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Performing Masculinity in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*: A Butlerian Analysis

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Abstract:
Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* explores the experiences of Arjie Chelvaratnam as a Sri Lankan Tamil and him becoming gradually aware of his sexuality. This paper examines the novel through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. The study focuses on the ways in which masculinity is constructed, performed, and regulated by the society. Arjie's childhood experiences demonstrate how certain behaviors, interests, appearances, and emotional expressions are coded either as masculine or feminine. This gender coding creates expectations about how a person should or should not behave in the society. His identification by people as a "funny boy" reveals the consequences of failing to conform to these expectations of the gender. The paper, through a Butlerian reading, further examines the relationship between Arjie's gender nonconformity and his emerging queer identity. Further, it illustrates the role of family and society in enforcing normative gender behaviour, while recognizing that gender expression and sexual orientation are not synonymous. *Funny Boy* can therefore be understood as a critique of the idea of masculinity that is fixed and rigid.

Keyword: Gender performativity, Masculinity, femineity, homosexuality.

Introduction

In *Funny Boy*, Shyam Selvadurai tells the story of Arjun "Arjie" Chelvaratnam, a Tamil boy growing up in 1970s–80s Sri Lanka, who slowly realizes that his gendered behaviors and desires do not match the strict expectations around him. Early critics often focused on Arjie's emerging homosexuality or on the novel's political context (the 1983 Black July riots). This study shifts the lens to Arjie's gender – specifically, to how the novel portrays masculinity as a constructed performance. Guided by research questions, we ask:
How is masculinity constructed and performed through social and familial expectations in *Funny Boy*? How does Arjie's gender nonconformity challenge those normative constructions? and How does *Funny Boy* reveal masculinity as a social performance in a

Butlerian sense? We aim to show that Selvadurai's narrative exemplifies Butler's famous claim that gender "is not a fact" but rather "acts of gender" that "create the idea of gender". Our methodology is close textual analysis informed by queer theory. We draw on Butler's *Gender Trouble* and related summaries, to frame gender as a repetitive performance. We also survey relevant scholarship on *Funny Boy*: Gairola's reading of Arjie's "gender-bending" Bride-Bride game, Edwards's thesis on queer awakenings, and Prateek's analysis of *Funny Boy* as a counter-hegemonic text. By integrating these secondary sources, we ground our reading in existing criticism while foregrounding the specific angle of masculinity and gender performativity. Finally, following MLA conventions, we cite primary and secondary sources (including *Funny Boy* and Butler) meticulously.

Historical and Cultural Context: Colonialism, Patriarchy, and Hypermasculinity

Selvadurai's novel is set during a turbulent period in Sri Lanka's history. Colonial history and ethnic conflict have shaped local notions of gender. As one critic notes, British colonizers in South Asia emphasized a racial binary ("male" vs. "female" races) and portrayed native men as "feeble in mind and body," which provoked post-colonial society to valorize a new ideal of masculinity. By the time of Arjie's childhood, Sri Lankan (especially Sinhalese Buddhist) nationalism idealized hypermasculinity to counter any stigma of weakness. The IvySCI summary of Karunanayake (2024) points out that *Funny Boy* interrogates precisely these "Victorian sexuality" and "patriarchal norms" inherited from colonialism. In other words, masculinity in Selvadurai's Sri Lanka is a product of historical forces: it has been "made, not born," much like "heterosexual" identity historically.

In *Funny Boy*, colonial legacies manifest in characters like the headmaster Mr. Abeysinghe ("Black Tie"), who embodies the British "English ideal" of discipline. Black Tie enforces strict masculine codes: he violently punishes boys for trivial deviations (hair length, clothing details, even "lick[ing] their lips or blink[ing] too hard" – read as winking). This imagery underscores that "the English ideal" of masculinity is not natural but imposed. Similarly, Arjie's father, Chelva, aspires to British-style masculinity. Near the novel's end, Chelva sends Arjie to an all-boys school so that it "will force [Arjie] to become a man" and not "turn out funny or anything like that". The echo of Macaulay's colonial rhetoric here is telling: Chelva wants Arjie "Indian in blood… but English in taste… morals". All this historical background shows that the gender regime Arjie faces – a strict, patriarchal, heteronormative ideal – was socially constructed long before his birth.

Theoretical Framework: Butlerian Gender Performativity

To analyze masculinity in *Funny Boy*, we invoke Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is performative: it is a repeated set of acts and signs that create the appearance of a fixed gender identity. As Perlego (Paige Allen) explains, Butler's view is that *"gender is what you do, not who you are."* These outward acts do not express an inner essence but actually produce gender. In Butler's words, there is "neither an 'essence' that gender expresses… nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires," and thus "the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all". In simpler terms: gender is like a ritual – made real only by its repetition.

