

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 16: Crossing Borders (India-Sri Lanka)- I

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugees, migration, and diaspora. Today, we are discussing our module, 'Historicizing South Asian Migrations,' through case studies of select South Asian literary texts. The text we will consider today for the lecture is Shyam Selvadurai's novel, 'Funny Boy.' Before we start discussing 'Funny Boy,' we must understand the dynamics, disputes, and issues associated with the India-Sri Lanka border.

India and Sri Lanka have deep-rooted historical, cultural, and economic connections. The Tamil population in Sri Lanka shares strong linguistic and cultural ties with the Tamil Nadu region in India. The Tamils living in Sri Lanka have very similar habits and culture to those residing in Tamil Nadu, India. Both India and Sri Lanka have engaged in diplomatic and political interactions since India's independence in 1947. However, the civil war in Sri Lanka, which lasted from 1983 to 2009, was essentially an intermittent insurgency.



Rebellions against the government were initiated by the LTTE, or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. These civil wars and intermittent insurgencies have significantly strained diplomatic relations between India and Sri Lanka over the years. The civil war arose from the marginalized position of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka and their demands for

visibility, rights, and justice. Their marginalized position led to the formation of groups like the LTTE, and these insurgencies have placed significant strain on India-Sri Lanka relations over the years.

India-Sri Lanka Border: Fishermen Disputes and Tamil Migration
Political and Cultural Ties

- India and Sri Lanka have deep-rooted historical, cultural, and economic connections. The Tamil population in Sri Lanka shares linguistic and cultural ties with Tamil Nadu, India.
- Both countries have engaged in diplomatic and political interactions since independence. However, the civil war in Sri Lanka that lasted between 1983 and 2009, and which was an intermittent insurgency against the government by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, has strained the relations over the years.
- Fishermen disputes arise from competing claims over the rich fishing grounds of the Palk Strait. Migration of Tamils, especially during the Sri Lankan civil war, intensified these disputes. Fishermen's boats are often used for both fishing and illegal migration across the maritime border.
- The complex relationship between the nations involves political, economic, and human rights dimensions.



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Fishermen disputes arise due to competing claims over the rich fishing grounds found in the Palk Strait. So, the Palk Strait has rich fishing grounds over which fishermen from both India and Sri Lanka compete. They compete for these rich resources. The migration of Tamils, especially during the Sri Lankan Civil War, further intensified these disputes. Fishermen's boats are often used for fishing and for illegal migration across the maritime border.

So, the complex relationship between the two nations—India and Sri Lanka—involves many different dimensions. These could be political, economic, or human rights dimensions, as well as personal ones. So, the 1974 and 1976 Maritime Boundary Treaties signed between India and Sri Lanka aimed to clarify and demarcate the territorial waters. There would be something called exclusive economic zones, or EEZs in short,

for both nations. So, each nation would enjoy exclusive economic zones where its fishermen could exploit their resources. They could fish within that zone. These treaties specifically defined the boundaries across the Palk Strait, Gulf of Mannar, and the Bay of Bengal. The maritime boundary treaties of 1974 and 1976 delineated the territorial waters.

India-Sri Lanka Border: Fishermen Disputes and Tamil Migration

Historical Relations and Boundaries

- The 1974 and 1976 maritime boundary treaties between India and Sri Lanka were aimed at clarifying the territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of both nations. These treaties specifically defined the boundaries across the Palk Strait, Gulf of Mannar, and the Bay of Bengal. The maritime boundary treaties of 1974 and 1976 delineated territorial waters.
- Disagreements over the boundary continue to cause friction, impacting fishermen and migrants.

These issues are interlinked, as migration is often a result of the economic hardships caused by these disputes.

- The fishermen conflict is not only an economic issue, but part of a larger geopolitical struggle. It reflects broader tensions between Tamil Nadu's support for Sri Lankan Tamils and India's national diplomacy. These disputes have become a proxy for addressing Tamil migration and cultural identity issues.



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So, this is something once again very peculiar, and, you know, critics who are looking at the human dimension of such territories treaties—parts of, you know, international diplomatic relations—would go on to ask how viable it is to even try to draw boundaries and lines through the water, across the water. Can we actually divide a water body in terms of borders? A part belonging to Sri Lanka and another part belonging to India? It almost sounds impractical.

