The betrayals of neoliberalism in Shyam Selvadurai's Funny Boy

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In this essay I suggest that analysis of the consequences of neoliberalism is central to the representation of Arjie and his family in Shyam Selvadurai’s 1994 novel *Funny Boy*. Not only does an examination of this relatively undiscussed phenomenon reframe our view of the novel’s thematic concerns, it also points to some important ways in which the novel intervenes in discussions in the social sciences about the relationship between neoliberal economic policies and the Sri Lankan civil war. Whereas neoliberal economists have tended to view conflicts around ethnic nationalism, homophobia, and other social forces as unfortunate, incidental factors that thwart economic progress, Selvadurai’s novel exposes the complex ways in which economic policy both produces and perpetuates generations of ingrained understandings of individual and group identity.

**Keywords**

Neoliberalism; Shyam Selvadurai; *Funny Boy*; Sri Lanka; civil war; Tamil; ethnic nationalism; homophobia
Early in Sri Lankan Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai’s 1994 novel *Funny Boy*, the young protagonist, Arjie, delightedly describes his family’s weekend shopping trips to Cornell’s Supermarket:

Cornell’s had opened up recently and was the first American-style supermarket in Sri Lanka. It was a wonderful place, for there on the shelves were items like blueberry jam, kippers, and canned apricots – things I had read about when I was younger in Famous Five and Nancy Drew books but had never actually tasted. From listening to my father’s conversations, I understood that this sudden availability of imported goods had to do with the new government and something called ‘free economy’ and ‘the end of socialism’. (pp. 98–9)¹

This celebratory description of the influx of Western goods into Sri Lanka as a result of its adoption of neoliberal economic policies is followed almost immediately by Arjie’s father’s revelation that he and a business partner are in the process of building a hotel for tourists called the Paradise Beach Resort (p. 99). Arjie describes his ‘astonishment’ at this evidence of the family’s increasing affluence, which culminates in his father’s trip to Europe to promote the new hotel (p. 100).

From this euphoric moment, however, the novel charts the relentless unravelling of the family’s economic and social status and eventual flight from Sri Lanka as refugees. Arjie’s father, who has attempted to insulate his Tamil family from ethnic violence by embracing what he sees as a universally welcoming discourse of neoliberalism, instead finds his business partners abandon him and his hotel vandalised by Sinhalese youth protesting the gay sex tourism it has implicitly sanctioned. In Selvadurai’s novel, we thus see the convergence of a number of threads that emphasise the link between neoliberalism and modalities of ethnic identity, gender, sexuality, and class: the state’s cynical deployment of ethnic nationalist propaganda alongside neoliberal economic rhetoric to turn citizens against one another, the tension around Arjie’s father’s toleration of homosexuality when it profits his hotel business but not when it is represented by his own son, and Arjie’s own use of an array of foreign objects through and against which he narrativizes his emerging sense of self. While *Funny Boy* has often been read as a narrative about gay coming of age or the trauma of ethnic violence, then, neoliberalism proves to be a central but undertheorized entry point to an exploration of how these narratives about identity evolve over the course of the novel.

Most of the interviews with Selvadurai following the publication of *Funny Boy*, as well as the academic scholarship on the novel, have...
concentrated on one or more of the intersecting currents of oppression experienced by the novel’s young protagonist, Arjie, as a queer Tamil subject in the increasingly tense political climate leading to the official outbreak of civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983. One finds extended discussions of how Arjie resists and reinforces constructions of ethnic, national, and sexual identity, as well as of the novel’s theorisation of exile. Questions of genre have also garnered a fair amount of attention, especially explorations of the novel’s use of the Western genre of the *bildungsroman*. The novel’s deft analysis of how neoliberalism as economic mandate and political philosophy contributes to the escalating conflict represented in the book has received surprisingly little attention.

In an interview with the *Lambda Book Report* in 1996, Selvadurai himself calls attention to how this neoliberal context shapes his young protagonist’s world, even as Arjie is unable to fully comprehend that context:

> I felt I couldn’t get into the novel, when told through the child’s perspective, the sophisticated explanation of what is going on, how the “liberalization” of the economy played into communal tension, how everything was being taken from the poor, with the government’s consequent need for scapegoating minorities. Until recently, there was a very different situation: an 80 percent literacy rate; excellent, free medical care. Now, all that is disintegrating, the value of the rupee has fallen dramatically. But it wasn’t possible to bring that in through Arjie’s consciousness.

