Indira Gandhi
National Open University
School of Humanities

BEGC-106
Popular Literature

Block

2

GENRES OF POPULAR LITERATURE I: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE & YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Block Introduction 3

UNIT 1
Children's Literature: An Introduction 5

UNIT 2
Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking Glass* 22

UNIT 3
Young Adult Fiction: An Introduction (Writings From Sri Lanka) 35

UNIT 4
Shyam Selvadurai: *Funny Boy* 51

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This is a delightful block as it introduces to you Children's Literature as a genre, examines the many sub genres within this broad rubric and also analyses two major novels that belong to this category of Children's Literature. We shall be examining the life and times of **Lewis Carroll** and **Shyam Selvudurai**, and we will also be examining a seminal work each of theirs - *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll and *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvudurai. Lewis Carroll's real name was **Charles Lutwidge Dodgson** (1832 – 1898), was an English writer of children's fiction, most well known for his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*. Carroll came from a family of high-church Anglicans, and developed a long relationship with Christ Church, Oxford, where he lived for most of his life as a scholar and teacher.

Shyam Selvadurai (1965) is a Sri Lankan Canadian novelist who wrote *Funny Boy* (1994), which won the Books in Canada First Novel Award, and *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998). He currently lives in Toronto with his partner Andrew Champion. Selvadurai was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father—members of conflicting ethnic groups whose troubles form a major theme in his work. Ethnic riots in 1983 drove the family to immigrate to Canada when Selvadurai was nineteen.

In 2013 Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* was included in the syllabus under marginalised study and gay literature of the under graduate English Department of The American College in Madurai. In 2014, he was presented the Bonham Centre Award from The Mark S Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, University of Toronto, for his contributions to the advancement and education of issues around sexual identification.

This block consists of four units.

Block 2: Genres of Popular Literature I : Children's Literature & Young Adult Fiction.

Unit 1: Children's Literature: An Introduction

Unit 2: **Lewis Carroll**'s *Through the Looking Glass*

Unit 3: Young Adult Fiction: An Introduction (Writings from Sri Lanka)

Unit 4: **Shyam Selvadurai**'s *Funny Boy*

Kindly note, you have to read the novels – both *Through the Looking* Glass and *Funny Boy*.

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UNIT 1 CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Defining Children's Literature

1.3 A Brief History of Children's Literature

- 1.3.1 Children's Literature in the 16th & 17th Centuries
- 1.3.2 Children's Literature in the 18th & 19th Centuries
- 1.3.3 Children's Literature in the 20th & 21st Centuries

1.4 Genres of Children's Literature

- 1.4.1 Graphic Novels
- 1.4.2 Verse Novels
- 1.4.3 Realistic Novels /Novels of Realism
- 1.4.4 Contemporary Novels
- 1.4.5 Fantasy Novels
- 1.4.6 Young Adult Fiction

1.5 Gender in Children's Literature

1.6 Let Us Sum Up

1.7 Hints to Check Your Progress

1.8 Suggested Readings & References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will have:

- A broad understanding of what constitutes Children's Literature, beginning with the books that we introduce very young children to, right up to the point where they enter their teens and become young adults, and grow beyond to enter the adult world.
- An understanding of the various concepts that are used in analysing Children's Literature, because we do know that, as students of Literature it is not enough for us to just read stories/ books/ novels.
- Some skills in being able to discuss them and analyse them critically.
- An understanding of the various concepts such as ideology; (remember ideology plays a major role in everything that is written); what childhood and adolescence are, apart from just being terms; the notion of gender, among other aspects.
- An idea of where Children's Literature may be located in the entire process of the socialisation of children and adolescents.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We may recall how we have always heard stories as small children be they fables, folk tales or even storybooks like **Enid Blyton**'s *Noddy*. Given that story telling

is an integral part of our living culture, it is but natural that writing for Children should actually grow and develop into an academic field. This particular course is on Popular Literature but *Through the Looking Glass* by **Lewis Carol** has been prescribed as part of the syllabus and is often classified as a Children's Storybook, hence the need for us to look at what Children's Literature is, and decide whether or not *Through the Looking Glass* is part of Children's Literature. In the next section we shall try and define Children's Literature.

1.2 DEFINING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

There are various ways of looking at this category of writings that comes under the broad umbrella of Children's Literature. However, we could define it broadly as writing/ visual narratives that have been written, designed and developed to entertain and largely instruct youngsters. Children's Literature would therefore encompass a wide range of works such as the good old classics; works from across the globe; pictorial story books, comics, graphic novels/ narratives, fables, folktales, fairy tales, lullabies, nursery rhymes, as well as orally narrated folk tales, folk songs and legends. Some scholars define Children's Literature as books written for children, some leave out comics, joke books, cartoon illustrated books, encyclopaedias for children and other non-fiction such as autobiographies/ biographies. However, it may be useful for us to take into account that we as students of Popular Literature, need to realise that the genre of Children's Literature is broad and inclusive with blurry boundaries.

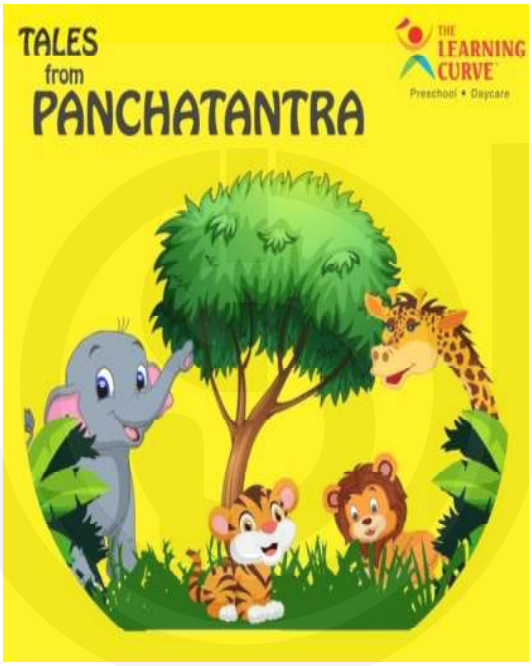
We might be aware that traditionally, Children's Literature as stated earlier, was aimed at educating and orienting children to adult expectations by imparting lessons in social propriety and inculcating the right moral values. For instance, Victorian society tried hard to influence its children through the medium of stories that were moralistic in nature and didactic at heart. These stories had a preaching tone, (think back to *Little Women* by **Louisa May Alcott**) teaching the right values to youngsters in this case young girls, while encouraging social conformity and compliance. (The example that we have given here is of a didactic children's literature novel however, by an American writer of the age). Children's Literature in a sense used and uses make-believe, fantasy as opposed to reality. While the serious novels were meant for adults, fantasy was considered non-serious/ nonsensical and best suited for children's literature. **Felicity Hughes**, author of *Children's Literature: Practice and Theory* says that 'children's literature during the late eighteenth century was full of fantasy, and therefore, excluded from the class of 'serious' literature since fantasy was considered lowbrow and antithetical to realism'. Fantasy was seen as frivolous and deemed unworthy of critical attention.

Let us now take a very brief and quick look at the History of Children's Literature to enhance our understanding of what it constitutes and how it came to be.

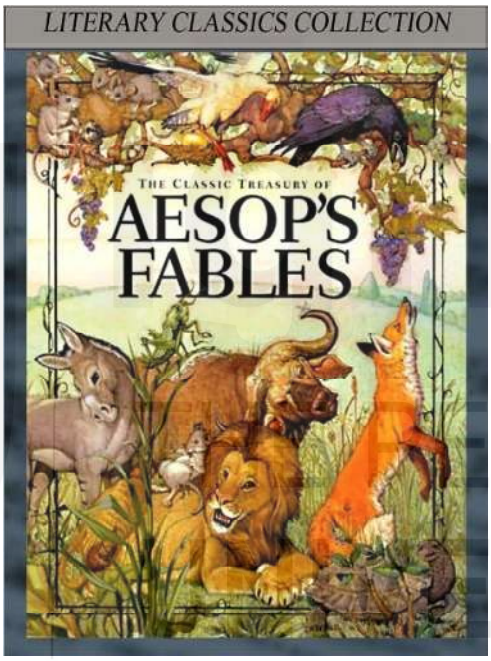
1.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's Literature began with oral story telling being passed down from one generation to another. For instance if we look at the Indian context the Sanskrit fable *Panchantantra* is said to have been composed around 200 BC, while *Aesop's*

Fables are believed to have been composed between 620 and 564 BC, and the *Irish Folktales* were composed around 400 BC. Globally, folk tales and fables were used as a means to instruct and were oral in tradition. And because we have read *Aesop's fables*/ the *Panchantantra* as children, it highlights the fact that children's literature to a large extent especially in the initial stages was didactic in nature. In the Far East the art of storytelling in China was at its height during the time of the Song dynasty (960 – 1279) and was once again didactic in nature and meant to instruct children. In medieval Europe there was little by way of the entertainment factor in children's literature. In the early 15th Century, text books and prayer books began to emerge that could be said to have been meant for children. A distinction between adult literature or writing for adults and writing for children was never made. It was a world where it was an unknown for adults to be writing for children – an unheard of and un-thought of thing. Hence, no real distinctions were made between the two readerships. Needless to say the earliest books written for children were Biblical tales and possibly folk tales and fairy tales.



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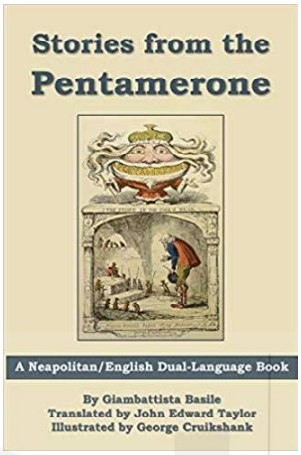


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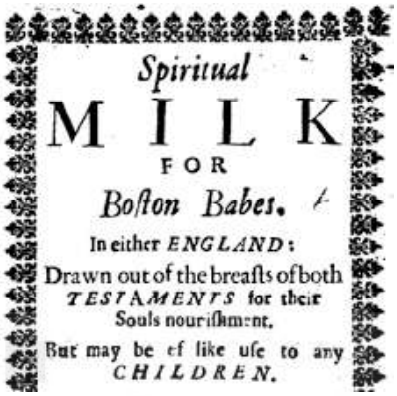
1.3.1 Children's Literature in the 16th and 17th Centuries

It was only in the 16th Century that alphabet books began to emerge from countries like Russia, Italy, and Denmark. Thereafter, illustrated chap-books came into existence and these chap-books dealt with folk tales, legends or Biblical stories and were meant primarily for children. It also needs to be remembered that for the longest time, children were not thought to be distinct from adults, they were considered to be miniature adults during the Puritan Age (1600-60). During those days, children as young as six years old were often apprenticed to artisans as the society and the economy of the day was labour intensive. However, towards the end of the middle ages, there was a change in society and academic skills became more important than physical labour. This led to a shift in the thinking of children as miniature adults. Children and the thinking that went behind raising children now was that, children were children and needed to be educated, thereby bringing in the concept of child development and child psychology and eventually children's literature.

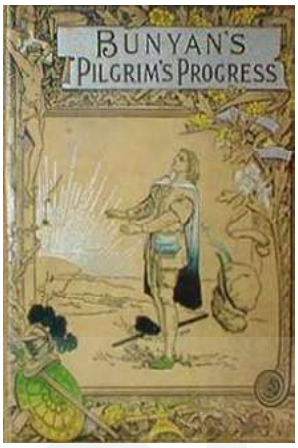
In 1643 a collection of folktales from all over Europe was brought out by an Italian poet named **Giambattista Basile -** the *Pentamerone*, or *The Tale of Tales*, containing the earliest known versions of both "*Cinderella*" and "*Rapunzel*." These two fairy tales it must be noted have survived the test of time and even thrived with the Disney Princess Movies. In 1697 **Charles Perrault** published a book of fairy tales and though he did not garner as much popularity as Giambattista Basile, he served a different purpose. He is said to have been the inspiration behind the work of the **Grimm Brothers**.



Courtesy: Wikipedia



Courtesy: Wikipedia

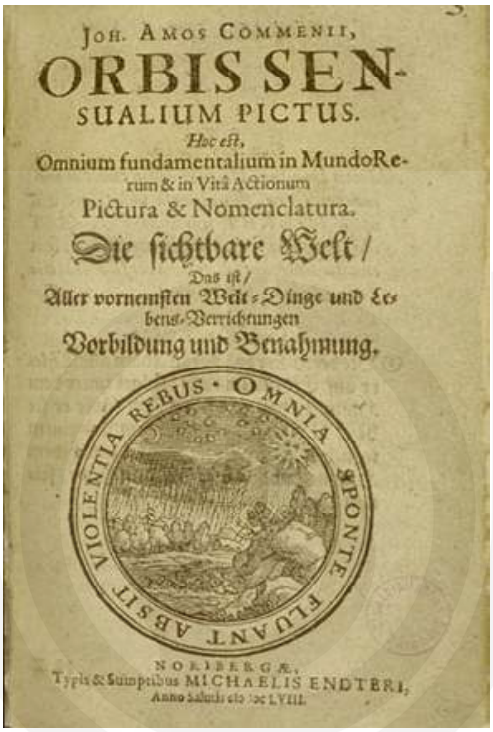


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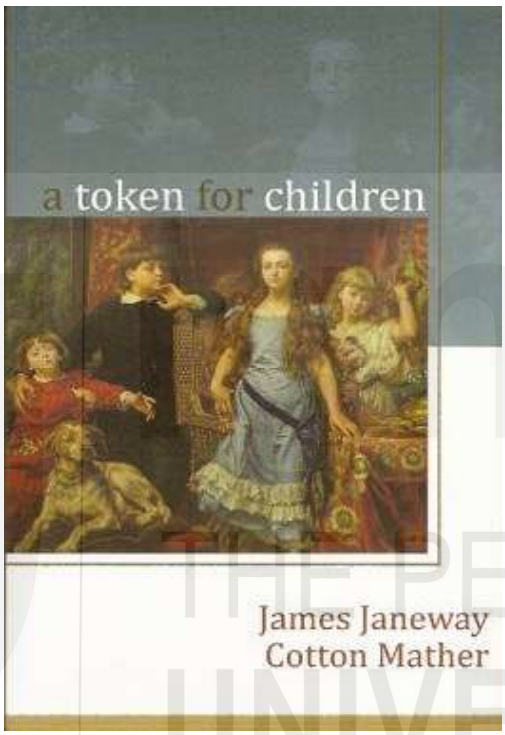
Meanwhile in Puritan England, **John Cotton** wrote a book for children in 1656 called *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes*. Do not be misled by the title - it was a catechism book for children, making *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes* the first children's book to be published in America. This book dealt largely with important questions and answers about the correct way of living so to as to be a good Christian and not earn the wrath of God. The book was to be published in both Boston and England and was eventually absorbed into The New England Primer—America's first text book—which remained popular and in use through the nineteenth century (The History of Children's Literature: Part 1, Adrienne Rivera, 2017). In 1658, in Czechoslovakia, **John Amos Comenius** published the *Orbis Pictus* or *The Visible World in Pictures*, considered to be the first picture book written for children. *Orbis Pictus* is written in separate chapters, with woodcut illustrations and deals with religion, botany, and zoology. This book for children was important as it was the first book that had illustrations as well as knowledge. **John Bunyan** (1628 - 88) was yet another Puritan who wrote the *Pilgrims Progress* (published in 1678) which may be described as a vision of what could be considered a good Christian's pilgrimage through life. This book is known to be the most famous Christian allegory still in print.

James Janeway's *A Token for Children* (1671-72) though touted as a children's book was more about Christianity, leading a good Christian life and was about the so called joyful death of young Christian children. In the 17th Century, the theme of books meant for children was largely educational, informative and didactic with moral, religious and social messages (teaching children manners and etiquette). Since it was the Puritan Age in England, it was but obvious that Puritanical beliefs and thoughts would find their way into books written during that period. The Puritans were of the belief that God had a special covenant / agreement with them and that they had to lead their lives according to the Bible. They had extremely rigid and strict laws and were largely patriarchal in nature

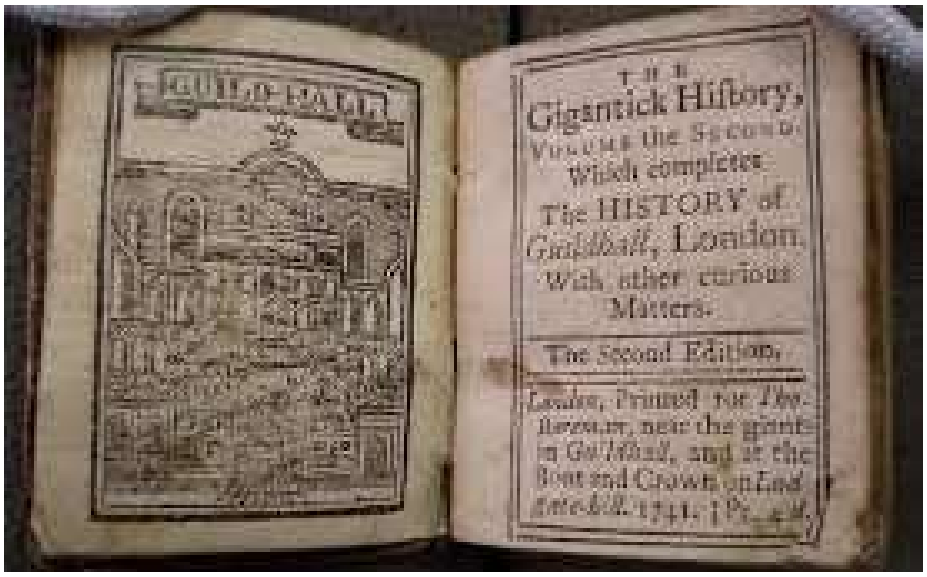
where women did not have any part in decision making. They banned smoking in public, drinking alcohol, fancy clothing, gambling. The parish could not miss Sunday Service or celebrate Christmas. They were very orthodox in their beliefs and close minded. They felt so strongly about their religious beliefs that they did not hesitate to permit the civic authorities to enforce allegiance and compliance with their faith in an attempt to save the souls of the sinners. Needless to say most of the literature of the period consisted of sermons, poems, letters or historical narratives and this body of literature existed for the sole purpose of sharing their value system, faith, the Bible and the importance of God in their day-to-day lives. The belief was further propagated and disseminated through lesson books that were primarily written in the belief that children had the potential to be evil and hence, needed to be shown the correct path of the Bible, God and Puritan faith.



