

# **REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA**

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## **Lecture 17: Crossing Borders (India- Sri Lanka & India- Myanmar)-II**

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. We are discussing our module on historicizing South Asian migrations through case studies of selected literary texts written by authors from South Asia. We will continue from our previous lecture and our discussion on Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* before we move on to a new topic today. So, *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, as we were already discussing, reflects the complex dynamics of cultural survival today

for a minority community in the context of displacement, and it offers a nuanced portrayal of Tamil refugees and their quest to maintain their identity. For the protagonist, the little boy that we see as the child protagonist, the entire narrative is seen through his and his family's lens. For this child, Arjie and his family, migration represents both hope and loss. On the one hand, it enables them to find a safer place and escape the immediate violence, the imminent violence;

on the other hand, it means losing one's home, one's national identity, and one's sense of rightful belonging in Sri Lanka. So, who will we be? What will become of us? These are the questions that are told through the character of Arjie's mother, but these are questions that cannot be one individual's apprehension. These would be the questions that rang in each and every Tamil individual's mind before they had to

quit their homes in Sri Lanka. These questions actually reflect; they signify collective fear, collective apprehension, and vulnerability. So, Arjie's mother's question captures a profound sense of displacement, even a sense of vacuum, which the entire experience of migration brings with it. So, leaving Sri Lanka means leaving behind a part of their own identity but also escaping persecution.

Arjie's journey in understanding himself is significantly influenced by the ethnic divisions that surround him in Sri Lanka. So, we see that it is a coming-of-age story as well. This child is growing up during violent times.

And it's a journey toward self-discovery—discovering human facets, discovering bestial possibilities in humans, as well as understanding his own sexuality. So, kind of a rite of passage, we can see. And as this Tamil boy grows up in a Sinhalese-majority country, he begins to notice the subtle and overt signs of discrimination, prejudice, and violence, all of which complicate his understanding of where he fits within the larger fabric of Sri Lankan society. Arjie's confrontation with ethnic divisions happens when he faces discrimination at school. So, Arjie

is attending a prestigious school in Colombo and begins to see how ethnic identity influences the way the students are treated. Depending on whether the student comes from a Tamil background or a Sinhalese background, the treatment is different. Tamil students are often ridiculed or sidelined by the Sinhalese majority, creating a sense of alienation. And this alienation is very deeply felt and very well represented through Arjie's psyche.

So a key moment of realization comes when Arjie's Tamil friend is humiliated and insulted by their Sinhalese peers. So this is a moment when the truth dawns on you—the fact that you are not like most of the people in your immediate society and you are a minority population. So Arjie internalizes this moment of ethnic division even as a child, and recognizes that despite his efforts to belong to his school among his friends, his Tamil identity will set him apart forever in a hostile environment. So, hostility starts showing in microcosmic spaces, such as

schools, right? Schools and classroom spaces show all these differentiations, these discriminations very loudly, very strongly. Arjie notes, I quote, 'I had come to realize that being different meant that you could not be part of the whole.' So there is something called the whole, and the whole expects you to act in terms of certain dictates, codes of conduct.

#### Arjie's Experience of Conflict in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994)

- Arjie's journey to understand himself is significantly influenced by the ethnic divisions that surround him in Sri Lanka. As a Tamil boy growing up in a Sinhalese-majority country, he begins to notice the subtle and overt signs of discrimination, prejudice, and violence, which complicate his understanding of where he fits within the fabric of Sri Lankan society.
- Arjie's confrontation with ethnic divisions occurs when he faces discrimination at school. Arjie, who attends a prestigious school in Colombo, begins to see how ethnic identity influences the way students are treated. The Tamil students are often ridiculed or sidelined by the Sinhalese majority, creating a sense of alienation for Arjie.
- A key moment of realization comes when Arjie's Tamil friend is insulted by their Sinhalese peers. Arjie internalizes this moment of ethnic division, recognizing that despite his efforts to belong, his Tamil identity sets him apart in a hostile environment.



It could be language. It could be practices and habits that define this whole and it also defines the nation in a way, the homogeneous practices that shape the quintessential culture of Sri Lanka. And Arjie notes that he cannot be defined through those set of cultural codes, so he is different.