We are taught to repeatedly perform it, which makes it seem stable; however, that stability is an illusion.

Butler also emphasizes that society rewards or punishes these performances. Structures of power enforce binary norms: those who perform gender "correctly" (e.g. hegemonic masculinity) are rewarded, while nonconformity is punished. For example, gender roles are literally choreographed by social institutions and the family, and failure to follow them can carry social stigma or even violence. Butler's insight is relevant in *Funny Boy*: Arjie's family and school routinely reward "masculine" behavior (strength, stoicism, heterosexuality) and discipline his transgressions (tomboy games, femininity, same-sex desire) with shame or force. This framework allows us to interpret scenes in *Funny Boy* not as exceptions, but as illustrations of gender as a repeated performance and as a "regulatory fiction".

Literature Review and Research Gap

Prior criticism has touched on related themes. Gairola (2014) interprets *Funny Boy* as a *"counter-bildungsroman"*, emphasizing Arjie's "gender-bending game of 'Bride-Bride'" and other playful transgressions. He argues these acts "queer" the institutions of home and school and subvert the masculine nationalism of the era. Edwards (2018) explores Arjie's "queer awakening," highlighting how Arjie seeks refuge in private spaces of femininity (the theater with Radha Aunty, Nalini's bungalow, reading girlish books). Prateek (2014) discusses how Selvadurai deliberately constructs *Funny Boy* as an "unhealthy" text to de-naturalize heterosexual norms; he notes how Arjie's rewrites of poems at school are acts of revenge and solidarity, and how the novel imagines Arjie as "a common homosexual man" rather than a traditional hero.

While these works analyze queerness, gender, and postcolonial identity in *Funny Boy*, few have explicitly applied Butler's performativity to masculinity in the novel. Much scholarship treats Arjie's gender and sexuality interchangeably; few focus on how *masculinity itself* is constructed and policed. Our paper fills this gap by foregrounding masculinity (not just homosexuality) and by using Butler's theoretical lens. We show that *Funny Boy* not only tells a queer coming-of-age story, but also reveals the arbitrary scripts of manhood as an ongoing performance.

Methodology

The analysis uses brief, directly verified quotations from the supplied edition of Funny Boy, alongside paraphrase and close textual analysis. Parenthetical citations refer to the printed page numbers in the novel. Secondary-source claims are retained as presented in the draft and should be checked against the original publications before submission.

RQ1: How is masculinity constructed and performed by social and familial expectations in *Funny Boy*?

In *Funny Boy*, masculinity is not an innate quality Arjie is born with, but a role others insist he inhabit. This role is defined by Sri Lankan society and Arjie's family in very explicit ways. Chelva (Arjie's father) embodies patriarchal authority and the colonial ideal of

manhood. Early on, Chelva demands Arjie join the boys in playing cricket – a quintessentially masculine, *English*-style sport – pushing him "into a new territory that encourages masculinity and aggression". In other words, Chelva evicts Arjie from the gentle indoor games and dresses his daughter Nalini usually plays, and forces him into the hypermasculine arena of the cricket field. At school, Mr. Abeysinghe (nicknamed "Black Tie" by the boys) similarly enforces masculine uniformity. He punishes any deviation from the English masculine code – for example, he canes boys whose hair is too long or even whose "[d]ress outfits violate the code," and he perceives "licking lips or blinking too hard" as a punishable *winking*. The very detail of punishing a blink underlines how arbitrary and totalizing these gender rules are. In Black Tie's regime, clothing, hair, and even unconscious gestures become markers of masculinity. These scenes illustrate how *boys are schooled to perform masculinity*: militaristic discipline, competitive sports, strict decorum. The drills and punishments are repeated and ritualized, instilling the illusion that "this is just what being a man is."

Primary-text evidence: Arjie recalls that the boys' cricket-playing "was incomprehensible to me" (Selvadurai 3).

Chelva's rationale for Victoria Academy is explicit: "The Academy will force you to become a man" (Selvadurai 205).

Arjie is told that his father fears he might "turn[] out funny or anything like that" (Selvadurai 205).

The euphemism "funny" makes gender nonconformity legible as a family problem to be prevented. The anxiety is not only about Arjie's private desires; it is about whether he will embody publicly recognizable manhood. The family thus acts as a regulatory institution, anticipating and disciplining a gendered future.

The verb "force" is especially revealing: manhood is treated as an outcome that an institution can manufacture through discipline. Arjie's father does not describe the school as helping him discover an existing identity; he expects it to correct him. This is a clear example of masculinity being produced through repeated institutional practices.

