

An extraordinarily powerful, deeply moving novel
AMITRA GHOSH

Shyam Selvadurai
Funny Boy

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY NEEL MUKHERJEE

“Funny Boy” by Shyam Selvadurai

3rd Sem: Popular Literature: Group C

First Lecture



Outline of the Lecture.

- 1. What is Popular Literature?
- 2. Biography
- 3. Plot, Symbols and Themes
- 4. Characters
- 5. Ethnic Identity and the Conflict
- 6. Questions of “Other” and the myth of Queerness



What is Popular Literature?

- In the book, **Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field**, Gelder has made an attempt to define the field of popular fiction. Perceiving the difficulty in defining popular fiction, Gelder notes, “The field of popular fiction is so immense that even those commentators who try to account for the whole of it inevitably reveal only the tip of the iceberg.”



More about Popular Literature:

“Popular literature includes those writings intended for the masses and those that find favour with large audiences. It can be distinguished from artistic literature in that it is designed primarily to entertain” (Encyclopaedia Britannica online).

Popular literature is the literature which is written for a wide range of people. It includes any form of literature, such as, poetry, play or novel, written with the sense of popularity.

Victor Neuburg examines in the book, **Popular Literature: A History and Guide (1977)**, that “popular literature can be defined as what the unsophisticated reader has chosen for pleasure. Such a reader may, of course, come from any class in society, although, the primary appeal of popular literature has been to the poor- and by the eighteenth century also to the children. Generally this literature has comprised non-establishment, non-official publications, but it has also included the religious tracts which one group in society thought that another group ought to read for its own good- and these were distributed in extremely large numbers” (12-13)



What is the difference between a canonical text and a “popular” fiction?

- In the book *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction (1990)*, **Thomas J. Roberts** has distinguished ‘popular fiction’ from ‘learned fiction’. He views learned fiction as ‘canonical’ and ‘serious’ which is “written for its own small, highly educated readership” .
- Roberts notes that this type of fiction is studied in the classroom and needs to pay serious attention for the understanding.
- On the other hand, he views popular fiction as ‘plain fiction’ which “does not ask to be read more than once: it certainly does not expect to be studied.”



Ken Gelder has observed that popular fiction can be distinguished from literary fiction using some of the unique features.

He has analysed popular fiction in the context of ‘the field of cultural production’.

He makes the distinction between popular fiction and literary fiction on the basis of the distinguishing features of ‘low cultural production’ and ‘high cultural production’ respectively.

The features of high and low cultural productions proposed by Pierre Bourdieu have been used by Gelder for defining popular fiction in contrast with literary fiction.

Gelder uses the word ‘Literature’ instead of literary fiction for all the literature except ‘popular fiction’. He defines popular fiction as something different from the rest of literature



Why are they Popular?

- Industrial value
- Cultural Value
- Popularity
- Source of Entertainment
- As Bestseller
- As 'Genre Fiction



Biography:

- **Shyam Selvadurai** is a [Sri Lankan- Canadian living in Toronto](#) was born on February 1965.
- He is most noted for his 1994 novel *Funny Boy*, which won the [Books in Canada Novel Award](#) and the [Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction](#).
- Selvadurai was born to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, which is one reason why the conflict between these two groups features so prominently throughout this text.
- He and his family emigrated to Canada in 1983; they ended up in Toronto and Selvadurai studied creative and professional writing here at York!
- Selvadurai published *Funny Boy* in 1994



Plot Outline:

- *Funny Boy* is constructed in the form of six poignant stories about a boy coming to age within a wealthy Tamil family in [Colombo](#). Between the ages of seven and fourteen, he explores his sexual identity, and encounters the [Sinhala-Tamil](#) tensions leading up to the [1983 riots](#).
- The story is divided into six sections:
- **Pigs Can't Fly:** The first story focuses on child's perspective on his own place
- **Radha Aunty:** child's perspective of adult world
- **See No Evil, Hear No Evil:** ethnic violence.
- **Small Choices:** political and economic forces exasperate ethnic tension
- **The Best School of All:** Arjie's sexual awareness.
- **Riot Journal: An Epilogue**



Characters:

Arjie: the narrator; formal name Arjun Chelvaratnam; a Tamil and "funny"

Amma: Arjie's mother; Nalini Chelvaratnam

Appa: Arjie's father; name Robert Chelvaratnam; in the hotel business

Diggy: Arjie's older brother

Sonali: Arjie's younger sister

Ammachi: Arjie's grandmother

Appachi : Arjie's grandfather

Janaki: Ammachi's cook

Kanthi Aunty: Appa's sister and Arjie's aunt



Cyril Uncle: Kanthi Aunty's husband

Radha Aunty: Appa's youngest sister; lives in America; Arjie's favorite aunt

Anil Jayasinghe: Falls in love with Radha Aunty

Rajan Nagendra :The man to whom Radha Aunty gets engaged

Mr. Rasiah: A family friend who comes to Radha Aunty's rescue

Mala Aunty: Appa's sister

Aunty Doris: The director of the play in which Arjie and Radha Aunty act

Neliya Auntie: Very strict principal of the Victoria Academy. Believes that it is possible to extract work from students only by beating them up.



Amma's sister

Daryl Uncle: Amma's friend; a journalist; formal name Daryl Brohier

Somaradne: Daryl's servant

Jegan Parameswaran: Son of Appa's friend Buddy and approaches Appa for work

Buddy Parameswaran: Appa's childhood friend

Q.C. Uncle: A former civil rights lawyer and an old friend of Amma's father

Sena Uncle: Appa's business partner and hotel co-owner



Sanath: Sena Uncle and Chithra Aunty's son

Banduraatne Mudalali: A powerful hotel owner

Mr. Samarakoon: Appa's hotel manager

Shehan Soyza: Arjie's love interest, whom he meets at the Victoria Academy. He made Arjie fully aware of his sexuality and its uniqueness.

The Black Tie



Theme: Gender and Sexuality
(to be continued..)