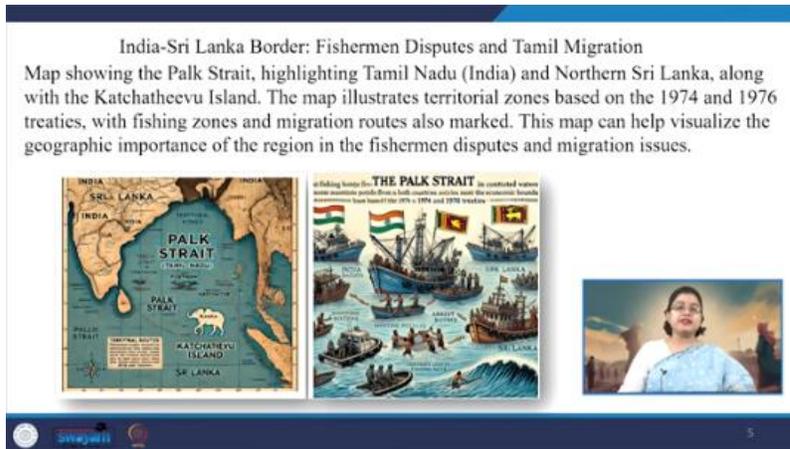
So these issues—the disagreements over the boundaries—however, continue to cause friction, and it impacts the fishermen and the migrants. All these issues are interlinked, and migration often happens as a result of the economic vulnerability and hardships caused by the disputes between the two nations. So, the fishermen conflict is not only an economic issue. We have to understand that it is part of a larger geopolitical struggle. It reflects the broader tensions between Tamil Nadu's support for Sri Lankan Tamils and India's national diplomacy.

And these disputes have become a representation—a proxy—for addressing Tamil migration and the cultural identity issues or the identity crisis that the minority Tamil population in Sri Lanka has constantly suffered. The Palk Strait is a narrow body of water that separates Tamil Nadu, part of India, from the northern province of Sri Lanka. So, it's just a narrow body of water that separates Tamil Nadu from Sri Lanka. And the Palk Strait connects the Bay of Bengal to the Gulf of Mannar. It is strategically important for both fisheries and maritime navigation.

So, due to the short distance between the two shores of the Palk Strait, sometimes as narrow as 53 to 80 kilometers, And such a narrow distance would mean that the two shores, the two opposite shores, are practically visible. Due to this narrowness, fishermen from both sides have historically used this region for fishing. Now, The Katchatheevu

Island, which is located within the Palk Strait, was ceded to Sri Lanka in 1974, and it remains a point of contention.

That further strains the India-Sri Lanka relationship—the fact that Katchatheevu Island became a part of Sri Lankan territory. So, the geography itself makes it easy for illegal migration and cross-border movements to happen, which impact both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka's northern Tamil culture, political life, and other different aspects of living. Now, let's take a look at this map. This map shows the Palk Strait, right.



We have the Palk Strait highlighting the Tamil Nadu part of India and then northern Sri Lanka, right. So, basically, this thin gap. Right. And then we have the Katchatheevu Island.

So, the map illustrates territorial zones based on the 1974 and 1976 treaties, with fishing zones and migration routes also marked. This map enables us to visualize the geographic importance of this entire region in the fishermen disputes and migration issues. So, we have a picture map of, you know, how fishing happens in this region. It's a kind of symbolic picture.

We see that the Indian boats and the Sri Lankan boats are all, you know, vying for their resources. They have their own countries' flags. And so, this region happens to be a very, we could say, volatile zone where so many things are happening. You know, illegal migration through these boats, competition over fisheries, some bit of smuggling,

India-Sri Lanka Border: Fishermen Disputes and Tamil Migration

Map showing the Palk Strait, highlighting Tamil Nadu (India) and Northern Sri Lanka, along with the Katchatheevu Island. The map illustrates territorial zones based on the 1974 and 1976 treaties, with fishing zones and migration routes also marked. This map can help visualize the geographic importance of the region in the fishermen disputes and migration issues.