In the childhood game, Arjie describes the pleasure of dressing as the bride and becoming "a self magnified" (Selvadurai 5).

Chelva objects to Arjie's reading, calling Little Women "a book for girls, a book that boys should not be reading" (Selvadurai 101).

The school's rules reach even involuntary gestures: Arjie is warned, "Never blink too hard in front of him, and most of all, don't lick your lips" (Selvadurai 206).

The disproportion between a blink or lip movement and punishment exposes the instability of the masculine code. Because ordinary bodily gestures can be interpreted as defiance, the boys must continually monitor themselves. Masculinity here operates as surveillance and self-regulation, not as a secure inner quality.

The repeated distinction between "girls" and "boys" turns a book into a boundary marker. Reading becomes a gendered practice, and paternal authority attempts to restrict the

cultural materials through which Arjie can imagine himself. This episode shows how masculinity is maintained not only by what boys do, but also by what they are forbidden to enjoy.

The language of transformation presents gendered appearance as something assembled through costume, gesture, and the approving gaze of others. Arjie's joy does not prove that he possesses a fixed feminine essence; rather, the scene dramatizes how clothing and ritual make a role feel vivid and inhabitable. The game also reverses the usual gender assignment by placing a boy at the center of the bridal ceremony.
At the novel's end, Arjie explains his intervention on Shehan's behalf: "I did it for you. I couldn't bear to see you suffer anymore" (Selvadurai 278).
His explanation relocates courage from the school's official masculine ideals to care, attachment, and ethical choice. The action disrupts the institution's ceremonial script, while Arjie's words frame loyalty to Shehan—not conformity to authority—as the motive that matters.

This brief admission establishes that the masculine-coded sport does not simply fail to interest Arjie; it is alien to his experience. The contrast between the boys' territory and the girls' garden makes masculinity spatially organized and socially learned. His exclusion from cricket is therefore a conflict over who is permitted to belong in the category "boy," not merely a difference in hobby.

When Amma orders Diggy to include him, Arjie protests, "I hate cricket!" (Selvadurai 18).
The blunt refusal makes visible the coercive nature of the lesson in manhood. Cricket is presented as a compulsory route into masculine peer culture, while Arjie's resistance exposes that route as a social expectation rather than an instinctive male preference.

Selvadurai also shows masculinity as enforced through literature and education. At a school assembly, Arjie is exposed to Victorian-era poetry. He finds that *Vitae Lampada* – an inspirational poem recited by schoolboys – lays out a stiff martial ideal of honesty, bravery, and patriotism, none of which match Arjie's experience at the Academy. In fact, Arjie "recognize[s] the unfairness of the patriarchal system" at school when he cheats on a cricket match only to be blamed. The Academy's mission to glorify such poems is portrayed as literally part of its patriarchal hierarchy. Darryn Edwards notes that for Arjie these poems "glorify masculinity and cast the Academy in a positive light," making them symbols of "the patriarchal hierarchy he has resisted". This shows that institutional narratives (curricula, literature) are invested in naturalizing masculinity.

Masculinity is also regulated at home by gendered expectations. Chelva tells Arjie and his older brother Shyam that Arjie must become manly or risk social condemnation. In the novel's climax, Chelva explicitly declares that sending Arjie to the all-boys Victoria

Academy will ensure Arjie "become a man" and not "turn out funny or anything like that". The implication is clear: to be male in this society means to abandon feminine traits. *Funny Boy* demonstrates that these familial commands – joining sports teams, avoiding makeup, dressing like a proper male – are not inherent mandates, but social scripts enforced by authority figures. This aligns with Butler's idea that gender norms are "regulatory fictions" used to control bodies.

In summary, *Funny Boy* depicts masculinity as a set of behaviors and attributes that must be repeatedly performed to meet cultural approval. Boys at school are drilled in obedience and sportsmanship, while at home Arjie is denied feminine outlets (for example, Chelva refuses to let him read *Little Women*, calling them "book[s] for girls" that "boys should not be reading". Such episodes underscore the novel's message: masculinity is *constructed* through discipline and exclusion, not discovered. Each instance of enforced cricket games, poetry recitation, or dress code violation and punishment drives home that masculinity is something Arjie and others must enact, rather than a natural, fixed essence.

RQ2: How does Arjie's gender nonconformity challenge these normative constructions of masculinity?

