorable” (p. 7). Tennent’s work reeks of romanticized tropicality as it was concerned not only with political matters but also with the geography and topography of the island. For example, he referred to his landing in the port town of Galle as follows: “We landed at Galle on Saturday the 29th of November 1845. No traveller fresh from Europe will ever part with the impression left by his first gaze upon tropical scenery” (p. 99). This showcases that the notion of tropicality dotted the colonial episteme that constructed the island as a singular political entity while being indifferent to its history and the ethnic divide that informed the political divisions within the island in terms of territories or kingdoms. Like the discourse of colonial tropicality, colonial historiography is biased and does not offer objective knowledge of the land concerned. While referring to the works of Knighton (1845) and Tennent (1860), Rambukwella (2024) notes that these “texts serve a ‘colonial purpose’ in how they compile and summarize knowledge to make the island ‘knowable’ for colonial governance” (p. 95). The notion of looking at Sri Lanka as a singular nation was reiterated in the post-independence political discourse of Sinhala nationalism, which posited it directly against the discourse of Tamil nationalism spearheaded by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Jazeel (2009, 2024) calls this notion of constructing a national Sri Lankan history in line with its island geography “islandness.” He places post-independent Sinhalese nationalism within the milieu of “islandness that has roots in colonial encounter and European vision” (2009, p. 409). Jazeel further argues that this phenomenon altered the politics and history of Sri Lanka forever and played an important role in cultivating the interethnic conflict due to “the ruthless 19th- and early 20th-century British ambition to create and maintain a unified Crown colony” (2024, p. 38). Similarly, Sivasundaram (2013) narrowed the British nation-making of Sri Lanka to *islanding* and partitioning—the island geography of Sri Lanka was considered to cut it off from mainland India, which was under the control of the East India Company while the island was a crown colony.

Apart from tracing its roots to a colonial episteme, Sinhalese nationalism also drew inspiration from notions of colonial tropicality—the tropical tropes of Sinhalese villages in the southern part of the island were exoticized and used to construct an “authentic”

picture of Sinhalese culture that dates back 2500 years. Rambukwella (2018) quotes the following from Gunadasa Amarasekara's 1992 novel, *Inimage Ihalata*, showing how the novelist constructed authenticity to articulate Sinhalese nationalism:

The layout of an ancient Sinhala kingdom came to Piyadasa's mind as he walked along the lake bund in the dusk. Wasn't that layout still well preserved here? On one side the lake bordered by the distant hills. On the other side the large paddy fields fed by the waters of the lake. The blue green of these paddies stretched as far as the eye could see. Houses were located in little islands amidst the paddies. All of this dominated by the massive stupa that rose embracing the sky. (Amarasekara, 1992, as cited in Rambukwella, 2018, p. 102)

This shows how some of the tropes of tropical landscapes, such as paddy fields, lakes, and hills bordering these lakes, are fused with religious and cultural landmarks like the Buddhist stupa to instill a sense of nostalgia for the ancient Sinhala Kingdom. It reveals how geography is utilized to construct a cultural nationalist narrative and how these tropes of tropical landscapes are self-exoticized and thus not limited to colonizers' exoticization of the tropical geography. The colonial episteme that constructed the island as a singular nation influenced the Sinhalese nationalist narrative, which also articulates the same island-ness. Jazeel (2009) notes how this is ingrained in the very idea of the Sri Lankan state, as "Sinhalese nationalism matured to pronounce the island a sacred space in which the Sinhala race has a responsibility to preserve Theravada Buddhism in its purity," and points out that the nomenclature "Sri Lanka," which officially became the name of the state constitutionally, is actually derived from the Sinhala language and means "Venerable/ Holy Lanka" (p. 409).

Colonial tropicality also concerned itself with sexuality. The tropics were considered to be "libidinally eroticized...[as] visions of monstrous sexuality" (McClintock, 1995, as cited in Benitez et al. 2024a, p. 3). Against this rampant tropical vision, colonizers emplaced a binary gender system where white heterosexual males were the model of temperate sexuality and human-ness. Females were the inversion of men, and native sexuality was to be kept in order (Benitez et al. 2024b, p. 4). It is to British colonialism that the legacy of homosexual discrimination is also traced.

