

Funny Boy



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHYAM SELVADURAI

Like his protagonist Arjie, Shyam Selvadurai also grew up gay in Sri Lanka during the 1970s before fleeing at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1983. However, the character of Arjie is in no further sense based on Selvadurai's family or life—indeed, whereas Arjie is Tamil, Selvadurai had a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father. After moving to Canada, Selvadurai studied theater at York University and wrote a handful of television plays before finding breakout success in 1994 with *Funny Boy*, which remains his best-known work. *Funny Boy* won both the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction and the Books in Canada First Novel Award, and it is also slotted for a film adaptation by the decorated Indian-Canadian director Deepa Mehta. His three other novels have covered similar themes: *Cinnamon Garden* (1999), set in the 1920s, follows both a young feminist pressured to marry by her family and her uncle's reunion with his male lover from decades before; *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (2005) recounts a boy falling in love with his cousin from Canada; and *The Hungry Ghosts* (2013) portrays the emotional conflicts of a gay Sri Lankan-Canadian man as he sets out to return to Sri Lanka to take care of his elderly grandmother, who rejected his sexuality when he first came out. Selvadurai has explained that one of his writing's fundamental goals is to help queer youth accept their sexuality. Selvadurai has also edited two anthologies: *Story-Wallah* (2004), a selection of short fiction from the South Asian diaspora, and *Many Roads Through Paradise* (2014), a similar volume focused on Sri Lanka. His novels have been translated into various languages, and he has also written short stories and nonfiction for publications ranging from *The New York Times* to *Toronto Life Magazine*. Selvadurai has also occasionally taught writing and, notably, led a project called Write to Reconcile that helped cultivate Sri Lankan writers interested in narrating the Civil War.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Funny Boy is set in the 1970s and early 1980s, during the lead-up to the Sri Lankan Civil War that was still raging at the time of the book's publication. This war, an ethnic conflict between Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority, is impossible to understand without grasping the historical antecedents that turned ethnicity into the basis for political identity. Ruled by a series of Sinhalese kingdoms until the sixteenth century, Sri Lanka was colonized in three waves by three separate powers. First, the Portuguese set up trading outposts and founded the city of Colombo in the sixteenth century. To defeat the

encroaching Portuguese, the king of Sri Lanka agreed to a treaty with the Dutch, who completely ignored their promise to respect the kingdom's sovereignty and instead conquered nearly the whole island in the seventeenth century. (The shrinking but socially prominent group called "burghers" are mostly the descendants of these Dutch colonists.) The British occupied Sri Lanka at the end of the eighteenth century and defeated the remaining local power, the Kingdom of Kandy, before largely turning the island into tea estates and importing Tamil laborers from India to work in slavery-like conditions on them. While a small percentage of Sri Lankan Tamils are the descendants of these indentured laborers, this is a distinct group from the Sri Lankan Tamil population that lives mostly on the island's north tip and east coast, and to which Selvadurai's protagonist Arjie Chelvaratnam belongs. Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948 and tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese soon began to escalate, as the characters in *Funny Boy* both experience and remember. After independence, the Sri Lankan Parliament defined Indian Tamils as foreigners and deported roughly half to India; later, the Sinhalese-run government passed the infamous "Sinhala Only Act," which defined Sinhala as the nation's only official language and accordingly reinforced Sinhalese control by kicking a substantial number of Tamils out of the government, even in Tamil-majority areas, due to their lack of fluency in Sinhalese. In response to this policy, small acts of violence and larger acts of retaliation turned into full-scale ethnic riots in 1956 and, more seriously, in 1958. The 1960s were relatively peaceful, but a militant separatist group called the Tamil Tigers grew and began demanding their own state soon thereafter, and violence spontaneously broke out various times throughout the 1970s, the period during which *Funny Boy* is mostly set, culminating in large riots in 1977 and setting the stage for the beginning of the Civil War in 1983. As the Tamil Tigers grew and the Sri Lankan government became more rigidly pro-Sinhalese, assassinations by the Tigers and targeted attacks by the government (even on civilians) became increasingly common. In 1981, government-backed forces burned down the library in the Tamil-majority northern city of Jaffna, and in 1983, the Sri Lankan government supported riots that killed and displaced thousands of its Tamil citizens. The Tigers and the government both retaliated by massacring civilians, and all-out war began soon thereafter. The government nearly won this war by the end of the 1980s, but then India interfered militarily on behalf of the Tamil Tigers. However, Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi then pushed through a peace accord that gave Tamils less autonomy than the Tamil Tigers demanded; in retaliation, the Tigers assassinated Gandhi, losing much of their international credibility. The following years saw much of the

war's deadliest conflict, culminating in 1992 battles near Jaffna, frequent suicide bombings by the Tigers, and government-led massacres of civilians in the late 1990s. A peace movement broke out in response to this extreme violence, and Norway managed to broker a peace accord between the sides in 2000, but the Tamil Tigers dropped this accord in 2003 and the government officially did the same in 2007, although all-out war had resumed the previous year. A strong military push by the government drove the Tamil Tigers out of their territory in northern and eastern Sri Lanka by 2009 and killed the organization's leader, ending the war and returning the mostly Sinhalese government to power (although Tamil is now an official language in Sri Lanka). Ethnic tensions remain high after the Civil War, with the Sri Lankan government on trial for war crimes and ethnic riots still common a decade after the war's end.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Beyond Shyam Selvadurai's three other novels (*Cinnamon Garden*, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, and *The Hungry Ghosts*), other prominent works of South Asian LGBT literature include the volume of gay fiction *Yaraana* (1999), edited by Hoshang Merchant; Hijra trans woman writer and activist A. Revathi's memoir, *The Truth About Me* (2011); Vivek Shraya's *She of the Mountains* (2014), which integrates Hindu mythology and the life of a queer Indo-Canadian; many of the works of Hanif Kureishi, such as the novel [The Buddha of Suburbia](#) (1990) and the screenplay for the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985); and Divya Sood's lesbian romance novel *Nights Like This* (2016). Selvadurai has named Sandip Roy's *Don't Let Him Know* (2015) as a personal favorite. Some celebrated works of Sri Lankan fiction dealing with the Civil War include burgher novelist Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000), whose title character is a Sri Lankan forensic pathologist who returns home to try and identify victims of the Civil War; Nihal de Silva's *The Road from Elephant Pass* (2003), which interweaves meditations on birdwatching with the tale of an Army commander and Tamil Tiger fighter forced to survive together in the jungle; and Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016), which follows two children's arranged marriage during the closing days of the war. The Sri Lankan Civil War has attracted even more nonfiction, from third-party accounts like Samanth Subramanian's wide-ranging history *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War* (2014), journalist Frances Harrison's history of government abuses against Tamils *Still Counting the Dead: Survivors of Sri Lanka's Hidden War* (2012) to first-person memoirs like that of a child soldier, *Tamil Tigress* (2011), and former army Major General Kamal Gunaratne's *Road to Nandikadal* (2016).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories*
- **When Written:** 1990s
- **Where Written:** Toronto, Canada
- **When Published:** 1994
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary fiction
- **Genre:** Coming-of-age fiction, South Asian diaspora fiction, Queer/LGBT fiction
- **Setting:** Colombo, Sri Lanka
- **Climax:** Arjie and his family flee their home in Colombo and then Sri Lanka as anti-Tamil riots break out in 1983.
- **Antagonist:** Homophobia, Sinhalese rioters, the Sri Lankan government
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Write to Reconcile Anthologies. The “Write to Reconcile” program for young, aspiring Sri Lankan writers that Selvadurai helps lead has put out a series of anthologies of its participants’ work, all of which include introductions by Selvadurai and are available online for free at www.writetoreconcile.org.

Radio and Screen Versions. The upcoming film adaptation of *Funny Boy* is not the novel’s first; Selvadurai wrote a screenplay version in 1995 and produced a live radio play based on the book in 2006, also in conjunction with the acclaimed director Deepa Mehta (who will be directing the new movie version).



PLOT SUMMARY

Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* uses six loosely connected stories to recount the childhood and adolescence of a Sri Lankan Tamil boy, Arjie, who comes of age in Colombo during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to learning he is different from other boys and eventually recognizing that he is gay, Arjie must confront the increasingly tense and violent relations between Sri Lanka’s two major ethnic groups, the Tamils and Sinhalese, which break out into a civil war at the book’s end in 1983.