So being different meant that you do not belong to the whole. The homogeneous practices that make up the Sri Lankan, the fabric of Sri Lankan nation state do not apply to Arjie by virtue of the fact that he is not a Sinhalese but a Tamil. So this statement itself highlights Arjie's growing understanding that being Tamil in Sri Lanka is inherently different. He will always be seen as a different child and it foreshadows the conflict owing to a minoritized identity that he will henceforth continue to experience. And, you know, along with that minoritized identity comes the baggage of hardship, the difficulty of having to explain yourself again and again, more so as he additionally also starts

#### Arjie's Experience of Conflict in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994)

- Arjie notes, "I had come to realize that being different meant that you could not be part of the whole" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 176). This line highlights Arjie's growing understanding that being Tamil in Sri Lanka is inherently "different," and it foreshadows the conflict owing to a minoritized identity that he will continue to experience, more so as he additionally also confronts his unconventional sexuality.
- One poignant moment comes when Arjie's father reprimands him for playing with girls and exhibiting behaviors that are not considered 'masculine.' Arjie's desire for freedom—both in terms of ethnic identity and sexual expression—collides with the rigid societal expectations around him.
- In addition to navigating his ethnic identity, Arjie also confronts the complicated terrain of his sexual identity—displaced and minoritized twice over



confronting his unconventional sexuality. So we see that this child Arjie is displaced twice over. Once in terms of the national fabric, the fabric of racism. Sri Lankan nation's, you know, common values, cherished values;

And then we have his own, you know, bodily experiences. He realizes that he is not like any heteronormal boy. His choices, his instincts are different. So that makes him all the more marginalized person. One poignant moment comes when Arjie's father is reprimanding him for playing with girls and for exhibiting behaviors that are not considered as so-called masculine.

So he is in the receiving end of discrimination for different reasons. Firstly, he is not part of the majority social group. Secondly, he is not part of the heteronormal kind of society, bodily experiences or heteronormal psyche or gender. So, he is not masculine enough according to his father and so he scolded.

Arjie's desire for freedom both in terms of ethnic identity and sexual expression clashes and collides with the rigid social expectations that are built around him. So in addition to navigating his ethnic identity, RG also confronts the complicated terrain of his sexual identity, like I already said. So he is displaced and minoritized twice over. So in response to his father's scolding, RG reflects, I quote, I realized that my place in the world would never be the same again.

that everything would be different from now on, unquote. So he realizes that he would have to carve out his own identity. He is not like most people, not only the rest of the people, but most people. There is a pre-given set of practices or prescribed set of rules that people follow when they have to be part of a society.

And he cannot really identify with some of these practices. So his place in the world would never be something very comfortable, something kind of given to him on a platter. He would constantly have to justify his position. This quote emphasizes the dual pressures on Arjie—the conflict, definitely the ethnic war that is going on, as well as the internal conflict of navigating his sexual identity in a very conservative, heteronormative society. So the outer conflict and the inner conflict kind of resonate, and that gives a very peculiar experience to a growing child.

#### Arjie's Experience of Conflict in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994)

- In response to his father's scolding, Arjie reflects: "I realized then that my place in the world would never be the same again, that everything would be different from now on" (Selvadurai, 1994, p. 176).
- This quote emphasizes the dual pressures on Arjie: the external conflict of the ethnic war and the internal conflict of navigating his sexual identity in a conservative, heteronormative society.
- In *Funny Boy*, ethnic identity and sexual identity are deeply intertwined, with the national conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese exacerbating Arjie's internal struggles.
- Selvadurai masterfully demonstrates how external conflict—in the form of ethnic divisions and violence—forces individuals to confront their internal conflicts about who they are and where they belong. For Arjie, the tension between his Tamil identity and his sexual identity makes his search for belonging even more fraught.



So in *Funny Boy*, ethnic identity and sexual identity are deeply interspersed; they are intertwined together with the national conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese, kind of worsening, exacerbating Arjie's internal struggles that he faces while growing up each and every day. So Selvadurai masterfully demonstrates this. how the external conflict, in the form of ethnic divisions and violence, forces individuals to confront their internal conflicts about who they are and where they belong. In other words, in very extreme situations, in the extremities of situations, we discover, we come to face or face up to who we are, start asking ourselves very fundamental questions regarding who we are, what we want from life, and where we belong.

We generally take life for granted until we are on the edge, facing an extreme kind of situation. So for Arjie, the tension between the Tamil identity and his actual identity—these two kinds of tensions together—make his search for belonging even more fraught with tension. The fishermen conflict in the Palk Strait represents a clear violation of both the economic and human rights of those involved. It is a theme—this fishermen competition and conflict—that resonates with the personal tragedies depicted in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*. So just as the Tamil characters in the novel experience persecution, displacement, and economic hardship, we see that in the real-world conflict,

in the Palk Strait, disproportionately affects the Tamil communities on both sides of the border. So on both sides of the border, the Tamils are disproportionately affected by this Palk Strait issue. So for many fishermen, their boats are their only source of income. This is something I have talked about in my previous lecture. They are often very poor people, and their only possession, in a way, is their boat.