On penal fronts, the independent Sri Lanka continued with the same legal framework set up by the British. Basnayake (1973) notes that penal codes in Ceylon "were largely based on the Indian Codes, which in turn were based on English law" (p. 289). The colonial undertone of these codes is evident. For example, in the context of India, John Mills wanted "a modern society based on competitiveness and the protection of individual rights and freedoms," implying a society mirroring British values by replacing

the existing traditional legal systems (Skuy, 1998, pp. 514-515). Han and O'Mahoney (2018) note that the existence of "the Indian penal code made it easier for other jurisdictions to adopt a code" instead of "muddle along without a formal codification effort, that is, to retain the English common law"; further, this led to the reproduction of the contents of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized homosexual practices, in the Ceylonese context (p.13). Currently, the Sri Lankan Penal Code criminalizes homosexual conduct through Sections 365 with respect to "(u)nnatural offences" and 365A concerning "(a)cts of gross indecency between persons" (Carroll & Mendos, 2017, p.137). There have been Supreme Court interventions as recent as 2022-2023 to decriminalize homosexuality in Sri Lanka, and the government at that time agreed that they would decriminalize homosexuality but ruled out the recognition of same-sex marriage (Thambiah, 2023). However, this is yet to be enacted and to come into effect. As of now, homosexuality is still criminalized.

These two factors, present in the narrative of *Funny Boy*, are legacies of colonialism and are still prevalent in Sri Lanka. Through a close reading of the novel, the following two sections attempt to trace an emancipatory Sri Lankan future where these dual intersecting factors are overcome—firstly by seeing how hegemony is subverted and secondly through a critique of the state.

Intersection of Ethnicity and Sexuality: Subverting Hegemony

Sri Lanka's political geography is marked by ethnicity and religion. The majority "Sinhala Buddhists predominate in all parts of the country except the Northern and Eastern Provinces," where the Tamils are in the majority (Perera, 2001, pp. 4-5). Further, Tamil identity is not homogenous—they are divided based on religion and descent. Perera (2001) notes that "ethnicity and religion also have a regional basis" and attributes Tamil militancy to this "strong geographical dimension, which has logically extended to the demand of a separate independent state" (p. 5). This expands upon the notion of island-ness introduced in the previous section. According to Jazeel (2009), there is an imaginative repetition to naturalize the island-ness of Sri Lanka. This is connected to the event of changing the name from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, meaning Venerable Lanka in the Sinhala language. Krishna (1999) notes the following:

Sri Lanka's movement from a peaceful, indeed idyllic Ceylon to a synonym for macabre ethnic violence is the story of a majority community's attempt to fashion a nation in its own image through monopolization of the state and of the consequent emergence of a secessionist ethnonational movement. (p.31)

Despite the narrative of island-ness being a postcolonial and imaginative one, it caused the spatial contestation of the island among Tamils and Sinhalese. Ceylon, in

becoming Sri Lanka, reiterated the notion of island-ness from the Sinhalese perspective as the whole island being theirs—with indifference to its ethnic geography in which Sinhalese lived in the southern and the western parts of the island, and the Tamils lived in the north and east. Jazeel (2024) notes that “(i)t is a geopolitical fact that islandness remains the spatiality cognate with Sri Lankan nationhood. At the same time, islandness was historically a taken-for-granted, yet also heavily contested, geographical imagination in the context of Sri Lanka’s 26-year civil war” (p. 36). Thus, the civil war became a spatial contest between the Sri Lankan state, whose polity was dominated by the post-independence numerical superiority of Sinhalese due to “the inevitable outcome of representative democracy,” and the Tamil secessionists, who disagreed with the Sri Lankan state’s island-ness (Rambukwella, 2024, p. 96).

Rambukwella (2018) points out that Sinhala nationalism was not just a discourse that countered the colonial rule of the island but also the Indian cultural influence on the island (through movements like Hela language). The self-asserted separation from India is very significant since the notion of island-ness in the colonial imagination was first employed to separate the island from the Indian mainland, capitalizing on the distinction between the island’s political status as a crown colony and India being under the rule of the East India Company. The notion of island-ness, complemented by Sinhalese cultural revivalism due to efforts of reformists like Anagarika Dharmapala, along with the precolonial imaginary that is premised on the Sinhalese Buddhist chronicles like *Mahavamsa*² and *Dipavamsa* deemed the Sinhalese as the first settlers of the island which contradicted the views of Tamil nationalist narratives that claimed Tamils as first settlers. Balasingham (1983) stated that the island was “the traditional homeland of two nations—Tamil Eelam and Sri Lanka, two distinct social formations with distinct cultures and languages having their own unique historical past” (p. 5). However, he also asserted the following, countering the Sinhala chronicles:

