

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12th Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue - 5 (October 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Cultural Elements in *Funny Boy* and *Kari*

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Article History: Submitted-30/09/2021, Revised-19/10/2021, Accepted-20/10/2021, Published-31/10/2021.

Abstract:

Culture studies started with the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in Britain with the work of scholars from varied disciplines. Culture, the term comes from the idea of 'cultivation' implying it is not natural. It is an umbrella term for a collection of knowledge, experience, hierarchies, religion thereby practically including everything. Raymond William and other Marxist thinkers like E.P. Thompson are credited for the roots of cultural studies who focused on micropolitical analysis rather than macropolitical issues. Cultural studies bridged the gap between theory and material culture, eliminated the distinction between high and low (mass/ popular) culture. It attempts to find counter-hegemonic cultures, the subalterns, focusing on 'subcultures' like punk culture, working culture, gay/lesbian culture which show resistance through different ways. Since culture studies cover a wide area, it shows association with postcolonialism, gender, mythology, identity etc. This paper intends to study the cultural elements in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and Amruta Patil's *Kari*.

Keywords: cultural studies, gay culture, *Funny Boy*, lesbian culture, *Kari*.

Introduction

Cultural studies started gaining popularity around 1970 and have presently become a very vibrant and developing field. Culture studies includes two distinct lines of approach. Firstly, it formed a relation between prevailing social, material, historical and ideological conditions of the particular time and works of literature. Thus, several views were added in each generation while studying any text, hence widening the study. So now Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could be read according to 'material conditions' (Marxist approach) as well as 'Oedipus complex' (Freudian ideology). Secondly, culture studies extended the study of literature

including pamphlets, non-written documents, various cultural phenomena apart from traditional great/elitist works. Stuart Hall gave two paradigms for cultural studies - Culturalist and Structuralist. Cultural study is interdisciplinary, dynamic and leads to civilization. Film studies, modernity, nationality, identity, politics of culture, popular and subculture and several others, form a part of it. It shows the resistance of the subculture through their different styles of representation of dress, speech, social behaviour, especially gay/lesbian culture.

Subculture is any social group with its own system of behaviour, lifestyle and ideologies. There are many subcultures within a postmodern society. However, it is most commonly used for deviant and youth culture which is opposed to the dominant culture, which resists and provide solutions. This gives a sense of identity to its members but also implies the existence of single dominant culture which the subculture tries to fight against.

Queer Theory is one of the vibrant and visible sectors of study which cultural study has included in itself and is emerging in the field of education. Italian-American feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis coined the term 'queer theory' in 1990 and said "The representation of gender is its construction." Queer theorists do not consider sexuality as a natural, fixed, fundamental identity rather as a fluid, plural, continually negotiated and broad social construct. Queer theory is the lens used to explore and challenge social constructs of creating sex-based binaries, works to actively critique heteronormativity and protest against hierarchies and social inequalities. (Hidalgo and Barber). Early theorists include Foucault and Butler among many others. Thus, the study of Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, portraying a gay protagonist and Patil's *Kari*, depicting a lesbian can be analysed through queer theory. It leads to resistance of dominant ideologies by subculture in the form of Gay culture and Lesbian culture. Postcolonial critical literacy shows that ideologies of sexuality and gender are constructed, defining heteronormativity, even after the end of colonial rule. Postcolonial literature includes the social, political and cultural effects during and after the historic end of colonial rule written by the colonized nation.

Funny Boy

Funny Boy by Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan, Canadian award-winning gay writer depicts turmoil within him due to his sexual awakening in the backdrop of ethnic conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka (1983) which can be interpreted as a metaphor. Violence and riot in the larger discourse represent the sexual and patriarchal intolerance within his Tamil family. Though he had a forced migration and writing as a queer diasporic he feels rootlessness

but he has accepted his queer identity and subverted his ‘otherness’ in Canada. Problems of homosexuality in this heterosexual normative society are very clear. The title ‘Funny boy’ itself bombards the narrator with violence, having sexual, insulting and political connotations at the same time. The story is from the perspective of a seven-year-old Arjie, a Tamil from an affluent family and is divided into six chapters- Pigs Can’t fly, Radha Aunty, See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Small choices, The Best School of All, Riot Journal: An Epilogue.