Courtesy: Wikipedia



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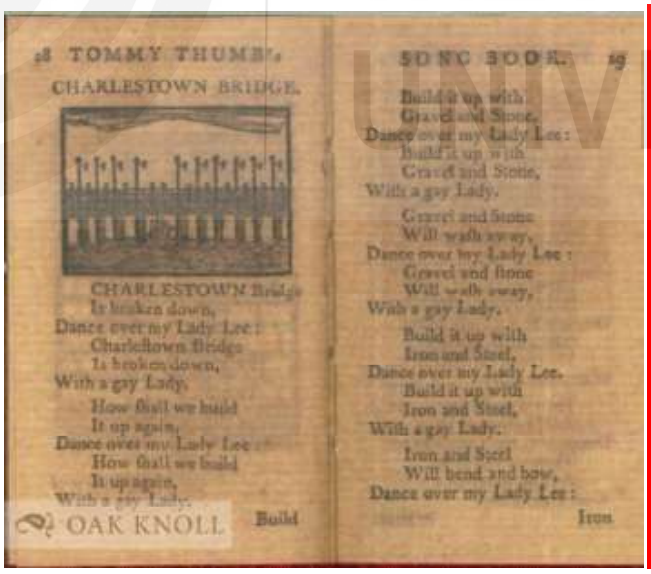


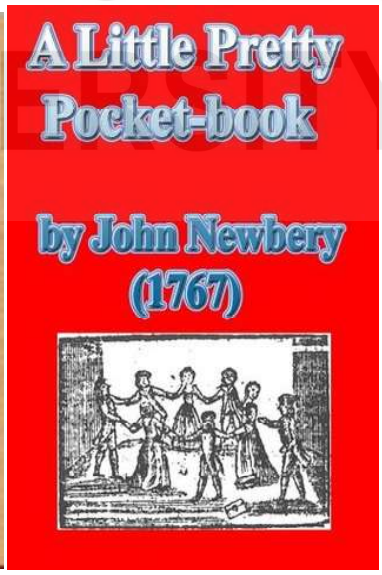
Courtesy: Wikipedia

Just as political changes came about in England with the beheading of **Charles I**, the revolution and the creation of the Commonwealth, and eventually the Restoration in 1660 when monarchy was restored and **Charles II** became the King of England; so did changes in the way people thought and understood society. The old strict and rigid Puritanical ideas gave way to more enlightened ideas in art, literature, culture and the way children came to be perceived and understood. This change in the way children came to be understood was largely influenced by the writings of thinkers like **John Locke** (1632- 1704). Locke's concept of the "*tabula rasa*" / a "blank slate" or the thinking that people/ children are born without any preconceived notions or ideas, and that all knowledge that they acquire comes about as a result of the lived experiences and their own perceptions marked a notable way in which people/ educationist/ writers came to understand children. Hence, stories with moral lessons/ values, fables, riddle books, rhymes, and games began to find a place in books for children. Books such as **Defoe**'s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and **Swift**'s *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), originally meant for adult readership too came to be adapted for children.

1.3.2 Children's Literature in the 18th & 19th Centuries

In the 1720s and 30s, a group of London publishers began publishing books for the entertainment of young readers. **Thomas Boreman** (1707-57) the publisher was one of the earliest to dabble with writing for children. His *Description of Three Hundred Animals* (1730); an illustrated history of London landmarks known as the *Gigantick Histories* (1740-43) were two such books published. **Mary Cooper**, another publisher of the times is well known for her contribution to nursery rhymes. Her *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book* Volumes I & II (1744) are the first known nursery rhyme collections. Her collection has early versions of "*Baa Baa Black Sheep"* and "*Hickory Dickory Dock*", "*London Bridge is falling down*", and "*Sing a Song of Sixpence*".





Courtesy: Wikipedia **Courtesy: Wikipedia**

However, the first real children's book is said to be *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* written in 1744 by **John Newbery**. This book has the distinction of being written purely for the entertainment of children so in that sense a real children's book. This was a book of simple rhymes with illustrations, focused on a letter of the alphabet. The innovative manner in which Newbery designed the book, teaching alphabets with rhymes and pictures is considered to be critical in the development

of the genre of children's literature that he came to be known as the father of Children's Literature. However, we might want to note that even though Newbery made these innovations, his was still an infotainment book but yes, we need to acknowledge that he designed it primarily for children. Just to remind ourselves of the importance of Newbery to Children's Literature, as we shall read later in the unit, an award has been instituted in his name – the Newbery Medal, presented each year to an outstanding work of American literature for children. Newbery also developed the first children's periodical, called "*The Lilliputian Magazine",* (1751-52), a miscellany of stories, verse, riddles and chatty editorials (M O Grenby, Childhood and children's literature, Reading and print culture, 2014). His most famous work is, *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765) believed to be the first children's novel. This novel tells the story of a poor orphan Margery, who becomes a teacher, marries a local landowner who is impressed by her honesty, hard work and good sense, needless to pint out - it was basically a didactic novel.


THE
Lilliputian Magazine:
OR, THE
Young Gentleman and Lady's
Golden Library.
BEING
An Attempt to mend the World, to render the Society of Man more amiable, and to establish the Plainness, Simplicity, Virtue and Wisdom
OF THE
GOLDEN AGE,
So much celebrated by the Poets and Historians.
Man in that Age no Rule but Reason knew,
And with a Native Bent did Good pursue;
Unforc'd by Punishment, unawe'd by Fear,
His Words were simple and his Soul sincere.
LONDON,
Printed for the Society, and published by *J. Newbery* at the Bible and Sun in St. Paul's Church-Yard. 1765.

Courtesy: Wikipedia

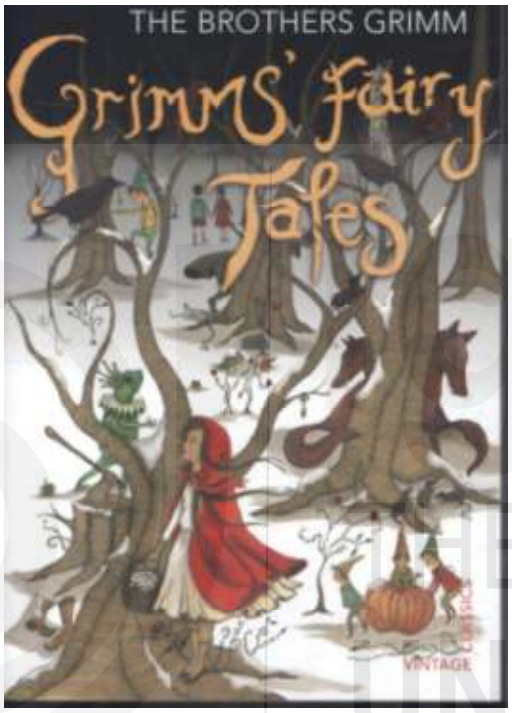

THE
HISTORY
OF
Little Goody Two-Shoes;
Otherwise called,
Mrs. Margery Two-Shoes.
WITH
The Means by which she acquired her Learning and Wisdom, and in consequence thereof her Estate; set forth at large for the Benefit of those,
See the Original Manuscript in the *Vatican* at *Rome*, and the Copy by *Michael Angelo*, Illustrated with the Comments of our great modern Critics.
The Fifth Edition.
LONDON,
Printed for Newbery and Carnan, at No. 65, the North Side of St. Paul's Church-yard, 1768.
[Price Six-pence.]
Little Goody Two Shoes

Courtesy: Wikipedia

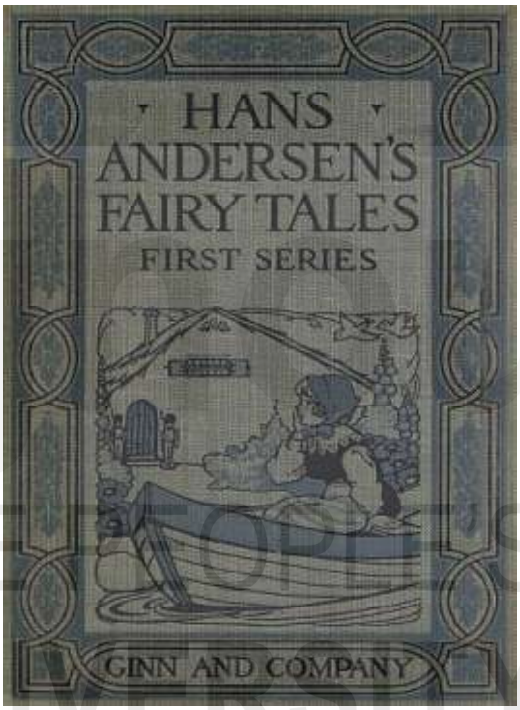
Along with picture books for children was something called the *Juvenilia,* or what may be classified as literary/ musical / artistic works created by an author when s/he is very young. If and when *Juvenilia* are published it is usually done when the author is an adult and is somewhat well known for his/ her later works. For instance the stories and poems which **Jane Austen** (1775 -1817), wrote when she was a young girl were published later as *Juvenilia* comprised of several notebooks said to have been composed between (1787 - 93), when Austen was between twelve and eighteen years of age. Towards the end of the century, children's literature had become a distinctive genre and was doing very well in Britain with as many as fifty books being published each year especially for children. However, these books were not like the books written these days for children. These books were published not only from London, but from Edinburgh, York and Newcastle as well.

The **Grimm Brothers - Jacob Ludwig Karl** (1785–1863) and **Wilhelm Carl** (1786–1859) published a book for children called *Grimms' Fairy Tales* or *Children's and Household Tales* in 1812. The first edition contained 86 stories, and by the seventh edition in 1857, had 210 unique fairy tales. Swiss writer **Johann David Wyss** (1743-1818), published *The Swiss Family Robinson* in 1812. This novel is unique in that it is one of the first novels written that teaches children

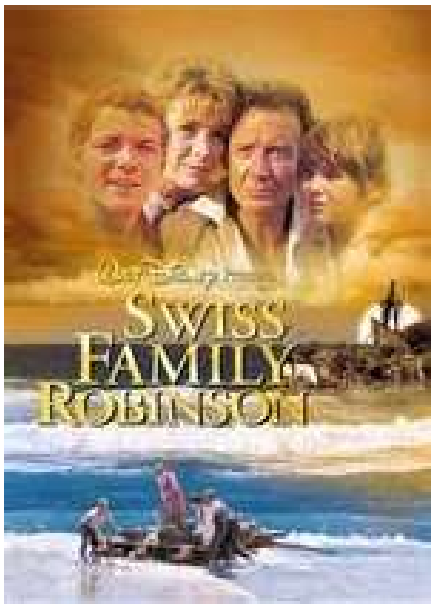
self sufficiency; and is about the dignity of labour; while also being a tale of adventure. In the meantime, **Hans Christian Andersen** (1805 - 72), was also gathering fairy tales to be written and published in 1835. Though he had achieved success as a writer, his fairy tales for children did not do well. In 1845, his stories/fairy tales for children which had never been published in his native Denmark, began to be translated and published in English and soon became popular with foreign readers. Some of Andersen's most famous stories are: "*The Emperor's New Clothes*," "*The Snow Queen*," and "*Thumbelina*." The 19th century saw quite a large number of books being written for children that was meant primarily for their entertainment such as **Randolph Caldecott**'s "*The Babes in the Wood"*. Randolph Caldecott (1846 – 86), has the distinction of having created the first picture book for children. But the golden age of Children's Literature was still some years away.



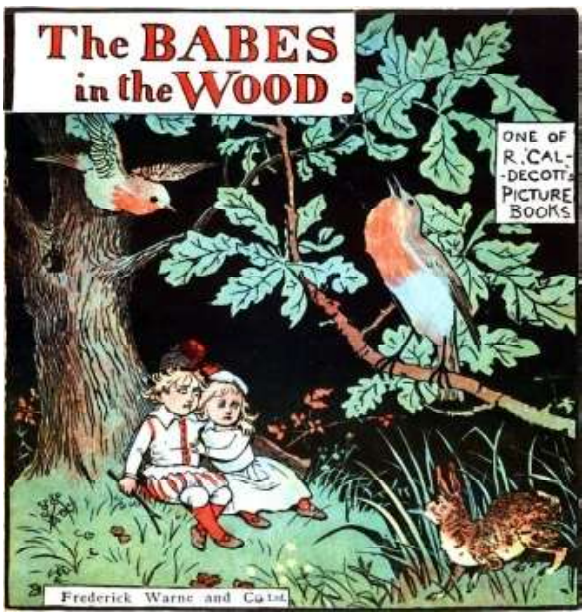
Courtesy: Wikipedia



Courtesy: Wikipedia



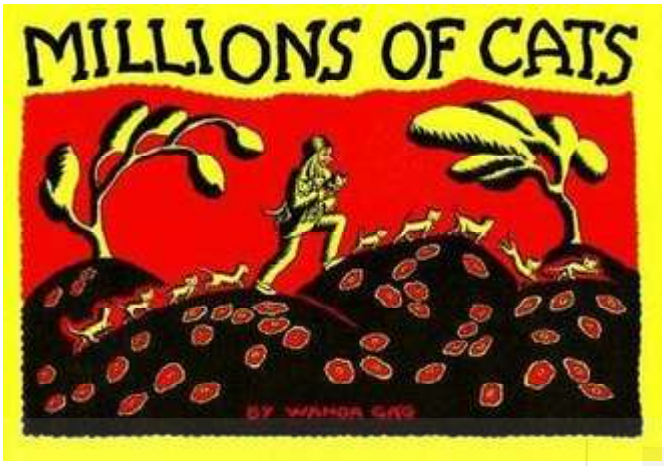
Courtesy: Wikipedia



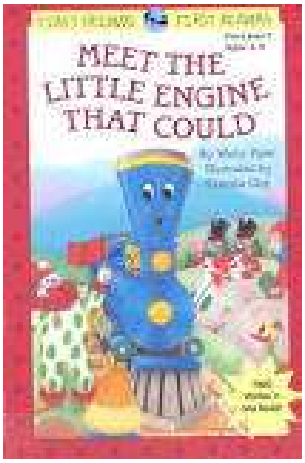
Courtesy: Project Gutenberg

1.3.3 Children's Literature in the 20th & 21st Centuries

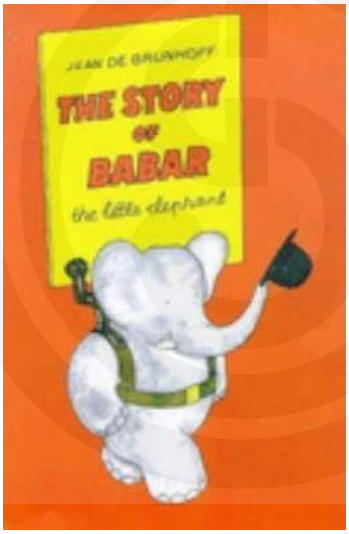
Children's literature thereby became more and more popular through the ages till finally in the first two decades of the 20th Century, colour illustrated books began to be mass produced. By then literacy had also gained prominence and children's literature was here to stay. Some of the early examples are:



Wanda Gag's Million of Cats, 1928 Oldest American Picture Book still in print



Watty Piper's The Little Engine That Could, 1930



Jean de Brunhoff's Histoire de Babar, 1931



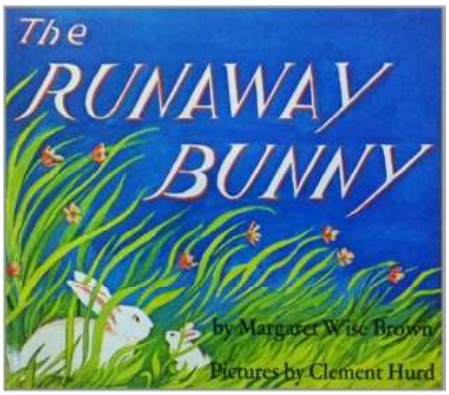
H A Rey and Margret Rey's Curious George, 1941



Ludwig Bemelmans, John Bemelmans Marciano's Madeline, 1939

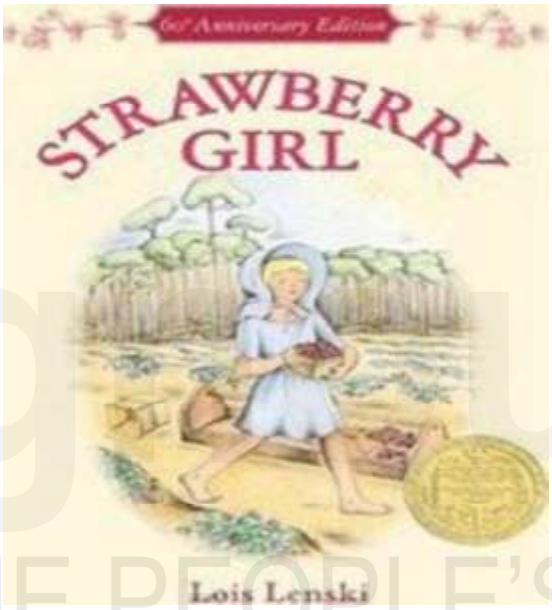
This brief history has given us a glimpse of how changes in society and economy as well as thinking led to changes in the manner in which books were written. The 20th century saw two World Wars (World War I 1914 – 18, and World war II 1939 – 45). Children's books written between these two world wars dealt with themes related to ideals; the spirit of pioneers; and a good example of this spirit of the pioneers is **Laura Ingalls Wilder**'s *Little House* series based on her childhood and teenage years in the American Midwest. The first of the books *Little House in the Big Woods* was published in 1932. It was later adapted to television by the name of *Little House in the Prairies*. Apart from these themes, books for little children such as those written by **Margaret Wise Brown** (*Goodnight Moon*, *The Runaway Bunny, Goodnight June*), were still hugely popular as were **Lois Lenski**'s stories such as *Strawberry Girl*.





Margaret Wise Brown





Lois Lenski

In the 1930s and 50s as we saw earlier on, children's literature or stories meant for children dealt also with issues concerning society, about hardship or tales of the pioneering era, striving against poverty etc. In the next two decades (1960s – 70s), "realism" made its entry into Children's Literature. Realism as you may know initially began in the Arts (paintings), and the advocators of realism in art, did away with traditional forms. Realism is said to be the precursor of modern art. Similarly in literature as in life, realism was concerned with how society, economy, politics and culture influenced and affected not only the arts but



Gustave Courbet, Self Portrait, wikipedia.org



Edouard Manet, wikipedia.org



Spring, Edouard Manet; wikipedia.org

literature as well. In a sense realism became the first non conformist movement in literature and the arts. **Gustave Courbet** (1819 - 77), and **Édouard Manet** (1832 - 83), were some of the prominent realist artists of the age. All this had indeed happened in the early 19th century but this artistic phenomenon was to affect and influence literature and art in the 20th century as well, hence, some brief comments here would help us understand the themes and trends in the development of children's literature.