When the interviewer suggests that this ‘economic background . . . was there . . . in Arjie’s father’s business dealings’, Selvadurai laments that the novel lacks ‘the analysis . . . but with all the father’s talk about “a free economy” and making Sri Lanka “the next Singapore”, I think that the analysis is there for all who know what went on’. In the essay that follows, I suggest that while the novel may not grapple with neoliberalism as overtly as Selvadurai might have hoped, analysis of the consequences of neoliberalism is in fact central to its representation of Arjie and his family. Not only does an examination of this relatively undiscussed phenomenon reframe our view of the novel’s thematic concerns, it also points to some important ways in which the novel intervenes in discussions in the social sciences about the relationship between neoliberal economic policies and the Sri Lankan civil war. Whereas neoliberal economists have tended to view conflicts around ethnic nationalism, homophobia, and other social forces as unfortunate, incidental factors that thwart economic progress, Selvadurai’s novel exposes the complex ways in which economic policy both produces and perpetuates generations of ingrained understandings of individual and group identity.
But what exactly is neoliberalism? For a term that has become an academic buzzword over the last two decades, according to Boas and Gans-Morse, it remains somewhat loosely and variously defined. What started as a more modest rethinking of liberal ideas by economists and legal scholars of the Freiburg School in Germany in the interwar years had transformed by the 1970s into the radical economic decentralisation of the Pinochet regime in Chile, among other cases. According to Elizabeth Povinelli, neoliberalism has typically involved ‘the privatization and deregulation of state assets, the territorial dispersion of production through subcontracting, and a shift in tax policies that favored the rich’. Such policies were widely denounced by the Left in the 1990s as the ‘Washington Consensus’, the US-mandated approach to economic development forced on countries in the Global South as a condition for IMF and World Bank loans. As Povinelli suggests, though, neoliberalism is not simply an economic policy; it is a historical time period, a prescription for the attitude of the state towards workers within and beyond its own borders, and most broadly, ‘a series of struggles across an uneven social terrain’.

Povinelli’s definition for me begs two obvious questions. First, is neoliberalism simply neocolonialism by another name? Does contemporary scholarship on neoliberalism substitute a universalised notion of class inequity for what is in reality a messier concoction that includes race and colonial and national histories? To put a finer point on it, what is the value of neoliberalism as a critical apparatus through which to approach texts from the Global South? These are questions that deserve more attention than I can give them here – and that I undoubtedly need to work out more fully – but that I want to address briefly in the hopes of spurring further discussion. My provisional argument about the relationship between these two terms, to echo Nkrumah, is that neoliberalism is the latest, if not the last, stage of neocolonialism. The fact that wealthy current and former colonial powers dictate economic and social policy directly through aid and foreign investment or indirectly through organisations such as the IMF and World Bank is nothing new. Neoliberalism simply provides a useful marker of the particular ideologies of economic and social relations currently dominant within this neocolonial framework. My modest proposal is that approaching neoliberalism in this way not only works against a static formulation of the neocolonial as everything that came after colonialism, but also situates neoliberalism as a historical phenomenon that is articulated through specific neocolonial contexts rather than as an abstract universal.

What, then, is particular to neoliberalism as historical moment and ideological program? What kinds of struggles, to return to Povinelli, has neoliberalism precipitated or even exacerbated? One key element is
neoliberalism’s claim about the intrinsically positive relationship between
deregulated capitalism and human well-being. David Harvey argues that

neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic
practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced
by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an
institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free
markets, and free trade.  

Capitalism is an old friend of neocolonialism, to be sure, but the shift in
focus from demanding the Western-style welfare state to demanding the
effective dismantling of that state (with the perpetual exception of the mili-
tary) adds a new element to the equation.

Prominent economists responsible for disseminating neoliberalism as
a gospel of development have demonstrated an extraordinary faith in the
idea that neoliberalism is the only viable means by which to advance the
well-being of citizens, and especially to sustain or even produce democracy.
Thus, when Pinochet’s large-scale neoliberal economic reforms were
accompanied by ‘brutal methods of political repression’, economists such as ‘[Milton] Friedman and [Friedrich von] Hayek nonetheless argued
that such neoliberal shock treatments ought to be given a “fair chance”,
predicting that their swift application would return Chile to democracy,
freedom, and unprecedented levels of prosperity’.  

By the early 1980s, neoliberalism had become the default answer to all questions of development.

As Harvey explains, “in return for debt rescheduling, indebted countries
were required to implement institutional reforms, such as cuts in welfare
expenditures, more flexible labour market laws, and privatisation. Thus
was “structural adjustment” invented”.  

Such structural adjustment pro-
grammes continue to be viewed as the recipe for successful development,
despite mounting evidence about their ultimate limitations. These were
certainly the expectations imposed upon the Sri Lankan government
when it accepted IMF loans in the 1970s.