From the earliest chapters, Arjie resists the masculine roles others impose. The famous "Bride-Bride" game in Part I is emblematic: as a young child, Arjie eagerly plays the bride and dresses in a woman's saree, enjoying all the trappings of femininity. When Radha Aunty's wedding is mocked at school, Arjie retaliates by imagining himself in that ceremony, and later insists on being the "bride" in a children's ritual. This act visibly disrupts gender expectations: in a rigid society, a boy adopting feminine attire and role is shocking. Gairola interprets this scene as the beginning of Arjie "queering" the home space, a playful appropriation of feminine identity that unsettles the adults and sets Arjie apart.

As Arjie grows, his nonconformity continues privately. In a safe space within the bungalow, Arjie and his uncle Daryl (who also loves *Little Women*) take every opportunity to share feminine-coded pleasures. For example, when sick in bed Arjie finally reads *Little Women* – a gift Daryl procured despite Chelva's objections – and imagines himself as Jo, the tomboy heroine who defies gender roles. In these moments, Arjie fully embraces activities that society labels "girls' interests." Critically, Darryn Edwards notes that with Radha, Nalini, Daryl and others, Arjie shares private spaces "in which he wore makeup, read traditionally feminine books, and experienced same-sex attraction" – spaces where "he was free to express himself fully". These scenes underscore that Arjie's gender is not simple or one-dimensional; instead, he fluidly inhabits both masculine and feminine modes when not publicly policed.

However, each of Arjie's nonconforming acts provokes backlash that highlights the rigidity of norms. Chelva forbids the very books Arjie loves, famously declaring that a twelve-year-old boy should not read "books for girls". At school, Black Tie's punishments for innocuous acts (lip-licking, eye-rolling) show how even minor gender-deviasm is

violently corrected. And at home, family members label Arjie's divergence as "funny" – a slur meaning queer or odd – without explanation. For example, Cyril Uncle offhandedly says to Chelva, "looks like you have a funny one here," referring to Arjie. Later, Chelva explicitly tells Shyam to make sure Arjie does not "turn out funny or anything like that". These repeated rebukes illustrate society's intolerance for Arjie's femininity. Yet the novel also shows Arjie growing stronger in his difference: he knows that "different" does not mean wrong, even if it puts him at odds with the world.

Thus Arjie's nonconformity *challenges* the scripted masculinity of his family and nation. By preferring girlish things, he exposes the arbitrariness of gender categories. In a Butlerian sense, every time Arjie cross-dresses or reads a romance comic meant for girls, he performs gender in a way that lies outside the "correct" script. Butler famously cites drag as a way to reveal gender's imitative nature, and Arjie's actions function similarly: his cross-gender play reveals that the masculine identity others expect is just one possible set of acts, not an inevitable one. By observing how Chelva and Black Tie react with hostility, the novel highlights the ritualistic policing of gender. Gairola puts it well: Arjie's childhood transgressions "queer" the domains of home and school, undermining the heterosexual-patriarchal order of those spaces. In sum, Arjie challenges normative masculinity by living outside its boundaries, thereby proving that those boundaries are indeed social constructs.

RQ3: Masculinity as Socially Constructed Performance (Butlerian Lens)

Putting it all together, *Funny Boy* ultimately demonstrates that masculinity is not a natural given, but a social performance maintained by power structures – just as Butler theorizes. The novel shows that the identity "man" has no fixed essence; it is made real only by the repeated acts that society mandates. For instance, Chelva and the school principal treat masculinity as a status achieved by certain behaviors (athletics, stoic silence, heterosexuality). These behaviors are enforced through repetition and ritual: daily cricket drills, dress codes, and recitation of patriotic poems all train the boys. Butler notes that this repetition "gives gender its illusion of stability". In *Funny Boy*, however, the narrative peels away this illusion. Arjie's very experiences reveal that if he simply acted differently (as he does in private), the idea of "man" would shift. He is never a "real boy" or "real man" only by existing; he must perform it according to others' rules. The punishment of trivial acts (like blinking) by Black Tie shows that *any* deviation from the script is unacceptable – signaling that the script itself is arbitrary.

Moreover, *Funny Boy* underscores Butler's insight that there are no "true" or "false" acts of gender. Arjie proves that what is considered inauthentic masculinity (reading a love comic, dressing up) still forms his sense of self. In fact, by the end of the novel, Arjie knowingly "mangles" two poems at an important ceremony – not out of madness, but as revenge for his friend Shehan and as a public rejection of the institution's values. This act of literary vandalism is a performative breakdown of the expected masculine ritual of poetic citation. When Arjie later tells Shehan "I did it for you…I couldn't bear to see you suffer any more", he makes clear that his loyalty is not to abstract ideals of manhood, but to personal

love and justice. Here the novel reveals that conventional masculinity (and the culture that enforces it) can be upended by an individual's differently motivated acts.