When the ancestors of the Sinhala people arrived in the island, with their legendary Prince Vijaya from Northern India in the 6th century B. C., Dravidians (Tamils) were living in the island. Though the question of original settlement is obscured by legends and mythologies, modern scholars hold that Tamils were indisputably the earliest settlers. (Balasingham, 1983, p.5)

This, however, did not imply that the Tamil nationalists laid claim to all the island or articulated island-ness. Contrary to Sinhalese nationalist discourse, the Tamil discourse laid claim to the island’s eastern and northern regions, where ethnic Tamils were the majority. This fractured the Sinhalese sense of island-ness and became the

² On the *Mahavamsa* chronicles in relation to queer Sri Lankan fiction and the civil war, see Łukaszyc (2024).

originating point of the conflict. Furthermore, Balasingham (1983) traces the origin of the interethnic conflict back to colonial rule:

The impact of the British imperial domination on the Indigenous Tamil speaking people of the Northern and Eastern province had far reaching effects on the political level. British imperialism imposed a unified administration with centralised institutions establishing a singular state structure which ended the separate existence of the Tamil statehood. This forceful annexation and amalgamation of two separate kingdoms, of two nations of people, disregarding their past historical existence, their socio-cultural distinctions, and their ethnic differences was the root cause of the present Tamil-Sinhala antagonism. (Balasingham, 1983, p. 7)

Despite the interethnic conflict and the civil war being a spatial contest, along with the historical and political factors that mark the island's ethnic geography, in the novel *Funny Boy*, the coexistence of Tamil and Sinhala families is presented. However, this cohabitation of space, set in the urban center of Colombo, is marked by ethnic tensions. Against this background of Sri Lanka's emergent ethnic tensions, the tensions surrounding the heterosexual courting of the interethnic couple acts as a precursor to the novel's central theme that deals with Arjie's divergent sexuality and later homosexual encounter with a boy from the ethnicity that is posited against his own.

If the foundation of war is to create hegemony, in *Funny Boy*, there are traces of utilizing certain geographical spaces to articulate resistance against or subvert hegemony. Selvadurai uses the construction of ethnosexual frontiers and heterotopias to carry this out. For Nagel (2003), ethnicity and sexuality are "strained, but not strange bedfellows," and she defines ethnosexual frontiers as "territories that lie at the intersections of racial, ethnic, or national boundaries" (p. 14). Further, these territories are

erotic locations and exotic destinations that are surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted, but that are constantly penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic Others across ethnic borders. Ethnosexual frontiers are the borderlands on either side of ethnic divides; they skirt the edges of ethnic communities; they constitute symbolic and physical sensual spaces where sexual imaginings and sexual contact occur between members of different racial, ethnic, and national groups. (Nagel, 2003, p. 14)

Another significant point Nagel (2003) touches upon is the connection between ethnic boundary and sexual boundary:

Like ethnic boundaries, sexual boundaries give the appearance of naturalness and timelessness. They seem inborn, unchanging, and stable. As history and cross-cultural research show us, however, like ethnic boundaries, sexual boundaries are socially constructed... (p. 48)

Two ethnosexual frontiers occur in the novel's narrative, and both are schools—classic heterotopic spaces. The first is St. Theresa's Girls' Convent, and the second is Queen Victoria Academy. St. Theresa's Girls' Convent is the venue for drama rehearsals of the play "*The King and I*," in which Arjie participates with his aunt, Radha, and it is here that she meets Anil, a Sinhalese boy. The school enables the aunt and nephew to venture into public spaces that are not strictly policed, unlike private spaces, which preclude intermingling between different ethnicities. The sexual tensions between Radha and Anil are made explicit. For example, one of Radha's friends says, "I think that bee is dying to pollinate your blossom," referring to Anil in the background of a discussion related to singing (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 2).

It is also in this context that the first reference to interethnic tensions appears in the novel. When Ammachi learns that Arjie and Radha are dropped at home by Anil Jayasinghe, Ammachi exclaims, "What did I tell you? She was getting a lift from a Sinhalese. Only a Sinhalese would be impertinent enough to offer an unmarried girl a lift" (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 2). However, Arjie is unable to comprehend the extreme reactions over the fact that Anil is Sinhalese:

The intensity of Ammachi's reaction had shaken me. I wondered why Anil's being Sinhalese upset her so? I was in a Sinhala class at school and my friends were Sinhalese. My parents' best friends were, too. Even our servant was Sinhalese, and, in fact, we spoke with her only in Sinhalese. So what did it matter whether Anil was Sinhalese or not? (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 2)