It was during the same decade that Foucault began his lectures on bio-
politics in which he questioned the ways in which neoliberalism as eco-
nomic policy connoted a fundamental change in our understanding of
governmentality. In Povinelli’s words, Foucault worried that ‘[n]eoliberals
did not merely wish to free the truth games of capitalism from the market
itself – the market should be the general measure of all social activities and
values’. Under this new market-bound logic, Povinelli argues, ‘any form of
life that is not organised on the basis of market values is characterised as a
potential security risk’. What Harvey, Foucault, and Povinelli point out
is that the supposed emancipatory politics of neoliberalism masks a pro-
foundly transformed sense of the value of human life, as well as of the

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purpose and shape of politics. The case of the civil war in Sri Lanka presents an illuminating example of this transformation from an earlier neocolonial phase to a neoliberal one. It was not simply an unfortunate but unrelated historical coincidence that the opening of the economy in 1977 with then-president J. R. Jayawardene’s acceptance of IMF loans paralleled the surge in violence that ultimately escalated into full-blown civil war, as neoliberal economists such as Athukorala and Rajapatirana would have it. Instead, many scholars have come to support the claim that Selvadurai makes in the interview above: neoliberal policies directly exacerbated ethnic tensions and led to the outbreak of the civil war by disrupting the precarious apportioning of the economic pie that had allowed different constituencies within the country to uneasily coexist in an earlier neocolonial phase.

To flesh out this connection between neoliberalism and violence further, some brief background on Sri Lanka is in order. The former British colony of Ceylon, Sri Lanka had already seen sporadic bursts of violence by the time of the notorious Black July riots of 1983. The parties in these conflicts have mainly been portrayed along ethnic lines, as the majority (primarily Buddhist) Sinhala community, comprising about 75 per cent of the population, and the minority (primarily Hindu) Tamil population, approximately 18 per cent of the population. However, as Winslow and Woost caution, the ways in which these communities identify themselves and others have shifted significantly over time, ‘with religion, language, and caste frequently given more importance than ethnicity’. Muslims comprise 8 per cent of the population, and Burghers (multiracial descendants of European men and Sri Lankan women) make up less than 1 per cent of the population. All of these communities are somewhat fragmented by internal divisions, such as those between Low-country Sinhalese, who came into earlier contact with the colonizers, and Kandyan Sinhalese, who live primarily in the interior of the country. Similarly, there is an important cultural gap between Tamils who have lived in Sri Lanka for centuries and Indian Tamils brought over by the British as agricultural workers during the colonial period. Moreover, both the Sinhala and Tamil constituencies include Christian minorities.

Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1947. In its early years, the country was ruled by the United Nationalist Party (UNP), a multi-ethnic umbrella party. The UNP offered no significant changes from British rule in that the English-educated, Westernized elite groups that had occupied the most important posts under the British remained in power. The fact that Burghers and Tamils had been favoured by the British before independence and continued to hold a large number of these positions fed resentment among the Sinhalese majority. The election
of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1956 decisively changed the political landscape. They veered sharply towards Sinhalese ethnic nationalism, voting to make Sinhala the official national language, advocating Buddhism as the state religion, and nationalising the private, mostly Christian, schools where wealthier Tamils, like Arjie’s family in *Funny Boy*, had sent their children. Ethnic divisions hardened further in the 1970s, as the newly formed separatist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) achieved dominance in the north of the country. The government committed a string of its own assassinations and atrocities, including burning down the library in the northern city of Jaffna in 1981 as part of a three-day pogrom after the murder of three policemen; nearly 100,000 books and ancient Tamil manuscripts were destroyed.

The riots of July 1983 are widely viewed as the opening event of the civil war in the country that continued for the next twenty-six years. They also function as the climactic event in Selvadurai’s novel, a point to which I will return later. What came to be known as Black July began with a government rampage in Jaffna. In retaliation, several Tamil youth ambushed an army truck in Jaffna and killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. Army leaders proposed to bring the mutilated corpses to Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital city, to be displayed to the public. While the bodies were not ultimately displayed, the effects of this explosive political rhetoric in Colombo were still catastrophic. Sinhalese mobs began killing Tamils in Colombo, and the rioting continued for three days while the government refused to intervene. In fact, the government reportedly let voter registration lists fall into the hands of mob leaders, who then identified and targeted Tamil houses, businesses, and factories. Figures on casualties and damage vary widely, but Winslow and Woost estimate that up to 4000 were killed and tens of thousands injured in the riots and approximately 18,000 homes and 5000 shops were destroyed. The conflict continued for decades until President Mahinda Rajapaksa declared victory over the LTTE in May 2009 after the completion of a massive and bloody military offensive in the north.

