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**IDENTIFYING THE QUEER: CULTURAL STIGMA AND SEXUAL FREEDOM IN  
SHYAM SELVADURAI'S *THE HUNGRY GHOSTS***

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**Abstract:**

*Shyam Selvadurai, Sri Lankan Diaspora writer, has a renowned place in South Asian literature because of his arguments on ethnicity and the politics of sexual identity of his homeland, Sri Lanka. At the opening of Millennium, many countries show green light for the LGBT movements and count them for providing legal rights and laws. Yet there are some South Asian countries including Sri Lanka, oscillate in between “the criminalizing act” and “the decriminalizing act” in the matter of queer community. This article is specifically discussed the Gay community by analyzing the life of Shivan, the main protagonist in the novel *The Hungry Ghosts*, written by Shyam Selvadurai. It critically segregates the character’s life with the minute details of his recognition of “newness” and how he boldly conveys his uniqueness to his family. The paper is an attempt of emphasizing the ignorance and tolerance of Sri Lanka in accepting the behavioural and biological changes of their closed ones and also specifying how homosexual becomes familiarized in the foreign country whereas in Sri Lanka, the islanders are still clogged with the cultural stigma, though it has already flourished inside the myth tales.*

**Keywords:** *Sri Lanka, LGBT, Identity, Culture Difference and Gay Rights, etc.*

Sex and Gender are the two concepts which have the appearance of the same subject. But they are totally different with each other in their particularities. Sex is the term, biologically refers the humans into three categories, like male, female and intersex; whereas Gender is the constructive idea, developed by the society. Here, humans are classified hypothetically into the above three. This categorization is entirely based on the norms and regulations of the society which derives the personalities of different kinds of individuals in order to fit in the circumstance, or the so called, imaginary community. However, both the concepts are inter-wined and always have the common linking idea, ‘identity’.

Featuring “Male” and “Female” in all perspectives and approaches is the most controversial theme in literature. Leaving aside, intersex is the third distinctive division, needed much scope to create one’s own identity and voice in the area of literature and also in the real world. This unique category comprises of isolated and uncanny behavioural people who are often labeled as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender, by the society. The first three sets of people are biologically same at all time whereas the last type of people is quite different that they adapt to their changed sexual organ after some span of time. Though the outcomes are dynamic and hard to digest, this type of people accept them in the slow processing of time.

The Sri Lankan Diaspora writer, Shyam Selvadurai has a prominent place in South Asian literature because of his arguments on ethnicity and the politics of sexual identity of his homeland, Sri Lanka. At the opening of Millennium, many countries show green light for the LGBT movements and count them for providing legal rights and laws. Yet there are some South Asian countries including Sri



Lanka, oscillate in between ‘the criminalizing act’ and ‘the decriminalizing act’ in the matter of queer community. Adding, in the rise of violent civil war, the psychologies of the inhabitants are capricious and exiguous. When the movement voices out for the LGBT, they are marked as security threats. Vashist states in 2B Magazine, “Like most other activists, they live in constant fear of being branded as security threats to the current regime leading to intimidation and hurt to them and the groups they represent. Heightened surveillance and the presence of security personnel in everyday life make this work doubly hard. It has been impossible to even raise the question of sexuality in the war torn northern and eastern region of Tamil speaking Sri Lanka.”

Being a Gay is not everyone’s choice. It is the natural process that some people undergo at certain stage of their life. Likewise, Shivan Rassiah, in *The Hungry Ghosts*, realizes he is a gay at the age of seventeen. As an avid reader, he, once, comes across the biography of Montgomery Clift. He picks up this book enthusiastically like he has chosen other books. Yet the constant reading composes him that he is also homosexual. It is his first time by the dint of the book, he understands that a man can also love another man. He ponders, “The sheer surge of my suppressed adolescent lust swept away shame or guilt or fear, along with the warnings, revealed by the biography...” (Selvadurai, THG, 68). With his recent realization, he starts to admire the boys in his school and relishes their accidental touches whenever they meet.

Shivan always feels queerness in Sri Lanka. So he is often insisting his mother Hema to leave the island by reasoning the civil war between the two communities, Singhala and Tamil, since his teenage. After his relationship has ended with Milli, his schoolmate, he feels isolated in the new land. Fortunately, he meets Michael who is the soul companion to Shivan. Michael shows him the compactable life in Toronto, Canada which is the actual dream of Shivan when he has first identified his sexual urges for men. He enjoys like a child whenever he is with Michael and observes that the foreign land is the most suitable place for the queer people like him.