Nagel (2003) uses the phrase "ethnosexual invaders" to signify persons who "launch sexual assaults across ethnic boundaries, inside alien ethnic territory, seducing, raping, and sexually enslaving ethnic Others as a means of domination and colonization" (p. 14). Ammachi's fear about Radha's bond with Anil Jayasinghe stems from the fact he is Sinhalese; Anil may not have been an ethnosexual invader *per se*, but Ammachi fears that he could be owing to the ethnic tensions between Tamils and

Sinhalese. The overlapping of ethnicity and sexuality is not superficial and is prevalent in spaces or territories that are contested. In Sri Lanka, ethnicities are highly separated geographically, and Tamil and Sinhalese populations of the island predominantly live in geographies that are mutually exclusive. However, certain geographies that lie in-between where people belonging to different ethnicities co-exist. Colombo, the setting of the novel, is one such space—and here, there remain ethnosexual frontiers.

In the novel, the overture to interethnic or interracial romantic and marital relationships occurs in the context of a conversation regarding the play *"The King and I."* When Arjie inquires of his mother about the play's ending, he asks her if the English governess will marry the King of Siam:

"Does she marry the king in the end?" I asked eagerly.
"Marry the king?" Amma repeated. She laughed. "You must be mad."
"Why?" I cried, disappointed that the story didn't end with a marriage.
"Because at that time people didn't marry outside their race."
"And now?" I asked, determined to get a happy ending out of the story.
"If it was now, would they have married?"
Amma looked at me, irritated by my persistence. "I don't know," she said. "Probably not."
"But why not?"
"Because most people marry their own kind," Amma said in a tone that warned me not to ask further questions." (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 2)

This episode acts as a warning to young Arjie not to venture into any interethnic relationships; likewise, the episode of Ammachi confronting Radha due to Anil Jayasinghe acts as a foreshadowing of the events that are to unfold towards the end of the novel concerning Arjie and the boy Shehan, his Sinhala romantic interest.

It is at this point in the narrative that the core of the interethnic tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese are exhumed. It begins with Janaki amplifying Ammachi and mentioning how the past wounds are not yet healed by referring to a certain "body" (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 2). Furthermore, Radha calls Janaki "racist," which causes Arjie to look up the meaning of the word. He is perplexed about the liaison between the terms "racist" and "body" and relies on his father for the answer, who reveals that Ammachi's father—Arjie's great-grandfather—was killed. This makes Arjie question why his great-grandfather was killed, and his father replies, "(b)ecause he was Tamil" (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 2). Curious, Arjie says, "(b)ut you're Tamil and I'm Tamil and nobody's killing us," to which his father responds that the incident happened "twenty years ago, in the fifties, son. At that time, some Sinhalese people killed Tamil people" (Selvadurai, 1994,

Ch. 2). Arjie's father traces the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese to the Sinhala-only Act of 1956.

The second instance of an ethnosexual frontier appears in the text in the form of the Queen Victoria Academy, the school Arjie joins. Being situated in Colombo, it becomes a space open to people belonging to different ethnicities and is not exclusive to a particular ethnic group. Similar to the previous instance, this episode also marks interethnic tensions. For example, Arjie is confronted by some of his Sinhalese classmates because he is Tamil yet has been enrolled in a Sinhala class, which is not the norm at the academy:

"How come you're in a Sinhala class?" Salgado asked me.

"My parents put me in a Sinhala class from grade one 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."

I stared at him. I couldn't very well go down the corridor to 9F. I didn't even speak Tamil. (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 5)

Thus, St. Theresa's Girls' Convent is constructed as an ethnosexual frontier concerning interethnic heterosexual bonds and foregrounds the Queen Victoria Academy, which acts as a homosexual ethnosexual frontier. Shehan and Arjie share a kiss at school, which undermines the hegemonic logic pertaining to ethnicity and sexuality. Further, emplacing this episode with the previously established premise, which situated the Queen Victoria Academy as a symbol of coloniality and interlinked the present penalized stature of same-sex physical acts to coloniality, signifies that the hegemonic logic of coloniality is likewise subverted. Thus, ethnosexual frontiers are employed to subvert not only the hegemonic logic of the society but also coloniality, which implies that it subtly questions the state, since coloniality and the state are in a continuum. As the interethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is premised on who gets to control the contested geographies, ethnicity becomes embedded in the political narratives of nationalism, which seeks the people of a particular ethnicity to be "pure" and uncontaminated by intermingling sexually with the Other.