Karunanayake's recent study extends this argument, noting that Selvadurai uses the bildungsroman genre to have the queer protagonist "undermine the colonial value system that casts a long shadow over postcolonial lived experiences". In particular, *Funny Boy* calls attention to the postcolonial "afterlives of imperialism" by showing how Victorian and patriarchal norms are still enforced. In Butler's terms, *Funny Boy* illustrates how gender identity is imposed by a "heterosexual matrix" of discourses. The novel thereby exemplifies a Butlerian deconstruction: as Arjie steps outside the norms, the fictional world starts to realize these norms were socially produced all along.

Finally, the scholarly framing of Arjie as a new kind of hero reinforces our conclusion. Rupkatha's Prateek observes that Selvadurai "transcends… heterosexual mainstream… to face a contemporary understanding of sexuality" through Arjie. He explicitly calls Arjie "a common homosexual man" hero, not a mythical archer prince. This endorsement of Arjie's identity as heroic is itself a performance: it flips the script on classic masculinity by centering a queer subject. In essence, *Funny Boy* dramatizes the Butlerian idea that *if we change the script – the repeated acts – what we call masculinity changes.* Selvadurai's text performs that very change.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that Selvadurai's novel and Butler's theory reinforce each other. Butler would observe that *Funny Boy* treats gender categories as regulatory fictions: they exist because people act *as if* they exist. Arjie's journey – resisting sports, literature, and roles meant to "make a man" – reveals those acts as conventions, not truths. This suggests that masculinity is "given" by power (family, school, nation) rather than nature. At the same time, Butler's framework gains depth by this non-Western example: it confirms that even in Sri Lanka's specific context, gender performance and policing operate similarly. The novel highlights how colonialism, patriarchy, and nationalism collaborate to script a man. Characters like Chelva and Black Tie function like components of a disciplinary regime – akin to Butler's concept of the "heterosexual matrix" – enforcing repetition of masculine signifiers.

This study underscores an important distinction: Arjie's gender expression is under scrutiny in the novel, separate from any sexual orientation. The analysis shows that what he wears and does is policed independently of his romantic preferences. This aligns with Butler's idea that gender and sexuality, though intertwined, are not the same. For example, Arjie's loving attachment to his friend Shehan is not the same as the reason he wears makeup or enjoys *Little Women*. Butler teaches us to decouple these, and *Funny Boy* gives a narrative example: Arjie is punished for femininity even before or apart from any explicit same-sex desire, showing gender norms are enforced on their own terms.

In sum, *Funny Boy* uses its narrative to lay bare the constructedness of masculinity. Arjie's life is a kind of performative experiment: by systematically violating codes and enduring their correction, he demonstrates that masculinity is always dependent on social enforcement. The patriarchal family and heteropatriarchal society treat masculinity as "the truth of the gender that must be revealed" (a phrase Butler uses about heterosexual norms), but Arjie's persistent queerness reveals that this "truth" is not self-evident at all, but produced through repeated acts (like being forced to play cricket or beaten for leaving eyebrows untrimmed).

Conclusion

Through a Butlerian lens, *Funny Boy* can be read as a powerful critique of masculinity's performative nature. Arjie's story exemplifies how gender identity is not a fixed essence but a series of cultural performances enforced by families, schools, and nations. The novel shows that patriarchal and colonial powers have "invented" an ideal man which children like Arjie are supposed to emulate. Every time Arjie deviates – in "bride-bride" play, subversive poem-recitation, or girlish pastimes – the reader sees that masculinity could be otherwise, that it is an external imposition. By the end, the community's reaction to Arjie underscores Butler's point: it is far easier for society to maintain its norms through repetition and exclusion than to allow alternate expressions.

In answering our research questions, we conclude: *Funny Boy* portrays masculinity as built by social/familial expectation (colonial sports, strict education, paternal commands); Arjie undermines these constructs through gender-nonconforming behavior (playing bride, reading *Little Women*, subverting school rituals); and the novel's overall effect is to show that masculinity is a performed identity sustained by continuous acts. Selvadurai thus offers a narrative validation of Butler's theory: gender is made real by what people do, and *Funny Boy* dramatizes both the enforcement and the disruption of those acts.

This analysis contributes to scholarship by explicitly applying Butler's framework to *Funny Boy* and by highlighting masculinity (not just sexuality) as a key site of performance. Future work might further compare *Funny Boy* to other South Asian queer narratives to see how pervasive these themes are. Ultimately, the novel (and this study) remind us that changing the play (the repeated acts) changes the gender. Arjie's journey holds open the possibility that if one stops performing masculinity as dictated, one can forge a freer identity – a hopeful insight for readers in any culture.

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