Though Realism as a movement in the Arts and Literature began in the 1750s, it did not really become a movement till the 1850s. In France, it was to gather momentum in the second half of the 19th Century and the propagators were against the artificial world created by the Classical Age as well as the Romantic Age. They believed in the contemporary, the now. Their subject matter was the middle class/ even the lower classes of society, the problems they faced, their social mores, customs, the ordinary, the humble people as opposed to the elite and the aristocracy who were the themes of earlier works of art. They brought the ignored, the unheard, the marginalised into the limelight with their works be it in painting or in literature. This trend was to continue into the 20th century and also find its way into Children's Literature.

Thus, by the 1960s and 70s, realism had made a foray into the world of children's literature with realistic stories by writers such as **Beverly Clearly**, **Judy Blume** and **Paul Zindel** who wrote about growing up, about serious issues such as abandonment, death, obesity. Such writings of course raised questions as to whether they were suitable for children but these books were written primarily for children. Their works include titles such as, **Beverly Clearly**'s *Henry Higgins* (1950); *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* (1965), *Runaway Ralph* (1970), and the *Ramona* series; **Judy Blume**'s *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. (1970); and **Paul Zindel**'s *My Darling, My Hamburger*, (1969), *I Never Loved Your Mind*, (1970), and *The Undertaker's Gone Bananas*, (1978). These authors were pioneers in their own way for authors such as **M E Kerr** (1927), **Cynthia Voigt** (1942), and **Robert Cormier** (1925-2000), who wrote about other important issues such as homelessness which was a real problem amongst teen runaways, about race, and sexuality. This was largely due to the changes that were going on in society be they historical, political or cultural influences. M E Kerr wrote books such as *Dark Intruder* (1952) *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me* (1977), and *Gentlehands* (1978), amongst others. Cynthia Voigt wrote the Tillerman Cycle including works such as, *Homecoming* (1981), *Dicey's Song* (1982), *A Solitary Blue* (1983. Robert Cormier had the following books in his repertoire: *Now and at the Hour* (1960), *A Little Raw on Monday Mornings* (1963), *Take Me Where the Good Times Are* (1965), to name just a few.

Since the latter half of the 20th century children's literature has grown steadily and is today a distinct genre of literature. There is a lot of critical analysis and critiques by scholars in this area and prizes/ awards for best children's literature have been instituted. Some of the most well known awards for children's literature are the *Caldecott Medal* and the *Newbery Medal* in America, presented by the American Library Association (ALA). Other International English-language children's book awards include the Book of the Year for Children Award from the Canadian Library Association, the Book of the Year Awards by the Children's Book Council of Australia, the Children's Books Ireland (CBI), Book of the Year Awards, the CILIP Carnegie Medal, the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal, the

Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults. In India, The Hindu Young World-Goodbook Awards, recognises "excellence in children's writing", these awards honour four categories: Best Picture Book (Story), Best Picture Book (Illustration), Best Book (Fiction) and Best Book (Non-fiction).

In the last few decades, children's literature has gained prominence and immense popularity. It has also undergone changes in the types of themes that are dealt with such as fantasy fiction, animal stories, stories set in the real world and of course the works of **Enid Blyton**. By now Children's Literature has evolved to include its own sub genres such as Young Adult Fiction, Contemporary, Supernatural, Fantasy etc. We will be dealing with these in the sections that follow.

Check Your Progress I

1) Trace the development of Children's Literature in the 16th and 17th Centuries.

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2) Trace the history of Children's Literature in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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3) Trace the growth of Children's Literature in the 20th and 21st centuries.

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1.4 GENRES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

By now we are familiar with the term *genre* and we also have an understanding of what it means, we will now look at the different genres in Children's Literature and the first genre we examine will be the Graphic Novel. As soon as we mention the word graphic novel the first thing that comes to mind is 'comics'. And we may also be right to an extent – a Graphic Novel does have pictures, the word graphic makes sure of that and it has a story line too, so, isn't that what a comic

also contains? Or is it that a Graphic Novel is different from a comic. I think we need to explore this term a little more as we will be dealing with a graphic novel in Block 4 of this course.

1.4.1 Graphic Novel

Some critics credit **DC Comics** with introducing the term 'Graphic Novel' way back in the 1970s. While others attribute it to **Will Eisner** and the publication of his book *A Contract with God: And Other Tenement Stories . . . A Graphic Novel* (1978), who termed his novel a graphic novel while trying to get it published. However, and whenever, the term may have been first used, it has come to stay now and may be said to mean "a full-length (esp. science fiction or fantasy) story published as a book in comic-strip format," (University of Maryland, What is a Graphic Novel). No matter what the term really means or defines, it has been subjected to a lot of debate. For instance, **Art Spiegelman,** the only Pulitzer winner of a graphic novel - *Maus*, calls it a "big comic book that needed a bookmark". Some others felt that the term graphic novel was more of a marketing strategy, to ensure that the adult readers were not perceived as juvenile or sub literate for reading comics.

Graphic novels also serve a very useful purpose, because of the manner in which they are designed - "reluctant readers" are quite comfortable reading them. Their fast pace, and the correlation between the word- and -picture makes it easy for reading and also for expanding the vocabulary of children. But, most importantly, graphic novels are more engaging than other books and they also impact the visual literacy skills of children very positively.

1.4.2 Verse Novels

Verse novels are narrative poems of long length that tells a popular and simple story for children. Verse novels range from those meant for little children to those for young adults. Some examples of verse novels for children are, *Roots and Blues* by **Arnold Adoff**; *Izzy Kline Has Butterflies* by **Beth Ain**; and *Love That Dog* by **Sharon Creech**; to name just a few. Whereas, those for young adults include: *Glimpse*, **Carol Lynch Williams** (New York: Simon & Schuster/ Paula Wiseman Books, 2010); *The Weight of Water*, **Sarah Crossan** (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); *Love and Leftovers*, **Sarah Tregay** (New York: Katherine Tegen Books/HarperCollins, 2011); *Johnny and the Seven Teddy Bears of Sin*, **James Venn** (Toronto, 2012); *One*, **Sarah Crossan** (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); and *We Come Apart*, **Sarah Crossan** and **Brian Conaghan** (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), to list the most well known titles and their authors.

1.4.3 Realistic Novels/ Novels of Realism

A very simple but workable definition of this sub genre is that realistic fiction appears like real life, has characters dealing with real life problems, and has a plot that takes place in the present time. While the situations are true or could be true, the main characters are of course fictional. Some popular examples include: *Looking for Alaska* by **John Green** (2005); *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007); If I Stay by **Gayle Forman** (2009); *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green (2012); and *The Hate U Give* by **Angie Thomas** (2017) to name just a few.

1.4.4 Contemporary Novels

Contemporary Novels and Realistic Novels have more or less certain elements in common. Like realistic fiction contemporary novels too create imaginary/ fictional characters and situations that depict our world and society, while focusing on themes of growing up and confronting personal and social problems. This genre portrays characters coming to understand themselves and others. *Life of Pi* by **Yann Martel** (2001); *The Goldfinch* by **Donna Tartt** (2013); *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* by **Jenny Han** (2014); *PS I Still Love You* by **Jenny Han** (2015); *Turtles All the Way Down* by **John Green** (2017); amongst others.

1.4.5 Fantasy Novels

Fantasy novels may be described as a genre of speculative fiction that is often set in a fictional universe. It could be inspired by real world myths and folklore. Its origins lie in *orature* or the oral tradition, which is then transformed into fantasy literature and drama. Since the 20th century it has also expanded to include other media such as film, television, graphic novels, *manga* and video games. Fantasy novels do not deal with scientific or macabre themes, but rather prefers a medieval theme. Some popular fantasy novels include: *The Chronicles of Narnia* by **C S Lewis** (1950); which was later adapted to cinematic representation as *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005); *Prince Caspian* (2008); and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010).

1.4.6 Young Adult Fiction

Young adult fiction (YA) is basically fiction written for young people between the ages of 13 and 19 or even 21. The genre was meant to bridge the gap between literature meant for children below the ages of 12- 13 years and the fiction read by adults. The subject matter and genres of YA correlate with the age and experience of the protagonist. Many young adult novels feature coming – of - age stories such as the classic example *The Cather in the Rye* by J D Salinger (1951). Young Adult Fiction deals with themes of adolescents comes to terms with themselves, their friendships, their romantic and sexual interests, overcoming personal problems; learning to take responsibility for their actions, friendship, getting into trouble, family life, self identity, individuality and sometimes even life and death situations, while focusing on real-life experiences and problems. *The Divergent* trilogy by **Veronica Roth**: *Divergent* (2011); *Insurgent* (2012); *Allegiant* (2013); the **Stephenie Meyers** *Twilight* Series: *Twilight* (2005); *New Moon* (2006); *Eclipse* (2007); *Breaking Dawn* (2008); *The Host* (2008); amongst other popular novels.

Check Your Progress II

1) Write short notes on the following:

   a) Graphic Novel

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b) Verse Novel

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c) Realistic Novel

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d) Contemporary Novel

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e) Fantasy

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f) Young Adult Fiction

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1.5 GENDER IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Before we end this introductory unit on Children's Literature it would be pertinent for us to take a moment to think back on literature we read as children and think about how the question of gender has been represented in those works. Think about how the character of the fictional boys and girls were depicted; how was gender roles understood or painted in those works and what did you grow up thinking about your role as a male or as a female? Think about these issues as you revisit the older versions of children's/ young adult fiction and see for yourselves how gender comes to be represented.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to define Children's Literature, we have traced the history and development of this genre, we have looked at the various sub genres within Children's Literature, and examined the representation of gender in Children's Literature. The next unit will deal with the novel *Through The Looking Glass* by **Lewis Caroll**, while Unit 3 will examine Young Adult Fiction as a Genre and then look at **Shyam Selvadurai**'s *Funny Boy* in Unit 4.

1.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1) Read section 1.3.1 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
2) Read section 1.3.2 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
3) Read section 1.3.3 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress II

1a) Read section 1.4.1 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
1b) Read section 1.4.2 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
1c) Read section 1.4.3 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
1d) Read section 1.4.4 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
1e) Read section 1.4.5 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
1f) Read section 1.4.6 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

Hans Christian Andersen:

The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories, translated by Erik Christian Haugaard (1974, 156 tales);

Eighty Fairy Tales, translated by R. P. Keigwin (1976, 80 tales);

Fairy Tales, translated by Reginald Spink (1960, 51 tales);

Andersen's Fairy Tales, translated by Pat Shaw Iversen (1966, 47 tales);

Tales and Stories by Hans Christian Andersen, translated by Patricia L. Conroy and Sven Hakon Rossel (1980, 27 tales);

Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales: A Selection, translated by L. W. Kinsland (1959, 26 tales);

The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen: A New Translation from the Danish, translated by Jeffrey Frank and Diana Crone Frank (2003, 22 tales)

Graphic novel. (n.d.) In Oxford English Dictionary online. Retrieved from www.oed.com.

McCloud, S. (1993). Understanding comics: The invisible art. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Schumacher, M.(2010). Will Eisner: A dreamer's life in comics. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA.

https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/the-history-of-childrens-literature-part-1

https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-origins-of-childrens-literature

https://scroll.in/article/895391/eye-on-the-prize-this-list-of-indian-literary-awards-for-books-in-english-is-a-long-and-varied-one

https://lib.guides.umd.edu/comics

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphic_novel

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UNIT 2 THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: A DETAILED ANALYSIS

Structure

2.0 Objectives

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Alice Liddell and her Adventures

2.3 The World of the Looking Glass

- 2.3.1 Sense and Nonsense
- 2.3.2 Chess Motif
- 2.3.3 The Two Queens
- 2.3.4 Language
- 2.3.5 The Train Journey and Tweedledee and Tweedledum
- 2.3.6 Humpty Dumpty
- 2.3.7 The Lion and the Unicorn
- 2.3.8 Meeting the Knight and Becoming a Queen

2.4 Let Us Sum Up

2.5 Glossary

2.6 Hints to Check Your progress

2.7 Abbreviations

2.8 Questions

2.9 Suggested Readings & References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to analyse chronologically and in detail **Lewis Carroll**'s *Through the Looking Glass*. This is being done with the aim of supplementing your reading of the novel and is not a substitute for your reading of the novel. Additionally, it looks at the category of children's literature, popular fiction and the text as a fantasy narrative. Let us begin by introducing the author.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Lewis Carroll, pseudonym of **Charles Lutwidge Dodgson**, was born on 27th January, 1832, and is known today as the famous Victorian author of the Alice books. He was a mathematician at Oxford and an ordained deacon at Christ Church. As a child, Carroll was always shy but gifted with an inquisitive mind and greatly enjoyed the company of his siblings and invented games and riddles for them. He had a fondness for stories and wordplay and invented many using fantasy and imagination. Though born left-handed, Carroll suffered psychological trauma when he was forced to correct this tendency, but later not only excelled in mathematics but grew equally fond of wordplay and photography. Little is known about Dodgson today except his interest in little girls—the most famous being **Alice Liddell**—who became the muse for his Alice books. The Alice Books included the following works, written between 1865 and 1889: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*

(1871), *The Wasp in a Wig* (1877), *The Nursery Alice* (1889), and *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* (1965). Incidentally, *The Wasp in a Wig* is the lost chapter from *Through the Looking Glass* that **John Tenniel** (the llustrator) had objected to in 1870, as a result of which Lewis Carroll had dropped the entire episode from his novel. This was later published as part of the Alice Books. *The Nursery Alice* (1890) was a shortened version of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) that Lewis Carroll himself adapted for children "from nought to five". The book was published by Macmillan a quarter-century after the original Alice. *Alice's Adventure Under Ground* (1862-64) was the original manuscript for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, written for Alice Liddell. Alice Liddell will be our next point of entry into the author and his life and works.

2.2 ALICE LIDDELL AND HER ADVENTURES

Carroll's inspiration behind the young protagonist of the Alice books was Alice Liddell— the daughter of **Henry George Liddell**, the Dean of Christ Church College at Oxford. Dodgson penchant for young girls was well known and he was fond of the Liddell sisters, particularly Alice Liddell. In a diary entry, dated 4th July 1862, Carroll describes a boating expedition he undertook with the ten year old Alice Liddell and her two sisters. Carroll began to tell the children a made-up fantastical story of a young girl - Alice's adventures. This invented story was expanded as Carroll's first novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and was followed by its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). *Through the Looking Glass* was published in 1871 when Alice Liddell was already a young woman of sixteen-and-a-half and not a child anymore. However, in the book she is presented as a seven-and-a-half year old child. Let us begin by looking at the world of the looking glass in the next section.

2.3 THE WORLD OF THE LOOKING GLASS

The book opens with Alice mock scolding her black kitten for unwinding a ball of yarn. While the boys are out in the snow gathering sticks for the bonfire, *Alice* being a girl is confined to the house and can only amuse herself through 'pretend' games. *Alice* is presented as an imaginative child with a propensity to daydream as she lists the mistakes Kitty has made, all along talking to herself and pretending she is in a dialogue with Kitty. Playing with chess pieces, *Alice* asks Kitty if it plays chess and then putting the Red Queen piece before Kitty asks it to imitate it. Scolding Kitty in the manner of a Victorian governess, she threatens to put Kitty into the looking glass house for the mischief. We see *Alice* thinking about the chess game as she falls asleep and enters the fantastic world of the looking glass. The story runs like the dream of a half-asleep child in which *Alice* magically crosses over to the other side of the mirror into the world of looking glass. The use of fantasy not only establishes daydreaming as a motif in the text but also presents the restricted life of young Victorian girls who were denied the freedom available to boys. A little girl like *Alice* in a conservative patriarchal society can wander freely only through her imaginative daydreaming. The next section deals with the use of nonsense in the novel.

2.3.1 Sense and Nonsense

The use of nonsense to depict the world of the looking glass is yet another theme as this alternative world does not follow any logic and is characterised by its absence of sense. The book is bracketed in the category of nonsense genre as it has many fantasy elements and subverts any logical reasoning. There are talking flowers, a Queen who has to run fast in order to stay at the same place and animals like sheep that shifts shape. The rules of the mirror world are topsy-turvy and based on the inverted logic of the outside world as there is a constant inversion and reversal at work. *Alice* has to walk in the opposite direction to reach the Red Queen. The cake is passed around first and then sliced. It is a highly illogical world where sense or rationality is absent.

Nonsense in literature is often used to produce an alternative reality to critique conventions and to comment on the lack of sense in our real world. The use of literary nonsense questions the construction and definition of 'sense'. What may seem absurd and nonsensical to adults may have meaning for a child. **Martin Gardner** believes that the *Alice* books have to be read differently since "we are dealing with a very curious, complicated kind of nonsense, written for British readers of another century" (AA, 7). By adopting a young girl's view of her surroundings, **Lewis Carroll** looks at the adult world afresh from a child's perspective and shakes our definition of 'sense'. What adults may consider as normal and sensible may clash with a young child's perspective. What may be dismissed as whimsical nonsense in the real world may make complete sense in the world of the looking glass. The Chess Motif will be examined next.

2.3.2 Chess Motif

The entire book is structured in the form of a chess game. Conventionally, chess is taken to be a game for the adults since it involves certain well-defined rules and thought-out irreversible moves. Learning chess is an important stage in maturation since it is based on unchanging moves. The use of chess as a motif is also reminiscent of the fact that Carroll taught chess to the Liddell sisters and even invented the traveller's chess. The chess motif that runs throughout the text becomes a key to the narrative. The game represents a map for the entire book and can be read at multiple levels: at the physical level, at the metaphysical level, and, at the dream world level of the looking glass. Ostensibly, the world of the looking glass is laid out in the form of a chess game, where the land itself is in the form of a giant chess board with rows separated from each other and divided by brooks and hedges. Alice looks down from the hill and finds that "*it is a huge game of chess that's being played – all over the world*", and wishes she "*could be one of the chess pieces… (and) wouldn't mind being a pawn… though of course I should like to be a Queen best*"(22). It is here that Alice finds herself a chess piece— a white pawn—herself a part of the bigger chess game that Carroll is playing by constructing the narrative. While, in the middle ages chess was played on enormous fields with human beings as chess pieces, Carroll borrows from this idea and presents it as a laid out path for Alice to move on. Given that it is a fantasy narrative, the text only loosely subscribes to the rules of the game of chess. The kings remain fixed and dormant while the two queens move/scurry about. Alice is a mere pawn who progresses from square to square before she reaches the last square and becomes a queen. The game of chess is conflated with fantasy and produces a nonsensical narrative. At the physical level, chess

becomes a symbol of Alice's journey through life where she begins as a young white pawn and eventually becomes a queen. Her unidirectional progress on the chessboard and its linearity presents her ageing and maturation where she has to leave behind her childhood and emerge a woman. This development fits in with the actual rules of the game of chess, where, upon successfully reaching the last row of the chess board, a pawn may become any piece the player desires (which is usually a queen, the most powerful of all chess pieces). As mentioned earlier, the game of Chess represents Alice's journey to maturation. She is entrapped in the "adult space" of the world of the chess game, where "*each square is a progression in successive stages of maturity*", with her "*arrested movement symbolized (by) the word 'checkmate*'" (**Gordon**, 162).

