



Research Paper

Looking for the Self: Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*

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ABSTRACT: Published in 2013, Shyam Selvadurai's *"The Hungry Ghosts"* spans Sri Lanka and Canada, delving into the 1980s-1990s ethnic and political strife in Colombo and the lives of Tamil immigrants in Toronto and Vancouver. The novel primarily centers on the Sri Lankan people themselves, navigating not only the nation's politics but also the intricacies of everyday life. It underscores the interplay between personal and political, individual and national, through the protagonist Shivan, a half-Tamilian, half-Sinhalese gay man. As Shivan grapples with his evolving spatial and psychological landscapes, other characters similarly seek inner coherence amid Sri Lanka's tumultuous history, prompting an exploration of the link between conflict and identity in the Sri Lankan context. In the course of my paper, I will focus on the possibilities of a stable selfhood amidst the chaotic mix of Sri Lanka's political history and the personal histories of the characters that inhabit the same spatial-temporal reality, reflecting on the relationship between conflict and identity in the Sri Lankan experiences of nationhood.

KEYWORDS: identity, conflict, diaspora, post-colonial, nationalism

Received 02 Oct., 2023; Revised 10 Oct., 2023; Accepted 12 Oct., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

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Antony D. Smith defines nations as - "The world is divided into nations; that is, named populations possessing a historic similarity, shared myths and historical memories a mass, public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members, which are legitimized by the principles of nationalism".¹ Smith, resonating with mainstream Western thought on the concept of nation-making, bases a shared history as the key pillar in both conceptualizing and forming a nation. Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* posits an important question, especially in the context of formation of postcolonial nation-states, that Smith seems to have missed in his definition- is the past enough to define the present? What happens to nations that are birthed in historic similarities and decide to give up on that shared past? What happens to the nations that want to start afresh? Most importantly, what happens to its people? Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*, published in 2013, initiates an understanding of the interconnectedness of the personal and the political, the nation and the national, the home and the world, and the individual stuck in these enmeshed webs. The novel is set in Sri Lanka and Canada between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, exploring both the violent ethnic and political conflicts in Colombo and the experiences of Tamil immigrants in Toronto and Vancouver. *The Hungry Ghosts*, however, is not so much about Sri Lanka as it is about the Sri Lankan people, who in addition to being spectators and actors in Sri Lankan politics, are also navigating their ways through the politics of everyday life. The readers enter the world of the novel through its narrator and protagonist, Shivan, a half-Tamilian half Sinhalese gay man, who moves back and forth in his narration to come to terms with his ever-changing spatial and psychological geographies. The complexities of the various identities contained in Shivan's singular existence reflect the complicated history of Sri Lanka, which even though appears just as a small cartographic land on the map of the world, contains a rich history of diverse populations mixing and attempting (mostly failing) to synthesize a coherent national existence together. Throughout the novel, Shivan tries to balance his inner conflicts in order to forge an integrated self, where how he sees himself and how he wants to be seen merge without resistance. Selvadurai has maintained several times that the novel is Shivan's story, before ascribing it to anyone or anything else, however, this attempt at self-definition is not Shivan's alone. This paper will attempt to briefly discuss the possibilities of a stable selfhood in *The Hungry Ghosts* amidst the chaotic mix of Sri Lanka's political history and the personal histories of the characters that inhabit the same spatial-temporal reality, reflecting on the relationship between conflict and identity in the Sri Lankan experiences of nationhood.

Shivan and his sister Renu are born to a Tamil man and a Sinhala woman, thus, carrying the fundamental binary of Sri Lanka's ethnic struggle in their social-cultural identities. They exist in violation of the

