BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN: *FUNNY BOY* AND THE QUEST FOR FILLING THE CULTURAL GAPS

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Abstract

The process of decolonization refers to a change of relationship between the colonizing power and the colony. It is mainly used in the context of the end of European imperialism in the developing world after the Second World War. The term decolonization has different significations. It refers to the political, economical, and cultural independence of the colonies from the imperialist control. This paper focuses on the cultural aspects of decolonization, a term with various implications. It particularly refers to passing the colonial frameworks by returning to a revival of the self. It is a process of returning to the pre-colonial nationalist and individual values. Mahatma Gandhi's term swaraj or self-knowledge introduced in his book Hind Swaraj (1909) developed during the Indian freedom struggle envisages decolonization as a cultural process. However, the cultural return has specific flaws. In an attempt to modernize the colonies, the empire created a distance between the present selfhood of the colonized nations and its past. As a result, the traditional values which had been lost for a long time return in extreme form of dogmatism, which in part fuel conflicts between traditionalists and liberals. The mental return as a result is shaped at the crossroads of anger and guilt. ShyamSelvadurai's novel, Funny Boy, pictures Sri Lanka as it passes through a postcolonial era. Since the colonization/westernization did not solve the problems of the previous colony, a desire for the revival of self by returning to the old traditions is evident in the novel. However, these returns are not free of memories of death and revenge. Using Freudian theories, I will show how Sri Lankan youth understand the importance of mourning and emotional release in the process of decolonization and let go of the authoritarian past.

One of the long held duties of imperialism is the right to "civilize." In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the European colonial powers exported Western civilization to the developing countries in a hope for civilization, exploitation, westernization and Christianization of the world. The European powersattempted to westernize the world in accordance with a colonial ideology known as "assimilation." Assimilation occurs when an individual adopts some or all aspects of a dominant culture such as its religion, language, norms and values. It can happen voluntary or involuntary. The assimilation was initially orchestrated by French politicians, when they decided to extend "equal rights and citizenship to those peoples who adopted French culture, including primary use of the French language in their lives, wearing Western clothes, and conversion to Christianity" (Bodley 9). Involuntary cultural assimilationis equal to what is called mental colonization,i.e. the process of giving up ones cultural and value system in favor of a more privileged value-system. After the colonial period, many voices aroused in response to colonization among which was the quest for decolonization through an orthodox return to national, cultural or religious values. The debate on modernity and traditionsexist in the works of these postcolonial thinkers. For instance, as an attempt

to bridge tradition and modernity, Mahatma Gandhi emphasizes that in the process of colonization it is not westernization of the culturethat should be questioned, but the amount and causes of such westernization. In other words, Gandhi was approved of Indian modernization by establishing a link between "the extremist and traditional school" and "western liberalism" and modernism (Sankhdher 35).

Gandhi's project was to "reconstitute the tradition" in a way that it can communicate with western values (ibid.). The first step in this process was to achieve an individual self-awareness. In his book *HindSwaraj* (1909), Gandhi envisions a return to "Indian selfhood" as a way out of "mental colonization." His attemptwas to make the people who,according to Thomas Macauley, were "Indian in blood and color but British in taste, opinions, morals and intellect," aware of their national and cultural values. Gandhi's works suggest the concept of *Swaraj* (self-knowledge) as an alternative.

> Since the individual's greatest strength rests in the maximum integration of personality and authenticity of living, self-knowledge is of the essence of social recognition. This, Gandhi thought, is the only way to counter the evil of pseudo-self [alienation in Marxist terminology], which plagues modern civilization (Wadhwa 35).

*Swaraj*as revealed through Gandhi's works is based on the essential uniqueness of man. Discussing Gandhi's ideology, Makarand Paranjape argues that decolonization should concentrate more"on the Self than on the Other. *Swaraj* means engaging in processes of self-understanding and self-reflection to rebuild a self-confidence that is free from arrogance, hatred or egoism." Gandhi firmly believed that only when Indians dispelled their illusions about the progress of the modern Western civilizations and the superiority of their role models, could they move toward cultural liberation.