The narrative also carries a metaphysical dimension with the structure of chess delineated as a metaphor of the world with all its rules. We see the influence of religion on Carroll as an ordained man of the church who raises philosophical question on the nature of our existence. The Chess motif presents a deterministic concept of life. It explores the idea of us humans as pawns, as a part of the bigger game of chess, journeying through the predetermined plot of life and moving according to what has been already planned for us. Just as Alice's journey in the world of the looking glass is guided by a set of rules that lead to a preordained conclusion, our lives are akin to an illogical game of chess, with us being a part of God's dream. This idea is presented through *Tweedeldee*, who informs Alice that she is living the *Red King*'s dream. It is the *Red King* who controls the dream and Alice is but a figment of his dream following a preordained path already set for her. Life is often drawn as a game of chess where we are mere pieces in a higher game of chess. According to **Martin Gardner**, the game of chess becomes an allegory of life itself (AA, 10). Alice can move freely but only within the confines of a square and has no real agency, just as we too are living out the dream of some God. It draws upon the idea of humans as mere chess pieces on earth with limited influence like Alice's movement on the board where things happen to her and she has no real agency. The chess motif helps Carroll throw light on the predeterministic nature of the universe where free will is an illusion and we humans are merely pawns being moved by an invisible hand. In the next section we shall look at the two queens in the novel.

Check Your Progress I

1) The chess motif of chess is central to our understanding of *Through the Looking Glass*. Explain.

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2.3.3 The Two Queens

The concept of time in the looking glass world is very complex and warped and is exemplified by the two queens who are presented as opposites of each other. The *White Queen* is feeble and fading and lives backwards in time, so that she

remembers only a series of '*yesterdays'* and '*tomorrows'* and never '*todays'*. Her regressiveness is contrasted with the fast forward progression of the *Red Queen* who tells Alice that in the looking glass world one has to run twice as fast in order to stay at the same place (23). In being diametrically opposite to each other, the figure of the *White Queen* personifies the nostalgia of bygone childhood days whereas the *Red Queen* symbolises the forward march of time contained in Victorian progress.

Alice's conduct in the mirror world depicts her patriarchal upbringing where she is conditioned by the Red Queen to obey, follow the rules and not answer back. Though Alice is polite and courteous towards everybody, most of the characters are rude to her. We find that the *Red Queen* gives her lessons in propriety and manners but is bossy and overbearing and tries to subdue Alice even when Alice tries to please her. In his diary entry (vol4) Carroll wrote that he pictured the *Red Queen* as formal and strict and the "concentrated essence of all governesses" with her commands to "look up, speak nicely and don't twiddle your thumbs all the time"(20). It is the *Red Queen* who is in charge and assigns Alice the role of the white pawn and tests Alice towards the end. She is the authority figure who teaches Alice morals and manners on how to be obedient, civil and good-mannered and snaps at her often. In the beginning we find Alice speaking to Kitty probably in the same way as she is scolded at home. It is considered that the *Red Queen* was modeled after **Mary Prickett**, governess of the Liddell children who was nicknamed 'pricks'. Language plays a very important part in *Through the Looking Glass*, and we shall look at language and how it is used next.

2.3.4 Language

The language of the looking glass world is full of ambiguities and wordplay since it is used in its literal sense. In the world of the looking glass, language becomes a source of great confusion for Alice as it is highly nonsensical and unintelligible and in conflict with her sense and use of language. Though the characters she meets speak English, the orderly system of language is disrupted as the language is used in an arbitrary way.

There exists linguistic anarchy in the mirror world as often the language used by the characters lack sense and appears to be nonsensical. For instance, in the garden full of talking flowers, Rose tells Alice that the branches of a tree are called boughs and therefore a tree could bark bough-wough. In the real world, 'bark' of a tree and bark of a dog are not related whereas in the world of the looking glass their meaning cannot be evaded. The trees have a 'bark' and can scare people off to protect the flowers with its 'bough(s)'. We find many instances of linguistic wordplay and puns in the text. The flowers of the looking glass world chatter and fight and aren't sleep since the flower 'bed' is not made soft by the gardener. At another instance, Alice is befuddled when a frog she meets says it can't understand why anyone should "answer" the door unless it has been "asking" something. Similarly, when Alice "begs pardon", the *White King* tells her "it isn't respectable to beg". When Alice remarks she sees "nobody" on the road, King wishes he had good eyesight to be able to see "nobody" (63).The use of homophones and homonyms are a source of confusion since one word can mean different things in different contexts. This is Carroll's ingenious use of homophones where two words sound the same but have a different meaning. It shows that language as our lived experience defies common sense and is highly arbitrary in its use. Similarly, the arbitrary nature of language in defining the

meaning of words is presented throughout the text through the use of homonyms (bark, bed, bough and so on) and homophones (tail-tale, flower-flour and so on).

On the face of it, the language of the looking glass world appears nonsensical, but on deeper interrogation, one finds that the language is highly orderly and logical and is used in its literal sense. *Gnat* asks Alice the use of names if they do not represent literally, the object they denote, and goes on to locate several insects in *Looking Glass Land*, including the rocking-horse-fly, the snap-dragon-fly and the bread-and-butter-fly, that represent the literal meaning of the names. *Bread* and *butter fly*'s wings are thin slices of bread and butter with its head as a lump of sugar. The rocking horse fly is made up of wood, swings from branch to branch and lives on sawdust, whereas the snap-dragon–fly as a Christmas - themed insect is made of plum-pudding. There exists extreme literalness of language as the insects literally represent the objects they denote. If we carefully analyse, the use of language in the *Looking Glass Land,* unlike the slippery language of our world, where there is a tenuous connection between logic and language, the language used in the *Looking Glass Land* is highly coherent and logical. However, the language of the inverted mirror world lacks sense for Alice since she has imbibed the language of her own Victorian world. This linguistic nonsense is used as a form of critique to depict the lack of sense and semantics in our real adult world where a single word can have many meanings and where it is necessary to know not only the correct meaning of the words but also how a particular word is used in different contexts and situations.

We find that the language of the looking glass world is very logical and is not used loosely at all like in our world. Words have the power not only to create events but also to manifest them. Lewis Carroll demonstrates this power of language to create events through the use of nursery rhymes that must follow the determined the course of action. Whatever is written in the nursery rhymes shall come to pass: Humpty Dumpty shall "have a great fall", Tweedledee and Tweedledum shall "fight over the rattle" not because they want to, but because it is written. Words give rise to events simply by being spoken. Language is not passive and has the power to predict and predetermine events! The author depicts how words have the power to assign identity to people and things. The very act of 'naming' not only identifies but also categorises, labels and stereotypes. It is through language that hierarchy and order are created and imposed. In the forest with no names, the fawn and pawn (Alice) are initially friends, but as soon as they reach the end of the wood, the fawn darts away in fear realising that Alice is a human child and hence, not harmless. The forest in which things have no names is a reflection of the pre-lapsarian universe where things exist without any imposed socio-cultural meanings and a 'human' and 'animal' are at the same level. Let's look at the train journey that Alice undertakes and her meeting with Tweedledee and Tweedledum next.

Check Your Progress 2

1) How does language work in *Through the Looking Glass*? Explain the linguistic ambiguities and wordplay in the novel.

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2.3.5 The Train Journey and Tweedledee and Tweedledum

Since *Through the Looking Glass* is a fantasy narrative, there is no real continuity. As Alice goes from the second square to the third, while trying to avoid some elephants behaving like bees, she suddenly finds herself seated in a train compartment with co-passengers who are - a goat, a beetle and a man dressed in paper. Alice discovers that she is travelling without a ticket, when the guard asks Alice to show her ticket, claiming "his time is worth a thousand pounds a minute," (26). Funnily enough, the guard's statement is extended and applied to trivial things and used as a refrain to represent a mechanised way of thinking where everything is seen by adults in terms of time and money. It reflects a commercialist society where time is equated with money. The appearance of the train shows not only a child's fascination with trains but also presents trains as mechanised wonder of industrial England— a symbol of progress for Victorian England that signals its fast-paced development and regimented way of life.

The twins, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, Alice meets in the fourth square are based on a nursery rhyme by **James Halliwell**'s '*The Nursery Rhymes of England*' (1886). The phrase tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum was used to describe two identical things. The twins are the mirror images of each other which suggest that the world of looking glass is based on the theme of inversion. The twins are not only the physical inversion of each other but also have inverted thought processes and represent contradictions and fights. They are fat grown up men who have been infantilised for being immature and fighting over a rattle like boys. Critics see the twins as a satire on the Whigs and Tories of England who were constantly at loggerheads.

The twins admonish Alice for not beginning right by greeting them and teach her the social protocol on how to correctly shake the right hand. Tweedledee begins reciting "The Walrus and the Carpenter", a poem that describes the story of a Walrus and a Carpenter who trick young, gullible oysters into leaving their underwater home for a stroll and eats them. The poem is an original nursery rhyme written by Lewis Carroll and is a departure from traditional nursery rhymes that always came with a moral instruction. The poem "Walrus and the Carpenter" instead becomes a cautionary tale about misleading promises of the corrupt adult world. It paints the adult world as that of lost innocence and the knowledge that comes through the experience of suffering and deception.

Carroll dwells on the metaphysical question of the nature of reality through Tweedledee who tells Alice that she is not real but only a "sort of thing" in the Red King's dream, adding that, Alice is a figment of the sleeping Red King's dream and would vanish if he were to wake up. Though Alice considers this as nonsense and claims she is real and not imaginary, Carroll questions if we are indeed a part of some God's dream. The identical twins also illustrate the power of language to create events through the use of words. The nursery rhyme must follow a predetermined course of action, and Tweedledee and Tweedledum shall "fight over the rattle", not because they want to, but because it is already written in the nursery rhyme. And, as the poem predicts, they are both 'frightened" away by a "monstrous crow". Alice meets Humpty Dumpty next and we shall examine the role Humpty Dumpty places in the novel next.

2.3.6 Humpty Dumpty

In the sixth square, the egg purchased from the sheep's shop turns into Humpty Dumpty whom Alice now finds perched atop a wall. Alice is able to recognise him from the nursery rhyme. Humpty Dumpty asks Alice her name and upon being told the name, declares that 'Alice' is a stupid name since it means nothing and gives us no information about the person. For Humpty Dumpty, a proper name like 'Alice' must tell us something about the person and his/ her attributes. Humpty Dumpty exposes the ambiguity inherent in language where a person's name does not represent him in any way, and believes the name of a person should necessarily give us an idea about the person since a person is represented by his/her name. Humpty Dumpty raises important questions on the construction of language and the arbitrary nature of words by arguing that there is no link between words and what they signify in the real world.

When Alice tries to compliment Humpty Dumpty on his cravat but is unsure if he is wearing a belt or a neck tie, Humpty Dumpty explains that it is a tie that was an 'un-birthday present'— a present which can be given on any day which is not one's birthday. Humpty Dumpty turns logic on its head by coining new words like 'unbirthday present' that denote presents given on non-birthdays. According to him, since the connection between words and what they signify is arbitrary, the speaker can make the words mean whatever he wants them to mean. He assigns new meanings to existing words like 'glory' which for him mean 'an argument that knocks-down an opponent'. By giving his own personal meanings to words, he considers himself to be a master of language: "*when I use a word, it means just what I want it to mean.*" (57) He questions if we own the language or is it language that controls us? What Humpty Dumpty means is that language is made by humans for their ease of communication and we are the masters of language. Therefore, he condescendingly assigns his own private meaning to the words and declares that he will make a word mean whatever he wishes it to mean.

Humpty Dumpty translates "Jabberwocky' for Alice—the poem written in reverse that she found upon entering the looking glass world. Ostensibly, the poem is about a boy who goes on an adventure to find Jabberwock—a mythical dragon like beast—and kills it to return home triumphant to his father as a hero. The poem is an example of literary nonsense since it is full of obscure, incomprehensible words that make little sense. The poem has a number of 'portmanteau' words that Humpty Dumpty defines as those words where "*two meanings are packed up into one word*" (59). Jabberwocky is full of made-up portmanteau words like '*frabjous*' which is a portmanteau of 'fair', fabulous and joyous, '*mimsy*' that is a combination of "miserable and flimsy". The poem also has nonce words or invented words created for a single occasion to solve an immediate problem of communication like '*uffish*', which is explained by Carroll as "*a state of mind where voice is gruffish, manner roughish and temper huffish*." (AA, 163)The poem shows great inventiveness with language and has several mythical animals like '*raths*' or green pigs, *bandersnatch* and *jubjub* bird that do not exist in reality. Like Humpty Dumpty, Carroll coined new words and also created new meanings of existing words to show the evolving nature of language where the meaning of words is not fixed but ever changing.

We find Humpty Dumpty to be a wordsmith who is fond of inventing new words just like Lewis Carroll was. Today, the English dictionary has a number of words that were originally coined by Carroll. Even the word 'jabberwocky' which means a monster beast in the poem, has found its way into the English dictionary and is used to mean literary nonsense or 'meaningless speech or writing'. Humpty Dumpty is a linguist who is extremely proud of his knowledge and is a literal egghead as his head is shaped like an egg. It is noteworthy that the word 'egghead' is often disparagingly used for an intellectual who is too proud of his knowledge, and that is exactly how Alice finds him to be. However, as the nursery rhyme says, Humpty Dumpty's pride has a fall.

2.3.7 The Lion and the Unicorn

In the next square, Alice meets the White King's messengers Hatta and Haiga who are Mad Hatter and March Hare from *Alice in Wonderland*. The messenger informs the White King that the lion and the unicorn are fighting for the King's crown. The animosity between the Lion and Unicorn is presented through a famous nursery rhyme. The Lion and the Unicorn traditionally were the animals used in Britain's and Scotland's coat of arms in the 12th century and talks of the rivalry between Britain and Scotland.

At another level, the episode with the lion and unicorn carries a topical reference. Political cartoonist and illustrator of Alice books, **John Tenniel**, who was famous for his *Punch* magazine cartoons as a political satirist, fabulises the lion and the unicorn to caricature two famous politicians of his day—**William Gladstone** and **Benjamin Disraeli**. These animals are not any generic lion and unicorn but carry a reference to the contemporary politics of Carroll's age, where Tenniel shows the confrontation between the liberal Whigs and the conservative Tories of his age by making the Unicorn look like Disraeli while the lion is made to resemble Gladstone. These two politicians battled through Queen Victoria's reign and were always sparring with each other. Though Queen Victoria was personally fond of Disraeli, it was lion Gladstone that "beat the Unicorn all around the town" and had a longer stint as the nation's Prime Minister. The Cake symbolically represents the united electoral mandate that chose Gladstone, who succeeded Disraeli and served as the Prime Minister for twelve years. The two political contenders are depicted as the rational Gladstone and the irrational Unicorn, both of whom desire a larger electoral slice of the national pie. There is a role reversal when Disraeli—the unreal unicorn, himself known for his unrealistic ideologies, ironically, calls Alice a "fabulous monster". Then there is the difficulty of cutting the cake which proves to be a difficult exercise as the slices of cut cake fuse together time and again, despite Alice's repeated slicing. The unicorn explains that in the world of the looking glass, the cake has to be passed around first and cut afterwards. On being passed around, the cake splits into three pieces on its own—figuratively representing the United Kingdom of Wales, Scotland and England and the united electoral mandate of the Britons. In the next section, we shall look at Alice's interaction with the Knight and her becoming a Queen.

2.3.8 Meeting the Knight and Becoming a Queen

In the chapter 'In my Own Invention', Lewis Carroll includes a caricature sketch of himself in the form of the White Knight who accompanies Alice to the seventh

square before she reaches the last square and is crowned a queen. Tenniel shows a clear resemblance between the author and the White Knight in terms of their "shaggy hair…gentle face and large mild eyes" (72) and other physical features. Bearing a sword clearly shaped like a cross, the Knight is drawn very similar to Carroll the clergyman, as a guardian of religion and the defender of truth and morality. The portrayal of the White Knight as the gallant alter ego of the author himself is highly self-referential as the Knight shares the same traits as Carroll. While Carroll spoke with a stammer, the knight has an awkward gait, rides miserably, and repeatedly falls off the steed. Not only this, the Knight too is fond of wordplay and is a great inventor of things just as Carroll was. The Knight carries around an array of objects such as a beehive, a dish, a mousetrap, and a little box to keep clothes and sandwiches, and has even invented anklets to save the horses from shark bites. Though these objects have little utility, it reminds us of knick-knacks such as wind-up animals, chess set for travelers, sealing wax and other things that Carroll invented. We also find that the White Knight is the only character in the world of the looking glass that is chivalrous and kind to Alice and saves her from the evil Red Knight. Before helping her cross the final frontier, the knight sings a parting song to her about humans growing old and losing their innocence. The plaintive song is Carroll's tribute to his friendship with young Alice and a sad realisation that they inevitably have to part ways upon Alice's maturation into a young woman.

As soon as Alice reaches the last square, she magically finds a golden crown on her head and discovers she will soon be crowned with a formal feast in her honour. The party can be taken as a symbolic coming-of-age feast, where all the quirky characters of the looking glass world that have been a part of Alice's growing-up get to participate. The ceremony has two Queens examining Alice on proper social conduct, dos and don'ts of appropriate behaviour, while teaching her manners and etiquette to prepare her for her role as a young lady. The pushy Red Queen criticises Alice and tells her to be obedient and behave appropriately since she is now the queen. Carroll makes a comment on the excessive emphasis on manners and the farcical rules that a person was expected to observe in Victorian society. The Red Queen considers it rude to "cut any one you have been introduced to" and applies this social protocol to the leg of mutton as well (256).The banquet episode where stiff outward formality is put on display even to food items such as a 'leg of mutton' and the 'pudding' is a caricature of Victorian emphasis on manners.

The Red Queen asks Alice to give a speech. As Alice rises to assert herself as the new queen, in a climactic moment, the banquet goes awry. The crockery comes alive, candles grow taller and reach the ceiling and the White Queen tumbles into the soup. Unable to make sense of this confusion and madness, Alice angrily turns the table over and blames the Red Queen whom she considers responsible for all the chaos. She grabs and shakes the Red Queen who begins to diminish into a kitten. By taking hold of the Red Queen, Alice checkmates the Red King. This signals the end of the game of chess of the dream world as Alice wakes up and realises that she had been dreaming all along. She questions the nature of her dream and wonders if it was she who was dreaming or whether she was indeed living the Red King's dream? The book ends with Carroll questioning the nature of our existence and the question of whose dream is it that we are living?