#### Fishermen Conflict in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994)

- The fishermen conflict in the Palk Strait represents a clear violation of both the economic and human rights of those involved, a theme that resonates with the personal tragedies depicted in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*.
- Just as the Tamil characters in the novel experience persecution, displacement, and economic hardship, the real-world conflict in the Palk Strait disproportionately affects Tamil communities on both sides of the border.
- For many fishermen, their boats are their only source of income. When these boats are seized or destroyed, it leaves families without a means of survival, pushing them further into poverty. The confiscation of boats, extended periods of detention, and a lack of legal recourse compound these economic violations, creating a cycle of poverty and dependence that is hard to escape.



So when these boats are seized or destroyed by authorities upon discovering any kind of illegal activity, it leaves their families without any means of survival, often pushing the fishermen's communities into further poverty. The confiscation of boats, extended periods of detention of the fishermen, and a lack of legal recourse—all of these factors compound and add up to their economic violations, creating a cycle of poverty and dependence that is hard to escape. In *Funny Boy*, Arjie's family contemplates the possibility of fleeing Sri Lanka, much like the refugees in the real world who cross the Palk Strait in search of safety. The novel reflects the economic vulnerability of the minoritized communities—the minority communities—and it heightens during the civil war and the political instability around them. For many Tamil fishermen and refugees, the cycle of persecution still continues.

Even after crossing the borders, the refugees face very limited rights. So, after coming to India, life is not immediately a very positive picture. They face the experience of refugeehood, which means limited access to resources and limited rights, poor living conditions, and economic marginalization because they are not part of the core citizenry. This cycle is echoed in the experiences of the Tamil families in *Funny Boy*, where displacement does not bring any immediate sense of freedom but rather a new set of challenges and problems associated with it.


Amnesty International estimates that between 2015 and 2020, over 500 Indian fishermen were detained by Sri Lankan authorities, with many spending months in detention before being released. And one should also remember that these people hail from the poorest of the poor backgrounds. So, destitute, almost very poor people are further destroyed once they are detained and their boats are confiscated. Tamil migration and displacement due to the Sri Lankan civil war is a topic that has been explored in various post-colonial

literary works. Each of these works offers a unique lens into the lived experiences of the refugees. Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* is one such novel that focuses on the personal and intimate narratives of migration;

whereas others, including Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, offer a broader reflection on the diasporic identity of Sri Lankans. The Sri Lankan diaspora is something that Ondaatje is more interested in depicting through his artworks, searching for one's belonging in the diasporic community. Together, all these works help in painting multifaceted vignettes, multifaceted portraits of Tamil migration in post-colonial literature. There is a gamut of artworks produced by different authors that give us some idea of what the Tamils underwent while migrating or while emigrating from Sri Lanka.

Literary Representations of Tamil Migration

- Tamil migration and displacement due to the Sri Lankan Civil War have been explored in various postcolonial literary works, with each offering a unique lens into the lived experiences of refugees.
- Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* is one such novel, focusing on the personal and intimate narratives of migration, while others, such as Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, offer broader reflections on diasporic identity and the search for belonging. Together, these works help to paint a multifaceted portrait of Tamil migration in postcolonial literature.
- In postcolonial literature, Tamil migration is often depicted through the lens of trauma, loss, and the search for identity. Works like *Funny Boy* stand out for their focus on the personal and intimate narratives of migration, while other works such as *Running in the Family* and *Anil's Ghost* delve into the broader effects of colonialism, civil war, and diaspora on identity and belonging.



In post-colonial literature, Tamil migration is often depicted through the lens of trauma, loss, and the search for identity. So, works such as *Funny Boy* stand out for their focus on the personal and intimate narratives of migration, whereas other works, including *Running in the Family* and *Anil's Ghost*, delve into the broader effects of colonialism, civil war, as well as the questions of identity and belonging in diaspora. Whereas broader post-colonial narratives often focus on the macro-level effects of migration and displacement, *Funny Boy* brings the issue down to the intimate individual experience, the personal level, showing how conflict and migration shape personal identity, family dynamics, and childhood development. So, we get a very rich perspective through *Funny Boy*, and this is very similar to Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* because, in both these novels, we have the experience coming through the perspective of a child.