The composite image consists of three distinct parts. On the left is a map of the Palk Strait region, showing the coastline of India (Tamil Nadu) and Sri Lanka, with Katchatheevu Island highlighted. The central part is an illustration titled 'THE PALK STRAIT' depicting several fishing boats from different countries (India, Sri Lanka, and others) in the water, with a small boat carrying people across the strait. On the right is a portrait of a woman with glasses, wearing a light blue top, looking towards the camera.

and then we see that when the fishermen are doing any kind of illegal activities and they are caught, they happen to be basically poor people, and their boats are confiscated. So, all they have for their living is their boat. And once they are found doing any kind of illegal activity, the boats are confiscated, and they are detained. So, the Palk Strait is a shared, contested space for both Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen. Many Tamil refugees, particularly

During the height of the civil war in Sri Lanka, people would use fishing boats to cross the Palk Strait and enter Tamil Nadu in India. This illegal migration increased tensions between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments as fishermen were frequently caught somewhere in the middle. So, fishermen's boats would be used by the Tamils to migrate to India as refugees. And because the fishermen are usually very poor, they are driven by economic necessity and would often become facilitators of these crossings, thereby adding another dimension to the ongoing maritime disputes. So, India has struggled time and again to manage the influx of refugees, resulting in so many refugee camps growing over the years that we see in Tamil Nadu.

These camps become politically charged issues in both Tamil Nadu and in central Indian politics. Tamil Nadu's cultural and ethnic ties to Sri Lankan Tamils led to political advocacy for the refugee population. There is a significant section of Tamils living in Tamil Nadu. They would definitely try to support the Tamil refugees who were coming in through the Palk Strait, seeking survival benefits and then citizenship within the Indian nation-state. The Tamil population would definitely support these refugees, considering their helpless status back in Sri Lanka.

India-Sri Lanka Border: Fishermen Disputes and Tamil Migration

- Palk Strait is a shared, contested space for both Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen.
- Many Tamil refugees, particularly during the height of the civil war, used fishing boats to cross the Palk Strait. This illegal migration increased tensions between Indian and Sri Lankan governments, as fishermen were frequently caught in the middle.
- Fishermen from both sides, driven by economic necessity, became facilitators of these crossings, adding another dimension to the ongoing maritime disputes.
- India struggled to manage the influx of refugees, resulting in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu. These camps became politically charged issues in both Tamil Nadu and central Indian politics. Tamil Nadu's cultural and ethnic ties to Sri Lankan Tamils led to political advocacy for the refugee population, adding a layer of complexity to the fishermen disputes.



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So, this entire picture centering on the India-Sri Lanka border adds so many layers of complexity to the fishermen disputes. Now, keeping this background in mind, we have to study Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*. So, *Funny Boy*, which came out in 1994, is set in Sri Lanka during the years that led to the civil war. So, we see the civil war as a general backdrop of this story, of this plotline. The novel follows the protagonist, whose name is Arjie, a young Tamil boy in a country fraught with ethnic tensions.

So, the different shades of a juvenile's emotions are portrayed through the character of Arjie. How a child who is part of a minority group feels as he grows up in a geopolitical space fraught with ethnic tensions and we see that this sense of, you know, unbelonging, this sense of jeopardy is further multiplied or further amplified in the case of the protagonist Arjie owing to the fact that his sexuality or sexual experiences are very different from that of a normal or a heteronormal boy.

So, the novel serves as both a coming of age story and a narrative of the Tamil diaspora and it offers readers insight into the emotional and cultural impacts of the Sri Lankan conflict. Selvadurai himself is a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist who is born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1965 to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father. So, he traces his roots to a very mixed background, mixed family where one parent is a Sinhalese and the other parent is a Tamil. He has shared roots. And so he can completely look at this entire Civil War episode in a way from the position of a third space, maybe more so because he is part of the diaspora.