Given that there had already been outbreaks of violence in the late 1950s and early 1970s, why did incidents of violence escalate so rapidly after 1977 and erupt so decisively in 1983? This is where we can most clearly see how neoliberal policies reorder perceptions about individual identities and governmentality. Newton Gunasinghe, who wrote one of the earliest and most influential responses to the 1983 riots, persuasively describes a series of interlocking factors linked to the neoliberal turn within the government that fed the increasing violence in Sri Lanka during the period from 1977 to 1983. One key change, he maintains, was the effective abolition of the complex system of political patronage that had developed in the granting of permits and licenses needed to do business within the country. Since this system had formerly
benefited Sinhalese business owners and public sector workers, the new opportunities available under liberalisation for wealthier Tamils (like Arjie’s father) in private sector trade and commerce sparked resentment within the middle- and upper-class ranks represented by the business community.\textsuperscript{24}

At the same time, neoliberal ‘reform’ in Sri Lanka, as in so many places, entailed massive redistributions of wealth upwards, as social welfare programmes related to food rationing, health care, and education were slashed.\textsuperscript{25} Those living most precariously at the poverty line saw their standard of living decline quickly and dramatically, fuelling widespread resentment among the urban poor. During the period of state regulation, popular resentment had tended to be directed at the government and follow class lines, but ‘as the economic role of the state appeared to them to be marginal’ after the neoliberal reforms of 1977, Gunasinghe claims some other object of hostility had to be discovered to be held responsible for the current malaise. It is precisely here that the Sinhala chauvinist ideology, which initially emerged from the ranks of the middle-level traders, found a fertile ground, engulfing numerous social strata among the Sinhala.\textsuperscript{26}

Equally importantly, because it had adopted a neoliberal mode of governmentality aimed at suppressing strikes and other forms of dissent that reduced capitalist productivity, the Sri Lankan state attempted ‘to quell all forms of legitimate protest and create a social system that was exclusively geared to the attainment of high rates of economic growth’. The real-world effect of this clamp down on social protest was that ‘the “safety valves” that were present in the body politic earlier to express frustration and aggression from those sections of society who felt deprived were deliberately closed’.\textsuperscript{27} Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that this frustration and aggression would erupt into violent conflict or that such conflict would continue without measures to address its root economic causes.

My objective here is not to argue that what was ‘really’ an economic conflict was simply translated into an ethnic one as economic conditions declined. To make such an argument would be to ignore the complex tensions around religion, region, gender, and ethnicity that have played out in Sri Lanka over centuries. Instead, I aim to explore the ways in which neoliberalism as mode of governmentality, consumerist fantasy, and global economic mandate has shaped and constrained our sense of who we are, whom we love and hate, and what we want from life. By presenting a carefully crafted, gradually expanding story about the influence of neoliberalism on one wealthy Tamil family in Sri Lanka during this period,
Selvadurai offers some imaginative insight into this meeting point of economic policy and individual and group identity. To return to an earlier point, my focus on neoliberalism here is not meant to distract from questions of neocolonialism and ethnic nationalism, but to call attention to how a new phase of neocolonialism became invested in neoliberal methods of commodifying people and dismantling the state. Earlier conflicts and forms of exploitation do not disappear in such a situation but are inflected by the new element.

Arjie, the perceptive young gay protagonist of *Funny Boy*, brilliantly (and often unintentionally) exposes this nexus of gender, sexuality, ethnic nationalism, religion, and neoliberalism. In the first chapter, entitled ‘Pigs Can’t Fly’, Arjie feels most comfortable playing on the girls’ side of his family’s rigidly divided social spaces (the boys get the front yard and the girls the back). However, he is forced to play cricket with the boys after being caught in a sari pretending to be the bride in a girls’ game he invented, called ‘Bride-bride’. ‘Because pigs can’t fly’ is Arjie’s mother’s reply to his anguished question about why he has to leave the girls and move to the front yard. As Gayatri Gopinath and others have pointed out, the fact that his mother cannot articulate a persuasive argument supporting this gender divide underscores the hysteria underlying these rigid prescriptions about gender and sexual identity.

Several details are striking in this early instance of Arjie’s transgressive behaviour: first, the paramount reason for Arjie’s punishment is that his behaviour undermines his father’s newly elevated social status within the neoliberal economic order, which depends upon a certain performance of masculinity by himself and his son. Moreover, Arjie’s father blames his wife for their son’s social transgression, telling her ‘if he turns out to be the laughing-stock of Colombo, it’ll be your fault’ (p. 15). Arjie’s father’s social standing is already precarious because he is a well-known member of the Tamil minority in the business community. It is thus potentially very dangerous indeed for him to lose the respect of his male social peers. That his social standing can be undermined by his son’s sexual identity, and that his wife is responsible for policing that identity, illustrates the degree to which sexism and homophobia serve the interests of an increasingly intense ethnic nationalism. Despite Arjie’s father’s faith in neoliberalism as a means to protect the family from this ethnic nationalism, then, his hysteria at Arjie’s queer performance indicates that he is keenly aware that neoliberal economic policies are not enacted in a vacuum. They are imposed upon and work through an existing network of cultural mores and expectations.