The first story, “Pigs Can’t Fly,” follows Arjie as a young child, when he cherishes his monthly playdate with all his cousins at his grandparents’ house. Free from the watchful eyes of their parents and Ammachi, the children break up into two groups: the boys play cricket in the front yard, while the girls—plus Arjie—play out a fantasy wedding in a game they call “bride-bride.” Arjie always gets this game’s most prestigious role—that of the bride herself—until a new cousin, whom the others nickname “Her Fatness,” arrives on the scene and tries to take over Arjie’s role. Her Fatness gets her mother, Kanthi Aunty, to march the **sari**-clad Arjie in front of all the uncles and aunts, who are horrified. One uncle laughs out loud and labels Arjie a

“funny one.” Arjie’s parents (Amma and Appa) declare that he will have to play cricket with the boys, but he has other plans. The next month, Arjie incites a fight between the boys’ cricket teams and, in a plot to win back his spot as the bride, convinces Her Fatness to start him off with the lowliest role in “bride-bride”: the groom. But after they get into a fight, Her Fatness again publicly humiliates Arjie. Ammachi blames him for the conflict and he lashes out before running down to the beach to cry.

Some time thereafter, the title character of the second story, Radha Aunty, comes home to Sri Lanka after four years in America. She plans to marry Rajan, a family friend she met while abroad, and the seven-year-old Arjie is thrilled at the prospect of his bride-bride fantasies becoming a reality. Although Radha looks nothing like Arjie had hoped, the two still strike up a friendship; Radha lets Arjie try her makeup and brings him to join her in a school production of the play *The King and I*. During rehearsals, a Sinhalese boy named Anil starts hitting on Radha and eventually offers her a ride home. But when Ammachi hears about this, she is furious: after her father was murdered by a Sinhalese mob during race riots in the 1950s, Ammachi began hating the Sinhalese and supporting the Tamil Tigers, a separatist militant organization. Arjie follows his curiosity and starts learning about Sri Lanka’s ethnic divisions. Ammachi threatens Anil’s family, and when Radha and Arjie go to apologize, Anil’s father curses them out and insists that he would never let his son “marry some non-Sinhalese.” After two aunts stumble upon Radha and Anil eating lunch together, Ammachi decides to send Radha north to Jaffna for a couple months. Having resolutely fallen in love, Radha and Anil make plans to get married when she returns. But on the day of her return, the family hears about riots elsewhere in Sri Lanka, and Arjie’s brother Diggy reports that a Sinhalese mob attacked the train on which Radha Aunty was traveling. Radha Aunty returns with a bruised face and, although she soon recovers, she cannot bring herself to continue seeing Anil or participating in *The King and I*. Radha and her original love interest, Rajan, officially get engaged, but Arjie loses his previous faith in the idea “that if two people loved each other everything was possible.”

The third story, “See No Evil, Hear No Evil,” starts with Appa buying a hotel and heading away to Europe on business. The rest of the family gets a visitor: Daryl Uncle, a white Burgher man who grew up in Sri Lanka but has been living in Australia for the last 15 years. A journalist, Daryl has returned to cover the accelerating violence in Sri Lanka’s north. He also introduces tension into the family, and after Arjie recovers from a brief bout of hepatitis, he and Amma take him for a stay at a bungalow in the hills. On this vacation, it becomes clear that Daryl and Amma used to have a relationship, but could never marry because they were from different ethnic groups. To Amma’s horror, Daryl insists on going north to Jaffna to cover

the government’s abuses of power during the conflict, and while he is away the family hears worse and worse stories about violence in the North. When Daryl does not return, Amma contacts the police, who ignore her fears and later report that he has “washed ashore [dead] on the beach of a fishing village.” They insist it is an accident, although Amma slowly comes to realize that the Sinhalese-run government is probably responsible for Daryl’s death. She visits the civil rights lawyer Q.C. Uncle, who encourages her to forget and move on, and the village of Daryl’s servant boy Somaratne, where the wary and long-suffering locals chase her and Arjie back to their car. Amma does not recover from her solemnity, not even upon Appa’s return.

In the fourth story, “Small Choices,” a young man named Jegan—the son of Appa’s longtime, recently deceased school friend—comes to live with Arjie’s family and work with Appa’s hotel business. Before coming to Colombo, Jegan worked with the Gandhiyam movement in Jaffna and (he later admits) briefly joined the Tamil Tigers. Arjie, now in puberty, is immediately fascinated by this newcomer, both because he finds Jegan attractive and because he admires Jegan’s sense of purpose. But Jegan starts facing trouble at work, where the mostly-Sinhalese hotel staff think he is getting promoted just for being Tamil, and in Colombo, where the police start following him and eventually arrest him on suspicion of helping plot an assassination attempt. Although Jegan is released without charge, word quickly spreads; Appa starts getting threatening calls, Appa’s Sinhalese employees grow distant, and locals nearly attack Jegan and then write “Death to all Tamil pariahs” on his door at the hotel. Forced to choose between his loyalty to Jegan and his business, Appa reluctantly fires Jegan, who leaves without even properly saying goodbye. While Arjie understands Appa’s dilemma, he also feels that Appa has unfairly given up on Jegan, scapegoating his friend’s son to save his own family.

In the penultimate and lengthiest chapter of *Funny Boy*, “The Best School of All,” Appa transfers Arjie to his brother Diggy’s strict, traditional, colonial relic of a school, the Queen Victoria Academy, which Appa thinks will “force [Arjie] to become a man.” The schoolboys are athletic, hypermasculine, and divided sharply by ethnicity. But Arjie, who takes Sinhala-medium classes, ends up watching Sinhalese bullies like Salgado beat up other Tamil kids, which he does with the blessings of the school’s vice principal, Lokubandara. Arjie also befriends and develops an attraction to the jovial, carefree Shehan Soyza, who shows him around and defends him from Salgado. One day, the school’s draconian principal, Black Tie, reprimands Shehan for having long hair and begins taking him to his office daily, punishing him constantly along with the group of students he deems “the future ills and burdens of Sri Lanka.” The following day, the English and Drama teacher, Mr. Sunderalingam, is impressed by Arjie’s recitation of a poem. Black Tie asks Arjie to

recite two poems for an upcoming ceremony, which Arjie soon learns is intended to maintain Black Tie's control over the school: although he is cruel, Black Tie is committed to welcoming various kinds of students, whereas Lokubandara wants the school to be officially Sinhalese and Buddhist. At the ceremony, Black Tie will honor a powerful politician who can ensure he remains principal.

Over the next few days, Arjie recites the poems for Black Tie, who punishes both him and Shehan whenever he messes up. Shehan and Arjie also start spending time together outside school, although Diggy warns Arjie that Shehan is known for having sex with other boys. When they get Mr. Sunderalingam to convince Black Tie to release them one day, Shehan and Arjie suddenly kiss. Shehan invites Arjie over to his house, where he expects something to happen between them but Arjie feels awkward and heads home. Arjie invites Shehan to his house instead, and they have sex in the garage while playing hide-and-seek. At lunch, Appa clearly dislikes Shehan, and afterward Arjie begins to feel intensely guilty and blame Shehan for corrupting him, but he dreams about Shehan that night and worries as Shehan continues to receive punishments from Black Tie. To save Shehan, Arjie hatches a plan: instead of dutifully reciting his poems during Black Tie's ceremony, he will purposefully bungle them and ensure that Black Tie's speech—which is based on the poems—comes out looking ridiculous instead of inspiring. Courageously, he carries out this plan, and after the ceremony he tells Shehan he “did it for you.”

The epilogue of *Funny Boy*, “Riot Journal,” consists of Arjie's notebooks during the 1983 Tamil-Sinhala riots that eventually turned into the Sri Lankan Civil War. Arjie learns that Sinhalese mobs are burning down Tamils' homes and businesses in Colombo, and then that the government is actively supporting these mobs, giving them lists of Tamil families from voter rolls and deciding not to publicly report what is going on. Arjie's family is planning to stay with Amma and Appa's friends, Chithra Aunty and Sena Uncle, but they soon learn that a man has stolen the petrol from Sena Uncle's van and used it to burn a Tamil family alive in their car, with the police watching all the while. Arjie's family develops a new plan: they will hide with their neighbors, the Pereras, in case anyone comes for them. They have to put this plan into action that same night, when a mob comes and burns down their house; Arjie is horrified and traumatized, unable to process the gravity of losing his home. Arjie's family does make it to Sena and Chithra's house, but Sena starts receiving threatening phone calls from people who accuse him of harboring Tamils. During a brief break in the curfew, Shehan visits Arjie but seems remarkably normal and proposes they see a movie, which makes Arjie realize that “Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not.” An uncle living in Canada, Lakshman, calls and suggests the family apply for refugee status. Although they publicly deny any intention of doing so, Amma and Appa privately agree to apply for passports for their