The conception of the ethnosexual frontier explains how the dominant logic is subverted, but it does not offer any explanation of futurism. In this context, the notion of heterotopia is relevant. The same spaces—St. Theresa's Girls' Convent and the Queen Victoria Academy—constructed as ethnosexual frontiers also function as heterotopias, which offer an overview of the future in the alternative social ordering of the present, even though these spaces are also heavily policed. Heterotopia primarily

originates from the works of Foucault (1986, 1998). Foucault (1986) distinguishes between heterotopia and utopia, which he calls “unreal space” (p. 24). He lists four defining heterotopic principles: first, heterotopia occurs across cultures; second, the signification of heterotopia can change in accordance with the society in which it is present, and it is also synchronic; third, several heterotopic spaces can exist within a real place even if those are incompatible with each other; fourth, heterotopias are linked to time (Foucault, 1986, pp. 24-26). Following Foucault, Hetherington (2002) defines heterotopias as “spaces in which an alternative social ordering is performed. These are spaces in which a new way of ordering emerges that stands in contrast to the taken-for-granted mundane idea of social order that exists within society” (p. 40). In turn, Faubion (2008) refers to heterotopias as “realized utopias” (p. 31). Integrating this last articulation with the fourth principle outlined by Foucault (1986) makes the conception of heterotopia compatible with futurism.

In the case of the narrative set at St. Theresa’s Girls’ Convent in *Funny Boy*, the heterotopic function of constituting an alternate social ordering is prevalent. The school becomes a place where Sinhalese and Tamils can get along and be together by suspending the hegemonic logic that would preclude such a scenario. The Queen Victoria Academy extends the alternative social order further. The same-sex intimacy between Tamil and Sinhalese boys occurs there, which subverts the ethnosexual hegemonic logic and provides space to imagine a future where ethnic differences are overcome, and sexuality is no longer policed. However, the remaining question is how this future could be achieved, and the following section speculates on that possibility.

Towards a Future: Critique of the State

Previous sections of this paper established the premise that the novel *Funny Boy* has two significant tropes alluding to the condition of coloniality: interethnic disquiet, and homosexual unease, and recognized how hegemonic logic is resisted and subverted. The previous sections also laid down the possibilities of engendering a future, which will be further expanded in this section.

For Frantz Fanon (1963/2004), decolonization is an event. It implies that the act of national liberation requires a political and epistemic break. However, the phenomenon of coloniality lingers over liberated nation-states, and this condition of coloniality persisting in post-independence Sri Lanka reiterates the fact that post-colonialism is not an event as the institutions of colonial rule continue to influence politics and society in the present.

This leads to situating not just the society and state in the premise of an “imperial-colonial” dialectic, but likewise its literary works. Ashcroft et al. (1989/2002) note, while referring to the works of postcolonial theorists like Fanon and Memmi, that “the act of

writing texts of any kind in post-colonial areas is subject to the political, imaginative, and social control involved in the relationship between colonizer and colonized” (p. 28). Further, they invoke Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Raymond Williams to compare two approaches where the former stressed regaining pre-colonial cultural and political organizations after political independence, and the latter noted that syncretism was an organic feature of postcolonial societies (pp. 28-29). This further opens the scope of this investigation to examining two significant postcolonial conceptions: the concept of the empire writing back reiterating the “center-periphery” binary, and Nietzschean resentment. These two conceptions are interlinked. Mwangi (2010) explores this in the context of Africa to arrive at the premise that African fiction before 1980 belonged to the genre of “writing back to the empire,” which housed the notion of “resentiment,” while the works after that era were “writing to self,” in which “resentiment” was absent. However, this may or may not be compatible with the larger context of postcolonial Sri Lankan fiction and with *Funny Boy* in particular.

In investigating *Funny Boy*, it is evident that Selvadurai wrote back to the empire, questioning several of its hegemonic aftermaths, and subtly housing the act of resentment within the novel. For example, the fifth chapter of *Funny Boy* was titled “The Best School of All,” and the school's name is Queen Victoria Academy, which explicitly displays the colonial legacy and acts as a symbol of empire. In the opening of the chapter, the protagonist's brother, Diggy, reveals that Arjie is being transferred to Victoria Academy as their father is worried about him, although he does not disclose why. The reason is hinted at when Diggy tells Arjie, “(o)nce you come to The Queen Victoria Academy you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other boys will look down on you” (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 5). This is in continuum with Arjie's mother pestering him to play cricket as he is “a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys” and not the game of “bride-bride” with girls and cross-dress in a “free play of fantasy” (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 1). The decision to transfer Arjie to the Queen Victoria Academy houses the hopes of his parents to make him a man, in other words, to cleanse him of divergent sexual behaviors. This reiterates Queen Victoria Academy as a symbolic colonial space and a space that polices sexuality, thus confirming the concomitance of sexuality regulation and colonial empire. When Arjie develops a homo-romantic relationship with Shehan, a Sinhalese boy, it implies an act of writing back to empire and offers an act of resistance against the meanings constituted under the aegis of colonialism, or, as Anver articulates it, to be “engaged in resisting the totalising, hegemonic narrative of the erstwhile centre” (2019, p.1). As established in the previous section, the school is constructed as a heterotopia, momentarily suspending oppressive logic.