Check Your Progress 3

1) Critics have called Lewis Carroll's use of nonsense and fantasy as highly subversive. Do you agree with this assessment?

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2.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at the following elements:

- The use of fantasy and nursery rhymes anchor the text in the category of children's literature. Several fictional characters such as Humpty Dumpty, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, the lion and the unicorn are based on the traditional nursery rhymes of Victorian England.
- Though *Through the Looking Glass* belongs to the genre of children's literature, there are well-disguised adult themes as well, that makes the work more symbolic and allegorical. Unlike the other children's books of the author's age, *Through the Looking Glass* registers a departure from the conventional form of children's literature.
- The mirror world is characterised by creatures that are rude to Alice and often talk down to her. It becomes a reflection of the actual adult world Alice inhabits with its conventions and rules of conduct. In her politeness and courtesy towards the characters of the glass world, Alice exemplifies the conduct expected of a Victorian girl child.
- Carroll uses the guise of fantasy to look critically at Victorian society and the authoritarian world of the adults. Alice as a young girl is a representative figure of Victorian childhood and the character of Alice, critiques a number of subjects ranging from God and religion (Red King), arbitrary construction of language (Humpty Dumpty and Jabberwocky), political tussles (lion and the unicorn), to the imposed order and restrictive world of the Victorian patriarchal society (Red Queen).
- The use of the chess motif is symbolic and works at different levels. At an allegorical level, the game of chess represents the progression of life. As one grows and matures through the journey of life one wakes up to reality.

2.5 GLOSSARY

Victorian: Pertaining to Queen Victoria of England or the period of Queen Victoria's reign (20 June 1837—22 January1901)

Didactic: intending to teach, particularly in having moral instruction as an ulterior motive.

Fantastic: imaginary or not based on reality; foolish or irrational.

Portmanteau: a word that combines the sounds and meanings of two words.

Neologism: a newly coined word or expression.

Jabberwocky: this word has come to mean 'nonsense' was originally coined by Lewis Carroll.

Wordsmith: an expert in the use of words.

Unicorn: an unreal animal represented as a horse with a single straight horn projecting from its forehead.

2.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Read Section 2.3.2 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Read Section 2.3.4 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 3

1) Read the whole of Section 2.3 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

2.7 ABBREVIATIONS

AA—The Annotated Alice.

TLG—Through the looking Glass.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1) How does language work in *Through the Looking Glass*? Explain the linguistic ambiguities and wordplay in the novel.

3) Would it be correct to say that *Through the Looking Glass* comes under the purview of both popular fiction and children's literature?

4) What do we learn about the Victorian society from Alice's adventures in the world of the Looking Glass?

5) The instability of language in *Through the Looking* Glass is intended to question the very foundation of the Victorian emphasis on reason, order and propriety. Discuss.

6) How does Carroll posit a relook at the established concepts of logic and reality in the guise of fantasy?

7) Critics have called Lewis Carroll's use of nonsense and fantasy as highly subversive. Do you agree with this assessment?

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

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UNIT 3 YOUNG ADULT FICTION : AN INTRODUCTION (WRITINGS FROM SRI LANKA)

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Young Adult (YA) Fiction

3.2.1 Tracing the Development of YA Fiction

3.3 Sri Lanka: Colonial History & Ethnic Conflict

3.4 Writings from Sri Lanka

3.5 *Bildungsroman*/Counter- *Bildungsroman*

3.6 Let Us Sum Up

3.7 Hints to Check Your Progress

3.8 Glossary

3.9 Suggested Readings & References

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will examine **Shyam Selvadurai**'s novel *Funny Boy* as an example of Young Adult literature. It will begin by understanding the many nuances and history of this genre and see how *Funny Boy* fits within this paradigm. *Funny Boy* is set in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, in the backdrop of the ethnic tension between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil ethnic groups. It focuses on the coming of age narrative of seven-year-old Arjie, a member of the Tamil community who struggles to negotiate his sense of sexual and ethnic identity. This unit will also examine Young Adult Fiction (YA) as a category of Literature; and study the genre of the *bildungsroman* i.e. a narrative which charts the process of the physical and psychological growth and development of a young protagonist. It will examine the ethnic and the socio-political situation in Sri Lanka that forms the backdrop of the novel. Let us look at what young adult fiction is next.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As a category of Literature, young adult (YA), fiction has emerged as a significant cultural and literary phenomenon over the past few decades. It is a broad spectrum of writing that includes iconic works like the *Harry Potter* Series, the *Hunger Games* series, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* etc. While young adult literature usually concerns itself with the life of a teenage or adolescent protagonist, its readership can vary across ages. Research has shown that 55 % of the readers of YA literature are 18 years or older while the largest demographic of readers comes from the 30-44 age group (Hill 5). The age bracket of the readership is one of the significant markers of defining young adult literature. While there is no single authoritative understanding of what constitutes this genre, several critics have identified certain salient features. **Bushman** and **Haas** define it as "literature

for and about adolescents" (2) while **Stephens** argues that it is "a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey towards identity" (41). In the next section we will examine Young Adult (YA) Fiction in more details.

3.2 YOUNG ADULT (YA) FICTION

Trites writes "YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual" (20). YA literature is usually written as realistic fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, mystery, memoir etc. Most critics agree on certain aspects that constitute YA such as, a) YA literature is literature for and about teens, b) it seems to exist to bridge the gap between children's and adult's books, c) it may be further subdivided into the same genres as adult books—romance, paranormal, mystery, horror, literary fiction, d) it is literature written keeping in mind readers between the ages of 12 – 18 years, e) the category could be a marketing strategy, but it helps in demarcating the lines between children's literature, YA lit, and adult lit there are bound to be crossovers, g) one age group can read the books that are actually targeted at another age group. In the next sub – section we shall try and trace the history of the development of YA fiction.

3.2.1 Tracing the Development of YA Fiction

But most importantly, critics such as **Tracy van Straaten**, VP at Scholastic, remind us that, "something people tend to forget is that YA fiction is a category not a genre, and within it is every possible genre: fantasy, sci-fi, contemporary, non-fiction. There's so much richness within the category." Here we discover that YA fiction is a category in literature and not really a genre, the main genre being Children's Literature. Let's now begin tracing the growth and development of this category of writing in Children's Literature.

Leonard Marcus (1950), who may be regarded as one of the world's most preeminent authority on children's literature, is an author, a curator, a historian, and a critic himself. He opines that the history of "Y.A." can be traced back to a gentleman by the name of **G Stanley Hall** (1846 – 1924), an American, an evolutionary and child development psychologist who devoted his study primarily in understanding adolescent development, particularly in the area of aggression. He is said to be "the father of adolescence" because of his early interest and emphasis on this critical point in the development of children. According to Marcus, In the 1930s **Margaret A Edwards**, an administrator of young adult programs at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, began to be specially interested in writing for teens, and contributed significantly to furthering the category of YA fiction. In the 1950s **J D Salinger**'s novel the *Cather in the Rye* (1950), was published which was not actually written it a teenage readership in mind, but it was to catch the imagination of the YA population in a big way, and the book was to become an anthem for the young adult readers who were caught up in the chaos of alienation, material wealth versus spiritual deficit, amongst other issues. **McCarthy** agrees, "Certain classics would be categorized as Y.A. if they were published today. Catcher in the Rye comes to mind. [The category] exists, really, to serve a market need and to be able to target a more specific reader who might not find these books if they were published into the wilds of the adult fiction world.")

Following the popularity of *The Cather in the Rye,* amongst YA readers, this category began to emerge with the writings of **Mary Stolz**, (1920 – 2006), with works like *To Tell Your Love* (1950), *Leap Before You Look* (1972), **John Tunis**, 1889 –1975), *The Kid from Tomkinsville Brooklyn Dodgers series*, then **Robert Cormier** (1925- 2000), "who grew up on Salinger," and wrote novels such as, *Now and at the Hour* (1960), *A Little Raw on Monday Mornings* (1963), and his most famous work, the third novel in fact, *The Chocolate War* (1974), that was a book for adults, but, his agent decided that it would do better as a book for teen/ YA. Cormier, was to become "the dean of teen fiction writers," says Marcus, and other writers such as **Judy Blume**, **S E Hinton**, and **Paul Zindel** following in his footsteps. Marcus also infers that World War II (1939 - 45) also provided a great impetus to YA fiction. Given that young adults were enlisting for the war, they had to experience the gruesome realities of a very adult world- the battlegrounds of World War II. When World War II ended in 1945, the YA came back as war veterans, they had matured mentally, psychologically and emotionally way beyond their years. On the other hand, the younger generation that had stayed behind being too young to enlist, were, still carefree and felt cheated of an experience of a lifetime, little realising that the horrors and experiences of war can change a person dramatically. The war according to Marcus, made a big huge impact on society, be it in the area of music (when rock and roll as a genre evolved,) or in literature that suddenly became more grown-up literature for "kids."

Incidentally, a Young Adult Library Services Association was created in 1957 when the American Library Association was being reorganised and while there was a category called Young Adult Library Services these young adults did not really have any books of their own, besides J D Salinger's *The Cather in the Rye* (1951), there were hardly any books for the teenagers so to speak, and S E Hinton's *The Outsiders* that was published in 1967. *The Outsiders* was exemplary as far as YA Fiction went as it talks about teenage angst. Then Judy Blume entered the literary scene of YA fiction with her novels *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970), and she deals with racism, menstruation, teen sex, divorce, masturbation— and these were topics that teenagers were looking for and needed to read and speak about openly. *Are You There God?* was quickly followed by the anonymously written novel *Go Ask Alice*, which dealt with teen drug addiction. With these three instrumental novels, the so called "Golden Age of YA" was well under way. The trend of writing YA fiction in such a manner discussing issues pertinent and relevant to the young adult, continued into the 1980s, when episodic series books like *Sweet Valley High* and *The Babysitter's Club* reigned supreme. Even though young women largely accounted for the readership of YA fiction with novels such as those mentioned above, the young male adult was not too far behind as he had the works of authors like **Robert Cormier** (*The Chocolate War*, 1974) and **Walter Dean Myers** (1937-2014), with novels such as *Shooter* (2004), *What They Found: Love on 145th Street* (2007), and *Roach" in Taking Aim: Power and Pain, Teens and Guns* (2015).

Another important aspect that needs to be kept in mind is that YA fiction was and is also a result of a clever marketing strategy in that, the creation of YA fiction as a category within children's literature actually made very "good business sense," says Marcus. "All along since the beginning of the 20th century, specialized publishing departments were being formed, with the underlying idea to create a parallel world to the world of the institutional book buyers." Having said that it

was also a marketing strategy that led to the creation of this category, there is a reason why this division exists – it demarcates the target audience very clearly (it's meant for teenagers above the age of say 15 but younger than 20 years). Yet, we do know that in literature there is bound to be crossovers between the categories of young readers and YA readers and Adult Books. The main reason there is a distinction is the basic and elemental question - who is the book meant for? So let us now try and look very quickly at the differences between YA fiction and Adult Fiction? Some critics and *Writer's Edit* believe there are three key differences between YA fiction and adult fiction.

1) The age of the protagonist/s: The main difference would be the age of the characters or more specifically the age of the protagonist(s). There should be at least one protagonist who is between the ages of 15 and 19 years, whereas adult fiction will normally have older protagonist(s). Yet, it's not always just the age of the main characters that determines or defines the category. It is also the issues that the protagonist is engaged with, the manner in which it is dealt with and are taken up, that defines the category as YA fiction.

2) The voice: YA fiction is usually written by adults but the voice that comes through the narrative is that of a young adult and it is a very true and authentic sounding voice that establishes itself through some basic points of intervention such as, the issues and concerns that are taken up in the novel, the thought processes of the young adult protagonist and the factors/ circumstances that motivate him/ her, and the style/ manner in which the novel is written. When it comes to the question of narrative technique, a work categorised as YA fiction would have a sense of immediacy much like the youth (almost like a culture of instant gratification), so would therefore be narrated in the First/ the Third Person narrative mode / voice, whereas an adult book could be more introspective or retrospective and would be written in the Third Person voice. The next important distinguishing feature is the themes that are dealt with by both categories.

3) The themes of the story: Apart from the coming of age theme which is particular to YA fiction, or the essential existential crisis that plagues most adults and is reflected in adult books, all other themes can crossover both the categories. The real difference lies in the way the themes are explored in YA fiction and adult novels. For instance, while love and romance could be a theme in both categories, the manner in which it's dealt would indicate whether it belongs to the category of YA fiction or adult fiction. As a young adult Rewa Lhaden told me recently, "the only major difference between adult fiction and young adult fiction would be the manner in which sex, sexuality and sex scenes are written. In YA fiction either there are no sexual scenes or if there are, they are very vague, whereas in adult fiction, they would be more graphic, and it would be ok as the categories are different". Apart from sex and sex scenes, violence, and how much of violence is to be detailed is yet another difference between adult fiction and YA fiction. But of course, lines between YA fiction and adult fiction may blur and when it does, it becomes difficult to actually distinguish between the two. But if a combination of the three distinguishing factors we detailed above exists then it would be more or less safe to categorise the fiction as YA fiction. More recently, there is another category called New Adult Fiction as well.

New Adult Fiction may be defined as a category in between YA fiction and Adult Fiction. And the writings that belong in this category are such that indicate clearly that the writing is intended for Young Adults who are above the age of twenty but are still very new to being adults. But all said and done, YA fiction has gained a lot of prominence, and ground. By the late 80s particularly in an essay written in 1989 by Brenda O Daly called, "Laughing with, or Laughing at the Young Adult Romance," she opined that YA fiction was in fact was extremely popular with its intended audience — but that adult critics made the mistake of assuming it was all the same. She also points out that there is a new trend in YA: books that explore "the territory of female imagination" that acts as inclusive portrayals of teenagers. In the next section we shall look at the history of the small island nation of Sri Lanka, since the novel *Funny Boy* is about sri Lanka.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Trace the history of the development of Young Adult Fiction briefly.

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3.3 SRI LANKA: COLONIAL HISTORY & ETHNIC CONFLICT

The island country of Sri Lanka is located along the southwest border of the Indian peninsula in the Indian Ocean. Between 1505 and 1948, parts of the country were occupied and governed by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British respectively. In 1505, the first Portuguese fleet landed in Colombo and by 1518, they had built their first fort in Colombo, the capital of modern day Sri Lanka. By the end of the 16th century, the most prominent kingdoms including Kotte, Sitawake and Jaffna had been annexed by Portuguese powers. Their exclusive control over Sri Lanka was short lived as the Dutch East India Company arrived in the early years of the 17th century. The Dutch began consolidating their power and by 1656, they had replaced the Portuguese as the colonial masters of Sri Lanka.

Around the period of the French Revolution (1789), the British conquered the island (which they termed Ceylon) after the Dutch forces surrendered. As with other erstwhile European colonies, the early 20th century witnessed the rise of nationalist sentiment which culminated in demands for independence. In 1948, Ceylon achieved dominion status under which it had its own constitution and could elect its own government. However, it continued to be a part of the British Commonwealth of Nations and recognised the authority of the British monarch. According to the agreement signed between the British government and Ceylon, Ceylon was to be conferred the "fully responsible status within the British Commonwealth of Nations". **Nira Wickramasinghe** argues that the "transfer of power within the framework of a dominion allowed the country to avoid the

necessity or human costs of struggling for a national cause, but it also denied its ruling class a founding myth" comparable to its neighbours like India. It was only in 1972 that Ceylon became the Republic of Sri Lanka with a new constitution. The post of Governor-General, which was the liaison of the British crown, was now replaced by the President who would act as the Head of the State.



https://www.mapsofindia.com/neighbouring-countries-maps/indian-subcontinent-map.html



https://www.mapsofworld.com/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-political-map.html

Once Sri Lanka became independent from British rule in 1948, it began to be plagued by ethnic conflicts. Historically Sri Lanka has had an ethnic makeup of Singhalese, Tamil and Sri Lankan moors, and a 2001 government census indicates their population size as 82%, 9.4 % and 7.9 percent. The seeds for ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil population were sown during the formation of the first constitution of the country. The Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 established two forms of citizenship – by descent and by registration. However, a majority of Tamils, who had migrated from India as indentured labour for tea and coffee estates, could not claim citizenship through either of these two approaches. The Tamil population felt alienated and marginalised by such laws which disenfranchised them. This was further complicated by the passing of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956 which made Sinhalese the official language of the country to be used for all administrative and educational purposes. Earlier, English was the official language but there was a growing sense of resentment against this as English was spoken by a thin Anglicised population. However, by replacing English with Sinhalese, the Tamil population, already marginalised by the citizenship act, felt that their identity and future prospects were under dire threat. There were widespread violent protests by Tamil collectives against the Sinhala Only Act and riots broke out in several parts of the country. These developments laid the foundation for the long and painful history of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In 1972, the name of the country was changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka and also declared Buddhism to be the primary religion given that the Singhalese were primarily Buddhist. As ethnic tensions escalated, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (the LTTE) was formed in 1976 with a demand for a separate Tamil nation. They were concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the country with Jaffna as their biggest stronghold. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (the LTTE), was formed under the leadership of **Velupillai Prabhakaran.** In 1983, the LTTE ambushed an army convoy, and killed thirteen soldiers. This ambush lead to the triggering of riots in which 2,500 Tamils died. Incidentally the novel under study *Funny Boy* by a Tamil writer ends during the time of the riots in 1983. The riots of 1983 also marked the beginning of one of the longest running civil wars in Asia that ended in 2009 and resulted in the death of close to 100,000 civilians. This conflict features prominently in the novel as Arjie, the central protagonist, belongs to a Tamil family who was forced to flee the country in the wake of the deadly 1983 riots. Having given you a brief summary of the history of the island nation and explaining the reasons for the ethnic tensions and violence that was to plague Sri Lanka for decades, we have also contextualised the novel under study. In the next section, we shall examine, Writings from Sri Lanka in English, from the island nation of Sri Lanka as *Funny Boy*, the novel under consideration is by a Sri Lankan writer and talks about the ethnic conflict that plagued Sri Lanka for a very long time.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Do you think Sri Lanka always had a history of ethnic issues?