animosity that has engulfed the nation, resisting the madness of the ethnic violence through the dichotomous ethnic mixture they contain within themselves. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as a matter of “becoming as well as being”.² The formation of this identity constitutes processes of relation and negotiation so as to establish a space for oneself in the social order. As a child, Renu understands that a part of her mother suffering comes from her decision of marrying a Tamil Christian man. In her childhood fantasies, she imagines marrying a Sinhalese man as the only way of escaping the discrimination meted out to them for being Tamils. For the child in Renu, subscribing to the majoritarian population seems to be an elegant solution against the discrimination meted out to the marginalized minority. It is only when she comes to the upper-class household of her grandmother Daya, she realizes how prejudice does not exist as a tangible object one can choose to not engage in; it functions through disguised tributaries out of one’s comprehensibility and control. Now protected from ethnic violence, Renu still feels invisible in the house for Daya develops indifference towards her, while simultaneously showering affection towards Shivan. Her gender intervenes with her dream of finding a secure self in her newly found upper-class Sinhala reality. Avtar Brah uses the term “homing desire” which is the desire of a home, not a homeland- “a mythic place of desire in diasporic imagination”.³ The adult Renu finds her mythic place of belonging in her continuously changing academic vocabulary that continues to grant her a steady sense of self and its association with the world around her- in Colombo, Toronto, and New York. Words like “racist”, “liminality” and “subaltern” become her “new insignia of belonging”- making it possible for her to access the diasporic complexities through an objective distance. Shyam Selvadurai says-There’s a sense of belonging in not belonging and it is not bad.⁴ Renu’s decision of not defining her selfhood as something exclusively hers but attaching it with academic theorizations and political movements provide her a stability that is denied to most characters in the novel. This stability is undoubtedly borrowed and insufficient to satiate the always expanding need of defining and understanding one’s condition. However, this temporary relief suffices Renu as it prevents her from indulging too deep in the predicament life offers her for it convinces her that she is not alone in her inability to belong. Her diasporic reality reduces to just being a door for her to comprehend the larger discourses surrounding feminism and immigrant lives. This culminates in her passion for academic research on these topics that give her hope to find answers not just for herself but also for the experiences of thousands of people who share her confusion and alienation. It is through belonging to an academic and political group that wants to unearth the reasons behind the complexity of belongingness that Renu escapes the naked perethi metaphor Selvadurai uses to structure the story of Shivan and his family.

Shyam Selvadurai incorporates multiple references to Buddhist tales and folklores in order to provide an overarching theme to the novel- the most important being Perathaya tales, loosely translated as “the hungry ghosts”, which is also the title of the novel. According to the myth, a person is reborn as a perathaya if they desired too much in their human life, hence, they have a large stomach that can never be filled through their tiny mouths. The tales function as a caution that one can never get rid of their past. The karmas of the past will always decide the present- “Like a leopard stalking its prey through tall grass, a man’s past life pursues him, waiting for the right moment to pounce.”⁵ At multiple instances in the novel, Shivan, his mother and his grandmother identify with the perathaya figures, trying to absorb the cruelty of the present by ascribing it to an unknown past. The act of placing the present suffering in an inaccessible past life provides a perverse sense of solace as it removes the burden of confronting one’s own actions in the present. Since, the accountability of the today is suspended in a time unknown, the characters struggle to face their innermost selfhood creating a permanent rift between feeling and expression. The text refers to this as the “inner parchedness of the soul”.⁶ This metaphor of inner parchedness has a cyclical presence in the novel. Selvadurai dedicates the novel to his partner Andrew, who for him is “like rain soaking on parched land”. The same phrase is used by Daya, Hema and Shivan at various junctures of the novel. The relief is temporary and dependent on others as the inner parchedness cannot be fulfilled through one’s own efforts. The other people in one’s life can be the rain that satiates the thirst momentarily but once they are removed, the person has no option but to live a life with an empty soul because they do not possess the strength to gratify the soul’s needs on their own. The rain is a momentary pause before the hungry ghosts arrive again to haunt the present. It is in this light that the paper wants to place Shivan’s existence- as wanting to shun the burden of past and start afresh, and the impossibility of the endeavour.

Avtar Brah defines diaspora as journeys that alter the cartography of the self.⁷ Shivan’s voice is the only possible route for the readers to traverse the cartography of his sense of self. He continues to define himself through the matrix of irreconcilable socio-political realities- a Tamil man in a Sinhalese majority nation-state, a homosexual man in orthodox Sri Lanka, and an undesirable gay brown man in Canada. The only commonality that these categorizations share is the fact that Shivan always exists on the periphery. In his self-description, Shivan always exists on the margins and that becomes the central cause of the flux of incongruous selves that he inhabits within himself. However, on a closer inspection, the binaries that he creates in order to construct his selfhood appear as his conscious efforts to conjure a false sense of stability. Shivan, instead of defining himself through these categories, wants to define himself outside them. This is not synonymous with saying that he is searching for an identity that resists these labels. Instead, he selectively chooses parts of them to fashion a self