So, the narrator is The narrator-protagonist is in no way someone who is a state actor—very far from it. So, in *Cracking India*, we have a disabled female child from a Parsi

community, which is also a minority community in Lahore. And here, in Funny Boy, we have a gay child. He's



probably not a heterosexual child, and he is a minor. He is a little child. He is starting to discover his own body and that he is not like other boys. And then, he is a Tamil in Sri Lankan society, which makes him part of a minority social group. So, it becomes all the more interesting that these voices are coming from very unusual spaces—the prism, you know, through which light is thrown on the narrative of civil war in Sri Lanka or the partition of India.

These prisms are positioned in very unusual, very unconventional positions and directions. So, Arjie's experiences reflect the emotional and psychological toll or impact of the ethnic conflict, the riots, and the looming prospect of becoming a refugee in a new land. So, from here, we move on to our next topic today within the same lecture, which is the other border, which is fraught with ethnic conflict and refugee movements. We are going to discuss the India-Myanmar border.

The India-Myanmar border is not just a line on a map. It is a site of ongoing migration, ethnic conflicts, as well as political tensions that have deep historical roots. The India-Myanmar border stretches over almost more than 1,500 kilometers, almost 1,643 kilometers. So, this border cuts through Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram and connects to Myanmar's Chin and Sagaing regions.

India-Myanmar Border: Migration, Ethnic Conflict, and Refugee Movements

- The India-Myanmar border is not just a line on a map—it is a site of ongoing migration, ethnic conflict, and political tensions that have deep historical roots.
- The India-Myanmar border stretches over 1,643 kilometers, crossing four Indian states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram—and connecting to Myanmar's Chin and Sagaing regions. The terrain is marked by dense forests, mountainous areas, and river systems, creating challenges for border management and infrastructure development.
- Historian Benedict Anderson notes that "mountainous borders such as those of India and Burma do not divide people but are spaces where multiple identities thrive" (*Imagined Communities*, 1983)



The terrain is marked by dense forests, mountainous areas, and river systems, which challenge, you know, border management and infrastructure development. And it, in a way, enables—it, in a way, kind of facilitates illegal migration also, which is a constant and ongoing process. Historian Benedict Anderson notes that mountainous borders, such



as those between India and Burma, do not divide people but are spaces where multiple identities thrive. So, here we would like to hearken back to the different critical discussions we have on borderland culture. People and borderland habitats are not really attached to their respective mainland cultures so much.

So, even if they belong within the boundaries of a certain nation-state, they somehow identify more with the abutting culture, the culture that is immediately adjacent to them but perhaps belongs to another nation. Similarly, the adjacent culture also does not quite identify so much with its respective nation-state, and although it has an affiliation with a particular nation, the borderlands are a peculiar heterotopia, a third space in themselves in terms of practices, language, clothing, and other everyday habits. And they are a very shared space. They are a microcosm that is complete in itself. They are very much like a third space, right?

A very thriving kind of life that is, in a way, cut off from the mainland habitats, from the mainland politics even. In the case of the India-Myanmar border, the border is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, many of whom straddle both sides of the border. So this is also something we see: borders are often quite porous, and people keep moving across both sides of the border as part of their regular habit, almost. And oftentimes, if we look at the localized culture, it is meant for their sustenance, for their survival.

Some people set up their bazaar or their market on one side of the border. At the close of the day, they move to the other side where they have their houses. Sometimes people come very frequently across the border to sell their commodities. So some of these movements facilitate business; they, you know, support living.

So, you know, We see that borders are usually very porous and not very well defined. Ethnic groups straddling the India-Myanmar border include the Chin, Kuki, Mizo, Naga, as well as others who share cultural, linguistic, and historical ties—something that predates the formation of modern nation-states. Despite national boundaries, these communities maintain cross-border familial and economic connections, often traveling freely between the two countries. As both nations seek to maintain security and stability, they also navigate the delicate, volatile relationships and the multifaceted, sensitive history—or rather, histories—of the ethnic communities living along the border.


So, there are so many different kinds of histories unfolding, that are part of the borderland culture, and they are all as valid as the others. So, these places are definitely very delicate, very sensitive, volatile, and often fraught with tensions. So, the works of

historians such as Thant Myint-U and literary figures such as Amitav Ghosh help us understand the deep cultural and political entanglements that define a border. A border can never be clear-cut because the repercussions—the consequences of drawing a border—

which is, by and large, a national decision. So, two nations or larger authorities decide to draw borders in certain ways. But such borders intercept human activities, human living, and human culture. And so, there is, on the one hand, the border on pen and paper, at the cartographic level, and on the other hand, we have a very live and lived experience of the border, which is never very clear-cut.