Equally striking is the way in which attempts to discipline Arjie into submission with these social demands and his response to these demands revolve around questions of productivity. When Arjie is ordered to play
cricket with the boys, he removes himself from the situation by insisting that they insert him into the line-up. His team, knowing that he will play poorly, lets him go back to the girl’s domain. In effect, he wins by losing, by refusing to produce the competitive masculinity expected of him. Once he has returned to the girls’ domain and is forced to play the role of the groom, he enacts a performance of the groom as businessman that is so excessive in its sendup of pointless bureaucracy and abuses of power that it undercuts the masculinity it is meant to replicate. In these early examples, Arjie subverts the ethic of productive masculinity expected by both neonationalist and neoliberal ideologies, and in so doing invokes a model of queer dissent that returns full force later in the novel.

Soon afterward, Arjie meets Daryl, the man who will become his mother’s lover, and who acts as a catalyst for both Arjie and his mother’s ultimate rejection of the neoliberal order. Daryl is a Burgher, whose ethnicity complicates his position within the Tamil/Sinhala conflict. As a reporter, he has spent the last fifteen years living in Australia, but returns to cover the escalating anti-Tamil violence in Jaffna. When he shows up to see Arjie’s mother, it becomes clear that she was close to him in her youth. His mother’s flustered response to seeing him, and her complete happiness when they begin to conduct a secret affair, indicate that this relationship, like Arjie’s aunt’s relationship with a Sinhalese man in an earlier chapter, was cut short by social prescriptions rather than by lack of interest on either side. As the drama of their relationship unfolds, though, we see how interpersonal matters are subject to violent intervention by the neoliberal state.

Arjie’s mother, like his father, has embraced the culture of the new open economy, with its fashion shows, parties, and new opportunities for wealthy Tamils to circulate among the ranks of elite businesspeople and government officials. After one such party, Amma exclaims to her sister, ‘Everything is wonderful! Who would have thought, a few years ago, that things would turn out so well!’ (p. 102). Amma and Arjie’s enthusiasm about the utopian possibilities of neoliberal consumption is quickly undercut by the reality of neoliberal state repression. Thus, this sentence follows Amma’s joyous exclamation: ‘Then, as if to contradict her optimism, Daryl Uncle entered our lives’ (p. 102). Amma’s happiness with this other man reinforces for Arjie how dissatisfied and trapped Amma is in her marriage to his father. More directly threatening, though, is the way in which Daryl’s investigation and subsequent murder, as well as Amma’s attempt to seek justice for him, reinforces the severity of the state repression underlying the new neoliberal dispensation.

Daryl is the first character to challenge the family’s view of the Tamil Tigers as simply terrorists. He openly discusses incidents of government torture of militants in the north, which Amma is desperate to deny:
'This government was not like the old one, she said. Besides, how could this be going on and the press remain silent about it, especially now that there was “freedom of the press”? (p. 107). She is equally defensive about the newly passed Prevention of Terrorism Act [1978], which allowed the police and army to arrest anybody they thought might be a terrorist without something called a warrant. Amma thought it was a good thing, but Daryl Uncle called it a “tool for state terrorism” (p. 107). As in the USA, where defending the country from terrorism has become inextricably interwoven with defending neoliberalism as a way of life,29 in Sri Lanka the open economy has been accompanied by a rapidly shrinking democratic public sphere and a deeply unsettling reliance on violent repression of those deemed security risks. As Daryl puts it to Amma, ‘People are being tortured and killed even as we sit in all this opulence’ (p. 114). Daryl’s trip to Jaffna coincides with the rioting surrounding the burning of the Jaffna library in 1981, a disaster the Sri Lankan government would not be eager for journalists to document, and his murdered body washes ashore several days later.