Although at first glance Gandhi's attempt to solve the conflict seems a reasonable humanitarian attempt which could end the long history of conflict between ethnic groups ofthe former colonies, in reality such moral orientation glancing a utopian panorama at distance is not a sensible answer to the cultural and psychological dilemma which the colonized nations face. Although Gandhi's moral approach was successful as a theory, in practice it did not carry the expected results.

In his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud considering the connection between modernization and human psyche, discusses different psychological reactions to the process of civilization. Back to the imperial claim for colonization as a "civilizing mission," one may read Freud's concept of "civilization" in relation to colonialism. Perhaps, as the social representation of colonial influence, the existing ethnic conflicts in former colonies are a good place to start. To connect ethnic conflict as a fruit of colonialism to the Freudian dilemma of civilization, I have chosen Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* as a postcolonial text properly responding to both the context of conflict (Sri Lankan ethnic conflict) and the mentality of the colonized. My straightforward objectives are to seek responses to the ethnic problem of the former colonies via the mentality of the colonized. I mainly employ Freud's text to read between the lines of Selvadurai's novel.

In many instances,*Funny Boy*represents the ethnic and national conflict in the context of self-doubt and double-mindedness. The uncertainty of characters about what they want in life and their worries about following a particular direction in life represents the in-between position of a colonized mentality. It seems that through the double-consciousness, the novel shows the double-reality of each character, the hidden and the manifest ones. While the double consciousness is caused by the internal conflict between characters' traditional roles and modern concerns, I would suggest that their

indecision on taking a stable standpoint between conventional and unconventional is the outcome of the different colonial and post-colonial waves that createda mixture of values.

According to Freud, civilization plays the role of a father who is restoring child's "limitless narcissism" (19). Civilization is a strong force with extra pressure on individuals:

> It was discovered that a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in service of its cultural ideals, and it was inferred from this that the abolition or reduction of those demands would result in a return to possibilities of happiness (Freud 34).

Happiness for Freud is the price that man pays in exchange for civilization. In the state of happiness man follows his desire without considering social or moral boundaries such as "beauty, cleanliness, order," while under civilizing forces he cannot achieve the same degree of wish fulfillment. Freud discusses that the "liberty of individual" which is the slogan of civilization has no reality, and man was more liberated before civilization.Individualism was more celebrated in the pre-civilized era. When the unhappiness of the civilized individual targetsthe authority, it turns into anger. However, in the presence of a suppressive authority, this anger is internalized as a sense of guilt:The "sense of guilt comes from suppressed aggressiveness" (Freud 78). Comparing the superior position of the *authoritative* father figure to his powerless childish state, the civilized person internalizes anger and guilt. The stronger the authority, the stronger the sense of anger and guilt. In the colonial context this sense of guilt emerges firstly by comparing the inferior self to the superior and civilized other, and secondly from the loss of the older self and its conventional values to the new values.

In the absence of father figure, Freud argues, the internalized sense of guilt emerges either in the form of superego or in dysfunctional cases in the form of anger or a desire for death. Likewise, in the absence of the imperial father, the colonizedsense of guilt reappears in the form of anger and a desire for death and revenge. Death instinct, according to Freud, is an intense form of narcissism. Gandhi's plea for returning to self (if being misread) may fall under thiscategory and lead to narcissism or violence through celebration of the death instinct.[1] While colonialism, as father or superego, suppresses anger and death instinct under conscience and sense of guilt, decolonization through returning to self, encourages narcissism and restores aggression. This intense feeling can lead to violence and terrorism through readiness to die.

The colonized nation'ssense of guilt that is partly the result of the loss of conventional self produces an internal gap and disability in taking a clear standpoint between tradition and modernity. Valuing modernity through underestimating the value-system of the colonized, the imperialist power creates a mentality thatprefers western lifestyle to the traditional one. The colonized starts to live with and believe in the imagined hierarchyof imperialism and values the western lifestyle. After the colonial period and in the absence of the imperial authority, the gap emerges. Since the western value-system no more functions, a return to the traditional values or a bridging of old and new is suggested. However, according to Freud, the anger towards the memory of the father figure is so strong that it is not substitutable with alternatives, and it rather intensifies and lionizes the anger to the stage of death for the sake of one's nation, culture, ethnicity or religious.

Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* has been written at the time of such father-loss. It pictures a community of people, which while living in modern Sri Lanka, still try to respect a conventional value-system. The characters' doubtfulness in choosing between traditional and modern values in the novel's context of ethnic conflict demonstrates the complex nature of such loss. There are several

[1] "It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence" (Gandhi).

instances in the novel that presents the complex duality of old and new, not only in the form of concrete roles and regulations, but also in the internal dialectics of self and other.

Narrating five different stories – those of Radha Aunty, Daryl Uncle, Jegan Parameswaran, Black Tie, and Shehan — insidethe framework of one (Arjun's) story, the novel prepares the reader for a final attack in the last chapter. Each of these chapters in Arjun's life gives him a new understanding of his life as a result of which he gets detached from his older picture of self. Near the end of the first chapter after fighting with his cousin for not letting him play "bride-bride," Arjun, who had been defeated says, "I knew that I would never enter the girls' world again" (*Selvadurai*39). Before this scene he had experienced fighting with boys that "closed the possibility of entering the boys' world" either (28). The conflicts between his older mindset and a newer one lead Arjun through his progress as a child and teenager.

In the same way, the end of Radha Aunty's story gives Arjun a different picture of his older reality. After walking away from her wedding ceremony he thinks, "how I had thought that weddings could not be anything but magical occasions. How distant that time seemed, a world I had left behind" (96). To leave the old "world" behind, as the book suggests, is a result of encountering the new. In the same way, when the colonies experience the modern world of western principles, their older picture of life vanished. The conflict between the two mentalities, which appears slightly in the first chapter of *Funny Boy*, takes a stronger voice in the later chapters.

Although loving Anil, Radha Aunty marries Rajan. In the same way that cousin Tanuja ("Her Fatness") violates the simplicity and safety of Arjun's old mentality, the train-attack complicates Radha Aunty's decision about marring Anil. Before going to Jaffna referring to their marriage she whispered to their housemaid, "Everything is set. When I come back from Jaffna we're going to do it. I don't care what his parents or my parents say" (81). However, Radha Aunty returned as a different person. "There was a seriousness to her face that was new, a harshness [that Arjun had never seen before]" (90). She wanted "to be let out of the show" (94) for which she was rehearsing for a long time. During this time and later in Radha Aunty's wedding Arjun felt that "something important is missing" (96).Radha Aunty's arranged marriage to a tall "engineer" who "doesn't have insanity in his family" (49) as well as her detachment from the person whom she loved but could not marry because he is not of her "own kind" (53), other than communicating a conventional cultural and social structure, depicts a gap inside her psyche. Having studied and lived in America, Radha Aunty had experienced an image of an independent and liberated woman. Back to Columbus, however, her situation was different. For Arjun who had initially imagined her as an inhabitant of "the realm of romance and marriage" (44) facing "a karapi, as dark as a laborer" with "fizzy" hair who played piano was perplexing:

> As I listened to the music, I felt disoriented… I had imagined her doing a number of things, going for walks on the beach with Rajan, getting dress to go out with him, even cooking and cleaning for him, but I had never imagined her playing piano (45).

It took Radha Aunty some time to situate herself in her older roles not only as a Sri Lankan wife, but also asa Sri Lankan Tamil wife. The slap in the face from Ammachi, the warning look and sharp responses of Anil's father, and finally the train attack taught her how to respond "properly" to the conventional expectations of her society. This return to an old mindset, however, was not aneasyprosperous return. The "missing" point that Arjun notices in Radha Aunty's wedding, besides the missing love for her husband, is the result of the recognition of the difference between two ways of thinking; a gap between western modern ideals which she experienced in America, and the traditional older realities which she faced at home. Although, her responsibility towards older values reduces the impact of the modern values on her,it was easier for an experienced woman like her to doubt the authenticity of the old value systems. This double-consciousness can be filled, as Freud

suggests, through anger and guilt, the passions intensely at work in the third chapter of the book "See no Evil, Hear no Evil."