children. Soon, the family learns even more horrifying news: Ammachi and Appachi have been murdered, too, burned alive in their car. Radha even visits for their funeral. Just before the family leaves for Canada, Arjie meets Shehan for the last time, only to discover that they have already withdrawn emotionally from one another. In his final journal entry, Arjie returns to his **burnt-out house** for the last time and cries.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Arjie – Arjun Chelvaratnam, called “Arjie” by his friends and family members, is the narrator and protagonist of *Funny Boy*. A Sri Lankan Tamil raised in Colombo with his sister Sonali and brother Diggy, Arjie is clearly unlike other boys from his earliest years. Barely interested in traditionally masculine pursuits, Arjie is more fond of acting out weddings and reading *Little Women* than playing cricket or rugby. He develops a long-standing mix of curiosity and shame about this difference, and as he grows up throughout the book, he begins to discover his attraction to men. But when he sees Radha Aunty marry Rajan instead of Anil and Amma reunite with Daryl Uncle while Appa is away, Arjie begins to lose faith in the storybook image of romantic love he learned from Janaki's Sinhala comic books. Ironically, he finds love only after his father sends him to the prestigious Queen Victoria Academy to make him more of “a man”; he meets a boy at the school named Shehan, although they eventually grow apart while Arjie waits to leave Sri Lanka for Canada. He has to make this move at the end of the book because his Tamil family is under persecution during the early days of the Sri Lankan Civil War; throughout the book's earlier sections, he also gradually learns about Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions and begins to recognize the racism in his community and his own family. Although he is Tamil, he only speaks Sinhala and English, and so feels relatively disconnected from the nationalistic sentiments that lead people like Jegan and Ammachi to support the Tamil Tigers, although he intimately understands the oppression his Tamil minority faces. As he watches his family members and acquaintances suffer violence because of their ethnicity, gender, or commitment to justice, Arjie also develops a more complex moral outlook during the book. Although the book ends with Arjie's move to Canada at a relatively young age, he sees and experiences a lifetime's worth of turmoil and injustice during his youth, which clearly instills in him both a sense of moral purpose and an instinct for pursuing that moral purpose carefully and realistically.

Amma – Arjie's Amma (the Tamil word for “mother”) is loving and close to her son; although she has a strong sense of right and wrong, she often chooses not to voice it, but she is also anything but passive. Instead, she tends to hold the family together emotionally in times of crisis. When Arjie is a child, Amma lets him dress up in her clothes, but is forced to stop

after the family sees him in the **bride-bride sari**. Like Arjie, she often silently disagrees with many of the cultural norms that determine life in Sri Lanka: although she forces young Arjie to play with the other boys, for instance, her inability to justify herself reveals “how little she actually believe[s] in the justness of her actions.” Similarly, Amma’s relationship with Daryl Uncle shows Arjie that, unlike many other Sri Lankans, she does not see ethnicity as a defining trait, although she eventually comes to agree with the Tamil Tigers that Tamils might need a separate state to overcome violence from the Sinhalese. Her zealous effort to investigate Daryl Uncle’s death reveals her commitment to justice, but her willingness to give it up shows that she considers her family’s safety primary. In this vein, she is also the first to suggest the family move to Canada. During the riots, which (unlike Appa) she predicted, Amma comforts not only her children but also Chithra Aunty (even though the Chelvaratnams’ own **house** was the one burned down).

Appa – Arjie’s distant, authoritative, and successful father (“Appa” is the Tamil word for “father”). Although he is a brother to Mala Aunty, Kanthi Aunty, Radha Aunty (among others), Appa seldom appears in the first half of the book; in the third chapter, he quits his job at the bank to buy a hotel that proves very lucrative and skyrockets the family into Sri Lanka’s upper class. He plays a more prominent role in the last three chapters; in “Small Choices,” Appa takes in Jegan Parameswaran because he made a pact with Jegan’s father in his school days, but ends up torn—at first, between his affinity for Jegan (who reminds Appa of his father) and his fear of Jegan’s political associations, and later, between his promise to Jegan and the safety of his family (which is threatened by the community’s harsh response to Jegan after his arrest). Throughout the book, he worries intensely about Arjie’s masculinity and sexuality. He sends Arjie to the Queen Victoria Academy in the fifth chapter so that he will “become a man,” but is deeply disappointed when Arjie befriends the equally “funny” Shehan. At the end of the book, he stays in Sri Lanka to wrap up his business, while the rest of the family leaves for Canada.

Radha Aunty – Appa’s younger sister, who comes back to Sri Lanka when Arjie is seven. She is engaged to Rajan Nagendra, whom she met during her four years studying in America. However, she is nothing like the fair-skinned, elegant, formal aunty Arjie was expecting; instead, she is rebellious, freethinking, a poor pianist, and “as dark as a laborer.” But she also lets Arjie dress up in her clothes and wear her makeup, which turns them into best friends. They join a local production of *The King and I* together, and during their rehearsals they meet Anil Jayasinghe, who starts hitting on Radha and eventually wins her attention. After Ammachi threatens Anil’s family, loudly voices her opposition to Radha seeing a Sinhalese boy, and decides to send Radha to Jaffna to get her away from Anil, she starts to fall for him. However, Aunty Doris’s warnings about forbidden love make her question her feelings, and then

she gets attacked by a Sinhalese mob on her way home. A family friend saves her, but half of Radha’s face is badly bruised, and she grows solemn and pessimistic in the following days. She finds herself unable to keep seeing Anil and decides to marry Rajan.

Jegan Parameswaran – The son of one of Appa’s old childhood friends, Jegan helps resettle Tamil refugees in Jaffna while working for the Gandhian Movement and briefly joins the Tamil Tigers before moving to stay with Arjie’s family in Colombo. After his father’s death, Jegan’s mother asks Appa to care for Jegan by invoking an old pact Appa made with Jegan’s father in school: they promised to “always protect each other and each others’ familys [sic].” Jegan quickly grows close to Appa (who employs him and thinks he resembles his father) and Arjie (who finds him attractive and understanding). But Jegan’s freethinking soon becomes a liability for the family; the Sinhalese employees at Appa’s work and hotel grow suspicious of Jegan, and eventually the police arrest him on false charges, but after his release everyone thinks of him as associated with the Tamil Tigers and Appa begins receiving threats. After a Sinhalese gang nearly attacks the family and someone writes “Death to all Tamil pariahs” on the outside wall of Jegan’s room at the hotel, causing all the guests to check out, Appa realizes that his business can only remain successful if he fires Jegan. Arjie is dismayed to watch this happen, and Jegan is understandably dismissive and bitter when he moves out of the family’s house, never to be seen again. His fate, like Daryl’s, shows how some of the conflict’s worst injustices were inflicted upon those with the purest motives.

Daryl Uncle – A burgher journalist who grew up in Sri Lanka with Amma but has been living in Australia for more than a decade. In the chapter “See No Evil, Hear No Evil,” Daryl Uncle visits in order to investigate the government’s abuses of power under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. While Arjie’s whole family ridicules him for reading *Little Women*, Daryl mentions his own affinity for the book and buys him the sequels, which brings them closer together. However, the rest of the family—especially Neliya Aunty—openly resents Daryl and his close relationship with Amma. During a trip with Daryl and Amma to the mountains in central Sri Lanka, Arjie begins to feel the same way, especially as he realizes that Daryl and Amma’s relationship used to be romantic long ago, before he left Sri Lanka; they could never marry because he was white and she was Tamil. After this trip, Daryl goes to Jaffna to research his story, but he never returns; his body washes up on the shore of a fishing village, and Amma is confident that the government is to blame. Daryl’s death shows the danger in pursuing justice and forces Arjie to think about how to balance his desire to confront power with the need to stay safe.

Black Tie – The cruel, traditionalist principal of Victoria Academy. Universally feared by the students, Black Tie is often seen wearing an old-school British colonial outfit, overlooking

Victoria Academy from the balcony next to his office. When a lock of Shehan's hair falls out of place, Black Tie gives Shehan a rudimentary haircut and punishes him endlessly along with the other students he deems the "future ills and burdens of Sri Lanka." A proponent of keeping the school multiethnic, Black Tie faces a challenge from Mr. Lokubandara, who wants to take his job. To help keep his power, Black Tie organizes a ceremony for a prominent politician and enlists Arjie to recite two of his favorite poems at this ceremony. When Arjie messes up the poems' words, Black Tie canes both him and Shehan, and he eventually forces them to kneel outside on the balcony for hours for the same reason. Arjie eventually decides to purposefully botch the poems he is to recite during the ceremony in order to ensure that Black Tie loses his job and Shehan is no longer senselessly punished with the "ills and burdens."