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3.4 WRITINGS FROM SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka as you may be aware was a British colony till it gained independence in 1948. Once it became independent significant writing in English began to emerge. However, literature in English from Sri Lanka had actually begun to emerge much earlier in 1917 when the first novel in English was published. While some of the writers felt that they were writing in the language of the colonisers such as, **Lakdasa Wikkramasinha** who is quoted to having said, "I have come to realize that I am using the language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth: ...To write in English is a form of cultural treason," others such as **Yasmine Gooneratne** differed with this point of view. Sri Lankan writing in English was also influenced by the political happenings such as the Insurgency of 1971. This insurgency took place in the April of 1971 and was the only really planned and organised rebellion against the Government of Ceylon when **Sirimavo Bandaranaike** was the Prime Minister of the then Ceylon. Some political analyst and even critics call it an insurgency, some an uprising while others call it a rebellion. Whatever we wish to call it, this movement was largely restricted to the rural Sinhalese youth. Though it was localised to the rural areas, it was a political statement that had never ever been made in the history of modern Ceylon or present Sri Lanka, and it lingered in the collective imagination of the people of Sri Lanka for a really long time, so much so, that it helped propel writing of Literature in English. This insurgency or what came to be called the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* that began on 5th April 1971 and lasted till June 1971 was unsuccessful needless to say, but it was frightening to see how the rebels/ insurgents were capable of capturing and holding several towns and rural areas for several weeks until the armed forces could regain control over these areas. This was just to provide the background to how writings in English from Sri Lanka began to grow and develop.

Today, we know that Sri Lankan English Literature comprises almost all genres and also examines the diaspora as well as women's discourse, apart from dealing with the ethnic violence that plagued the country. But mostly the writings that have emerged from this small island nation draw from their own cultural roots and moorings, their culture and tradition. **Ameena Hussein**, an author and also a publisher in Sri Lanka in an essay titled, "Literary Arts in Sri Lanka," talks about how "English writing and publishing in Sri Lanka is the smallest segment and yet today it is the window to the larger world and reflects a vibrant and promising future". She goes on to say that, Sri Lankan writers deal with a large number of themes in their writings, such as – poverty, romance and politics, and of course the civil war that came to an end about a decade ago (2009).

One of the prominent writers of Sri Lanka is **Ashok Ferrey** (1957), who studied Mathematics at Oxford University, and worked on construction sites in London before returning to Colombo. Though born in Sri Lanka he grew up in Somalia and started writing at 42, once his father was diagnosed with cancer. Some of his novels include *Colpetty People* (2005), *The Good Little Ceylonese Girl* (2006), *Serendipity* (2009), *Love in the Tsunami* (2012), *The Professional* (2013), and *The Ceaseless Chatter of Demons* (2016).

Kala Keerthi Carl Muller (1935 - 2019) was a Sri Lankan writer, poet and journalist most well known for his trilogy on the Burghers of Sri Lanka: *The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993)*, Yakada Yaka (1994),* and *Once Upon A Tender Time* (1995)

apart from these he also wrote historical novels such as *Colombo a Novel* (2003). He won the Gratiaen Award for *The Jam Fruit Tree* in 1993. The Gratiaen Prize is an annual literary prize founded in 1992 by **Michael Ondaatje**, the Sri Lankan born Canadian writer, for the best work of literary writing in English by a resident of Sri Lanka. He is said to have established this award with the money he received as joint-winner of the ***Booker*** Prize for his novel *The English Patient* (1992).

Romesh Gunesekera (1954), his most well received novel also his first novel is the *Reef* (1994), shortlisted for the ***Booker***, as well as the ***Guardian Fiction Prize***. The novel was also nominated for a ***New Voice Award*** in the United States of America. His other works include a collection of short stories called the *Monkfish Moon* (1992), *The Sandglass* (1998), *Heaven's Edge* (2002), *The Match* (2006), *The Prisoner of Paradise* (2012), and *Noontide Toll* (2014).

Ru Freeman is a Sri Lankan born writer and activist widely published globally and the author of the novels *A Disobedient Girl* (2009), and *On Sal Mal Lane* (2013). Both her novels have been translated into many languages and she is also the editor of the anthology, *Extraordinary Rendition*: *(American) Writers on Palestine* (2015), amongst other non- fiction works.

Nihal de Silva died on 28th May 2006, killed by a land mine explosion at the Wilpattu National Park. He is remembered for his novel *The Road from Elephant Pass* (2003), which was adapted into a film. He also published *The Far Spent Day* (2004) and *The Ginirella Conspiracy* (2008).

Shyam Selvadurai (1965), is someone we have already met. His other works include the *Cinnamon Gardens* (1998), *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005), (Edited) *Story-Wallah: Short Fiction from South Asian Writers* (2005), and *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013).

Nayomi Munaweera (1973), was born in Sri Lanka migrated to Nigeria and finally settled in Los Angeles in the United States of America. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) was her debut novel that came to be nominated for many of the major literary prizes including the ***Man Asian Literary Prize.*** The novel won the ***Commonwealth Regional Prize for Asia*** in 2013. Her second novel is *What Lies Between Us New York* (2016).

Shehan Karunatilaka was born and grew up in Colombo, studied in New Zealand and has lived and worked in London, Amsterdam and Singapore. His most notable work is the *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* (2010), where Karunatilaka uses cricket as a trope to talk about Sri Lankan history. His first work *The Painter*, though shortlisted for the ***Gratiaen*** Prize in 2000, was never published. His other work is *Chats with the Dead* (2010), once again dealing with the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

Pramudith Rupasinghe (1979), was born in Sri Lanka is considered one of the emerging authors of our times. His books have sold worldwide, have been released internationally and been translated into several languages. His *Behind the Eclipse: The Unheard from the West African Ebola Crisis* (2017) is set in Africa. And unlike the other Sri Lankan novels that dealt with Sri Lankan themes or people, this deals with a young African boy and how he survives the Ebola virus. In the next section we shall examine how violence and ethnic conflict shaped the *Funny Boy*.

Check Your Progress 3

1) Name some of the prominent writers of Sri Lanka and their seminal works.

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3.5 *BILDUNGSROMAN / COUNTER - BILUNGSROMAN*

A *bildungs* narrative is primarily concerned with the growth of an individual within the rubric of a social collective. It closely follows the conflicts that emerge between the developing self and the demands of a traditional society. It is characterised by the relationship between an individual and the society he or she inhabits. In the case of the *Funny Boy*, this relationship is complicated by several factors – firstly, Arjie's developing sense of queer sexual identity, and secondly, his status as a part of the ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. Using Arjie's journey into adulthood as a lens, *Funny Boy* explores the delicate equation between the personal and the public domains of social, cultural and political existence.

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines a *bildungsroman* as a class of novel that depicts and explores the manner in which the protagonist develops morally and psychologically. The German word *Bildungsroman* means "novel of education" or "novel of formation." The traditional *bildungsroman* ends on a positive note. Some great examples of *bildungsroman* are: *Jane Eyre* (1847) by **Charlotte Bronte**, *Great Expectations* (1861) by **Charles Dickens**, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by **Lucy Maud Montgomery**, *Sons and Lovers* (1913) **by D H Lawrence**, *Gone with the Wind* (1936) by **Margaret Mitchell**, *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by **J D Salinger**, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by **Harper Lee**, *Black Swan Green* (2006) by **David Mitchell, and** *Skippy Dies* (2010) by **Paul Murray**.

Franco Moretti argues that two opposing forces of individuality and normality are perpetually in a state of conflict in a *bildungsroman*. This is evident in *Funny Boy*, a novel divided into six sections and in each of these sections Arjie comes across a different social, cultural or political construct. This is accompanied by a tussle between accepting his unique sense of self and trying to assimilate within the traditional social fabric. *Funny Boy* is essentially a queer coming-of-age story set within the backdrop of a violent ethnic struggle between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority. Throughout the novel, ethnic, national and sexual identities come into conflict with each other, making us question how they are formed in the first place. Arjie comes from an upper middle class Tamil family which has witnessed the horrors of the riots that took place in the 1950s. One can see multiple forms of segregation at work between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. For example, there are separate sections for both communities at Arjie's school and inter-marriage between a Sinhala and a Tamil is considered taboo and socially inappropriate.

Therefore, when Radha, Arjie's paternal aunt returns from America and falls in love with a Sinhalese man Anil, Arjie's grandparents are aghast. In order to put an end to her romantic relationship with Anil, they send Radha to one of their relatives' place in Jaffna, located in the north east part of Sri Lanka. On her way back to Colombo, Radha is physically assaulted by armed Sinhalese men during an episode of ethnic violence. This is symptomatic of how ethnic violence persecutes the female body and creeps into the most personal of relationships. Following this incident, Radha's resolve to marry against her family's wishes is weakened and she eventually gives into their demands. This also becomes a painful learning experience for Arjie about the failings of true love. Significantly, this isn't the only relationship in the text which is crippled by ethnic difference. Arjie's own mother once loved Daryl, a member of the Burgher community (half Dutch, half Sri Lankan). However, since their relationship did not receive social sanction, she (quite like Radha) entered into a marriage of convenience. The ramifications of the Tamil-Sinhala conflict can be felt in Arjie's school as well. As he prepares for his poetry recitation to be held on the Annual Day, he is told that he will be supporting the Tamil cause by performing well. The most agonising influence of the ethnic conflict can be witnessed in the riots that take place towards the end of the novel. Arjie's grandparents are killed in the violence and his family is forced to migrate to Canada, leaving behind much of their wealth.

Funny Boy looks at the multiple ways in which seven year old Arjie struggles to define his sense of self within a traditional heteronormative, ethnically conflicted society. Arjie's personal identity is primarily mediated by his sexuality and his ethnic status as a member of the Tamil minority. The novel introduces us to the many nuances of the process through which this social and cultural constructs percolate into the most personal of spaces and influences Arjie's maturation from innocence. Let us examine what a *bildungsroman* and counter *bildungs* is, and how these concepts relate to the novel. A traditional *bildungsroman* ends with an internalisation of the dominant norms of a society. The protagonist undergoes a journey at the end of which, he or she integrates into a community's culture and way of living. This is usually achieved by reaching a consensus between an individual's impulses and the demands of normalcy and discipline imposed by the society. When an individual's desires can be accommodated within the rules and fabric of a society, it is possible for this individual to live in harmony with the world around him or her. However, when a person's sense of identity is distinctly at odds with what is permissible under a society's rules, the *bildungs* narrative fails to reach an agreeable conclusion.

In *Funny Boy*, Arjie harbours a strong sense of alienation on two distinct levels, both as a homosexual and as a member of a minority ethnic community. In the first section titled "*Pigs Can't Fly*", he is caught in the middle of the gendered spatial division wherein girls and boys have separate areas earmarked for them. Before he is prohibited from playing with the girls because of his cousin Tanuja's interference, Arjie is the unquestioned leader of the girls' gang because of the force of his imagination. Through the power of fantasy, he successfully transgresses society's imposed gender roles. He derives almost a sensual kind of pleasure from all activities associated with the game titled '*Bride-Bride'*. For a brief period, Arjie manages to find happiness by inhabiting a space and indulging in activities that are considered inappropriate for boys according to the rigid norms of society. This is just one of the many ways in which Arjie subverts or challenges heteronormative traditions. Even as this rebellion might be short-

lived and unsuccessful in the long run, he is able to imagine an alternative to the one ordained by traditions. A similar kind of resistance is also forged by the two prominent female characters of the novel, Radha Aunty and Nalini, Arjie's mother. Radha Aunty decides to continue her romantic relationship with Anil even as her family has dire reservations about Anil being a Sinhalese. She also decides to marry Anil but ultimately, her resolve is broken as her body becomes the site of severe ethnic violence. Similarly, Nalini risks her reputation in a rather conservative Sri Lankan society when she urges the police to interrogate Daryl's murder. When she is not satisfied with the police investigation, she takes matters into her own hands and drives to Daryl's servant's village herself. It's only when her car is attacked that she decides to keep a low profile. Just like Arjie's, their acts of defiance are also fleeting and ultimately unproductive. However, their actions are significant because they draw attention to certain problematic social conventions.

The most definitive act of dissent is Arjie's conscious decision to mangle the poems he is meant to recite at the school function. Arjie is aware of the importance of these poems for Black Tie who has woven excerpts from these poems in his speech. The contents of the principal's speech will play an instrumental role in deciding his future and the future of the school as an educational institution. Therefore, indirectly, Arjie's performance may be instrumental in deciding the future of the school as a multicultural space where students of all ethnicities will be welcome or as an exclusively Buddhist or Sinhalese institution. Despite understanding the extent of his involvement in this situation, Arjie musters up the courage to deliberately deliver a flawed performance. This rebellion is driven by Arjie's feelings both as a student of the school and as a young homosexual who is beginning to embrace his sexuality. Significantly, this idea takes hold of Arjie's consciousness after his first sexual encounter with Shehan which takes place in the garage of his house. Immediately after the encounter, Arjie experiences shame and feels disgusted with himself. He becomes extremely conscious of his family's gaze on him and seems to have internalised their sense of discomfort with the very prospect of homosexual behaviour. As he sits at the dinner table with his family, he thinks, "*I looked around at my family and I saw that I had committed a terrible crime against them, against the trust and love they had given me*" (Selvadurai 262). It is only when he thinks about the countless times that Shehan had come to his aid that he begins the process of embracing their relationship. In this moment, he disassociates himself from his family's views and develops a unique individual sense of self. He also goes against the moral code of his parents (and by extension of the society) as he moves towards a healthy acceptance of his homosexual relationship with Shehan.

Arjie's plan to mix lines from the poems is dedicated to the memory of Shehan who had suffered immensely at the hands of Black Tie. The love and compassion he feels for Shehan gives him the courage to execute his bizarre plan. It is also important to note that Black Tie was a proponent of the Tamil cause and by thwarting his speech, Arjie also effectively goes against his own ethnic interests. He makes the conscious choice to prioritise his individual judgement over his sense of belonging to a community. In each of these instances, Arjie manages to subvert the spaces of home and school and the gender expectations associated with them. He thrives in the territory of the girls and orchestrates their activities before Tanuja comes into the picture. Similarly, he disrupts the hyper-masculinist ethos of the Victoria Academy by developing a healthy homosexual relationship

with Shehan. Arjie's father decides to transfer him to this school because he wants to make a man of him i.e. he believed that Arjie's 'funny' instincts could be remedied by placing him in an environment which privileges masculine values. However, quite the contrary happens, it is here that Arjie learns to embrace his sexuality and moves towards a wholesome development of his individual self.

If a traditional *bildungsroman* is meant to conclude with the protagonist accepting the social fabric and integrating within it, Arjie's journey follows a different course in *Funny Boy*. Instead of simply submitting to social codes, he rallies against them and develops a new set of moral codes for himself. He challenges society's rules regarding gender and sexuality and refuses to judge himself or his relationship with Shehan according to such oppressive norms. In doing so, Selvadurai gives us a revised understanding of the *bildungs* narrative. Traditionally, the conflict between individuality and socialisation is resolved by extracting a certain degree of consent from the individual. He or she accepts the social, cultural and legal codes of the society and designs his or her life around them. However, in *Funny Boy*, Arjie's sexual disposition is categorically demonised by the society. For his coming of age journey to reach a meaningful conclusion, he has to go against society and its gender expectations. Therefore, the novel has been often read as a counter-*bildungsroman* that de-centres hegemonic traditions (**Gairola**). It presents an alternative point of view of a character whose journey towards self-realisation is achieved by challenging and subverting the *status quo*. Towards the end of the novel, as Arjie stands with Shehan after delivering a flawed performance, he is fully aware that his parents might never understand his decision. This is just another example of how his individual identity is not completely dependent on or derived from institutions or people around him including his family and his school.

Check Your Progress 4

1) What are the key elements of a bildungsroman? Comment on *Funny Boy* as a coming of age narrative?

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2) How does Arjie's sexual identity interfere with the formation of his individual sense of self?

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3) How does Arjie negotiate the multiple kinds of alienation in the text? How do they contribute to his journey from innocence to experience?

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3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have examined young adult fiction, dealt briefly with the socio-political history of Sri Lanka, looked at writings from Sri Lanka and examined Funny Boy as a counter bildungs. The coming of age narrative is a cardinal feature of young adult literature. *Funny Boy* follows the journey of the maturation of its protagonist, Arjie, as he manoeuvres his way around his sexual, national and ethnic identity. It introduces us to the many ways in which Arjie moves from a state of innocence to one of experience. It also looks at the intersections between sexual identity, queerness and ethnic/national identity. It is important to understand that none of these forms of identification exist in isolation with each other. In fact, Arjie's sense of individuality is a complex product of the mingling of these processes. Finally, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* takes us through a journey in which a young boy contends with his homosexuality, his loss of home and understands the cruel ways in which the world around him functions. Even in the middle of all this, the protagonist takes definitive action, goes against the grain of society and inches closer to the development of a healthy, wholesome self.

3.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Read section 3.2 carefully and then answer in your own words

Check Your Progress 2

1) Read section 3.3 carefully and then answer in your own words

Check Your Progress 3

1) Read section 3.4 carefully and then answer in your own words

Check Your Progress 4

1) Read section 3.5 carefully and then answer in your own words
2) Read section 3.5 carefully and then answer in your own words
3) Read section 3.5 carefully and then answer in your own words

3.8 GLOSSARY

Queer : Queer is an umbrella term for sexual and gender identities which do not conform to the heteronormative binary which is masculinity and femininity. In the 19th century, it was used as a pejorative term for homosexuals. Since then, it has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community and has emerged as a radical political slogan.

Heteronormative : Heteronormative is a worldview or a belief that promotes heterosexuality as the default or standard form of sexual identity. Under this system, only two forms of sexual identity, masculine and feminine, are recognised as natural forms of sexuality.

Hegemonic : Hegemony describes the dominant position enjoyed by a group or a set of ideas and their tendency to become ordained as natural or common sensical over a period of time. It also refers to domination which maintained by dispersing a set of ideas in the cultural domain.

LTTE : Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is a political and militant organisation formed in 1975 with the demand for a separate Tamil nation. It had its stronghold in the north-east part of Sri Lanka and was involved in several violent attacks until it was defeated by the Sri Lankan state in 2009.

Diaspora : The term diaspora comes from an ancient Greek word which means 'to scatter about'. It refers to communities of people who live outside their country of origin or ancestry.