Chapter three starting with a description of the afternoon activities of Arjun's parents is a*reminiscence* of Macauley's statement about being Indian in blood and western in manner: "my parents began to go out to cocktail parties, dinner parties, and dances at the Oberoi Supper Club" (98). Colonialism not only brings the symbols of western civilization with itself, it also makes the colonized possess those symbols, as Arjun's family owns the "hotel" (another sign of the western culture): "this hotel is our hotel" (100). Later in the book we read that, "The people near [the hotel] were poor and lived in very small houses. Some of them made their living by selling trinkets to tourists. Others worked in the hotels" (165). The imperial claim of the welfare, which was supposed to accompany civilization, was not fulfilled.

Similar to the "western doll"/ "old sari" dichotomy in the first chapter, the third chapter puts forth dichotomies between Alcott's "*Little Women*" (100) and Neliya Aunty's "large trunk full of photograph albums, letters, trinkets, and books, all of which smelt camphor" (101). Neliya Aunty has the classical habits of the older generation, which resemble her "more to the grandpa's generation than [Arjun's] parents" (ibid.). Perhaps, the various traditional and colonized objects gathering in the same trunk mirror the possibility of an inward conflict.

Arjun's mother, Amma, once in love with Daryl uncle, was not allowed to marry him because he was a Burger, a non-Tamil man. Apart from the ethnic oppositions of older generation, which has caused her the present problems, Ammachi's internal conflict is carefully outlined in the narrative. Having entered a conventional marriage with Arjun's father, after years she is still thinking of Daryl uncle. Arjun, despite his illness, observes that, "on many mornings Amma dressed up in her smarter pants suits and left the house… she seemed very different … happy but strangely nervous" (110). It is only after Daryl Uncle's death that Amma calms down. Similar to Radha Aunty, her resolution takes time to shape. Right after Daryl Uncle's death, she steadily attempted to prove that "he did not die by drowning" (133) as the witnesses claimed, but through a legislativeassassination. After her attempts in the police office and when she had recognized the indifference of the police in dealing with the issue, she decided to investigate the issue by going to the village where Daryl servant, Somaratne, lived. In the village, as they passed, children were looking at them "nervously" (142). Somaratne's mother, after all, was not happy for meeting her, she said, "you rich folk from Colombo, what do you know about our suffering?… To people like you we are not even human beings" (143). Leaving disappointedly, Arjun's mother became the targets of the villagers' stone throwing, and she was forced to "run" and leave the village (144). Amma's resolution emerges at the point where she put her hand on Arjun's back and he "broke away from her" calling her "selfish" (ibid.). After this scene she showed no more interest in following Daryl's case and decided to follow her domestic life and take care of her family and children as others had advised her since she was young. After the village scene when a journalist from *Sydney MorningStar* came to talk to her about Daryl Uncle she did not discuss the issue and the man left (147). In the last scene of this chapter, Amma is shown celebrating her husband's return in a manner that is "happy, almost gay" (150) "as if nothing unusual had happened in [their lives]" (123).

The moment of recognition in Selvadurai is also a moment of alienation. After joining his mother to look for Daryl Uncle, Arjun feels "terrible sense of distance from" his siblings (116). Similar to Freud's argument of the traditional man and his moment of recognition that produces anger or guilt, Amma's recognition appears initially in the form of guilt. When seeing Daryl Uncle's corpse she performs a faithful lover, and, later due to the sense of guilt, when celebrating her husband's return she performs the role of a dutiful wife. The point is, perhaps, they would return to "regular routine," as Arjun reflects; "yet nothing could take [them] back to where [they] had been before" (149). The behavior of police officer towards Arjun and his mother when they were in the office also

holds some characteristics of the Freudian argument. When they entered the office Arjun notices that, "The policeman behind the courtier studied [them] for a few moments, looking at [their] clothes and general demeanor to decide what treatment to give" (122), after a few moments, recognizing that they are investigating about a Burger, and "hearing the word "white man," the policeman's attitude immediately changed and became "more helpful" (123). Preferring a "white man" to native Sri Lankans, perhaps, is the result of the westernization of the culture. Speaking English, Daryl Uncle represents the superior citizen that in the policeman's view, native people lack. Playing "squash" with Arjun's father (129), the policeman himself performs the sings of the westernization.