The new spirit ignites him to do the future plans away from the island. Even in his younger age, he perceives that the war-torn island is not the only reason but also the culture of the islanders will not allow the queerness on the land. So he plans to shift to the foreign land in order to enjoy his sexual freedom. He thinks, “If America offered such opportunity for sex with women, did it not offer similar opportunity for people like me? ...I told myself, I would become the person I really knew myself to be” (Selvadurai, THG, 69). Thus, Shivan prefers the foreign lands, that is, other than Sri Lanka, in order to enrich his new identity, might be appreciated the concept of Gay community.

During his first stay in Toronto, Shivan used to visit book store to kill time. On his usual visit at Scarborough, he comes across a pamphlet which emphasis meeting up with the random gay guys. Though he convinces himself that he is not straight, he is hesitant to accept him to himself, “Just the word gay, out there in the open, sent a frizzle of coldness through me. I glanced around to see if anybody had noticed the pamphlet or my attention to it...” (Selvadurai, THG, 113). In a brave attempt, he dials the number from the pamphlet in order to connect with the people like him. Through the call, he meets Ronald, a gay, working for the communication services for gay and AIDS companions.

Ronald is not an appropriate person for Shivan. Yet he is the first man who gives inspiritment to Shivan to accept his new identity as the normal one. He assures him that there are more people like Shivan, are withstanding in the different parts of the countries. At several times, Shivan fights with his emotions to deliberately voice out his nature; with the soothing words of Ronald and his teenage experiences in his home town, helps Shivan to finally say, “Yes, I have never said this to anyone. And yes, I am gay” (Selvadurai, THG, 117).

Many organizations and movements are formed to support the LGBT community. Among them, Human Rights Watch is one of the organizations, prevailingly supports gay community and monitors all the abuses and violence faced by them all around the world. They expose, in one of the



statistics, that approximately 2.8 billion people are identified as gay, including all the countries. But only 780 billion are acknowledged with legal rights. The remaining face tortures in the name of authorities and communities. Even, the gay people are marked as security threats to their country, so they hide their identity and live secretly in the society. Through Ronald, Shivan learns that the gay community in Canada is “Cruisey” (Selvadurai, THG, 121) and “Cesspit” (Selvadurai, THG, 123). After all the talking about the various organizations at different times, Ronald shows indifference to Shivan. And finally, he witnesses himself after his breakup with Ronald in one of his night visits at the gay club and parties, “It did not take me long to realize that ...in the meat market of 1980s gay bars, I was not prime steak” (Selvadurai, THG, 128). Shivan longs for love and companionship in the gay parties, yet he traps with adventitious sexual encounters with odd people including Ronald. Obviously, the confrontation depresses him to a great extent and gains dominant of him with isolation and depression, amidst the group. After the long hardness of eight weeks, he walks out the gay community.

Milli Jayasinghe is the schoolmate of Shivan in Sri Lanka. He is interested in serving society and even has joined in Women and Human Rights’ Organization at Kantha, which is run by Sriyani Karunaratne, history professor at the University of Colombo. Like other Sri Lankans, he wishes to see the island in “a better place” (Selvadurai, THG, 71), devoid of war and violence. Unlike Shivan, he aspires to stay back in his homeland and longs to bring changes in the mindset of the islanders.

During his second visit to Colombo, Shivan meets Milli and become lovers. He realizes that he does not love a boy who he has met in the school days; yet he falls in love with another version of Milli. He ruminates, “It seemed impossible to reconcile the Milli I had known in school, star cricketer, head perfect, with what had happened in that bed room” (Selvadurai, THG, 201). So far, Shivan has known Millias an all-rounder personality who does not bother about the country and its conflict. In contrast, when he sees Milli after long years of gap, he observes him as a totally different person whose only focus is on the welfare of the country. Moreover, Milli is completely deviated from the characteristics of Shivan. However, they endear with each other at their first intimate meeting at the house party of Karunaratnes’. His relationship with Milli, Shivan always has a sense of belonging and comfort, like “homing desire” (Humaira). He senses, “I would think of all the Canadian men I’d had affairs with and the strain of having to explain myself and Sri Lanka to them. With Mili it felt so peaceful” (Selvadurai, THG, 169).