Shehan Soyza – Another student at Victoria Academy and Arjie's first real love interest. Initially, Shehan helps protect Arjie from Salgado's bullying; they exchange smiles and Arjie immediately feels attracted to Shehan's charisma, confidence, and long hair. But this long hair gets Shehan into trouble with Black Tie, who names him as one of the "ills and burdens" and punishes him extensively for little apparent reason. Through their punishments in Black Tie's office, Arjie and Shehan bond, and eventually they begin to meet outside of school. Once, when their plot to get released from Black Tie's punishments succeeds, Arjie and Shehan suddenly kiss; when Diggy tells Arjie that Shehan has a reputation for having sex with other boys, Arjie is both intrigued and confused. Eventually, Arjie and Shehan do have sex, but Arjie feels intensely guilty and blames Shehan. Over time, they reconcile and become regular lovers, and Arjie sabotages Black Tie's award ceremony to put a stop to the "ills and burdens" group. Near the end of the book, they are still close and spend much of their time together, but they grow distant as their experiences during the 1983 riots differ and, finally, as Arjie plans to immigrate to Canada.

Ammachi – Arjie's overbearing, opinionated, cruel, racist grandmother, who punishes Arjie excessively for fighting with Her Fatness and tries to break up her daughter Radha Aunty's budding romance with the Sinhalese Anil by sending her to Jaffna and trying to convince her to quit the play *The King and I*. During the family's monthly "spend-the-days" at her and Appachi's house, Ammachi always insists the kids give her an uncomfortably tight hug and then retires for the rest of the day. After her father was killed by a Sinhalese mob during the 1958 ethnic riots, Ammachi refused to associate with Sinhalese people and staunchly supported the Tamil Tigers' fight for an independent Tamil state. Alongside Appachi, she is also murdered by such a mob in 1983, just before Arjie's family leaves for Canada.

Aunty Doris – An old burgher woman who directs the production of *The King and I* that Arjie and Radha Aunty join.

During Radha's conflict over whether to marry Anil or Rajan, Doris encourages to think her decision through (instead of simply leaving Anil all at once, like Ammachi wants) but warns about her own experience. Decades before, Doris went against her English family's wishes by marrying a Tamil man; in retaliation, her family left Sri Lanka and never contacted her again. Now that her husband has died, Aunty Doris wonders whether her marriage was even worth it; her experience demonstrates that, sometimes, it is foolish to give into the power of love and, in the process, undervalue family.

Anil Jayasinghe – A likable, friendly Sinhalese boy who acts in *The King and I* with Radha Aunty and Arjie. He starts out by shamelessly hitting on Radha, joking about pollinating flowers and offering her rides home, which annoys her to no end. But eventually she starts to enjoy Anil's company; the problem is that both of their parents are fiercely opposed to the idea of letting their child even associate with someone outside their ethnic group. After Ammachi voices her opposition to Radha's apparent relationship with Anil, she actually starts to fall in love with him. Anil proposes Radha marry him instead of Rajan, but after a Sinhalese mob attacks her train from Jaffna to Colombo, Radha cannot bring herself to marry Anil and ends up marrying Rajan, as she had originally planned.

Sena Uncle – Chithra Aunty's husband and a family friend of Amma and Appa; all four go out together for formal dinners, shows, and parties in Colombo when Appa buys the Paradise Beach Resort. During the riots, Sena and Chithra (who are Sinhalese) shelter Arjie's family, although Sena frequently becomes the bearer of bad news. Initially, he gets stuck after a mob steals the petrol from his van to set a Tamil family and their car on fire. After the family makes it to Sena and Chithra's house, Sena gets a threatening phone call—which is followed by the arrival of another mob—and ends up having to hide Arjie's family away again, this time in his mother's house. Later, he reports to the family that Ammachi and Appachi, too, have been burned alive in their car.

Chithra Aunty – Sena Uncle's wife and Amma's best friend, who goes out with her frequently both when Appa is in Sri Lanka and while he is on vacation in Europe, and who often accompanies the family to the Paradise Beach Resort that they own. She and Sena Uncle shelter Arjie's family during the 1983 riots, and Arjie finds it particularly ironic when she shows up to the Pereras' house (where the family is hiding out) and breaks down in tears because Arjie's family's **house** has burned down.

Mr. Lokubandara – The Sinhalese vice principal of Victoria Academy, who is allegedly poised to take the principal position from Black Tie due to his extensive political connections. Mr. Lokubandara's docile and mild-mannered personality belies his explicit preference for Sinhala students like Salgado and desire to make the school officially Buddhist (the religion of most Sinhalas, but almost no Tamils). However, Arjie ultimately decides to support Mr. Lokubandara's attempts to take over the

school by botching his poetry recital at Black Tie's awards ceremony.

Tanuja / Her Fatness – Tanuja, Kanthi Aunty and Cyril Uncle's young daughter, gets nicknamed "Her Fatness" by the rest of her cousins. Self-serving, spoiled, and unpopular, she manipulates the family into letting her play the prestigious role of bride at the girls' monthly "bride-bride" game. After trying to impress the other girls with her dolls and gregarious behavior as the groom, she insults Arjie for being a "pansy," "faggot," and "sissy" before complaining to her mother Kanthi, who marches Arjie out in front of all the aunts and uncles to answer for his effeminacy. When Her Fatness and Arjie fight again over the **sari** and the role of bride, she cries out in front of Ammachi, who blames and punishes Arjie.

Mahagodagé Somaratne – A servant boy who works in Daryl Uncle's house. When Arjie and Amma stop by during their search for the missing Daryl, they encounter his room in shambles, and Somaratne disappears soon thereafter, leading the police to ultimately accuse him of stealing Daryl's possessions. Arjie and Amma then go to Somaratne's village in an attempt to locate Daryl and meet Somaratne's mother, who informs them that Somaratne returned with his arm paralyzed and has since hidden away. The villagers start throwing bottles at Amma and Arjie on their way out, who realize how disconnected they are from the realities and struggles of Sri Lanka's rural underclass.

Diggy – Arjie's boisterous, athletic older brother, whose conventional masculinity contrasts with Arjie's effeminacy. The family encourages Arjie to follow in Diggy's shoes, for instance by playing cricket with the boys during the family's "spend-the-days" and by going to the Queen Victoria Academy. Diggy grows jealous of Arjie's close friendship with Jegan and encourages him to stay away from Shehan at school.

Appachi – Arjie's grandfather on his father's side, a quiet and steadfast old man who seldom interacts with his grandchildren. During the riots at the end of the book in 1983, he and Ammachi have their house burned down and, on a completely separate occasion, are murdered by a Sinhalese mob that sets their car on fire with them still inside.

Janaki – Ammachi and Appachi's overworked Sinhalese servant, who is responsible for cooking for everyone and looking after the children during the family's monthly spend-the-days. While she is generally too stressed out to play with the children, Janaki takes pity on Arjie when Ammachi starts making him perform housework, and so she lets him read her Sinhala love comics, which spark his mental image of the perfect wedding.

Meena – One of Arjie's cousins, a girl who plays with the boys' group (much as he plays with the girls). She and Arjie's brother Diggy struggle for power among the boys, and they both try to pawn Arjie off onto the other cricket team when Amma forces

him to play with the boys.

Anil's Father – A bigoted Sinhalese man who threatens Radha Aunty and Arjie for being Tamil, suggesting that the Sinhalese are on the verge of kicking the Tamils out of Sri Lanka. He is furious about his son Anil's relationship with Radha and promises never to let his son "marry some non-Sinhalese" or someone not "from a good family."

Neliya Auntie – Amma's old, traditionally minded sister, who moves in with Arjie's family around the time that Appa buys the Paradise Beach Resort. When Daryl starts visiting the family, Neliya is visibly uncomfortable with his presence because she knows about his past relationship with Amma. However, she consistently supports her sister and the family, helping around the house and caring for Arjie during the riots.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rajan Nagendra – A Tamil man whom Radha Aunty meets in America and plans to marry "because he's an engineer and he doesn't have insanity in his family." Although she nearly leaves him for Anil Jayasinghe, Radha ends up marrying Rajan after a Sinhalese mob attacks her train.

The Banduratne Mudalali – A wealthy and powerful Sinhalese man who owns most of the hotels in the same town where Appa's Paradise Beach Resort is located. He orchestrates violent riots against Tamils, including the threats against Arjie's family after Jegan comes to work at Appa's hotel.

Salgado – A Sinhalese bully at Victoria Academy who openly targets and voices his hatred for Tamils, including Arjie. He is a favorite of the Sinhala nationalist vice principal Mr. Lokubandara, who lets Salgado do whatever he wants. However, Shehan manages to save Arjie from much of Salgado's bullying.

Mr. Sunderalingam – Victoria Academy's English and Drama teacher, whose understanding and humble manner stands in stark contrast to Black Tie's cruelty and arrogance, and who first encourages Arjie to recite poetry at Black Tie's award ceremony.

Perera Uncle and Aunty – A neighboring family whose house shares a backyard wall with Arjie's. When a mob comes in the night to kill them and burn down their **house**, Arjie and his family hide out in the Pereras' storeroom until the morning.