From time to time, we see how the characters' conventional mentality interrupts such performances. Noticing Amma's concern for Daryl Uncle, the policeman tells her "I'm sure he (referring to Arjun's father) will be fascinated by all that's happened in his absence" (130). The policeman expects Arjun's mother to remain faithful to her domestic roles in the absence of her husband. Through preferring western culture and manner to their native culture, while simultaneously expecting conventional performances from women, the policeman presents the amalgam of the colonized mentality; his mind becomes similar to Neliya Aunty's trunk.

In the next chapter of the book the distinction between old and new appears in the relationship between Jegan and Chelva (Arjun's father). One of the people whom Arjun finds different from the members of the older generation is Jegan. Similar to Anil "who was different from men like [his father and uncles]" (82), Jegan is the one with whom Arjun can talk, he becomes his second friend after Radha Aunty. Once, after talking to Jegan, Arjun contemplates, "I had never talked to anybody like that before, nor had anybody spoken to me with such frankness" (200). Picturing the relationship between different people, especially that of his father and Jegan, this chapter focuses on Arjun's father's double-mindedness. Promising Jegan's father to protect his family, Chelva had written done: "We will always protect each other and each others' families until death does us part" (152). Under a passion for this old memory Chelva provides Jegan with a job. However, later under the ethnic conflicts, "he abandoned his promise" (199) and fires him.When Jegan comes to live with them Arjun feels that his father who used to be "a distant figure" starts to change (153). He is no more the silent "parental authority" but "started to tell stories about his childhood" and his romantic life (160). Although he was consciously content with his role as a father, it seems that the distance between father as a paternal authority and father as a friend and a storyteller, is a dichotomy between his defined conventional roles and what he desires to be. His double-mindedness has emerged more gravely when as a Tamil manager he could not decide between supporting Jegan and firing him. On the one hand, he had promised to protect Jegan saying, "[Of course I am not firing you] what kind of man do you think I am?"(183); on the other hand, he acted "shabbily in the whole affair" (181) both when the police arrested Jegan and when the people in the office criticized him. He acted like "an idiot," Arjun thinks (ibid.): "I thought of the number of times he had abandoned his promise, how he had left Jegan in jail overnight, how he had taken the side of the office peon against him" (199). However, after firing Jegan, we see how disoriented Arjun's father becomes: "After breakfast… he was seated on his patio, and when he saw us he didn't even acknowledge our presence. As I drew near, I could see that he had a glass of whiskey in his hand" (197). Although, to an outsider Jegan's dismissing seems to be the result of an ethnic conflict in the office, scrutinizing the father's mindset one can see his double-mindedness and dichotomy between his old mindset and a new social role which caused Jegan's discharge. On the one hand, the father wants to stay loyal to his old promises to Jegan; on the other hand, he should handle the hotel's affair. "As a Tamil" he has "to learn how to play the game" (169); he believes Tamils "must treat carefully" (185). Ending almost abruptly, the friendship between Arjun and Jegan left Arjun perplexed and disappointment. It seems that abrupt ending of friendships is a leitmotif in the narrative. The first chapter ends with Arjun's detachment from his childhood friends, the second with losing "his only friend" Radha Aunty, and the third

chapter finalizesthe friendship between two adults. Jegan has left without "even saying goodbye," an act Arjun "could hardly believe" (202). It seems that Arjun's unfulfilled desires for making friendship work, finally concludes in the next chapter.