India-Myanmar Border: Migration, Ethnic Conflict, and Refugee Movements

- The border is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, many of whom straddle both sides of the border. These groups include the Chin, Kuki, Mizo, Naga, and others, who share cultural, linguistic, and historical ties that predate the formation of modern nation-states.
- Despite national boundaries, these communities maintain cross-border familial and economic connections, often traveling freely between the two countries.
- As both nations seek to maintain security and stability, they also navigate the delicate relationships and histories of the ethnic communities that live along the border.
- The works of historians like Thant Myint-U and literary figures like Amitav Ghosh help us understand the deep cultural and political entanglements that define this border.



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Human activities never let borders remain something that walls off two people or two societies that have very similar habits and cultures. Usually, the borderland culture is very unified—a world in its own right, a microcosm beyond the defined nation-states. The fact that borderlines are never constant, natural, or ahistorical can be understood from Bengal's history, where its borders were redrawn five times before 1947. The northwestern provinces were taken out of the presidency of Bengal in 1835, and Arakan became part of Burma.

Then, nine districts from the east split off from Bengal to form the province of Assam. Assam was born out of Bengal in 1874 when nine districts were split off from Bengal. Later, Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts were transferred from Bengal to Assam in 1892. Then came the first partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon—the Curzon Partition—which separated East Bengal from Assam in 1905. Further, when this division was revoked in 1911, Bihar and Orissa were both removed from the presidency of Bengal.

The Government of India Act, passed in 1935, was responsible for completely separating Burma from India. Thus, we see a history of togetherness, followed by certain decisions by authorities that created separate states and provinces. Borderlines are redrawn and are never constant throughout history. As historian Thant Myant-U observes, 'For the Naga, Chin, and other hill tribes, the border has always been porous.'

It is only now with modern statehood that new walls have been erected between people who have long considered themselves as part of one community, unquote. So, ongoing ethnic conflicts within Myanmar, particularly in the Chin and Rakhine states, have led to significant refugee movements across the border into India. Over a period of many decades, both Chin and Rohingya refugees have crossed into Mizoram and Manipur, seeking asylum from persecution, especially during periods of military crackdowns in Myanmar. In this regard, Anne Talbot writes, I quote, 'The India-Burma border has seen more than just national disputes.' It has borne witness to the suffering of people caught between two nations and histories not of their own making.

So, the human impact of borders, basically. On the one hand, we have these demarcations, which come as a result of very elitist political decisions. The delegates from two nations—a very select, exclusive conclave—are responsible for drawing and redrawing these borders and boundaries, and on the other hand, we have the grassroots people—how such a decision comes top-down, it has a vertical impact on the people, especially those who are at the tail end of this whole process, people who are from the destitute sections of any society, who hardly have any decision, hardly have any agency in understanding or determining which side of the border they belong to.


So, I mean, people are suffering; they're caught in the crossfire of two nations and two histories not of their own making, as Ian Talbot would write. So, the border has grown in strategic importance for both India and Myanmar. India's Look East policy emphasizes stronger economic and trade ties with Southeast Asia, making the India-Myanmar border crucial for regional connectivity. In this regard, Bertil Lintner writes, I quote, 'The region has historically been a site of political tension involving ethnic insurgencies on both sides of the border.'

Extremist groups such as the NSCN, the full form being National Socialist Council of Nagaland. So, NSCN means National Socialist Council of Nagaland, which is a Naga militant and separatist group. And then, the Chin National Army. These extremist groups

have sought greater autonomy or independence in the borderland area, often leading to armed conflicts and resulting in periods of mass migration and cross-border violence.

India-Myanmar Border: Migration, Ethnic Conflict, and Refugee Movements

- The border has grown in strategic importance for both India and Myanmar. India's Look East Policy emphasizes stronger economic and trade ties with Southeast Asia, making the India-Myanmar border crucial for regional connectivity
- Bertil Lintner writes, "The India-Myanmar border remains one of the least regulated but most critical regions for trade and security in South Asia" (*Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*, 2012)
- The region has historically been a site of political tension, involving ethnic insurgencies on both sides of the border. Groups such as the NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland, a Naga militant and separatist group) and Chin National Army have sought greater autonomy or independence, often leading to armed conflicts and resulting in periods of mass migration and cross-border violence.



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So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let us meet in our next lecture with a new text and a new set of discussions. Thank you.