Before Daryl’s body is found, Amma makes the risky decision to go to the police, hoping the fact that Daryl reads as a foreign white man will make the police eager to protect him and bring him safely back to Colombo. At the station, Amma’s ability to speak Sinhalese allows her initially to hide her identity as a Tamil and thus secure better treatment, and, as she had hoped, ‘at the words “white man” the policeman’s attitude immediately changed and he became more helpful’ (p. 123). But when the officer gives her report to his superior, who not only knows the reasons behind why Daryl’s house in Colombo was ransacked, but also the social circles in which Amma travels, the situation deteriorates rapidly. The police accompany Amma and Arjie to Daryl’s house, where they arrest his servant, Somaratne, a Sinhalese peasant, effectively making him a scapegoat for a case of police corruption and abuse. When summoned to the police station the following day, Amma is blackmailed by the police official, who casually mentions that he plays squash with her husband and tells her ‘I’m sure he’ll be fascinated by all that’s happened in his absence’ (pp. 129–30). Furious and humiliated, Amma is still determined to seek justice, telling Arjie ‘We can’t just sit by and act as if nothing happened. . . . But where does one turn when the police and the government are the offenders?’ (p. 134). Her last ditch effort is to visit a friend of her father’s, a retired civil rights lawyer, who tells her that it is ‘too dangerous’ to pursue her inquiry and explains how to tell if her phone has been tapped when she gets home (pp. 137–38). The fact that it has confirms that at this stage anyone who challenges police corruption is marked as the ‘security risk’ Povinelli describes above.
It is important that class emerges as a key marker of difference in this chapter. There are not two but three victims of the ethnic violence that leads to Daryl’s death: Amma, who loses her lover; Arjie, who loses the only sympathetic man in his life; and Somaratne, Daryl’s young servant, who is knowingly scapegoated by the police for Daryl’s murder, tortured in custody, and permanently disabled. When Amma’s mother tries to find the boy in his village to question him further, Somaratne’s mother is enraged at her arrogance, demanding ‘And what about my son? ... What do you care? You rich folk from Colombo, what do you know about our suffering?’ (p. 143). As the subaltern, the boy is a silent but haunting presence in this chapter, and he calls attention to the ways in which Arjie’s family’s wealth, up until this point, has insulated it from violence to a much greater degree than those farther down the economic ladder. Somaratne’s peasant family, with members working in Colombo to send money back to the village, is in precisely the position John M. Richardson describes: poor Sinhalese who saw their standard of living decline rapidly with the opening of the economy, even as they perceived families like Arjie’s benefiting from the boom in trade and tourism.

Indeed, Arjie’s father reaps substantial benefits from the neoliberal reforms initiated in the late 1970s. Just as Arjie’s mother is initially jubilant about the newly enhanced social status that allows her to rub shoulders with business and government elites, Appa embraces his role as the quintessential neoliberal businessman, pooling his assets with Sinhalese partners like Sena Uncle to take advantage of the potentially enormous profits to be garnered from the burgeoning tourist industry. Yet, as with Amma, the privileges of neoliberalism seem to come at a steep cost. When Jegan, the son of a childhood friend, shows up at their house in Colombo asking for work, Appa reluctantly employs him, wary of calling attention to himself because of the young man’s earlier ties to the LTTE. Appa is convinced that neoliberalism as an ideology can insulate him from ethnic violence as long as he does not advertise his identity as a Tamil. After Jegan chastises someone he is supervising for a legitimate error, Arjie’s father sides with the other man, reasoning that ‘as Tamils we must tread carefully. ... Even I have to be circumspect when I’m talking to the staff. If I was Sinhalese, like Sena, I could say and do whatever I liked’ (p. 185). Not long afterward, though, one of his own hotel employees vandalises Jegan’s room by writing ‘Death to all Tamil pariahs’ across his window, and even Appa begins to doubt his ability to manage the situation (p. 192).

Still hoping to contain the crisis without further jeopardising his business, Arjie’s father fires Jegan, his friend’s son. He does so not knowing that **Jegan has already threatened his assimilationist agenda on more than one level.** From the moment Jegan arrives at Arjie’s house, he has defended Arjie. During one early conversation, Appa thanks Jegan
for taking an interest in Arjie and expresses the hope that Jegan might ‘help him outgrow this phase’ (p. 162), that is his queer or ‘funny’ tendencies. Jegan is the first to stand up for Arjie, claiming that he sees nothing wrong with him. He is also the one to implicitly call out Appa for his hypocrisy in participating in gay sex tourism by allowing wealthy foreign guests to bring young boys from the village back to the hotel (p. 166). Perhaps most importantly, Jegan is the first man Arjie meets to imply that he has been in love with another man. When Arjie asks him about how he ended up joining the Tigers, Jegan explains that he became radicalised after a man close to him was tortured by the police. He tells Arjie that he reminds him of the man at his age, concluding ‘[w]e were ... we were very good friends’ (p. 171). Watching Jegan stand up for his beliefs and refuse to hide his identity as a Tamil provides Arjie with an alternative to the neoliberal masculinity of his father, and it undoubtedly helps inspire Arjie’s most radical act of rebellion later in the novel.

Not long after Jegan’s departure, Appa informs Arjie that he is transferring him to the Queen Victoria Academy, the strict private school his older brother attends. ‘The Academy will force you to become a man’, his father offers by way of explanation (p. 205). This attempt to force Arjie to play his socially prescribed masculine role points towards the collusion of ethnic nationalism with sexism and homophobia. It also calls attention to neoliberalism as just an updated version of colonialism, a current import that represents the same old colonialist values in a new guise. Arjie has already seen how much his mother has been forced to sacrifice to the demands of ethnic purity through her relationship with Daryl and her disciplining by the Sinhalese police. Amma is harshly reminded that her social and economic status within the neoliberal economy is still completely dependent on sexist and ethnically chauvinist ideas about her proper position as an upper-class woman, as well as the mandates of an oppressive, authoritarian state that, like Pinochet’s Chile, is willing to disappear anyone who gets in the way of its perceived ideas about progress and development. Similarly, Arjie’s ‘funniness’ is not just a problem within the family, but undermines Appa’s attempts to appear non-threatening in an environment of increasingly virulent Sinhalese nationalism. Somewhat ironically, then, it is at the school meant to straighten him out that Arjie meets Shehan, his first boyfriend, who becomes the primary motive for his revolt against the interconnected forces of neoliberalism, ethnic nationalism, and homophobia that have made his life increasingly unbearable.