Protagonist Arjie loved to play the ‘bride-ride’ game, getting decked up, acting as a bride and being part of the girl’s side. The binary between boys and girls for playing was decided by territory and leadership. Detailing of dressing for bride shows the imagination and fantasy world of children and also reflect Arjie’s differences. The word ‘homosexual’ is nowhere used instead ‘funny’ and certain ‘tendencies’ are used in the text which is derogatory and creates humiliation. Language dominates textual discourse and the context and the manner it is used gives it a meaning. The first chapter itself shows his exile from the games and interests he had. On one of the spend-the-days at their grandparent’s house, a new entrant Kanthi Aunty and her daughter Tanuja from abroad ruined their fancy and imagination. Arjie gets exposed in his bridal apparel and became a subject of mirth. Uncle Cyril says to Arjie’s father “Ey, Chelva, ... looks like you have a funny one here.” (Selvadurai 14) Even though he did not understand what the word funny means, realizes its negative connotation, his differences, sensing the changed behaviour of his parents. Mother distanced herself, playing with jewellery and cosmetics was denied to him and was asked to play with boys. “I knew then that something changed. But how, I didn’t altogether know.” (Selvadurai 39)

These events tell of the mystery of his sexual orientation. His differences made him alienated, lonely and othered as he was homosexual, counter-hegemony of heterosexual normativity. Such a study was made possible by cultural studies. Coming of Radha Aunty from America brought a friend in disguise for Arjie. She pampered, fulfilling his girly desires because it wasn’t taboo to her and also involved him in a stage play ‘The King and I’. Aunty Doris remarks on seeing Arjie “What a lovely boy, ... Should have been a girl with those eyelashes.” (Selvadurai 55) Aunty Doris’s comment focuses on the physical attributes of homosexuals. He also understands the concept of ethnicity and the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict through the friendship between Radha Aunty and Anil. In another instance, on seeing Jegan, his homosexual tendencies surface. Arjie admires “how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers.”

Since Appa, Arjie's father was disturbed because of his heteropatriarchal and heteronormative behaviour and worried that he may "turn out funny like that Rankotwera boy ... the laughing-stock of Colombo, it'll be your fault." (Selvadurai 14) He decides to send him to Victoria Academy, a school which he hoped would force him to become a 'manly'. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise for Arjie since he met Shehan who was one of his kind. Though everyone disliked Shehan he strikes a friendship with him. Arjie began to comprehend his sexuality after being kissed by Shehan and later had sexual encounters too and realized his sexual orientation. This incident is also an example of the elimination of racial discrimination by the marginalised. He subverts the established hierarchy by taking help from Shehan (Sinhalese) in a Sinhala-dominated school. He also understands, his differences and alienation from his family. Shehan had invoked his gay personality which Appa feared from the very beginning as certain 'tendencies', which he referred to as 'funny'. Thus, Victoria Academy, a 'colonial space' instead of suppressing his 'tendencies' became a queer homosexual space. According to some critics, there exists complex relationships between queerness, homosexuality, ethnicity, and postcoloniality in the novel.

Riots followed, grandparents were killed, house ransacked and Arjie was forced to move to Canada with his family, where he got the freedom and acceptance to live openly with his own identity (homosexual). The novel presents a vivid picture of family, teachers, love (homosexual and heterosexual both) which are universal issues. Sex being a biological construct and gender being a social construct is ingrained in our society to the level where we cannot think beyond established binaries. The acceptance of gays or lesbians for that matter finds no space. As seen in *Funny Boy*, Arjie feels suffocated and outcast battling dual oppression in a heteronormative society, facing the patriarchal ire to defend his queer identity.

His parents are equally disturbed and put all their efforts to make him 'manly'. Others make him a subject of mirth and laughter. Radha Aunty is the only person who understands him and support him in his endeavours. But in spite of the oppressive air of rigidity of the adults, he comes to terms with his sexuality and finds natural expression. Even though the government has made several rules and regulation, there is still a long way to go because only a liminal space for transgenders and queer identities have been provided so far. Unfortunately, Arjie becomes othered in his home too, showing his vulnerability but finally comes to terms with his identity in Canada. Throughout the novel, Arjie's queerness appears as an attribute