At this juncture, it is important to conceive what political trajectory would align with the imaginative future of a Sri Lankan state that is devoid of these ethnic and sexual

prejudices. In invoking the question of the political future of Sri Lanka, there persist problems with returning to the pre-colonial political organization of the island. Firstly, returning to pre-colonial conditions would not create a unified state, but rather, a fractured one, as the island was divided politically in terms of ethnic geography. Secondly, this would not account for populations that are descendants of European colonial rulers and the members of Indigenous ethnicities who converted to different sects of Christianity under different colonial regimes, and it could render these populations as peripheral political entities similar to “inexistent” or “*homo sacer*” (Agamben, 1998; Badiou, 2009/2011).

This makes the case of Sri Lanka *sui generis* in the context of the “decolonial” question but establishes the syncretical postcolonial overview of Williams (1989) as relevant. However, the underlying problem of the postcolonial state stemming from a colonial legacy would require re-signifying the political nature of the new Sri Lankan state so that the old logic of the postcolonial state transfixed under the spell of coloniality would no longer be compatible. Coupled with this is that the Sri Lankan state, in its present stature, is foundationalist in nature. Sri Lanka is constructed as a Sinhala Buddhist state, and its constitution asserts this ethno-theological foundationalist polity, which does not foster unity but rather aggravates the particularistic differences in terms of post-independence ethnicity and religion (Schonthal, 2016; Wijeyeratne, 2013). This foundationalist disposition of the Sri Lankan state should also be addressed in conjunction with the colonial legacy in re-signifying the Sri Lankan state.

Given that the Sri Lankan state is based on a foundationalist premise, it necessitates overcoming the existent state to establish an egalitarian nation-state. In this regard, two trajectories are possible: anti-foundational or post-foundational. The post-foundational trajectory is explored here as the most judicious, as it enables the cessation of the present foundationalist state while allowing for the historical territories upon which it is constituted to remain intact.

In speculating a Sri Lankan political future, two approaches are possible, and both are compatible with the post-foundational trajectory—one approach refers to the political apparatus within the existing state, and the other moves beyond the state. Both Alain Badiou and Alex Quicho offer theorization in this regard. Alex Quicho (2022) refers to the former as reproductive futurism and the latter, which is its antithesis, as radical futurism. The French philosopher Alain Badiou, in his critique of state-based politics, offers the additive and subtractive theory of politics, which parallels Quicho’s reproductive futurism and radical futurism, respectively.

According to Paquette (2020), an additive conception of politics “can take the form of an already existing state’s recognition of a particular group identity or culture” and “it

maintains the power of the state...and extends its power to include more/other individuals” (p. 21). Alternatively, the subtractive theory of politics is “distinct from the logic or law of the state and is not concerned with expanding state power” (p. 21). The additive theory poses a serious question about the compatibility of this concept in the context of the incumbent Sri Lankan state (a unitary parliamentary democracy) while addressing issues of overcoming biases and prejudices. The democratic system in Sri Lanka fosters identity-centricism, which brands the ethnic other as the enemy. The divide was perforated due to the civil war, and the lack of reconciliation efforts by the state post-civil war has not overcome the ethnic divide of the people and erased the distrust Tamils have for Sinhalese and vice versa. This leaves the alternative, subtractive theory of politics, as more compatible with the Sri Lankan political condition in the quest to overcome ethnic and sexual prejudices inherent in the state in order to create an emancipatory future.