Both Shivan and Milli enjoy their togetherness in various places of Sri Lanka. The former does not worry about the next phase of their relationship until the latter reminds him that Sri Lanka is not a place for gay couples and the word, itself, is banished in the land. Moreover, in the midst of civil war, the Sri Lankans have become rancorous. Milli reflects, “You know the rules here. We can’t set up house like people do in Canada. Always and eternally we will be two bachelors living with our mother and grandmother” (Selvadurai, THG, 213). As he presumes, they awkwardly have caught in the hands of Shivan’s grandmother by means of her hooligan, Chandralal. In one of the novels of Selvadurai, *The Funny Boy*, he pictures the gay personalities in the character of Arjie who loves to play Bride-Bride game with his girl cousins. When the family members question him about his choice of playmates and the games, he reveals his interest to the girl things dominantly. Notwithstanding, the parents and relatives strictly force him to play with the boys and their games which show his “sign of man”. After that, Arjie starts hiding his feelings from the family and even married a woman by breaking up with his lover.

Similarly, to correct the ill-behaviour of both Shivan and Milli, Daya, the loving grandmother blames Milli for her grandson’s corrupted behavior. She does not realize that it is their nature not just their desires. Notwithstanding the situations, she orders Chandralal to kidnap Milli in order to frighten him. But, in the process, Milli is died. The last minutes of Shivan with Milli is highlighted in the



words of Selvadurai, “The rubbery, musty smell of the mattress choked me, yet I struggled, for the men were dragging Milli from the room. He was crying out in protest, his heels squelching along the floor ...Once they were on the verandah, they found some way to silence him” (Selvadurai, THG, 277). Sherman de Rose, the founder of *Companions on a Journey*, writes in “Gay Sri Lanka News and Reports”, that, “gay identity does not make much sense to many homosexuals in Sri Lanka... It’s a foreign word and has a foreign meaning. A gay identity must emerge from the Sri Lankan cultural context. Shivan wishes to live Canadian style of gay life in Sri Lanka, but he fails to acknowledge the struggles of homosexuals in Sri Lanka; the country still considers the sexual encounters between the men is a cultural crime. Thus, Shivan faces the consequences with the death of Milli which he cannot reciprocate till his end of life.

Shivan is devastated on hearing the news of Milli’s death. He longs to tell others that the reason beyond this accident is his grandmother, but Sriyani, the founder of organization where Milli is working, silences him that it is not practicable way to convey the news to the islanders. So the newspaper is headlined with key words like “late-night swim and currents” (Selvadurai, THG, 288). Shivan’s conversation with Sriyani, clearly shows that the culture and customs of Sri Lankans decide the relationship of people who are staying in the land. Piyumi in Ashok Ferrey’s *Serendipity*, wishes to fit in her birth land of Sri Lanka, after two decades of departure from the island to London. She returns back to occupy her share of property and finally falls in love with the country. She forgets that she “can never step into the same river twice” (Ferrey, 49) and mockingly is reminded by Aunt Pushpam in the fiction, that the island is not a place for foreigners who have a card of escapism- a British passport in their hand, to fly any time. Thus, observing the two similar situations from the two fictions, the conversations deliberately highlights the point that the natives only have the capacity to live in the country, amidst the discriminations. People who have left the homeland and return back to the country as a foreigner, cannot survive in the land and also do not wish to be the land as same as they have once seen.

Micro aggression is a developing theory, focuses on the study of contemporary discrimination faced by group of people such as LGBT, People of Colour, Women and Specific religious crowds. It is a concept of emphasizing the behaviours of the society, intentionally or unintentionally to such specific group, through languages and actions. Microassaults are one of the forms of Micro aggression, concentrates on the verbal and non-verbal gestures to the targeted group. For example, Trans genders are often mocked with the petty names and actions, even a male talk in girly voice means, the people around him, label him as “transgender” and “girl”.

In *The Hungry Ghosts*, while Shivan visits his Grandmother in Sri Lanka, he takes care of her business of collecting the rent amounts, for the short span of time. Once, a tenant in the Pettah property insults Shivan by calling him “ponnaya” while Shivan is asking for two months arrears of rent. The word actually denotes as an insult for the man who behaves like a woman, commonly noted as “gay”. Though Shivan is a gay, he cannot tolerate the other man teasing him like, “You’re a fine boy. From Cinnamon Gardens, aren’t you? Beautiful face like a girl’s, soft hands like a girl’s” (Selvadurai, THG, 218). So he seeks the help of henchman Chandralal to vacate that man permanently from the house by harassing the whole family in the street of Pettah.