He moved to Canada and he can evaluate, he can assess the human repercussions from a non-biased point of view, his mixed heritage exposes him to both the community's cultures as well as the conflicts, the different issues which significantly shape his writing. Now, *Funny Boy* combines personal struggles with a broader narrative of the Sri Lankan

Tamil experience during turbulent times. After the ethnic riots that happened in 1983, (and the month is called Black July, it happened in the month, during the month of July, so known as Black July), Selvadurai and his family fled Sri Lanka and they eventually settled in Canada. This personal experience of migration and displacement is a recurring theme throughout his artworks, particularly in *Funny Boy*.

Selvadurai's debut novel, *Funny Boy*, brought him critical acclaim. The novel won several awards, including the Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Men's Fiction. His writing often focuses on themes of identity, sexuality, and ethnic conflict, particularly within the context of Sri Lanka's civil unrest. This novel portrays the rise of ethnic tension between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka. Tamil families, including that of the protagonist Arjie, start feeling the pressure of displacement.

This mirrors the real-world migration and the experiences of migration that the Tamils underwent when they had to come to India. As tensions between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority escalate in Sri Lanka, *Funny Boy* highlights the growing fear among Tamil families that migration may eventually be their only option for survival. The violence that begins to consume Sri Lanka leaves families such as Arjie's grappling with the question of whether they should flee their homeland or stay and face an uncertain future. In the novel, Arjie's father somberly reflects on the possibility of leaving Sri Lanka by saying, 'We must think of leaving, or there will be no future for us.'

Migration and Displacement in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994)

As tensions between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority escalate in Sri Lanka, *Funny Boy* highlights the growing fear among Tamil families that migration may be their only option for survival. The violence that begins to consume Sri Lanka leaves families like Arjie's grappling with the question of whether to flee their homeland or stay and face an uncertain future.

In the novel, Arjie's father somberly reflects on the possibility of leaving Sri Lanka, saying, "We must think of leaving, or there will be no future for us" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 273). This line from the text encapsulates the internal conflict faced by many Tamil families during this time—the tension between staying in their homeland and fleeing for safety.

Selvadurai uses this moment to mirror the experiences of thousands of Tamils who fled the country during the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 (Black July). The violence led to the first large wave of Tamil refugees who sought asylum in countries like India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, which shares cultural and linguistic ties with the Sri Lankan Tamils.



Swagati

This statement from the text contains the germ of the internal conflict that so many Tamil families faced during the civil war in Sri Lanka, where there was always this consideration, this fear, or the apprehension of losing one's homeland, losing one's identity tied to one's home and earth, and becoming a refugee in a new nation. But then,

just to survive, so many families took the decision to flee. for safety, just to save their own lives. Selvadurai uses this moment of vulnerability, human fear, and collective apprehension among the Tamils to mirror the experiences of thousands who fled the country during the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, also known as Black July.

The violence led to the first large wave of Tamil refugees who sought asylum in countries like India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, which shares cultural and linguistic ties with the Sri Lankan Tamils. So as the violence worsens and the human impact of civil war is largely visible and once the animosity sets in, just like we see in the case of India's partition, once animosity sets in, once insanity sets in, sets in the human moral is plummeting like anything there is only hitting an abysmal pit people can lose all their moral dimension burden and reduce their instincts to that of animals so there would be large scale incendiary, pillaging, killing and the novel illustrates how Tamil families increasingly seek migration to India as their only hope for survival. In particular, the proximity of Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka, both in terms of geography and in terms of culture, becomes an important factor for the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Migration and Displacement in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994)

- As the violence worsens, the novel illustrates how Tamil families increasingly see migration to India as their only hope for survival. In particular, the proximity of Tamil Nadu, both geographically and culturally, becomes an important factor for these families. The straits separating Sri Lanka and India become the symbol of both escape and loss.
- Arjie's mother, for instance, expresses her concerns: "*Do you think they'll ever stop? Or will we always be running?*" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 255). Her words highlight the feeling of perpetual displacement that comes with being a refugee—the uncertainty of when, or if, one can ever truly stop running from conflict and violence.
- This text reflects the real-world fears of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who fled to India in waves. Many feared the loss of their cultural roots and homeland, but they were confronting the harsh reality that remaining in Sri Lanka could mean violence, persecution, or death.