Badiou’s subtractive theory of politics is premised on the amalgamation of interrelated conceptions, including the notion of truth, indifference to differences, and event. Badiou (1997/2003) sees an intrinsic connection between politics and truth, and this signifies “subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class” (p. 5). For Badiou (2006/2009), truth occurs in four domains—politics, love, art, and science. Further, the notion of truth is interlinked with indifference to differences. Badiou (1998/2001) states, “(o)nly a truth is, as such, indifference to differences. This is something we have always known, even if sophists of every age have always attempted to obscure its certainty: a truth is the same for all” (p. 27). He views identitarian politics based on differences or identities as an impediment to achieving universal emancipation. The notion of truth is central as it is universal and is not relativist—the context of Badiou’s philosophical position against postmodernity, which relies on relativism and particularism, is significant here since truth is premised on indifference to differences. As Menon (2015) states, “Embracing the universal does not ask for the sacrifice of the particular but only an indifference to it” (p. 13). These domains, coupled with what Badiou calls “event,” have the potential to create the person as a subject (rather than remaining a mere body).

These Badiouian conceptions amalgamate to inform universal emancipation, which becomes essential to the given scenario of overcoming Sri Lanka’s state-mandated ethnic and sexual prejudices. The interethnic conflict, the state’s response to it, and the continuation of the conservative penal code that criminalizes non-heterosexual behaviors are, by default, built upon the assumption that particularistic notions of ethnicity and sexuality are in line with the state and society. Despite these prejudices having a common genesis in colonial rule and the failure of the state to address it in the post-independent era, the possibility of engendering common resistance movements against these is not possible due to the primacy of their particularistic

identity in terms of sexuality or ethnicity being in the forefront. Such resistance movements premised on particularities become identitarian and would lead to counter-movements, especially in a democracy, as Badiou warns (1997/2003, pp. 12-13). As Paquette notes, “identity is organized by the logic of the state” (2020, p. 31). Thus, the central theme of the Badiouian subtractive politics is to subtract the state from politics. This implies that at the core of Badiouian emancipatory politics is the deconstruction of the state.

This deconstruction also means overcoming the state’s existing logic. The transcendental logic of the Sri Lankan state is an extension of coloniality and is the root cause of interethnic discontent and the criminalization of homosexual practices. So, overcoming the state means overcoming this transcendental logic. In the previous sections of this paper, this is referred to using the phrase “hegemonic logic” since it is imposed through coercion and force.

Taking this into account, in the previous sections of this paper, the conceptions of ethnosexual frontiers and heterotopia have shown how this logic could be countered and subverted. However, these have their limitations—heterotopias are shown in the novel as spaces where futurism has the potential to be engendered merely as an “other space” that exists within the realm of the state and which has suspended the transcendental logic only briefly. These are the acts of resistance that are momentarily articulated but cannot be sustained long-term. Nevertheless, they have identified the underlying problems that persist in society and the state, which need to be overcome to give rise to the future. For example, *Funny Boy* ends with Arjie leaving for Canada. Though the narrative established Arjie’s relationship with Shehan at the school as an act of resisting hegemonic logic and their acts transpose the school into a heterotopia by subverting that logic, the narrative that leads to Arjie quitting the school and leaving for Canada reiterates that these acts of resistance are momentary. It also reinstates the hegemonic logic. To overcome this, it is necessary to engender a politics that transcends the existing state and logic.

In reading *Funny Boy* through the philosophy of Badiou, the same-sex physical intimacy between Arjie and Shehan opens several new trajectories of politics. Their physical intimacy signifies that they are not only suspending the transcendental hegemonic logic that prohibits the homosexual act but also articulating the notion of “indifference to differences,” which is a quintessential aspect of Badiou’s anti-state politics. The act is a Badiouian event. Paquette (2020) summarizes what is meant by Badiouian event as follows:

For Badiou an event is of particular importance for political emancipation because it provides the condition necessary to attend to

the tension between the order or law of the state and what, or who, this order excludes—that is, the inexistent. (p. 23)

Further, Paquette notes:

An event is what exceeds the order or law of the state. As a result, given that events exist outside the law and the language of the state, events are initially unintelligible and illegal. However, it is this quality of not belonging to the law of the state that is necessary for the event to produce the conditions through which the inexistent can become apparent. The event exceeds the logic of the world (i.e., it is not produced out of a world) and instead is manifest as a radical break from the state. Furthermore, an event can reveal the way in which a state is ordered. Such a form of revealing can make it possible to reevaluate the foundations guiding that world or state. (2020, p. 23)

To contextualize this, Arjie and Shehan—owing to their engagement in homosexual acts—are the excluded ones, the inexistent. Additionally, this involves boys from two ethnicities that are at war with each other. These two aspects imply that the very act exceeds the order of the state. Their acts are illegal as they are non-heterosexual; they are furthermore unacceptable for either ethnicity, as they are engaging in a romantic sexual act with a person from another ethnic group. Thus, this event articulates the possibility of the coexistence of ethnicities with their particularistic ethnic identities suspended—in other words, indifference to differences—and the subjects being free to exercise their sexuality. Their first act of intimacy at the Queen Victoria Academy is described in Arjie's words:

He laughed out loud and grabbed hold of me, spinning me around with him. Then he did a most unexpected thing. Quickly, before I was aware of what was happening, he kissed me on the lips. My mouth must have opened in surprise, because I felt his tongue against mine for a brief instant. Then it was over. (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 5)

Badiou (1998/2005) outlined the concept of the event, which is also linked to the process of subjectivation and truth. As mentioned above, particularistic identity is suspended at the time of their act, and this is where the notion of truth comes in—premised on the notion of indifference to differences. The very act of a Tamil boy establishing a romantic or sexual relationship with a Sinhala boy and vice versa, especially at the time when the interethnic conflict was burgeoning, implies that they are indifferent to the differences. This also implies the manifestation of truth, which is otherwise obscured by particularistic biases. Had particularistic bias, informed by the

state and society to look at the ethnic other as a rival, been in effect, the very act of establishing an interethnic relationship would not have occurred.³ Arjie and Shehan articulate their fidelity to the event to the very end. In the closing chapter titled “Riot Journal: An Epilogue,” their fidelity is established as Arjie meets Shehan before the former’s departure to Canada, and they make love (Selvadurai, 1994, Ch. 6). For Badiou, fidelity to the event is a vital part of the process of subject-making. Before the event, the persons involved do not qualify as subjects and are simply bodies. The event and their fidelity to it transform them from non-political bodies into political or revolutionary subjects (Badiou, 1998/2005).

Further, this literary narrative of physical intimacy also highlights the notion of love, which is one of the four domains where truth manifests. In other words, love is a domain in which an event occurs. Thus, Badiou and Truong (2009/2012) identify love as synonymous with truth procedure. In turn, Barclay (2010), in reading Badiou, notes that this is “a truth destined for everyone and not just for some new sub-set of humanity,” which means that an event is a “universal phenomenon” (p. 174).

This reading of the Badiouian event in the novel concerning Sri Lankan futurity offers the following speculations. Firstly, the event does not consider particularistic notions regarding ethnicity and sexuality, which also reconfigures the meaning of nationalism—the existing Tamil and Sinhala ethno-nationalisms are rendered meaningless. Secondly, the futurism generated based on this premise guarantees a state devoid of such particularistic notions; thus, particular sexual practices would not be penalized. The event makes the two persisting and pressing problems in Sri Lanka, as explored in the narrative *Funny Boy*, converge together, similar to how they converged with respect to their cause having roots in colonial history. Thirdly, post-event, the Sri Lankan state is transmuted into a state where citizens no longer belong to any particularistic identitarian categories in terms of ethnicity or sexual orientation. The subjects of this transmuted state are universal. These subjects are also singular since particularities are disposed of (Badiou, 2023, pp. 28-29).

Conclusion

In a post-event futurity, the island-ness geography of the Sri Lankan state shall no longer cater to geographical contestations, but rather, a sense of universal singularity where the subjects feel they belong to the nation and the island. This recreates the colonial utopic imagination of the Sri Lankan landscape as a paradise in terms of its physical tropical geography in the realm of governance, which the notion of tropicality—in its colonial form—viewed as impossible for a tropical state to achieve.

³ This could raise a question as to whether the bond that sprouted between Radha and Anil could be labeled an event. However, it does not qualify as an event as there is no sense of fidelity to the event.

Thus, tropicality, in its older imaginary as a product of a colonial episteme, is undermined by formulating a post-evental state where the equality of its citizens is the foundational principle—which is possible due to the subtractive politics with the motive of achieving universal emancipation. Also, through a Badiouian intervention, the problems persisting in the Sri Lankan state—interethnic conflict and criminalization of homosexual acts—which have roots in colonial history are overcome.

The concept of universal emancipation is much debated philosophically. With the advent of poststructuralism and postmodernism, emancipatory politics became limited to particularistic renderings, and “universal” is deconstructed to signify anything but the universal. However, Alain Badiou reinforces the concept of the universal back into emancipatory politics. Through a reading of *Funny Boy*, this paper offers a future that negates the drawbacks of the present, which by default is an extension of the past, by employing Badiou’s political philosophy.

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Guhan Priyadharshan P. is a doctoral research scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India. He conducts research in a broad interdisciplinary area that intertwines Continental Philosophy, Critical Theory, and Postcolonial Studies. He is also a Lecturer at the Department of English, Government Polytechnic College, Coimbatore, India.