This incident depicts the true colour of Sri Lanka and its approach on the gay community. The islanders like Chandralal employ the identical words of queer masses to insult the straight. Moreover, this particular event indicates that the gay folks are treated inferiorly when compare to the other people. Coming to Shivan, being a gay, he always desires for sexual freedom and identity. Yet in the case of revealing the identity, he prefers Canada to Sri Lanka.

With the hint of recovering from Milli’s death, Shivan meets Michael through one of the office colleagues, Bill. Soon, they become friends and share the same work space and the same flat in



Vancouver, after his return back from Sri Lanka. In the new land, among the variant cultured people, they lead a happy homonormativity life. Shivan amazes at his easy-peasy relationship with Michael: “During my years in Vancouver, I had never stayed over at a lover’s place ...asked mildly, “What would you like to do?” as if we were an old married couple. We ended up reading for an hour, me pretending to be engrossed in a book but looking over at Michael from time to time, filled with wonder at this new tranquility I felt” (Selvadurai, THG, 370-71). At the same way, Michael always looks after Shivan as like his son, “It is impossible to believe that, across the country in Vancouver, daffodils bloom and the grass is a summer green ...And I am filled with longing for Michael ...smiling like he is watching Children at play” (Selvadurai, THG, 18) and, as a responsible partner, he introduces Shivan to his parents Robert and Hilda, at their first meeting itself. Being Canadian parents, unlike Sri Lankans, they accept the queer identity of Shivan and Michael and affirm them as a couple, like all other normal couples.

Often with the nightmares of Milli and his strangled family, Shivan at last tells about his homeland and home, except without the memories of past love. Michael listens patiently and consoles him, “you were right to choose Vancouver, Shivan, to make a life for yourself away from all that pain. And I’m glad you did, because now, see, I have you” (Selvadurai, THG, 376). As he has promised Shivan, he rents an apartment from his parents and they shift to their new home in Harwood Street.

Mother brings the child to the world with lots of expectations. Though she faces many hardships, she finds solace with her children. Hema, mother of Shivan, being a widow strives hard in the new home in Toronto. Adding with the pressurized office work, she prepares herself to work in the kitchen of tiny and stinking small house. Her only peaceful time is her productive hours of readings books at the public library of Bridlewood Mall. Sometimes her unusual silence frightens Shivan and his sister, Renu.

Selvadurai is known for describing alienation in most of the novels. Alienation is one of the parts in finding sexual identity and freedom. The characters often find difficult to balance in between the family and the queerness. Most of the time, they fail to harmonize between the two and remain estranged in the group. Hoping to live as a happy family, Shivan, with the support of Renu, shares his queer identity to his mother. However, Hema is a portrayal of native Sri Lankan Mother, arouses with resentment. She contemns, “Are you an idiot to choose to be gay when this plague is going on? ...Have I brought you into this world and sacrificed so much for you to destroy your life? ...If I had known you would throw away your life, I would have aborted you ...I would have strangled you at birth” (Selvadurai, THG, 156-57). In spite of her age and experiences, Hema cannot tolerate or accept her son’s identity at the initial stage. She behaves, like all other people, to her son, without realizing Shivan’s emotions and feelings. Later, after the death of Milli, she witnesses the devastating life of Shivan, before her. As a mother, she always wants her son to be happy and that’s why she accepts his love life, later in Vancouver in Canada.

At the closing point, the researcher quotes Selvadurai’s words regarding the condition of Sri Lanka: ‘Homosexuality is illegal in Sri Lanka and the very real threat of physical violence and intimidation might have stopped me from exploring this theme had I lived there...being Sri Lankan was based on rigid heterosexual and gender roles’. As a writer and gay, Selvadurai also faces the same circumstances when living in his homeland. He feels that displacement to Canada might be helped him to write more on the gay community in Sri Lanka and believes his writings might bring change in the perspectives of the islanders who accept that their languages and beliefs have the impacts of the foreigners, due to the colonial rule in Sri Lanka. However, they portray ‘Gay Identity’ as a westernized concept. Though many foreign countries establish a proper legal rights for the gay community, the authorities of Sri Lanka still consider the sexual acts between men is a crime and the punishment lasts for up to 12 years of imprisonment from 1883 Act.



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