suggested by the term “funny” in the title. Traditional norms of heteronormativity are subdued and subverted by subculture and can be called a critique of the social discourses that target sexualities, genders and ethnicities in Sri Lanka. In this “Novel in Six Stories,” each chapter begins with what Freud calls “the return of the repressed” (Freud 154), and ends with a compromise, or further repression. *Funny Boy* is a coming-of-age novel about growing up and coming to terms with the sexual orientation of a gay protagonist amidst ethnic conflicts. Since it is a flashback from his childhood experience and presently Selvadurai lives openly as a gay, it is a sort of protest against the mainstream bringing marginalized subculture to the fore. The text sails through cultural conflicts and pleads for inclusiveness. Arjie, gives in to his callings and realizes his difference even in Sri Lanka in spite of societal pressure and openly establishes himself as gay in Canada. Bell asserts, “*Funny Boy* should not be seen as a failure of traditional Bildung philosophy but, rather, an opening for and insistence upon a more pluralist ethos” (273).

Kari

Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008) is the first Indian graphic novel in English by a woman influenced by multiple media. This intertextual narrative is shown from the lens of an unusual protagonist, who is a queer woman in contrast to the typical feminine models commonly seen. Amruta has used multiple media such as art styles from across cultures and many literary and graphic texts. Cultural studies brought to the fore lesbian culture which was ignored, subdued and marginalized till now. The story starts with the failed attempt of double suicide of two lesbian partners- Kari and Ruth. Being a graphic novel, it vividly captures the reclusive, alienated moods and inner turmoil of the protagonist as well as other characters, shown through her perspective, set against the heterosexual metropolitan city. Kari’s unusual gaze generates love, affection, curiosity and inclusiveness. There are several chapters in the text which shows the episodes in Kari’s life from suicide attempt in the beginning to her decision to continue living and accepting her identity- The Double Suicide, FairyTale Hair, Crystal palace, The Visitations, Angel on the Cornice, The Snow Globe, The Ark, Smokescreen, Secret Lives of Fruit, The Vigil, Playing, Love Song Fish, The Umbilical, Ganesh Country, The Boatman, The award Ceremony and The Exit Route It is a canonical graphic novel engaging the othered section of society and at the same time celebrating ambiguity, exploration and fluidity. Since it is mostly the internal world of Kari that shows the external reality, it can be said that ‘stream of consciousness’ technique has been utilized. The plot accounts protagonist’s everyday life on the repercussion of a ‘slipshod surgical procedure’ (Patil 3). Ruth saved by a safety net leaves

the city entering into a larger discourse and Kari saved by sewer starts her journey of self-exploration in this dominating, discriminatory urban society. Unlike other lesbian depictions, Patil unfolds Kari both in private and public spaces of the city. Many lived realities are portrayed at the same time so that Kari's love affair or her gender is not the only issue and it has global relevance. Nothing is glamourized here not even the nude pictures of Kari and Ruth, which depict realism.

Kari has come to live in a big city, Bombay and works in an advertising agency. Billo, Delna, their boyfriends and Kari lived in a shared space. In spite of the failed suicide attempt and loss of her lover she still has to go for her work. Since "work, ... is unaffected by the waxing and waning of personal moons." (Patil 10) She had to prepare an advertisement for Fairytale Hair which she finally succeeded in, after 'thirty-sixth rewrite'. Lazarus, her boss asks her to bring in sex and glamour which was an irony indeed. The ugly picture of the corporate world and working culture is also brought to the fore. Irrespective of the product being sold, women and their bodies are always used as models and objectified. Even Kari's workplace shows scantily dressed models which is a common occurrence in almost every advertisement industry with popular media frequently portraying women as 'rumpled sirens', emphasizing their sex appeal (Patil 107). Since we are looking from Kari's gaze it appears absurd.

Thus, it is a multi-layered text, which talks of various realities but doesn't glamorize anything. Pictures are of different proportions. Coloured panels occur only to show epiphanic moments and greyscale is used for the ordinary, dull and gloomy. Her house named Crystal palace, the advertisement she creates, her moments with Ruth and few others are shown as coloured pages. Kari's world is populated mostly by women, and they are viewed through the lens of the protagonist's love, affection and keen observation. Her imaginary house only has twelve dancing princesses, depicting the absence of a man. Even the advertisement she creates shows that the girl never reaches the fox (symbolising man). So, Kari's ideal world is only of women or perhaps an egalitarian and inclusive place. Kari can also be a vision that can be observed from many angles.