Kanthi Aunty – The least popular of Appa's siblings, husband to Cyril Uncle and mother to Her Fatness. Kanthi Aunty is nosy, racist, and overprotective of her daughter.

Cyril Uncle – Kanthi Aunty's husband, who calls Arjie "funny" in front of the whole family after Kanthi finds the boy wearing a **sari** for the girls' game of "bride-bride."

Muruges – Arjie's male cousin, who plays cricket on Diggy's team.

Sonali – Arjie’s sensitive, playful younger sister.

Anula – A servant woman who lives and works with Arjie’s family.

Mr. Samarakoon – The manager at the Paradise Beach Resort, Appa’s hotel.

Mala Aunty – Appa’s younger sister, a doctor who is very levelheaded compared to her siblings.

TERMS

Colombo – The capital and largest city of Sri Lanka, located on the island’s southwestern coast, where **Arjie** and his family live throughout *Funny Boy*. Colombo is very ethnically diverse, with only slightly more Sinhalese than Tamil inhabitants, although it is surrounded by a primarily Sinhalese region of the country.

Sinhala / Sinhalese – The Buddhist majority ethnic group of Sri Lanka, which comprises about three-quarters of the island’s population, as well as the name of this people’s language. The Sinhalese-led government fought the Sri Lankan Civil War against the Tamil Tigers. “Sinhala” and “Sinhalese” are largely interchangeable terms, but “Sinhala” more often refers to the language and “Sinhalese” to the people.

Tamil – Sri Lanka’s second-largest ethnic group, dominant in the island’s northern and eastern portions, as well as their language (which is Dravidian and historically unrelated to Sinhala). The majority of Tamils actually live in the part of South India closest to Sri Lanka, but Tamils do not have their own state, which spurred the Tamil Tigers to fight a violent campaign to create such a state (which they wanted to call Eelam). **Arjie** and his family are Tamils, although not all of them speak Tamil and they recognize that they are under constant threat as an ethnic minority in divided Sri Lanka, especially since many Sinhalese associate all Tamils with the Tigers. The book is punctuated by both violence committed by the Tamil Tigers and violence committed by Sinhalese mobs and the government against Tamil citizens.

Pottu – The Tamil word for the colored dot traditionally worn by Hindus between the eyebrows. (In English, this is most commonly called by its Hindi name, *bindi*.)

The King and I – A celebrated 1950s musical based loosely on the memoirs of an Anglo-Indian woman who becomes a governess (nanny and tutor) for the King of Siam’s children in the 1860s. The woman’s teachings conflict with the King’s traditional values, but she also helps him resist British imperialists who want to take over Siam and ultimately ends up changing customs in his kingdom. During the second chapter of *Funny Boy*, **Arjie**, **Radha Aunty**, and **Anil** act in *The King and I*, which serves as a foil for Radha and Anil’s impossible love (besides allowing them to meet) and also points to Sri Lanka’s troubled relationship to its colonial past.

Tamil Tigers – Short for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a militant nationalist group that fought and ultimately lost the 26-year Sri Lankan Civil War against the national government from 1983-2009 (although the action of *Funny Boy* ends at the outbreak of this war, in 1983, when **Arjie** and his family are about to emigrate to Canada). Based in the heavily Tamil northern and eastern sections of Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers demanded an independent Tamil state in those areas, which they planned to call Eelam. Because they violently lashed out against their opponents, political figures, and even fellow Tamils who disagreed with their policies, 32 countries declared the Tigers a terrorist organization, and many observers (both Sri Lankan and foreign) got the false impression that the Tigers’ position reflected the desires of all Sri Lankan Tamils.

Throughout *Funny Boy*, Arjie’s family members struggle with their relationship to the Tigers; his **Ammachi** (grandmother), whose father was killed by a Sinhalese mob, defends them, while his parents consider them extremist. **Jegan**

Parameswaran, the son of a family friend whom Arjie’s family takes in during one chapter of the book, is a former member of the Tamil Tigers, and the family starts getting targeted for their ties to him. The Civil War breaks out after Tamil Tigers kill a number of soldiers and Sinhalese mobs, supported by the Sri Lankan government, lash out in response, indiscriminately murdering Tamils and burning their homes and businesses.

Jaffna – A city in Sri Lanka’s Northern Province, which is primarily Tamil. This is where much of the violence recounted in *Funny Boy* starts, including the 1981 riots that kill **Daryl Uncle** and send **Jegan Parameswaran** (who is from Jaffna) fleeing south to Colombo.

Burgher – A small, socially privileged, mixed-race ethnic group in Sri Lanka who are descended from European male colonists and (usually, but not always) native Sinhalese or Tamil women. Generally, they retain cultural and linguistic ties to Europe, and many left Sri Lanka during the Civil War. **Aunty Doris** and **Daryl Uncle** are both Burghers.

Little Women – An acclaimed, semi-autobiographical 1886 novel by American writer Louisa May Alcott, which recounts the coming of age of four sisters in Massachusetts. *Little Women* is famed in part for being one of the first prominent novels directed to women, which is also why **Arjie**’s family disagrees with his affinity for it. However, **Daryl Uncle** shares his interest in the novel and buys him its three sequels, which Arjie is unable to find in Sri Lanka.

Prevention of Terrorism Act – A Sri Lankan law passed in 1978 that gives the police wide discretion and almost unchecked power to arrest, detain, torture, and sometimes execute people suspected of associating with terrorists. This essentially puts the entire Sri Lankan Tamil community under a constant threat of arrest. **Daryl** visits Sri Lanka to investigate government abuses of power under this act, and the government justifies detaining **Jegan** by citing it. The law is still in force in majority

Tamil parts of the nation.

Sarong – A large piece of cloth traditionally worn wrapped around the lower body by men in Sri Lanka.

Gandhiyam Movement – A movement inspired by Gandhi’s teachings that aided Tamil refugees displaced by ethnic violence in the lead-up to Sri Lanka’s Civil War. **Jegan** was a member of the Gandhiyam Movement before fleeing Jaffna for Colombo.

Rugger – Another term for the game of rugby. In the book’s penultimate chapter, the game is popular at **Arjie**’s new school, Victoria Academy.

Topee hat – Also known as a pith helmet, a cloth-covered helmet popular among European colonial forces and “adventurers” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. **Black Tie**, the principal of Victoria Academy, wears a topee hat, which points to the continuity between the arbitrary violence of British colonialism and Black Tie’s cruel and violent behavior toward his students.

Vijaya and Kuveni – The legendary first king and queen of Sri Lanka, who ruled the island for a half-century until about 500 BC. Vijaya, who came to Sri Lanka from India, supposedly married the indigenous Kuveni, with their offspring becoming the Sinhalese people’s forefathers. The Victoria Academy’s Sinhala Drama Society performs a version of this story, symbolizing Sri Lankans’ growing investment in Sinhala ethnic nationalism during the years leading up to the nation’s Civil War.

embarrassment and shame. Ultimately, Arjie’ does not manage to find acceptance for his sexuality or even come out to his family during the novel; instead, his great accomplishment is simply learning to accept himself, reject shame, and disavow his family’s demand that he follow in other men’s footsteps.

Arjie grows up in a family and society structured by rigid gender roles and a distinct concept of masculinity that he does not, and never will, fit into. At the family’s monthly gatherings, which they call “spend-the-days,” Arjie and his numerous cousins have complete freedom to play and invariably split up by gender: the boys play cricket, and the girls act out weddings—along with Arjie, who is always the bride. When Arjie’s cousin Tanuja (also known as “Her Fatness”) tries to take over his role, she calls him a “pansy,” “faggot,” and “sissy.” Although she is no older than ten, she already has a deeply ingrained sense of what masculinity—the “proper” way of being male—requires. In order to cultivate his masculinity, Arjie’s dad (whom he calls Appa, the Tamil word for “father”) sends him to his brother Diggy’s school, Victoria Academy, in the novel’s penultimate chapter. As Diggy puts it, Appa “doesn’t want [Arjie] turning out funny,” but instead thinks he can “force [Arjie] to become a man” by surrounding him with Victoria’s rambunctious, aggressive, athletic students. Indeed, Appa’s continual fear that Arjie will become “funny” and his commitment to masculinizing his son suggest that he sees masculinity, femininity, and sexuality as changeable, rather than innate, which means that being properly masculine is in one’s control and reflective of one’s value as a human being.