If in the first chapter Arjie attempted to recover his social space in the girls’ domain by performing masculinity unproductively, at the end of the novel Arjie once again turns neoliberal masculinity against itself. Arjie’s skill at reading poetry aloud draws the attention of his school’s principal, called Black Tie by the students, who selects him to represent the school
at a fundraiser by reciting two poems, ‘The Best School of All’ and ‘Vitae Lampada’, by turn-of-the-century British poet and imperial propagandist Sir Henry Newbolt, praise the glory of one’s school days as well as the merits of the colonial enterprise as a whole. This same principal has brutally beaten both Arjie and Shehan, who is Sinhalese, for various infractions of school rules. Arjie is placed in an impossible position where he is supposed to support Black Tie against the vice principal, Lokubandara, because Black Tie stands for a secular – however violent and neocolonialist – model of education that makes a space – however minimal – for Arjie as a Tamil student. In this school event, the outdated, paternalistic neocolonialism of Black Tie is meant to defeat the new bureaucratic order’s ethnic nationalism.

But Arjie refuses the terms of this conflict and decides to intentionally bungle his recitation of the two poems, changing the order of lines and mingling their verses. The incomprehensible presentation humiliates the principal and virtually guarantees Black Tie’s removal from the school. His defeat accomplishes two immediate goals: it will prevent further beatings of Shehan, and it will also ensure Arjie’s expulsion from a school he hates anyway. It is not just the violence against himself and Shehan that Arjie hopes to end through his recitation, but a longer history of neocolonial violence. Gazing at the school building, he imagines ‘how many boys like Shehan had passed through this school, how many Shehans had been its prisoner. I knew there must have been many. They were the ones no one spoke of, the ones past pupils pretended had never existed’ (p. 267). Arjie’s act of defiance exposes the similarly rigid notions of masculinity that an older model of neocolonialism shares with the new order to which it is supposedly opposed; Arjie is unacceptable for both, and the two have colluded in his and his boyfriend’s oppression.

To return again to Povinelli’s claim that within a neoliberal framework ‘any form of life that is not organized on the basis of market values is characterized as a potential security risk’, we can see Arjie’s intentionally bungled recitation as a tactic for calling out Black Tie for a crucial tactical error. By ordering Arjie to demonstrate the productivity and usefulness of his neocolonial education, Black Tie accepts the terms of his opponent’s neoliberal framework. Unfortunately, he’s producing a subject for which this representative of the new guard has no place. Lokubandara has no interest in Arjie’s capacities – he has already written him off as social excess, inherently unproductive because of his ethnic and sexual identities. Arjie is smart enough to know that just as the future Black Tie offers is not worth the price, there is not future for him in the neoliberal order either. Refusing to perform his function within the neoliberal educational system is one of the few means of resistance available to Arjie at this point, and he bravely marks himself as a threat to that system.
Unfortunately, the escalating ethnic violence in the country has already marked the whole family in ways they cannot control, and the horrific events of the July 1983 riots occur not long after Arjie’s performance. Arjie’s father experiences the anti-Tamil riots as more of a betrayal than Arjie or Amma, because he has held on to his faith that neoliberalism will protect them. After the family’s house and hotel are destroyed by the mobs and his own parents are burned to death in their car while attempting to reach them, Appa finally acknowledges that ‘we no longer belong in this country’ (p. 297) and begins to organise the family’s departure for Canada as refugees.  

To compound the betrayal of neoliberalism even further, the government refuses to let Appa ‘take his money out of the country’, allowing only five hundred pounds for each family member (p. 302). Free trade, as neoliberalism has shown us again and again, is never actually free.

Still in shock, Arjie processes the dramatic change in his own position within a neoliberal system by thinking about the material objects in his room:

“It’s the little things, the comforts and luxuries, that I miss. The yearning for things like my records or my books or even the mat by my bed gnaws at me until I think I must have them this moment or I will die. Then I become angry and frustrated, because I can’t have them.” (p. 298)

He had already witnessed what became of these objects a few days before when the family went to see if there was anything that could be salvaged after the fire. Surveying the burnt shell of his old room, Arjie becomes ‘suddenly aware that records were not music but plastic, which had now melted into black puddles; that my books were mere paper that had browned and now came apart between my fingers’ (p. 291). While he misses the luxury commodities made accessible to him by his father’s status, Arjie’s trauma forces him to see these objects in new ways, stripped of their earlier symbolic value. His sister and mother attempt to salvage a few items that have not been destroyed, but Arjie decides to take nothing with him (p. 292). In doing so, Arjie is contrasted yet again with his father: he sees the emptiness of neoliberalism’s fantasies of belonging and status, while his father still cannot let go of those fantasies and remains in the country.