he feels satisfied with temporarily and once the satisfaction wears off, he conveniently changes the locus through which he defines and describes his life. During his first visit back to Colombo, he tells Mili that he abandoned Sri Lanka because Sri Lanka abandoned him. In that moment, he becomes an integral part of the Tamil population being subjected to ethnic violence, understating his class privilege which allowed him a sanctuary from the 1983 riots and a relatively easier migration to Canada. When Ronald asks him whether he is a refugee, he promptly replies that he is an immigrant, a man with resources. He conveniently proclaims that he will adopt his grandfather's Sinhalese surname when Hema tries to dissuade him from going back to Colombo. There exists an uncomfortable ease with which Shivan shuffles between his ways of interacting with his nation—a relationship not only complicated by the socio-political upheaval but also Shivan's personal incapacity in understanding his position in the relationship. Shivan's confusion does not arise from the intricacies between the attempt to find a home outside a home; it arises from the repetitive choice of convenience where Shivan relies on the temporary relief instead of uncomfortable truth in order to deal with a situation. As a young progressive man, Shivan is familiar with the ways of the world and holds important opinions on the same. He engages in various political discussions and debates highlighting the oppressive nature of State, hegemonic structures, and people with power. At various junctures in the novel, he becomes the voice of resistance against the same offering empathy to the victims. The only complication in this description of Shivan is the blinding attitude he holds towards his own class privilege that undercuts the major claim of marginalization he uses in order to position himself as a victim in all his spatial and temporal realities. Questioning one of such incidents where Shivan uses Daya's money to fund his apartment in Toronto, Christel R. Devadawson asks, "How can money wrung out of local brutality can be used-without the slightest hint of moral recognition-to fund an escape from Sri Lanka? How real can such an escape ever be?"⁸ Since Shivan continues to not address his class privilege in the narration of the struggle he faces while coalescing his homosexuality with his ethnic identity, his identification with the naked Perathaya happens only partially. Both his need and greed for an integrated self makes him oblivious to a significant part of his identity, which in turn dilutes his attempt at fleshing out the complex diasporic reality of Sri Lankan Tamils that he claims to have experienced.

In his first trip back to Colombo after the family's initial relocation to Canada, the city provides him a space to perform his masculinity, an opening denied to him because of his race in Toronto. In the initial pages of the novel, Shivan disgusted both by the violence in the country and the violence Daya uses to run her business promises his forever betrayal of her and her ways. But right after coming back to Colombo, he starts working for Daya—collecting rent and evicting tenants. When a tenant calls him emasculated, he goes directly to Chandralal, giving into the same pattern of violence that he refused to participate in earlier. The performance of masculinity, however, comes with the precondition of his homosexuality being veiled. As soon as the veil is lifted off, Shivan becomes a victim of the same violence he readily accepted as part of his job. Chandralal and his goons kill Shivan's lover, Mili, an act where Daya is also complicit. Throughout the novel, Shivan oscillates between repulsion and identification with his grandmother; her complicity in Mili's murder creates a permanent rift between them. Nonetheless, Shivan regards both the loss of Mili and his grandmother as personal tragedies, refusing to draw connections between the source of Daya's wealth which he accepts as his own and the use of the same source to kill the man he loved. It is easier for Shivan to accept the truth of Ranjini's death as "political" as that relationship functioned at some distance. He fails to grasp the political nature of Mili's murder— to not see Mili just as his lover but also a Sinhalese man who by not choosing to subscribe to the nation's heteronormative ideals becomes a threat just like the Tamils, an identification he is deeply familiar with since his childhood. Chandralal, and to an extent, Daya, as guardians of Sinhalese nation-state ensure that the "corrupt European blood" does not enter the familial and the social. It is not only the enormity of the loss that makes these correlations blurred for Shivan. Sri Lankan politics, significantly more than a background against which Shivan paints his identity, is just a conversational topic for him— on dinner tables, Kantha parties, and workspaces. He resists all likely situations where the national-political can creep back into his life. Shivan is trying to locate a self that is not linked to the surrounding political climate and in this attempt to preserve himself from the larger social reality, he turns blind to the crucial interconnectedness of the individual and the society. Shivan expresses his disappointment with Mili— "While I believed that this rising violence truly troubled him, at the same time, I felt he sensed my dislike for talking about such things as they spoilt our time together, and he was doing it to thwart and irritate me. He would never tell me about the other men he had been with and where he had met them. For some reason, I was frightened to inquire directly and tried to probe by asking how he had figured out I was gay."⁹ The political unsettles the personal. It disturbs his desire for normalcy; it muddles with the utopian imagination of him finally finding everything he needs. That's why, the political registers no space in the corridors of his psychological reality, especially when it comes to his personal relationships. For the outer world, he continues to engage in these discussions as a learned man with many opinions. This duality of the self makes it impossible for Shivan to face the hypocritical patterns he has devised in his attempts to design an integrated selfhood for himself.