Arjie’s deviation from traditional masculinity leads his family to continuously shame him, and he quickly internalizes this shame and begins to think of himself as inherently flawed. Largely because they do not know what to make of him and fear that his failure to be conventionally masculine reflects their failure as a family, the Chelvaratnams repeatedly call Arjie “funny”—a word that both betrays the family’s anxiety about admitting the possibility of having a gay son and shows that their homophobia is based on an unjustified, instinctual revulsion, tied to the cultural norm of heterosexual marriage and families. While he is too young to even understand his family’s conviction that he is the wrong kind of boy, Arjie understands that he is being punished for simply being himself and following his desires, things over which he has no control. Although Arjie’s sexuality mostly falls out of view during the middle part of the book, when he goes to Victoria Academy, he befriends and falls in love with a boy named Shehan, about whom his brother Diggy repeatedly warns him. After Arjie and Shehan first have sex, Arjie immediately sees that Appa disapproves of Shehan and thus lashes out at him, although internally, Arjie actually blames himself for committing a “dreadful act” and feels he has betrayed his family. Over time, Arjie has absorbed his family and culture’s sense of shame surrounding queerness, and like many young people overcome with such shame about sex, he is



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MASCULINITY AND QUEERNESS

Set from the late 1960s to the early 1980s in Sri Lanka, *Funny Boy* follows the childhood and adolescence of Arjie Chelvaratnam as his nation hurdles toward civil war. At the same time as he watches Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese majority gradually turn against his minority Tamil community, Arjie comes to terms with the consequences of being gay in a patriarchal culture and family. From his earliest days, Arjie fails to meet his family’s expectations of a boy; he prefers staging weddings with his girl cousins, acting in plays, and reading love comics and *Little Women* to playing cricket with his male cousins or rugger with the boys at school. When his parents start openly worrying about his “funny” sexuality and Arjie realizes that he is indeed gay, they all react with deep

unable to fully appreciate or embrace his first love.

Ultimately, however, Arjie does manage to overcome his shame, and this shows the groundlessness and arbitrariness of the conventional gender roles his family tried to squeeze him into. Even in the first chapter, when Amma forces Arjie to play with the boys rather than the girls, she reveals that she does not completely believe in the restrictive notion of masculinity she is enforcing: she says that Arjie must go with the boys "because the sky is so high and pigs can't fly," as though gender separation is just an inherent and necessary feature of the world. When Arjie challenges her, Amma's frantic reaction proves to him "how little she actually believed in the justness of her actions." She has done what she was pressured to do, not what she believes. Eventually, Arjie learns to form his own beliefs about gender and love; he learns to see "powerful and hidden possibilities" in his friendship with Shehan, to recognize that the same behavior his family shames him for also allows him to uncover his true self and pursue his true desires without self-censorship. After berating Shehan, Arjie soon realizes that what they share is love, not deviance: he sees that Shehan "had not debased me or degraded me, but rather offered me his love," and so he decides to take this at face value instead of continuing to fight against his genuine desires.

In simply deciding that his own feelings are more important than the roles he is asked to fit into, Arjie overcomes his family's restrictive assumptions and accepts himself. Although Arjie does not come out to his family or win their acceptance—which is another, longer battle—he does realize that society's scripts for what men should do, how they should carry themselves, and who they should love really just reflect everyone else's fear of difference. While others see gender roles as inevitable, like the fact that "the sky is so high and pigs can't fly," Arjie proves to himself that an alternative is possible and learns to reject shame in favor of self-acceptance.



FORBIDDEN LOVE AND FAMILY

While *Funny Boy's* most important love story is undeniably about Arjie discovering his sexuality and meeting Shehan, the vast majority of the book

follows other relationships, in all of which people fall in love across, despite, and even because of the social boundaries that separate them. Like Arjie's sexuality, these forbidden relationships draw familial ire; and yet, whereas Arjie learns to accept his sexuality despite his family's criticism, the book's forbidden relationships seem to end, for the greater good, because of a similar family pressure. While *Funny Boy* shows how class, race, ethnicity, and culture are never absolute barriers to desire, it also makes a case for prioritizing family—to whom one is already committed—over particular love interests.

Beyond Arjie's own love story, *Funny Boy* is full of relationships that cross social barriers and prove that differences of class, race, ethnicity, and culture can seldom stamp out the feelings of

love—and, in many cases, are precisely what attract people to one another. One example of such a relationship is Radha Aunty's relationship with Anil, a Sinhala boy who acts alongside her in a production of *The King and I*. Although she initially finds him annoying, Radha grows attracted to Anil because she realizes that he loves her despite belonging to an opposed ethnic group. In fact, *The King and I* also foreshadows the failure of Radha and Anil's interethnic relationship: in the play, an English governess and her employer, the King of Siam, fall in love but can never be together because, as Amma explains, interracial love was not (and in many places is still not) conventionally accepted. Amma's ambivalence about interracial love becomes even more clear when Arjie learns about her previous relationship with Daryl Uncle, a white burgher who grew up in Sri Lanka but has lived elsewhere for at least 15 years. And beyond Arjie's relationship with Shehan, his early affinity for romantic Sinhala comic books and insistence on playing the bride during his mock weddings with his girl cousins demonstrate how his romantic desires consistently land outside the sphere of social acceptability. Whether ethnic, cultural, racial, or class-based, social barriers cannot quash the feelings of love.

And yet all these characters face immense pressure for loving someone outside their social group; they are ultimately forced to choose between romance and family. Both Radha Aunty's mother (Ammachi) and Anil's father are horrified that their children are dating across ethnic lines. And Daryl's return to Sri Lanka, while Appa is in Europe for business, sows division in Arjie's family. Neliya Aunty, Diggy, and Sonali grow distant and resentful as Amma and Daryl grow close; Arjie is horribly ill the whole time, and when he recovers, Amma brings him to a bungalow in the hills, where Daryl soon shows up. As Daryl explains that burghers and native Sri Lankans were effectively barred from dating one another in the past because of social prejudice (obviously referring to his history with Amma), Arjie, too, begins to resent him for getting between Amma and the rest of the family. As though to prove Daryl's point about the social pressures against interracial marriage, Aunty Doris, the school theatre director who is also a burgher, warns Radha about marrying Anil by divulging the fact that her own family rejected her—by moving back to England without even informing her or leaving contact information—when she married a Tamil man. Radha, Anil, Amma, and Daryl—plus, eventually, Arjie and Shehan—end up in moral dilemmas: while they know their families are wrong to reject their love, they still have to pick between the sure thing that is family and the enchanting uncertainty that is romance.

Ultimately, while the novel openly criticizes the social divisions and norms that make intergroup marriages taboo, it also suggests that people are correct to choose family over their transgressive relationships. When Radha gets violently attacked by a Sinhala mob on a train, she finally caves in to her

mother's pressure, quits the play, and marries Rajan, the Tamil man to whom she was already engaged. After this, Arjie explains that he has lost the ability to think "that if two people loved each other everything was possible," a view that might strike a young reader as cynical, but is full of wisdom: love is powerful but can always be rediscovered, and sometimes prudence requires sacrificing it and waiting. Amma loves and loses Daryl twice: once in her youth, and then again when he dies while covering the Tamil-Sinhala riots in the northern city of Jaffna. While his death is a tragedy, Daryl Uncle likely would have broken up Arjie's family had he stayed with Amma. (When she visits the civil rights lawyer Q.C. Uncle, he encourages her to do something similar: to give up her passionate desire to avenge Daryl's death in order to save her family from the government's wrath.) Aunty Doris, of all people, is the one to deliver the book's message about hasty love: after her husband's death, Doris explains, she began to wonder whether it was really worth it to marry the person she loved and lose her family, since she presumably could have had a successful marriage with someone else down the line. In *Funny Boy*, romance is fleeting and limitless, while family is enduring and finite; it is always possible to find another love but never possible to find new parents and siblings.

Although *Funny Boy* shows how the social constraints around love will never stop people from falling in love and sees a deep tragedy in relationships cut off by family and cultural pressures, it also shows how, in many cases, the tragedy of losing love might be preferable to the tragedy of losing one's community or family. Despite this preference for family ties, *Funny Boy* also pushes for constructing a world in which people are not forced to choose between love and community, in which difference makes relationships more vibrant instead of more difficult.



NATIONALISM, ETHNIC CONFLICT, AND VIOLENCE

Behind Arjie's coming of age, *Funny Boy* also traces the lead-up to the Sri Lankan Civil War, a growing tension between Sri Lanka's Sinhala majority and sizable Tamil minority that eventually erupts into violent conflict and becomes the book's driving force, uprooting Arjie and his family forever. And yet Selvadurai presents this ethnic conflict from the perspective of a boy who scarcely cares about ethnicity. In doing so, he sheds light on the fundamental illogic of the quest to secure a country for a single group of people, and a single group of people for one's country, in addition to showing the horrifying impact of the random violence that seems to inevitably emerge from such ethno-nationalist politics. By emphasizing personal relationships that transcend the ethnic divide, Selvadurai suggests that pluralism is the only route to political coexistence.