"The Best School of All" is a chapter that shows paternal and school authority in the life of Arjun. It presentshis father's sudden decision for changing Arjun's school and sending him to "Victoria Academy" where they force him "to become a man" (205), as well as the character of Black Tie who performs as a disciplining authority. The first thing Arjun noticed about the school was students' different way of dressing; Victoria Academy's uniform was "long trousers" not shorts and shirt which they used to were in his former school St. Gabriel. The way of dressing becomes more precise in Black Tie's costume: he is wearing "a sola topee, that white domed hat… from the time the British ruled Sri Lanka" and "a carefully pressed white suit that also belonged to another era" (209). Considering Black Tie's way of dressing as a British legacy, the book connects him at the very beginning of the chapter to the colonial power. Besides his way of dressing, his authority is presented through his stern manner towards and punishment of defective students, which he calls, "future ill and burdens of Sri Lanka" (218). He has a clear mind about the western lifestyle. Through "playing cricket," he thinks, "one learns to be honest and brave and patriotic" (227). Unlike other characters of the book, Black Tie is not double-minded about what he is doing. As a representative of colonial power, he does not experience the dichotomy of the colonized mind. Based on Freud's theory he is a disciplining father figure implementing the power of civilization and superego. Black Tie is "cruel" (241). Civilization creates an inflexible body of roles and regulations that produces sense of suppressed anger. The students internalized this anger against Black Tie in the form of fear and sadness. Shehan's "face was grimy from weeping," he tells Arjun that he "can't stand the punishments" anymore and Arjun thinks Shehan had "reached his limit" (265). The internalization of anger against authority exist in Shehan, in Arjun takes the form of action. Instead of reciting the poem at the prize ceremony, Arjun decides to perform his hidden disobedience and sense of anger in form of a bad performance: "My ears attuned only to my voice as it mangled those poems, reducing them to disjointed nonsense" (274). And afterward Black Tie looks"tired and defeated" (276).The failure of the authority appears in three levels in this chapter: first, at the level of school's disciplining policies through Black Tie's defeat, second, in Arjun's father and the failed attempt of sending Arjun to Victoria Academy. While his aim was to prevent him from "turning out funny" (205), he actually paved the way for his homosexual orientations. After his first physical relationship with Shehan, Arjun reflects, "My father had been right to try to protect me from what he feared was inside me, but he had failed" (256). The failure of local authority echoes the global failure of the colonizing forces that regardless of individual/cultural differences try to impose their moral principles.

Unlike the other chapters where Arjun's friendship was interrupted and unfulfilled, his friendship with Shehan bears the signs of fulfillment and durability. This friendship is formed not based on sharing similarities but based on "sharing differences." He states, "The difference within me that I sometimes felt I had, that had brought me so much confusion, whatever this difference, it was shared by Shehan" (250). To recognize the differences and trying to modify them, for Selvadurai, is not a solution. The gaps of differences could be filled through sharing and tolerating differences regardless of what they are. Selvadurai's answer to the conflict between any two gaps—Arjun/ Shehan, Black Tie/students, father/son, colonizing/colonized, modernity/tradition—isa dialogue to communicate their differences.

Explaining the psychological roots of the struggle, Freud does not provide an answer for the conditions in which actual struggles happen. Nevertheless, in Arjun's reaction to the bare skeleton of their burned house, Selvadurai provides an answer to the conflict that is reminiscence of Judith Butler's concept of human "vulnerability."In *Precarious Life*, Butler introduces the human vulnerability as a channel for releasing anger through grieving. "When a vulnerability is recognized,"

she asserts, "that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself" (Butler 43). For Butler discharging anger of loss through weeping is a form of recognition. Recognition of one's vulnerability happens at the end of Selvadurai's book:

> The reality of losing our house is slowly beginning to sink in, but what I feel is nothing like what I imagined. I expected to be sad and nostalgic for a part of my life that is now destroyed. But I only get irritated and lethargic… The yearning for things like my records and my books… gnaws at me until I think I must have them this moment or I will die. Then I become angry and frustrated (Selvadurai 298).

Following his anger and frustration, Arjun's vulnerability emergesas for the first time he cries for what he lost:

> For the first time, I began to cry for our home. I sat… and wept for the loss of my home, for the loss of everything that I held to be precious. I tried to muffle the sound of my weeping, but my voice cried out loudly as if it were the only weapon I had against those who had destroyed my life (304).

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