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The streets separating Sri Lanka and India become the symbol of both escape and loss. Just like the symbol of train, you know, that is almost a constant symbol, a leitmotif that comes back, that keeps coming back in partition artworks, the train that is in the normal times supposed to be a symbol of connector, connecting humanity becomes a symbol of bloodshed, of hostility, carrying corpses and also in less extreme situations it symbolizes leaving one's homeland behind. So it is a symbol of escape and loss just like the symbol of Palk Strait here, where one can run away with one's life through the Palk Strait, but also leave behind so many things that cannot be retrieved once again.

Arjie's mother, for instance, at one point expresses her concerns by saying, I quote, do you think they will ever stop or will we always be running? Unquote. So how much can people run? What can people run away from and how far? Right.

So her words are almost ringing in the ears of the readers. They deliberate how far and how long and how much can the minorities, the marginalized subjects, you know, run. When can we stop running? Her words highlight the feeling of a perpetual displacement which comes over. along with the sense of becoming a refugee, the uncertainty of when or whether ever one can truly stop running away from conflict and violence.

So there is this sense of, you know, being in exile, being uprooted, from one's familiar territory by force and suddenly reduced to someone begging for security on political grounds. That is the experience of refugeeness, basically. So Funny Boy reflects the real-world fears of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who fled to India in batches, in waves, across different periods in history, at different junctures in history, over many years, over a period of many years. And many feared the loss of their cultural roots and homeland.

However, they were confronting so much of a harsh reality that remaining in Sri Lanka would mean facing violence, persecution and even death. While the novel is deeply personal in its portrayal of Arjie's family, it also humanizes the broader political conflict through individual stories. So this is also something once again that we see in the case of Partition Scholarship, And this is where the lens of history and the lens of literature or creative writing kind of differ.

History or historiography is much more formal in nature, and it gives us—or at least tends to give us—facts, whereas creative works can extrapolate. They enable us to imagine things. So, they enable us to extend human relationships beyond a world of boundaries, a world of political situations. So, to put it in a very artistic or poetic manner, it wouldn't be wrong to say that creative writing or artworks always have this human touch, this dehumanizing question of political conflict, the question of border tension. People reunite again and start living in harmony.

It's very difficult to imagine in the face of riots and hostile situations. It's very difficult to believe that the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka will start living with love and harmony in the near future. But then creative works, artworks, come up with these kinds of extrapolations, these kinds of suggestions. What if? And history, through its straight facts, just gives back as if this is going to happen.

So, what if this happens? What if people come together? What if humanity comes together and all the differences are resolved? Artworks delve more on that, and history gives us as if that is going to happen because all the facts are kind of against such possibilities. But then the possibilities do remain, and we never know what could happen in the future. So, artworks always have this tendency to humanize the experiences, go back, bring out experiences through real-life coordinates, touch the human psyche, human consciousness, human sensibilities, rather than only talk about the larger political decrees or the larger political chapters that we get to know about from history.

So, migration, the process of migration that is shown, that is portrayed in *Funny Boy* is not just an abstract concept. But it is shown as a lived experience filled with complex emotions, be it fear, loss, longing or hope. Arjie's grandmother, when discussing the possibility of leaving the homeland, says, this is our home. How can we leave it?

And once again drawing a parallel with partition texts, so many of the matriarchs, the senior female members from the family, they still cannot believe that they have to leave their homes where they have spent all their lives. They have never seen the public place. Not many elderly women would go, you know, into activities in the public domain. All they knew was the home and now the home is going. So it's very difficult for elder women like the grandmother kind of figure out to understand the consequence of such displacement.

So this quote says, How can we leave our home underscores the emotional tool of displacement, reflecting how deeply intertwined the concept of home is with one's identity and belonging. So once the home is taken away, a chunk of one's identity is also compromised. It is left behind. This emotional conflict between leaving and staying mirrors the real experiences of so many Tamils who, even as they were finding physical safety in India or in other countries,

would continue to feel a deep sense of void, a deep sense of disconnect from their homeland, from their native land. In this way, *Funny Boy* bridges the gap between the personal lives of its characters and the larger socio-political happenings, the larger socio-political issues that lead up to, that culminate in the civil war and that drive the Tamil migration out of Sri Lanka as the war reaches its height. Migration is presented in *Funny Boy* as both a source of hope and loss. It offers the possibility of escaping ethnic persecution, but at the same time, it also means leaving behind one's homeland and the comforts of a familiar world. So, whenever we are refugees in a new land, we have to

start life afresh, we have to develop knowledge of the surroundings, and we are forever outsiders in a new land.

