
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 *Catcher 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 Catcher 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 Catcher 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

**Genres of Popular Literature I:
Children's Literature & Young
Adult Fiction**

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 Sinhalese, 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 Sinhalese 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 led 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 Gunsekera (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 *bildungsroman* 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 *bildungsroman* 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 *bildungsroman* 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 *bildungsroman* 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 sense over a period of time. It also refers to domination which is 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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**Genres of Popular Literature I:
Children's Literature & Young
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