During Arjie's childhood and adolescence, the reader watches Sinhala and Tamil Sri Lankans grow increasingly mistrustful of

and violent toward one another. Arjie's first encounter with this tension is hearing about Ammachi's hatred toward the Sinhalese, a response to her own father's murder by a racist Sinhalese mob in 1958. At this point, not only does the young Arjie fail to understand Ammachi's racism, but he does not even know what the word "racist" means. When Daryl Uncle returns to Sri Lanka after 15 years, he is there to document the violent conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese in the northern region around Jaffna. His mysterious death, declared an accident by the police likely responsible for it, shows that the Sri Lankan government actively backed the Sinhalese and drove the nation toward war. In the following chapter, a young man named Jegan, the son of Appa's old friend, comes to live with Arjie's family. A former Tamil Tiger, Jegan's presence makes Appa's Sinhalese employees suspicious; after the police falsely but publicly accuse Jegan of plotting an assassination and then quietly release him, thugs deface Appa's hotel with threats and Appa feels he has no choice but to fire Jegan. Although he disapproves of violence, Jegan is treated as a threat and a pariah, which reflects Sri Lankans' severe ethnic paranoia in the lead-up to the war. The book's Epilogue most saliently captures the toll of Sri Lanka's ethnic violence, as Arjie and his family have to flee their house (which is then **burned down**), Appachi and Ammachi are murdered, Appa's hotel is burned down, and numerous Tamils lose their homes and businesses, not to mention their lives.

The conflict between Sri Lanka's Tamils and Sinhalese is fundamentally a conflict over belonging: it is about who gets to own the nation, whom the government should serve, and whether different groups can coexist at all. Over the book's course, Arjie's family increasingly feels that they are being defined out of the national identity and made foreigners in their own homeland. The novel explains that the earliest waves of Tamil rebellion and violence followed the government's attempts to make Sinhala the nation's only official language. The Tamil Tigers demanded their own state because they felt Tamils were being made sub-citizens, while being Sri Lankan increasingly came to mean being Sinhalese. Yet ethnicity never means anything to Arjie, who is no more attached to Tamil than Sinhalese identity; he shows how it is not at all inevitable for ethnic identities to take on political weight. He takes Sinhala-medium classes and surrounds himself with Sinhala friends; in fact, he does not even speak Tamil. Despite this, when Jegan comes to Colombo, the family realizes that, as Tamils, they are under constant threat from the government, which can declare them extremists and targeted them whenever it wishes. And near the book's end, Arjie and Shehan grow distant, despite being one another's primary source of emotional support; Shehan cannot understand Arjie's sense of constant persecution, and Arjie can't fathom how Shehan feels normal enough to propose they go see a movie. While they never turn against each other, their rift shows how the experiential and empathetic gap between a majority group and an oppressed

minority group can easily foster misunderstanding.

The book also shows numerous close relationships between Tamils and Sinhalese that prove mutual understanding is possible and disprove the government and Tamil Tigers' shared assumption that successful nations should be drawn on ethnic lines. During the riots, Sinhalese neighbors and friends save Arjie's family: the Pereras shelter them from the mob that **burns down their house**, and Chithra Aunty and Sena Uncle lodge them afterwards. In other words, the Chelvaratnams manage to survive because of Sinhalese people who put personal relationships and human connections before the bare fact of ethnic difference. Similarly, in the last chapter, Arjie chooses to side with the pro-Sinhalese Mr. Lokubandara over the school's racially indifferent principal, Black Tie, in order to save Shehan from Black Tie's cruel punishments. In a Sri Lanka apparently unable to see past ethnicity, Arjie stubbornly insists on doing so, and in his last reflections on immigration he expresses hope that Canada might be able to accept him in a way his own home country cannot. However, he also sees it possible that Canada will be just as racist as Sri Lanka, and that his family could be reduced to begging. While he can envision a better kind of nation, then, Arjie does not necessarily expect it to be possible.

In *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai shows both how real people are far more complex than ethnicity and also how they are nevertheless reduced to it by political forces. In doing so, he points to the insolubility of ethnic conflict over national identity: people will never be as one-dimensional or cut-and-dry as nationalists and racists want them to be, and so nationalism and racism, beyond perpetrating horrible violence, cannot achieve the kinds of societies they want to begin with. It is only because some Sinhalese and Tamils do not care about being Sinhalese or Tamil, in other words, that the efforts to create a fully Sinhalese or Tamil nation will inevitably fail.



JUSTICE, POWER, AND MORAL AWAKENING

As it follows Arjie's coming of age, *Funny Boy* also becomes a tale of moral development: Arjie encounters and grapples with blatant injustices that challenge his initial faith in human goodness. Yet, rather than giving up on the idea of a just world and resigning himself to the self-interested worldviews of those around him—including, at times, his own family—Arjie continues to pursue the just world he recognizes as impossible. Nevertheless, in responding to the abuses of power around him, he learns that pressure and manipulation—the very tools of injustice—are often the only way to convince the powerful to give the powerless their due.

Arjie learns early and clearly the world is not just, and in fact that the same adults who claim to be the bearers of morality often fail to choose good over evil. When Arjie and his younger

cousin Tanuja (whom he calls "Her Fatness") fight over the **sari** they use in their game of bride-ride, Ammachi immediately blames Arjie and ignores the rest of the children's attempts to fully explain the situation. Because Kanthi Aunty had already shamed Arjie for his femininity, Ammachi decides the fight is his fault and makes him do housework instead of playing with the cousins on the family's subsequent Sunday gatherings. Similarly, in the chapter "The Best School of All," Victoria Academy's draconian principal, Black Tie, arbitrarily and cruelly punishes students he calls the "future ills and burdens of Sri Lanka" for offenses like wearing long hair or winking, even as he ignores violent bullying by students like Salgado. And Daryl Uncle's death shows how such abuses of power play out on a larger scale. The Sri Lankan government targets Daryl for documenting its human rights violations against Tamils, and then refuses to investigate his mysterious death—for which Amma is convinced it is responsible. And Arjie sees another dimension of injustice—his own family's complicity in it—when he learns that his father's hotel is supporting the prostitution of underage boys and, later, goes with Amma to the village of Daryl's servant boy, Somaratne, only to be violently kicked out because the village's impoverished inhabitants are so used to being exploited by wealthy city people like Arjie's family.

While witnessing, experiencing, and learning about his complicity in profound injustices could have easily led Arjie to give up on his faith in good and evil altogether, instead it actually inspires him to pursue the kind of justice he thinks the world deserves. Daryl and Jegan, who dedicate their careers to exposing the Sri Lankan government's abuses of power and helping beleaguered Tamils, respectively, inspire Arjie to try and live with a sense of moral purpose rather than simply following the path of least resistance. And he continues to feel inspired by them even after they suffer horribly for taking moral stands. Due to his respect for both Daryl and Jegan, Arjie takes a prominent role in his family's attempts to save each of them: he insists on helping his mother search for Daryl (including by visiting Somaratne's village) and tries to support Jegan while Appa grapples with the consequences of firing him. In both cases, though, despite his sense of what is right and effort to pursue it, Arjie does not yet have the means to make a difference. His first serious opportunity to stop an abuse of power comes when Black Tie labels Arjie's friend and lover, Shehan, as one of the so-called "ills and burdens." When Black Tie makes Arjie recite poems, he punishes Arjie and Shehan together whenever Arjie messes up; even though Arjie is ostensibly one of Black Tie's favorites and Shehan one of the "ills and burdens," their struggle becomes one and the same, and ultimately Arjie ends up deliberately messing up the poems in order to sabotage Black Tie's important ceremony and ensure that the more docile vice principal, Mr. Lokubandara, takes over Black Tie's job. In doing so, Arjie willfully disobeys authority for the first time in order to end Shehan's unjust and unequal punishment.

In fact, by the end of the book, Arjie learns that he must fight those who abuse their power with their own tools: ruthlessness and manipulation. Because they do not care about morality, the perpetrators of injustice do not respond to moral appeals; instead, they must be pressured to correct their ways or be forced out of power. Arjie first learns this in childhood, after Her Fatness ousts him from the game of bride-ride and the adults force him to play cricket with the boys. When reasoning with the adults and cousins fails, Arjie hatches a plot: he hides the bride's **sari**, he so seriously disrupts the boys' group that they kick him out of their cricket game, and when Her Fatness agrees to make him the groom in exchange for the sari, he uses his sense of humor to steal his cousins' attention and ruin her moment, as if to remind her that she is not the game's legitimate bride. But Arjie truly proves his willingness to fight dirty for the right cause when he deliberately botches his poetry recital at Victoria Academy, which makes Black Tie's speech based on the poems look nonsensical. The audience breaks out in laughter when Black Tie furiously insults Arjie before dutifully reading the contradictory speech that he had prepared. At the end of the chapter, Black Tie is poised to lose the presidency and stop unfairly punishing Shehan for simply having had long hair on one day months before.