It cannot be the same as one's home. This tension is central to Arjie's journey because he is grappling with the prospect of leaving a place that has shaped his identity altogether, even as that place becomes increasingly hostile toward him and his family. The novel also reflects the larger reality of the Sri Lankan civil war, during which thousands of Tamil families fled the country, as I have already mentioned. So, through this little child's personal journey, what he understands, how he realizes things, how things dawn on him.

Author Selvadurai highlights the emotional toll, the trauma that migration causes on those who are forced to leave their homes, as well as the complicated relationship between national and ethnic identities at the time of conflict. For Arjie and his family, migration represents both hope and loss. On the one hand, it offers the possibility of escaping violence and finding safety. On the other hand, it signifies losing their home, their national identity, as well as their sense of belonging in Sri Lanka. Such duality is

You know, it is a central theme in the novel, reflecting the experiences of many Tamil families during that time. So, coming back again, just reiterating the quote: 'If we leave, what will become of us? Who will we be?' Right? Once being is kind of challenged, once being in a way is kind of hurt, once the familiar land is left behind, the identity experiences a setback—the being, the existence, experiences a setback, right? 'Who will we be? What will happen to our becoming?' There is a kind of turning point once you are in a new land; there is no control over your being, your becoming.

Because you are not a rightful citizen. In a sense, you are a refugee, seeking refuge, seeking protection and security in an unknown land. So, this question captures the profound sense of displacement that migration brings. Leaving Sri Lanka means losing a part of one's identity, a chunk of one's identity, but at the same time, staying back means continuing to face persecution. So, *Funny Boy* reflects the complex dynamics of cultural survival in the context of displacement,

and it offers a very nuanced, very layered portrayal of Tamil refugees and their quest to maintain their identity. In *Funny Boy*, Shyam Selvadurai highlights the importance of cultural preservation for Tamil migrants and refugees. The novel explores how Tamil traditions offer both comfort and a sense of identity to the families who are otherwise displaced and marginalized. So, seeing the entire novel is narrated through the lens of

Arjie's family, and we see the emotional complexity of maintaining cultural identity in the face of migration and displacement.

How do you keep your identity together when your existence, your basic survival, is at stake? This novel shows that for Tamil refugees, cultural survival is not just about preserving basic customs; it is also about resisting, defying, or challenging the erasure of their self. In a world that seeks to marginalize them. It is always very challenging for a minoritized, marginalized social group to maintain its customs, especially if the larger population is not very accommodating in nature and does not accommodate who they are. Otherwise, they feel imperiled, vulnerable, and jeopardized.

So, in this sense, *Funny Boy* reflects the resilience of Tamil culture in the face of general adversity and hostility. The theme of cultural preservation in *Funny Boy* can be seen as part of a larger, broader post-colonial narrative in which displaced communities often seek to maintain their cultural identity, even as they are forced to move across borders due to unavoidable situations, especially political tensions in their homeland. With this, I would like to conclude our lecture here today. Let us meet in our next lecture, and we will continue our discussion on *Funny Boy* a bit more before moving on to our next topic.

Culture and Survival in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994)

- In *Funny Boy*, Shyam Selvadurai highlights the importance of cultural preservation for Tamil migrants and refugees. The novel explores how Tamil traditions offer both comfort and a sense of identity to families who are otherwise displaced and marginalized. Through the lens of Arjie's family, Selvadurai portrays the emotional complexity of maintaining cultural identity in the face of migration and displacement.
- The novel shows that for Tamil refugees, cultural survival is not just about preserving customs; it is about resisting erasure in a world that seeks to marginalize them. In this way, *Funny Boy* reflects the resilience of Tamil culture in the face of adversity.
- The theme of cultural preservation in *Funny Boy* can be seen as a part of a broader postcolonial narrative in which displaced communities seek to maintain their cultural identity even as they are forced to move across borders.



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Thank you.