Categorizations are reflected at several points. "Eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman" advised Zap, one of her roommate's boyfriend. (Patil 81). Later in the chapter 'Love Song', when Kari refuses Lazarus romantic interest he says "Are you, like, a proper lesbian?" (Patil 79). Patil shows resistance by Kari's reply, "I'd say armchair straight,

armchair gay, active loner.” (Patil 79). In the previous chapter in Angel’s house ‘Secret lives of fruit’, a sensual image of consuming fruit is somewhat similar to the sensual description of the word ‘lesbian’. The panels corresponding to this description are just as sensual and peach is a metaphor resembling a woman’s bottom. But in totality, the novel is a depiction of realism with no glamourization even in the nude pictures of Ruth and Kari.

The idea of home as a safe haven has also been subverted here. She has left her parental home, an unnamed town at the seaside is nostalgically remembered—Kari keeps it as “an altar in my heart” (Patil 84). She had come to the ‘city’, leaving behind her home, and was living in a shared accommodation along with four other people, and the other place she visited was her workplace, which was equally repulsive. Eventually, the idea of home was claustrophobic and suffocating to her, thus subverting the normative. Her mother was the only person who always wanted to talk with her and gave her attention otherwise she feels lonely, alienated disoriented and misfit. Though she misses her parents initially, their visit appears like apparitions from a faraway world, as seen in the chapter ‘The Visitations’. (Patil 27) This makes it clear that the protagonist has now somewhat adjusted to her new surrounding and left her past behind.

Kari is openly telling about watching the lesbian Canadian singer k. d. lang on TV and she is also shown reading Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*, a novel in which the author presents her readers with “a counter-historical framework that naturalizes lesbian desire”. (Roessner 105). Everything about her identity appears very obvious and natural. Kari’s humane character is also shown in her friendly relation with ailing Angel whom she cares for and regularly visits. Depiction of Angel, a cancer patient, as ‘actively dying person’ (Patil 36) has magical and realistic form. Her illness and death are equally real and original.

In fact, several layers of realities are shown, personal reality (loss of someone close), professional reality (troublesome, monotonous to work in an ad agency) and city reality (includes natural problems - pollution, waterlogging). Her flatmates of Crystal Palace, Angel, Lazarus, Kusumbai and her neighbour form the chorus to her song as she explores and navigates as an ‘active loner’ (Patil 79), the dark heart of ‘Smog City.’ The recurrent image of stench, sewer, waterlogging, polluted air, fluidity and navigation serves as a metaphor for exploring the unconscious, “the city’s lower intestine”. (Patil 41) The turmoil in Kari’s mind resembles the overflowing roads and sewers. She imagines the blurring of divisions too between heterosexuality and homosexuality just like the roads and sewers appeared as one. And she becomes a boatman who is ready to struggle for establishing her identity.

The text while exploring urban migration also shows that the city gradually provides them personal as well social space in the cosmopolitan arena of music, literature, philosophy or film and simultaneously provides anonymity in the larger discourse. Kari in the end attends her award ceremony with a ‘2 mm buzz cut’ hairstyle specific to boys. She declares, “I feel no bird urge. I want to step back, not step off.” (Patil 115) and decides not to give up her life for anyone anymore, thus accepting and celebrating her identity. Protesting and demanding inclusiveness to ‘othered’ subculture, she transcends the boundary of traditional norms of heteronormative patriarchal culture ready to face the world with established identity and declare herself as a ‘boatman.’

Conclusion

Since cultural studies have expanded and extended the purview of literature, the various small issues and petite narratives are being studied forming different subcultures within the postmodern society. Each of them tries to make its presence felt, protesting for inclusion and acceptance as human beings with a difference. Queer theory, postcolonial critical literacy has been utilized in the analysis of the texts to explore the cultural elements. *Funny Boy* shows the trajectory of a gay protagonist from his hidden identity during his childhood in Sri Lanka to his openly established gay identity in Canada. Larger ethnic conflicts are depicted through the turmoil of his unaccepted world. Moreover, the language dominates textual discourse and the word ‘funny’ through its usage and context convey negative connotations and derogatory intentions. While *Kari* depicts, a lesbian protagonist, who attempted suicide, struggles and fights and eventually accepts and celebrates her lesbian identity. Detailing of the lives of two marginalized, othered, subdued characters and generating global impact by resisting and protesting against dominant hegemony was made possible by Culture studies. Knowing, becoming acquainted and understanding our society is the first step towards egalitarianism.

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