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Sri Lankan Writers

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THE PEOPLE'S
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UNIT 4 SHYAM SELVADURAI : *FUNNY BOY*

Structure

4.0 Objectives

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Queerness and Self Identity

4.3 *Funny Boy*: Summary & Analysis

- 4.3.1 Section I/ Chapter I: *Pigs Can't Fly*
- 4.3.2 Section II/ Chapter II: *Radha Aunty*
- 4.3.3 Section III/ Chapter III: *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*
- 4.3.4 Section IV/Chapter IV: *Small Choices*
- 4.3.4 Section V/ Chapter V: *The Best of All Schools*
- 4.3.5 Section VI/ Chapter VI: *Riot Journal: An Epilogue*

4.4 Gender and Sexuality

- 4.4.1 Gender and Space: Home
- 4.4.2 Gender and Space: School

4.5 Nation and Community

- 4.5.1 Acts of Rebellion

4.6 Let Us Sum Up

4.7 Hints to Check Your Progress

4.8 Glossary

4.9 Suggested Readings & References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will contextualise Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* as a novel that deals with the coming-of-age of a queer protagonist amidst the conflict ridden nation of Sri Lanka. It will provide a brief introduction to Sri Lankan history, especially the long and arduous ethnic conflict and civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. It will also study the processes through which individuals establish their social, national and sexual identities. This will be done by taking a closer look at gender constructs in society and how they influence the young protagonist's journey from innocence to maturity. Finally, it will attempt to comprehend the nuances of the word 'funny' in the title with respect to queerness and homosexuality. Some of the points discussed here have also been examined in Unit 3, but do keep in mind that this helps reiterate and reinforce ideas that may be new to you.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Published in 1994, *Funny Boy* is set in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, in the months leading up to the 1983 riots. The novel is narrated from the point of view of seven year old Arjie and details his experiences within his family and in his school. In each of the six sections of the novel, Arjie learns valuable life lessons through his interactions with different characters. Through these relationships, he inches closer towards embracing his unique identity, both as a queer homosexual and as a member of an ethnic minority who is forced to flee his

country and immigrate to Canada. This becomes the lens through which the novel examines the ways in which people with different social, ethnic and sexual identities relate to the idea of belonging to a nation.

Shyam Selvadurai is a Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist who was born in Sri Lanka and currently lives in Toronto. When Selvadurai was nineteen, his family migrated to Canada during the ethic riots of 1983. These riots were triggered when the Tamil militant group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) attacked and killed several soldiers of the Sri Lankan Army. In response to this incident, anti-Tamil riots broke out in Colombo and spread to other parts of the country. As is evident, there are several similarities between Selvadurai's biographical details and Arjie's fictional persona; yet, Selvadurai has often categorically stated that *Funny Boy* is not an autobiographical narrative. *Funny Boy* as we know by now talks about a queer identity as Arije is a queer. How did this term/ word come to evolve and how did it acquire the connotation it has today is what we shall look at next.

4.2 QUEERNESS AND SELF IDENTITY

Queer is a sort of broad rubric term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or are not cisgender. The word 'queer' actually means strange or peculiar or weird, but later it was often used to describe those men and women who were interested in people of the same sex. Needless to say, the usage of the word 'queer' (particularly in the 16th Century) was in a pejorative/ negative manner. By the 19th century the word 'queer' was used to define or describe men who were more feminine than masculine and who were believed to have had same sex relationships. In short, it began to acquire the connotations of men engaged in a homosexual relationship. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, homosexuality began to be recognised as a category of people with non heterosexual needs and relationships and there developed a male gay subculture that included distinct sub categories such as - queer, fairy, trade, and gay. Gay men themselves began using the term 'queer' to kind of claim or identify with what was perceived by society as masculine. **George Chauncey** (1954), a historian at Columbia University states that many men who identified themselves as queer were, "repelled by the style of the fairy and his loss of manly status, and almost all were careful to distinguish themselves from such men". This they felt was necessary because they lived their lives in the shadow of the dominant 'straight' culture. The term 'trade' was used for so called straight men/ heterosexual men who would sometimes engage in same-sex activity/ a homosexual relationship.

In the 20th century when the word 'queer' began to be used, it had the sexually loaded connotation of same sex relationships as well as other terms such as 'fairy' or 'faggot'. Mind you these were all derogatory terms used to describe somebody who might have been perceived as being extremely flamboyant. The historian Chauncey says that the terms 'fairy', 'faggot' were "the predominant image of all queers within the straight mind." While the homosexual men and women, and the cisgender and the transgendered people, used the word queer to describe themselves, in medical terms and by the police, they were being referred to as "invert", "pervert", "degenerate", and "homosexual". Whatever the queer people chose to call themselves or whatever the medical fraternity or the police termed them, the general idea/ concept of a homosexual identity, only emerged because

of a binary understanding of sexual orientation in the 1930s and 1940s which was heterosexual vis a vie homosexual. Gradually as this binary between the heterosexual and the homosexual began to be accepted by society, the queer identity began to disappear gradually and it was only in the 1950s, that the Queer began coming out beginning with the underground gay bars of the 1950s, then, gradually moving more into the open in the 60s and 70s, by which time the identity of men engaged in same sex relationships began to undergo a change in terminology. This coming out from underground bars became possible in the aftermath of the World Wars, once the younger gay men began to realise that the term 'queer' was a derogatory/ pejorative term and began using the term 'gay' as they felt that the word 'gay' was gaining wider acceptance from society.

> *In calling themselves gay, a new generation of men insisted on the right to name themselves, to claim their status as men, and to reject the "effeminate" styles of the older generation. [...] Younger men found it easier to forget the origins of gay in the campy banter of the very queens whom they wished to reject.*
>
> *Chauncey, 1955, pps 13-16*

Gradually the homosexual identity began to be replaced by a 'gay' identity. In the early years of the 1970s, the term 'gay' was more of an umbrella term that included: gay men, lesbian women, bisexual men and women, as well as transsexual and gender-nonconformists. We must remember that being a homosexual or a gay was something people were not really open about and this was to change gradually over a long period of time. So the movement went from being quiet and introverted, to being a homosexual being and then on to being called gay which was a term that was used in a derogatory sense to indicate men who were passive and receptive in sexual encounters with other men. However, sometime in the late 1980s various queer activists, members of the Queer Nation, began to use the same word 'queer' to describe themselves and to appropriate the word in order to provoke a sort of reaction from the rest of the heterosexual or the so-called 'straight world'. Let us begin with an analysis of the novel the *Funny Boy* in the next section. As mentioned earlier, the term 'queer' was initially used as a disparaging term for people whose sexuality did not conform to the binary of heteronormative roles. Much like the word 'funny' is used in the text, 'queer' was used to exclude people from the domain of normalcy. Over the years, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning or the LGBTQ community has reclaimed the word and radicalised its many associations. As a result, it is now used as an umbrella term for people of all sexualities that lie outside the ambit of heteronormativity. In the case of Arjie, his queerness will play an important part in his coming-of-age journey as he moves from a stage of confusion and denial to a gradual acceptance of his queerness. In the next section we shall look at the summary and analysis of the novel.

4.3 *FUNNY BOY*: SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

The novel *Funny Boy* is divided into six chapters, the first few parts capture Arjie's childhood and recall the various episodes that introduce the whole family and the protagonist Arjie himself. The later chapters start to focus on the political tension brewing up in the nation and Arjie's discovery of his own sexuality. The Six chapters are titled - *Pigs Can't Fly*; *Radha Aunty*; *See No Evil, Hear No Evil; Small Choices*; *The Best School of All;* and *Riot Journal: An Epilogue*. The first

chapters titled "*Pigs Can't Fly*" and "*Radha Aunty,*" helps to shape Arjie's understanding of love, relationships and sexuality.

4.3.1 Section I/ Chapter I: *Pigs Can't Fly*

Summary

In the very first section/ chapter, called "*Pigs Can't Fly"* the readers are introduced to the rigid patriarchal set-up of Sri Lankan Tamil society where there are very well-defined spaces and activities for young girls and boys. While the area outside the domestic space i.e. "*the front garden, the road and the field that lay in front of the house*" belonged to the boys, the girls' territory was "*confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch*" (Selvadurai 3). *Pigs Can't Fly* takes place during the "spend the days." By virtue of the "*force of his imagination*" (Selvadurai 3), Arije is selected the leader of the girls' territory and orchestrates the games they play which essentially re-enacts ceremonies related to weddings and domestic chores. Told from his point of view *Funny Boy* is about coming to terms with being queer, a taboo in a close-minded Tamil family, as well as an "unnatural offence … against the order of nature" in the Penal Code of Sri Lanka (Sri Lankan Penal Code Chapter XVI section 365); and the story of how political and regional conflicts affect people's lives. As Arjie grows up, his parents continue to do what they can to 'man up' their son, as they are worried that he may turn out to be gay. Arjie is made to feel different from the rest of his male cousins in terms of his sexual disposition. He is unable to comprehend the taboo surrounding his desire to indulge in what are traditionally associated as 'feminine' activities. As **Gayathri Gopinath** states, "her answer attempts to grant to the fixity of gender roles the status of universally recognised natural law" (171). This marks the beginning of a sense of exile and loneliness for him as he is "*caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either*" (Selvadurai 39). The feeling of being different from the kids around him begins to define Arjie's self-identity. The sense of pleasure he derives from dressing up as a bride or his preference for games played by girls sets him apart from other boys and earns him pejorative titles like '*funny one'*.

Analysis

Arije finds his grandparents and the formalities of his family very constricting as their roles are defined by Society approved gender roles. It is also obvious that children are aware of the binary gender –but they are alright with someone crossing the lines. While the other girls are perfectly fine with Arije as the bride, Her Fatness Tanuja opposes his role and through her character she seems to be replacing the creative transformation of gender (Arije being the bride though he is the only male child playing bride - bride), with rigid, adult, societal rules. She also calls Arjie all kinds of vile names that he has no knowledge or understanding of and by doing so, she ushers in the harsh, real- world that Arije will have to face eventually. She calls him a "pansy," "faggot," and "sissy"— and introduces the prejudice against more effeminate men which Arije as a little boy hasn't really encountered. The word 'funny' takes on a weird connotation as the adults guess or know what Cyril Uncle is hinting at, but are almost afraid to articulate their thoughts in case, Arjie's effeminate manners hint at possible homosexuality. His father Appa thinks that sexual orientation is a result of bad parenting or nurturing rather than anything else or nature. Amma fears he'll turn out to be homosexual so prevents him from playing or watching the girls play. Meena is

interesting as she is the only girl who plays with the boys but this does not seem to threaten the family's sense of integrity or social standing. Is it because in a patriarchal society an effeminate male is perceived as more dangerous to the integrity of a society than a masculine girl? Arije soon realises that he stands totally alone, excluded from both the worlds of the girls and the boys, deeply shamed and alienated. In the next sub-section, we shall look at Radha Aunty and her role in the novel.

4.3.2 Section II/ Chapter II: *Radha Aunty*

In the next section titled "*Radha Aunty*", the readers are introduced to Radha Aunty, Arjie's paternal aunt who has recently returned from America. Much to Arjie's shock, Radha Aunty looks and behaves very differently from his imagined ideal of Sri Lankan femininity. She is described as "*thin, not plump*, "*flat like a boy*" and she is dressed in Western clothes instead of the traditional saree. An acquaintance of Radha Aunty, Rajan Nagendra, proposes to her, but she does not accept his proposal and instead becomes friends with Anil Jayasinghe, a Sinhalese also involved in the play. Since Arjie is close to his paternal aunt, he becomes a witness to her romantic relationship with Anil, a Sinhalese man. When Radha's parents find out, they are aghast as the very prospect of a Tamil and a Sinhalese entering into marriage which is socially a very repulsive thought for them. This is symptomatic of how ethnic and political affiliations influence the most private of decisions. However, Radha is prepared to marry Anil against the wishes of her family. To prevent this union from taking place, Radha's family decides to send her to Jaffna for a few weeks. On her way back, she is physically assaulted by a group of Sinhalese men in an episode of ethnic violence. As her body becomes the site of the historic conflict, her resolve to fight her family weakens and she submits to their demands and marries the Tamil man (Rajan) of their choice. Arjie's sense of excitement at the prospect of being involved in a real wedding is poisoned by the knowledge that love isn't enough to sustain Radha and Anil's relationship. As he walks away from the wedding, Arjie thinks to himself, "*I thought of her love-comics and how fervently I had believed in them; believed that if two people loved each other everything was possible. Now, I knew this was not so*" (Selvadurai 100). Once again, Arjie is forced to reformulate his beliefs and accept the harsh social reality of his family and many others like him. Arije's father then explains to Arije the ethnic tension and conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese people and Arjie realises the gravity of the situation. As he grows up, he becomes more conscious and aware about racial intolerance, unfairness that exists in the world around him. Arjie's mother too could not marry a white Dutch colonial (Daryl Uncle), because her family did not approve of that match and she ended up marrying Arije's father.

Analysis

Arije reads Sinhala romantic comics but he will never be able to experience that kind of love because of his sexuality. Radha Aunty is Arjie's supporter and defender who unlike the other extremely judgmental adults, of the family listens to Arije and takes him seriously. There are parallels drawn between Radha Aunty and Arije, both of them are unique and independent, because, both of them deviate from preconceived notions of perfection, and conformity. Arjie learns that he does not need validation from others for his self esteem to remain intact. Eventually he comes to realise that the racist attitude his mother has is symptomatic of ethnic tensions and conflicts throughout the history of Sri Lanka

that continues till present times. *Funny Boy* the novel then talks briefly about the history of the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and while the LTTE claimed that it was the voice of all the Tamils in the island nation, many Tamils like Arije's father (Appa) do not accept the LTTE's claim and try and assimilate with the Sinhalese. The Anil and Radha Aunty's romance/ situation is weird, complicated and ambiguous yet it brings to light the racial discrimination that exists on both sides – Amma from Radha Aunty's side of the relationship and Anil's father from his side. Funnily enough it is because of the familial antagonism that Radha Aunty and Anil are drawn closer together and they fall in love. Arije realises that Doris Aunty's words to Radha Aunty are or could be meant for him as well, as, his position in his family and the Tamil community will also be threatened by his sexuality. Shortly after, Radha Aunty is attacked in a train on her way back from Jaffna along with other Tamils and this attack by the Sinhalese not only demonstrates but also consolidates the ethnic tension that is brewing and can boil over at any time. Eventually Radha Aunty ends up choosing family and stability and agreeing to marry the man her family chooses. The enxt subsection will deal with Chapter/ Section 3, *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*.

4.3.3 Section III/Chapter III : *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*

Uncle Daryl returns to Sri Lanka from Australia in the third section/ chapter. Uncle Daryl is a burgher who grew up in Sri Lanka with Amma. He is a journalist and has been in Australia for more than ten years when he returns to Sri Lanka for work and primarily to look into whether the government of Sri Lanka has been abusing its powers under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Daryl reads *Little Women* (1868-69) by Louisa May Alcott, as he claims he has an affinity with the book and of course, he is laughed at by Arije's entire family. Daryl Uncle then goes on to buy Arije the sequels to *Little Women – Good Wives* (1880), *Little Men* (1871), and *Jo's Boys* (1886). This sharing of books immediately draws Daryl Uncle and Arije closer together. Arije's family, particularly Neliya Aunty do not approve of Amma's closeness with Daryl Uncle. When on a health trip to the mountains in Central Sri Lanka with his mother, Daryl Uncle visits them. And that is when Arije realises that Daryl and Amma had a romantic relationship a long time ago, before he left Sri Lanka. Daryl Uncle leaves for Jaffna, despite Arije's mother's pleas, as violence is high in Jaffna - the capital city of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. He goes to find out for himself the atrocities that could have been committed there. Eventually, he does not return to Colombo alive but his body washes up on the shores of a fishing village. They are told that Daryl Uncle drowned but Amma and Arije are convinced that the government is to blame and that he has been murdered. Amma wants to look deeper into the death of Daryl Uncle but the lawyer tells her that she cannot do anything as such. Referring to the three monkeys, he says … See No Evil, Hear No Evil suggesting that they put the death of Daryl Uncle to rest and not look into it any further.

Analysis

With Daryly Uncle's death several things come to light – (i) it does not make sense to pursue justice in a conflict ridden state, (ii) should one try and confront the might of the state or should one try and survive? (iii) ethnic tension is causing an economic slump and (iv) the Chelvaratnam family or Arije's family are economically very well off, and (v) the family's wealth could also implicate the family in various ways. Arije has also grown up quite a bit as he realises that

adults too are fallible, vulnerable and they are as much individuals as they are parents/ siblings/ other associated relationships; particularly from his observation of Amma and Daryl Uncle's, and Radha Aunty and Anil's interactions. He also realises that his father is absent most of the time being away on business trips and that Daryl Uncle's presence changes the family structure and dynamics as he sees Diggy, Sonali and Neeliya Aunty (Amma's sister) get more and more frustrated and alienated. At some point he is briefly attracted to Daryl Uncle and that is when the attraction hints at his becoming sexually aware. This relationship between Amma and Daryl Uncle is the third such relationship that threatens the family's social acceptability – first, Arije's "funniness", second, Radha Aunty's relationship with Anil and now Amma and Daryl Uncle. Just as Radha Aunty is chastised by the family, Daryl Uncle is in a sense chastised by the government officials who eventually kill him for trying to unveil the government's involvement in the ethnic violence against Tamils. In keeping with the ending of the earlier two chapters this one ends on a tragic note too.

4.3.4 Section IV/Chapter IV : Small Choices

Summary

Arije father gives a job to his friend's son (Jegan Parameswaran at his hotel), and who apparently had ties with the LTTE earlier but claims he doesn't now. Jegan and Arije become friends and Arije becomes a little more aware of his sexuality. Meanwhile the tension between the two communities – the Tamil and the Sinhalese continues to rise till Jegan is said to have been plotting to kill a Tamil politician. Appa fires Jegan immediately.

Analysis

Arije develops a crush on Jegan who seems quite comfortable with the extra attention and Jegan becomes a sort of male role model for Arije as well as Diggy. Appa meanwhile is in a relationship with an English girl and Arije realises that his father is a hypocrite, as he has the affair, and is much closer to Jegan than to his own children. Arjie wonders whether his father is using Jegan to try and manipulate him.

4.3.5 Section V/Chapter V : The Best of All Schools

Summary

Appa begins to suspect Arije's sexuality and decides that Arije needs to be transferred to Victoria Academy as he feels that this school will help change his son's sexual orientation. Victoria Academy is run by "Black Tie" the principal who wishes to keep the school open to all ethnicities as against the proposal for making it an exclusive Sinhalese school. Arije meets Shehan, a gay/oblique queer and is warned to stay away from him but the two become friends instead and Arjie is slowly deeply attracted to Shehan. Arjie is to recite some poems in an event scheduled later and this is important for retaining the inclusiveness of the school. Arije and Shehan are beaten up every time Arije forgets his lines. Ultimately Arije realises that the two of them are beaten up because they are not "manly" enough. Shehan kisses Arije who then starts comprehending and acknowledging his own sexuality and their first sexual encounter takes place in the garage of Arije's home. Thereafter, Arjie is ashamed, disgusted and feels he

has betrayed his family but on the day of the event he purposely forgets his lines to get back at "Black Tie" who has been beating Shehan badly repeatedly.