Shivan's construction of his selfhood lacks a centre— he regrets his decision of going to Canada just before the departure, questions his decision of going back to Sri Lanka just before the departure, and spends a

night rationalizing his decision to go back there again. The inertia that prevents him from ascertaining his choices ties up with the baggage of the past that one is supposed to carry until they break the cycle- to resist the Sisyphean force and let go off the boulder for once and all. The narrative remarks- "As a forest fire raging out of control only stops when it reaches a lake or river, so hatred and vengeance can only be quenched by the waters of compassion".¹⁰ Shivan decides to confront the burden of the past and face his grandmother with compassion but in order to do so, he must give up Michael. Even if temporarily, he must surrender his homosexuality before revisiting the traumatic truth of his sexual and ethnic identity, the reason he left Colombo twice before. The promised calmness calls for a sacrifice of his queerness if he wants to align his image of the self with the image of the nation he finally chooses as his place of belonging. Shivan's desire to belong can only be fulfilled if he cuts up all ties with all the identifiers that complicate his journey towards the permanent belongingness he is seeking. Unlike Renu who finds belongingness in academic labels and jargons, Shivan's task is not just to refuse the labels but to change his intrinsic nature that is defined by these labels. In such a scenario, there remains no possibility of an authentic self in a nation. Even if Shivan manages to find solace in his decision, the selfhood that he chooses for himself is going to remain truncated. Furthermore, the sacrifice still does not guarantee the integrated "I" Shivan desperately wants to achieve. Selvadurai seems to suggest that the only way forward is through retracing your steps and accepting your karma- Shivan says, "But there is also a calm within me now, the inner stillness of someone who has finally given up, who has stopped clinging to the ridiculous notion that he, or any of us really, can avoid our fate."¹¹ Just like his grandmother, Shivan decides to fashion his sense of self around the abstraction of fate, failing again to look at his own participation in the structures that initiated his self-disillusionment. Shivan denies the accountability of his own participation in the chain of events that transpired for it saves him from questioning his own lack of centre in the relationships he maintained with people as well as places. The naked perethi metaphor becomes a saviour concept for him to put together the remaining pieces of self and view his life as a tragedy controlled by destiny. This conscious removal of actions from thoughts makes it impossible for Shivan to ever access his authentic self that does not rely on the binary of black and white to survive.

Shyam Selvadurai places the predestination versus free will debate at the centre of the novel, making Shivan attempt to cut himself out of his history and then realize the futility of it, whereby he decides to leave it to his fate and face the demons he has been avoiding most of his life. This seems like a point of resolution with one's own conflicts, however, if the reader is to understand Shivan in the entirety of his characterisation, the resolution is merely transient. This apparent respite is deceptive. Shivan's naivety or conscious denial of his own part in the making of his fate prevents him from acknowledging and reconciling with the schisms inside his own self. Consequently, the fractures within his being are only suspended to an unknowable time in the future. His refusal to situate his personal in the political hinders his ability to construct a stable and holistic selfhood. Since Shivan's gaze is Selvadurai's entry-point in exploring the complications of diasporic existence, this deliberate ignorance of the larger moral-political connections limits *The Hungry Ghosts* as a narrative of Sri Lanka and its people. The nation and the self only interact selectively which further simplifies the nuances contained in the association of the two. The alienation felt in all three places- in the upper-class life of Colombo and diasporic life of Toronto and Vancouver-becomes the solitary experience of a narrator that conveniently plants the socio-physical landscape in order to construct an appeasing self. The longing is not shared between a nation and its people, but between the alternate selves an individual harbours to build a sense of definable identity. The epigraph to the novel contains a quotation from Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*- "Destiny is fixed; all doors open to the future".¹² Through the use of this quote and the Buddhist myths and folklore in *The Hungry Ghosts*, Selvadurai endorses submission to fate as the only possible way of finding satisfaction in a chaotic world. This solution fails to seem convincing as it also turns out to be entrenched in the same violence it sets out to oppose. If the violence of the past is the primary reason for the violence of the present, is there no way out of this cycle? Moreover, Shivan's conscious participation in the cycle of violence and the consequent inability to recognize its repercussions dilute the trust in Shivan's newfound commitment towards surrendering entirely to his destiny. The quest for the self is still incomplete; it is only veiled in a manner that it appears fulfilled. A stable selfhood, therefore, is impossible- not only because the diasporic experiences shape it as such but also because both the author and the narrator refuse to ask difficult questions required for a coherent imagination of it. Without liability, a coherent self is always a mirage.

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