Selvadurai’s decision to end the novel with the unravelling of Arjie’s family and their impending flight from the country begs us to consider the text as a narrative about the betrayals of neoliberalism. Through Arjie’s conflicts within and beyond his family around masculinity and homophobia, his mother’s disillusionment with the supposed benefits of her newly attained status, and the final blow of the family’s personal losses and financial ruin, *Funny Boy* systematically undermines the
triumphalist claims of neoliberalism. For not only the central characters but also subaltern figures like Somaratne, neoliberalism’s fantasies of economic prosperity and democratic freedoms fail to mask a profoundly violent and corrupt system. Most poignantly, the novel refuses to romanticise the possibilities of resistance within such a system. If Arjie’s final spoken word performance ‘dares to envision other possibilities of existence exterior to dominant systems of logic’, as Gopinath argues, the novel’s ending cautions that realising such possibilities ultimately depends on systematically combating the logic of neoliberalism.

At a formal level, the shift from coherent narrative chapters to disjointed diary entries at the end of the novel dismantles the conventional trajectory of the *bildungsroman*, in which the young subject ultimately assimilates into the social order. This formal decision not only emphasises Arjie’s rejection of neoliberalism at the end of the text, but also complicates the marketing of the novel itself for a neoliberal publishing industry in which the postcolonial *bildungsroman* is a favoured text for Western audiences. The result in the USA, for example, has been that readers often focus on the novel as a (more triumphant) gay coming of age story at the expense of sustained attention to the particularities of its geopolitical and economic context. My reading here has aimed to connect the dots between the violent and homophobic masculinity Arjie resists and the neoliberal system under whose auspices this violence operates.

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**Notes**

1 Page numbers refer to Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* (San Diego, CA: Harvest, 1994).

2 On questions of ethnic and sexual identity, see Sharanya Jayawickrama, ‘At Home in the Nation? Negotiating Identity in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny*
Emily S. Davis The betrayals of neoliberalism


6 Ibid.


10 Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment, p. 17.


14 Harvey, A Brief History, p. 29.

15 Ibid. See especially the chapter ‘Neoliberalism on Trial’ (pp. 152–82), which presents convincing quantitative data about the ultimate failures of many neoliberal development programs.

16 Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment, pp. 21–2.

18 For example, Jennifer Hyndman argues that ‘Economic liberalization meant an end to many of the concessions and patronage relations that had kept the peace between otherwise disparate class and ethnic factions; the glue holding ethnic and class alliances together was effectively removed’. Hyndman, ‘Acts of Aid: Neoliberalism in a War Zone’, *Antipode*, 41.5 (2009), p. 876.


21 Ibid, p. 6.


26 Gunasinghe, ‘The Open Economy’, p. 113.

27 Ibid, p. 103.


30 Ahilan Kadirkamar notes that the end of the war in 2009 initiated a second wave of neoliberalism as foreign capital flooded into the country. Much of this funding is tied to massive mall and hotel complexes like the one on the Galle Face Green in Colombo. The boom in financial investment in real estate and ‘rosy projections of returns from the tourist industry’ repeat the earlier pattern of concentrating wealth and urban development in the Western Province, especially in Colombo, at the expense of the rest of the country. Kadirkamar warns that the ever-increasing economic inequality of this system threatens to breed the kind of ethnic, sexist, and homophobic violence that Selvadurai dramatized in the conflict around Arjie’s father’s hotel in the early 1980s. As the neoliberal cycle repeats once again, this scene proves unnervingly prescient about the tensions bubbling under the surface, which have already erupted in strikes by students and workers and violent repression.


32 As Gopinath points out, there has been considerably less attention to the nexus of sexuality and nationalism, particularly the ways in which institutionalized heterosexism structures national identity. See Gopinath, Impossible Desires, pp. 9–10. John Hawley’s work represents an important intervention in this area.

33 Jayawickrama argues for a more modest reading of the political stakes of Arjie’s recitation: ‘Selvadurai’s representation of Arjie’s act of agency is made through the medium of words as an act of subversion from within a structure of control rather than an outright revolt against authority’. Jayawickrama, ‘At Home in the Nation?’ p. 133.


35 Because of what Jennifer Hyndman calls ‘important gaps in Canadian refugee processing in the 1980s, Canada admitted a larger percentage of Tamil asylum-seekers than other Western countries. Hyndman, ‘Acts of Aid’, p. 878.

36 Gopinath, Impossible Desires, 20.