Analysis

The reasons why Appa sends Arije to Queen Victoria's Academy are very apparent he thinks he will be able to make Arije more masculine. The school is still a practitioner of colonial style education revealing a postcolonial Sri Lanka still living with the relics of colonialism. The Tamil-Sinhala ethnic divide is also very obvious and it is interesting to note that Arjie though a Tamil is always in the company of Sinhalese students and the language – Sinhala. Soyza, Cheliah and Salgado are instances of bullying be they the perpetrators or the victims that is, typical of particularly boarding / residential schools. The students and teachers of Queen Victoria Academy too seem to be divided between the Principal "Black Tie" and Lokubandara, and are symbolic of the ethnic tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Arije is shamed time and again as the family tries to change his behavior and are worried that he is gay/queer or will turn gay/queer. Spending time with Soyza, Arije realises that he is indulging in flirtation with him.

4.3.6 Section VI/Chapter-VI: Riot Journal: An Epilogue

Summary

The tension that has been building up through the years is now reaching its pinnacle. The rioters' start burning down houses and commercial establishments owned by the Tamils and Arije and family have to seek asylum in a neighbour's house. Their hotel is burned down and Arije's grandparents - Ammachi and Appachi are killed. Arije's family then decide to leave the country and Arjie and Shehan end up making love for one last time, before he is forced to say goodbye, never to see his friend and lover again. Then Arjie and his family leave their country, their homeland Sri Lanka and move to Canada.

Analysis

Civil unrest and ethnic violence has started in Sri Lanka and all across the country, atrocious acts of violence are committed against the Tamils. Arije's house is razed to the ground, as is his grandparent's place. Ammachi and Appachi are trapped in their car and burnt to death by the rioters. That is like the last straw and Arije's parents decide that they need to flee from Sri Lanka and move to Canada. Arjie is deeply troubled by all the happenings and by the fact that he needs to leave everything and everybody he has known and loved including Soyza. In the next section, we will look briefly at gender and sexuality.

4.4 GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai attempts to uncover the many social gender constructs that govern the private and public lives of individuals. It looks at the ways in which masculinity and femininity are defined in a social matrix and how these norms influence the identity and experiences of a wide spectrum of characters. Let's look at Gender and Space in the home/ domestic front next.

4.4.1 Gender and Space: Home

In the first section titled "*Pigs Can't Fly*", the young protagonist Arjie is forced to confront social gender stereotypes. His parents have joined their extended family for a monthly reunion at his grandparents' house. At these occasions, all his cousins would get together and play two games – the boys usually played cricket in the field outside the house while the girls played 'Bride-Bride', a game where they enacted the many ceremonies associated with a wedding. As the narrator tells us, "Territorially, the area around my grandparents' house was divided into two. The front garden, the road and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys" (Selvadurai 3). As opposed to this, the second territory of the girls was "confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch" (Selvadurai 3). Already, one can see a gender-based spatial segregation at work. There are specific sections of the house designated for activities involving girls and boys. While girls remain within the household and play a typically domestic game, boys venture out and engage in physical activity.

This gendered division of domestic space prefigures a similar phenomenon which takes place at the national level. In other words, the domestic spatial segregation along gender lines mirrors the national segregation along ethnic lines that will tear apart the narrator's and his family's lives. This draws our attention to how space is divided along gender and ethnic parameters, both at the microcosmic domestic and the macrocosmic national sphere. **Gayatri Gopinath** argues,

> "the gendered specialization of the domestic sphere in the story mirrors and reiterates nationalist framings of space that posit the 'inner' as an atavistic space of spirituality and tradition, embodied by the figure of the 'woman', as opposed to the 'outer' male sphere of progress, politics, materiality and modernity" (170).

However, Arjie, has managed till now to transcend these boundaries as he has always been the most significant member of the Bride-Bride gang owing to the force of his imagination. It is the "free play of fantasy" (Selvadurai 3) which attracts Arjie to games played by his girl cousins which imitated adult domestic functions or enacted fairy stories. Arjie's favorite game is called 'Bride-Bride' and he derives utmost pleasure from dressing up like a bride. Unfortunately though, his happiness is curtailed by the arrival of his cousin Tanuja who is very cross at being made the groom, the person with the least importance in the hierarchy of 'Bride-Bride'. When her desire to play the bride is met with derision from her fellow cousins, she tells her mother who drags a sari-clad Arjie in front of the adults of the house. This revelation causes a stir in the family and becomes a source of embarrassment for Arjie's parents as one of his uncle remarks sardonically to his father, "Ey Chelva! Looks like you have a funny one here" (Selvadurai 14).

The word "funny" here has obvious connotations of taboo and shame resulting from the fact that Arjie indulges in actions which are inappropriate for his gender. This is the first time that Arjie becomes painfully aware of such gendered restrictions even as he can't comprehend their rationality. This also marks the beginning of the sense of gendered alienation Arjie will continue to feel for a long time. As the narrator remarks rather poignantly, "Yet those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved" (Selvadurai 4). The exile mentioned here ensues from his sense of difference from normative

gender roles prevalent in the society. Thus, even before his family goes into exile geographically (when they migrate to Canada under dire circumstances), he is already living in a state of psychological alienation because of his non-heteronormative sexuality. The next section will examine Gender and Space but in the public domain of the School.

4.4.2 Gender and Space: School

The other space where Arjie is forced to contend with ethnic and gender divisions is in his new school. In the section of the novel titled "*The Best School of All*", Arjie's father decides to change his school to Queen Victoria Academy because it will "force [him] to become a man"(Selvadurai 210). This educational institution is governed by an ethos of hyper-masculinity and young boys are expected to pattern their behavior according to dominant masculine stereotypes. The students refer to each other with their last names and ardent physical punishments are relatively common. Arjie's elder brother, Diggy, advises him never to complain about the use of strict punishment since, "Once you come to Queen Victoria Academy, you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other boys will look down on you" (Selvadurai 211).

It is within this ethos of hyper-masculinity that Arjie meets Soyza and their relationship will play an important role in the journey through which Arjie begins to accept his homosexuality. Soyza is described as a misfit in the Academy, he is often bullied by his classmates and is deemed an "ills and burden" student by Black Tie, the principal. There are also rumours about his alleged homosexuality due to which he has become the laughing stock of the whole school. At the same time, the school is also driven with ethnic and political tensions and anxieties. There are separate sections for Sinhalese and Tamil students and there is an ongoing tussle between the Principal, Mr. Abeysinghe (referred to as Black Tie by the students) and the Vice-Principal. Mr. Lokubandara, a "political appointee". The struggle between them is coloured by the prevailing ethnic conflict and a debate about the future of the academy and by extension, the country. While Black Tie imagines a modern, multicultural academy where diverse communities will be given equal representation, Lokubandara is a firm believer of the grassroots Sinhala movement i.e. a return to the idea of Sri Lanka as a pure Sinhala nation. **T Jazeel** says that "essentially, this is a battle for which type of modernity is best for the Academy, thus linking the school to larger debates about appropriate geopolitical templates for the modern Sri Lanka nation-state" (242), when he talks about the turf war between Lokubandara and Black Tie aka Mr. Abeysinghe, the principal.

It must be noted here that both the house and the school are emblematic of the larger concept of the nation-state. The network of gender and political relations that constitute these spaces are reproduced at the national level. Within this rubric, the family is meant to function as a heteronormative unit where each gender has a definite social role. While men are supposed to be providers who venture in the external social realm, women are identified as nurturers and care-givers within the domestic household. In this rather rigidly ordered framework, there is no clearly defined role for queer people i.e. individuals who don't identify with either of the two binaries of the heteronormative set up. Similarly, the school is meant to mould young boys according to pre-ordained, socially sanctioned models of masculinity. Anyone who goes against these roles is either labelled as 'funny' or classified as 'ills and burdens' of the country. In other words, an individual

who cannot be accommodated into the traditional heteronormative binary will occupy a rather ambiguous position vis-a-vis the society and the nation-state. As a result, they are often persecuted by the traditional moral code of communities. Let us look briefly at the ethnic conflict that plagued Sri Lanka for decades next.

Check Your Progress 1

1) How is Arjie's life informed by the traditional gender norms of the society?

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2) Comment on the alienation experienced by Arjie in his home and school? How are these spaces symbolic of the nation-state?

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4.5 NATION AND COMMUNITY

Arjie's family belong to the Tamil community and his great grandfather had fallen victim to the nefarious riots that took place in the 1950s. Radha Aunty's failed relationship with Anil marks Arjie's first serious encounter with ethnic differences. When he transfers to a new school called the Queen Victoria Academy, he finds himself in a partisan environment as the school is clearly divided between Sinhala and Tamil identities. Not only are there separate classrooms for each ethnic community, there is an ongoing rivalry between the Principal, Mr Abeysinghe (referred to as Black Tie by the students) and the Vice-Principal. Mr Lokubandara, a "*political appointee*". While Black Tie intends to preserve the multicultural inclusivity of the academy, the Vice-Principal wants to turn it into an exclusive Sinhala Buddhist institution which has no place for Tamils. Both of them are slated to speak at the Annual Day celebrations of the school, an event which will have an important influence on the future of the school. The speech delivered by Black Tie revolves closely around the two poems meant to be narrated by Arjie. As he prepares for the event, Arjie is repeatedly reminded of the contribution he can make to the Tamil cause by way of his performance.

Arjie also becomes conscious of his status as member of an ethnic minority through his friendship with Jegan. Jegan is the son of his father's late buddy Parameswaran, one of Arjie's father's closest school friends. Jegan soon starts working for Arjie's father's business and also develops a close friendship with Arjie. As Jegan rises through the ranks in the office, other Sinhalese employees begin harbouring hostile, antagonistic sentiments against him. It is also revealed that Jegan was affiliated with the LTTE in the past. As tensions rise on the political

front and clashes between the two communities begins to take place, Jegan is arrested and soon, Arjie's father is forced to fire him. Through the *dramatis personae* of Jegan, Arjie learns the nuances of ethnic conflict and how minorities are forced to live in fear and submission. Even though his father leads a successful and prosperous life, he has been forced to make many concessions along the way.

Sarah Graham writes that the "*bildungsroman* is profoundly concerned with what it means to be an individual and to participate in the life of a nation" (4). Arjie's ethnic identity as a Tamil is violently in conflict with his national identity as a Sri Lankan. The end of the novel is set in the backdrop of the 1983 riots wherein Sinhalese mobs attacked, looted and killed Tamils in Colombo and other parts of the country. Arjie's family escapes this attack narrowly as they are protected by their Sinhalese neighbours and friends. When their survival within the country is threatened, they decide to migrate to Canada. This complicates Arjie's notion of national identity. For multiple generations, his family had identified as citizens of Sri Lanka. However, as they are forced into exile, they become members of a diasporic community, alienated from their home and without a sense of national belonging. Under ideal circumstances, a *bildungs* narrative leads to the development of a secure national identity. In this case, however, this narrative is brought to an abrupt and agonising halt as Arjie's national identity becomes a contentious issue. His claim to a Sri Lankan national identity is discredited by the rising anti-Tamil sentiment in the country and he will remain an immigrant or a refugee in Canada. Clearly, there are no easy answers to be found in the case of Arjie and his national belonging. We will now look at the various acts of rebellion that takes place in the novel.

4.5.1 Acts of Rebellion

In each of the six sections of the novel, Arjie is introduced to a new facet of life and society and this also constitutes his coming-of-age journey. His interaction with different characters like Radha aunty, Daryl Uncle, Jegan and Soyza shape his sense of self as he moves from a state of innocence to experience. Hence, *Funny* Boy can be classified as a bildungsroman, a novel of formation or education which charts an individual's actual or metaphorical journey from youth/childhood to adulthood. Franco Moretti argues that a bildungsroman attempts to offer a harmonious solution for the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the demands of socialization (15). In other words, an individual is often drawn between two forces, the ideal of unique self-expression which might come into conflict with the need to assimilate within the social fabric. The goal of a bildungsroman is to narrate the journey through which an individual finds reconciliation between these antithetical forces by giving into social demands. The novel of education then delineates the process through which individuals are integrated into the standardised homogenous social make-up.

However, *Funny Boy* attempts to destabilise this process as the protagonist rebels against the social order instead of conforming to it. This section will look at the many expressions of dissent in the novel wherein different characters question and subvert status quo, albeit only temporarily. Before the 'Spend-the-Days' become traumatic for Arjie after the incident with his cousin Tanuja, Arjie is able to transcend spatialised gender boundaries. He has always been the leader of the girls group primarily due to his superlative imagination. He is attracted to the girls' territory primarily because of its potential for "free play of fantasy"

(Selvadurai 3). Through his fantasy, he is able to imaginatively fulfill his desires by accessing an alternative realm of existence. He says in the novel, "I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self" (Selvadurai 4). This amounts to a re-figuration of gendered spatialization as it shows how non-heteronormative desires and pleasures can surface within the most traditional of spaces (Gopinath 170). It is also interesting that the game played by the girls is called 'Bride-Bride' and the person with the least importance is the groom. This symbolically overturns the patriarchal fabric of the society which always privileges masculine gender roles. Therefore, we see how normative gender roles are subverted in the realm of imagination by presenting the possibility of an alternative world order.

The more tangible act of rebellion happens towards the end of the novel when Arjie deliberately mangles the two poems he was meant to recite at a major school function which could decide the future of the institution. He makes this courageous decision knowing that this could have dire repercussions for him. This is a significant moment in his coming of age journey as it is here that he consciously decides to go against societal and familial expectations. The nature of his rebellion is at once personal and political; on the one hand, he goes against the very ethos of discipline and submission that the school demands of him while on the other hand, he is also motivated by his personal feelings for Soyza and this is meant to be a gesture of solidarity. Arjie's experience at the Queen Victoria Academy is marked by alienation and disillusionment. The school demands blind obedience from its students and victimises anyone who doesn't follow their prescribed model of masculinity. The poem that Arjie is expected to recite is titled "The Best School of All" and certain lines from the poem read as follows, "For working days and holidays,/And glad and melancholy days, /They were great days and jolly days" (Selvadurai 273). Quite the contrary, Arjie's time here has been marked by physical punishment and psychological harassment and doesn't resonate even remotely with the sentiments expressed above. Therefore, his act of dissent can be read as a form of protest against the nefarious policies of the school which victimised students like Soyza.

Significantly, Arjie decides to jumble lines from the two poems after he has had his first sexual experience with Soyza in the garage of his house. Immediately afterwards, Arjie feels disgusted with himself and becomes particularly conscious of his family's gaze. He seems to have internalised the shame of being 'different' or 'funny', epithets often used by the society for homosexuality. However, he soon begins to understand that there is nothing inherently wrong about his relationship with Soyza. It's only the society's arbitrary codes of judgment that have deemed it immoral or taboo. As he contemplates his decision, Arjie comments, "How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't" (Selvadurai 274). This marks the beginning of the process by which Arjie will develop his individual sense of self and morality, one which is free from the society's oppressive codes. Instead of hiding from his sexuality, he embraces it and moves towards a fuller realisation of his identity. In doing so, he goes against the many caveats of the society regarding gender, family and so on.

Interestingly, Arjie isn't the only character in the novel to stage such a rebellion. At different points, Radha and Arjie's mother, Nalini, also challenge the traditional social order. When Arjie sees his aunt Radha for the first time, he is shocked as

her body through her "dark skin, unkempt hair, flat chest and American apparel" defies the ideal of Tamil femininity (**Gairola** 5). Moreover, she exercises her free will and agency when she decides to go against her family and continues her relationship with Anil, a member of the Sinhalese community. However, this resistance is short lived as she becomes a physical target of the ethnic conflict and eventually decides to marry a Tamil man chosen for her by her family.

Similarly, when Daryl Uncle is found dead under suspicious conditions, Arjie's mother, Nalini, goes against her sister's advice and tries to conduct an investigation into the murder. She also pays a visit to Daryl's house help Somaratne's village in order to procure some information about Daryl's murder. Quite like Radha, the fear of physical violence forces her to retreat and put an end to the investigation. However, both these characters actively defy gender roles prescribed by society, even if their transgression is eventually curtailed. Just like Arjie, they find themselves marginalised by the unjust norms of the society and attempt to challenge them. Rahul K Gairola argues that these characters may be perceived as "funny girls who transgress Tamil femininity and even emulate some masculine character traits" (7).

Check Your Progress 2

1) Discuss the many interpretations of the word 'funny' in the title of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*?

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

Set in the backdrop of an ethnically divided country, *Funny Boy* traces the coming-of-age narrative of a young boy who is only beginning to come to terms with his homosexuality. The novel looks at the many ways in which social, cultural and political norms affect the personal lives of the characters. Children are introduced to gender roles at a tender age and Arjie soon feels alienated by these rigid constructs. At the same time, his identity as a member of the minority Tamil community also relegates him to a relatively marginal status. As the novel progresses, Arjie learns, rather painfully, to mediate his way through such social constructs and create a new form of identity for himself. He achieves this self-acceptance by transgressing the status quo and by rejecting the prejudiced moral order of the society, according to which homosexuality is associated with disgust and shame.

Through these tropes, the novel explores the many linkages between the personal and the political, the private and the public. The alienation experienced by Arjie in his school is intricately tied to his sexual identity. Similarly, his sense of belonging (or the lack of it) to his family is heavily mediated through his personal identity as a homosexual. And finally, his status as a member of the nation is put under doubt because of his Tamil ancestry. The notion of home itself gets achingly

difficult to define for a character like Arjie as his entire family is forced to leave their country behind and adopt a foreign country (Canada) as their own. Ultimately, *Funny Boy* is about exploring different possible forms of belonging to a community or a country, depending on the cultural, ethnic and gender identity of the individual in question. By giving us a character who has witnessed exile at multiple levels, both within and outside his home and country, *Funny Boy* examines the arbitrariness and fragility of the many ties that bind individuals and societies.

Check Your Progress 3

1) How do the personal and the political interact in *Funny Boy*? Discuss with relevant examples from the text.

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4.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Read Sections 4.3 and 4.4 carefully and answer the question in your own words.
2) Read Section 4.4 carefully and then answer the question in your own words.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Read Section 4.6 carefully and then answer the question in your own words.

Check Your Progress 3

1) By now you will have read all the sections and the novel, cull out your answer from your reading of the unit.

4.8 GLOSSARY

Bildungsroman : a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of a young protagonist who undergoes a journey from innocence to experience.

Burgher : an ethnic group in Sri Lanka of mixed Dutch, Portuguese and Sri Lankan origins. They are offspring of Dutch and Portuguese officers from the colonial period who married women of Sri Lankan descent.

Heteronormative : is a worldview or a belief that promotes heterosexuality as the default or standard form of sexual identity. Under this system, only two forms of sexual identity, masculine and feminine, are recognised as natural forms of sexuality.

Jaffna : Jaffna had a population of 88,138 in 2012, making it the 12th most populous city. Jaffna has a Tamil majority.

Queer : Queer is an umbrella term for sexual and gender identities which do not conform to the heteronormative binary which is masculinity and femininity. In the 19th century, it was used as a pejorative term for homosexuals. Since then, it has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community and has emerged as a radical political slogan.

4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

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