As a tale of moral development, then, *Funny Boy* is peculiar for showing not only how Arjie gains a moral compass, but also how he realizes that far too much of the adult world seriously lacks one. The systematic injustices Arjie sees in Sri Lanka come from unchecked power, and so he learns to respond to these injustices on the only terms that they know: by doing everything in his power to hold the unaccountable accountable.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BRIDE-BRIDE SARI

During his childhood “spend-the-days” at Ammachi and Appachi’s house, young Arjie plays the game “bride-ride” with his girl cousins, which consists of staging a fantasy wedding. During these weddings, he invariably gets the position of honor: that of the bride herself. When he puts on the rudimentary sari (a traditional draped cloth garment) he made out of a bedsheet, Arjie feels like a film hero and declares that he is “ascend[ing] into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self.” Many years before he even realizes that he is attracted to men, this sari illuminates and stands for the changing and conflicted relationship between Arjie’s gender expression, social norms, and the promise of romantic love.

Beyond clearly representing his break from gender norms and affinity for things considered conventionally feminine—which

soon gets him in trouble—the sari also shows how Arjie, as a boy who does not fit in, only gets to pursue his real desires (here, the desire to be beautiful and fall in love) in the register of fantasy. Indeed, when Kanthi Aunty finds him in the sari, she marches him out in front of all the other adults, who fall silent in horror at Arjie’s effeminate outfit. In this sense, the sari comes to represent Arjie’s shame before his family, and his family’s shame before the world; it crystalizes what is wrong and “funny” about Arjie in everyone else’s eyes (except the children’s). Even his most innocent desire—to play with the girls—becomes seen as a deviation from the “correct” way of being and threat to his family’s honor. When he withholds the sari in order to try and win his role back from his vicious cousin Tanuja (“Her Fatness”), Arjie and Tanuja end up literally fighting over an emblem of womanhood, which Arjie tries but fails to hide (like his feminine disposition and his own sexuality later in the book) and ultimately gets punished even more harshly for seeking out. His conflict during bride-ride is both a prediction and a microcosm of the struggles he will face as gay teenager in his conservative Tamil family and Sri Lankan community.

Ultimately, the sari both exposes and ridicules the unchallenged norm of heterosexual love. By donning the sari, Arjie gets to fulfill his nascent desire to love a man, but only in fantasy, by roleplaying a heterosexual marriage; the children have no concept of a marriage except as a bride marrying a groom, and so when Arjie dons the sari, one of the girl children—namely, Arjie’s sister, Sonali—ends up with the unwanted role of groom. In this sense, while it reveals the strong norms of gender, tradition, and heterosexuality that ultimately constrain Arjie’s self-realization throughout the book, the sari also circumscribes an inverted realm of play in which femininity is power and masculinity is irrelevant.



ARJIE’S BURNED-DOWN HOUSE

During the epilogue chapter of *Funny Boy*, as ethnic riots break out in 1983, a Sinhalese mob shows up at Arjie’s house in the middle of the night and set fire to the house, which comes to represent. Luckily, his family has a plan and escapes in time, taking shelter in the storeroom of their neighbors, the Pereras. The next morning, they go outside and see that their house is completely unrecognizable. With nearly everything destroyed, it feels small and alien, nothing like the familiar space at the center of their past lives. Beyond marking an abrupt break between the past and the future, this moment shows Arjie’s family the severe dangers they face as Tamils in Sri Lanka: with their home, their country also becomes a forever foreign and unlivable place in the blink of an eye.

This points to the ambivalent nostalgia that characterizes Arjie’s narrative voice throughout the novel: living in Canada after the narrative’s events, he writes to remember the place (Sri Lanka, his home, and his sense of belonging in both) from

which he was abruptly uprooted and to which he cannot return. In the book's closing lines, on the day he is supposed to leave for Canada, Arjie visits his home once more and realizes that "everything that was not burnt had been stolen," from pipes to furniture to flowers in the garden (presumably to be used in prayers "to increase [devotees'] chances of a better life in the next birth," which clearly also serves as a metaphor for Arjie's hope for a better life in Canada). The house now has a new layer of meaning: in addition to standing for the past that Arjie is now enthusiastically and resolutely putting behind him, it also points to the way his life was robbed of significance by the self-interest and shortsightedness of those who involved Sri Lanka in the war.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Funny Boy* published in 1994.

1. Pigs Can't Fly Quotes

From my sling-bag I would bring out my most prized possession, an old white sari, slightly yellow with age, its border torn and missing most of its sequins. The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki's cracked full-length mirror—by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes—I was able to leave the constraints of my self and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self, a self to whom this day was dedicated, and around whom the world, represented by my cousins putting flowers in my hair, draping the palu, seemed to revolve. It was a self magnified, like the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema, larger than life; and like them, like the Malini Fonsekas and the Geetha Kumarasinghes, I was an icon, a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Janaki

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *Funny Boy*, protagonist Arjie Chelvaratnam recalls spending his Sundays at his grandparents' house in his childhood. While the adults went out, the children had the entire day free to play; invariably,

the boys would play cricket in the front yard, while the girls would stage make-believe games—most notably "bride-bride," a pretend believe wedding—in the backyard. However, Arjie always preferred to play with the girls, and his robust imagination meant he invariably got to play their game's most prominent role: that of the bride herself. In this passage, he recalls how he used to feel dressing up in his sari up for the play.

In addition to pointing unmistakably to Arjie's deviation from the masculine roles and presentation expected of him—and showing the reader that his sexuality eventually comes to play a major role in the later parts of the book—this passage also introduces Arjie's interest in theater and performance, which allow him to escape a family, body, and social world in which he feels unvalued and unwanted and, instead, be appreciated precisely for his capacity to become something else, a character of his own creation. His sari is both the symbol of his gender difference and the means for him to explore and embody what he has begun to recognize as a different version of himself.

Her Fatness looked at all of us for a moment and then her gaze rested on me.

"You're a pansy," she said, her lips curling in disgust.


We looked at her blankly.


"A faggot," she said, her voice rising against our uncomprehending stares.

"A sissy!" she shouted in desperation.

It was clear by this time that these were insults.

Related Characters: Tanuja / Her Fatness, Arjie (speaker), Sonali

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

When a new girl named Tanuja—called "Her Fatness" by all the other cousins—begins coming to Arjie's family's "spend-the-days," Arjie's games of bride-bride are thrown into crisis: the jealous, manipulative Tanuja wants to be the bride and will stop at nothing to win the role. After her first attempt, when she discovers that her girl cousins remain loyal to Arjie (who is "the besets bride of all"), she lashes out: not

only can he not be the bride because he is a boy, she declares, but moreover he is less of a boy for wanting to dress up like a girl.



Although it is unclear where Tanuja learned the words “pansy,” “faggot,” and “sissy,” she obviously understands that they describe behavior out of line with the conventional trappings of manhood—strength, aggression, and stoicism, rather than beauty, emotionality, and refinement—and that they signal that there is something inferior and incorrect about boys and men who deviate from this ideal. In calling Arjie these names, she also demonstrates how children absorb and spread such concepts of gender from a young age, and especially how people can perpetuate prejudice and deploy these concepts in specific situations to injure others for their own personal benefit.

Arjie, on the other hand, is unfamiliar with these words; he does not yet understand that femininity is considered not only abnormal for boys, but wrong and unfit for them. When he hears Tanuja yell “pansy,” “faggot,” and “sissy,” he only gathers that they are insults by her tone of voice, but this allows him to infer for the first time that others might think there is something deeply wrong with the way he expresses his gender.

☝ It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn't comprehend. I thought of what my father had said about turning out “funny.” The word “funny” as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression “That's funny.” Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone.

Later, Amma came out of her room and called Anula to give her instructions for the evening. As I listened to the sound of her voice, I realized that something had changed forever between us.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Anula, Cyril Uncle, Kanthi Aunty, Appa, Amma

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis


After Kanthi Aunty marches the sari-clad Arjie in front of the rest of the adults and Cyril Uncle declares that he is a “funny one,” Arjie's relationship to his parents suddenly changes: Amma no longer lets him watch her get dressed, and Appa seems to blame Amma for raising a “funny” child.

While this reaction seems to make sense to everyone around him, Arjie is left completely baffled—not only does he not yet fully understand why the adults are worried about his gender presentation, but he also has no idea why “funny” is their word of choice. His confusion reflects precisely the ambiguity deliberately built into this word: it allows the adults to reference something definite and understood—homosexuality—without speaking its name or explaining why they feel a “hint of disgust” about it.

2. Radha Aunty Quotes

☝ This was not how a bride-to-be was supposed to behave. It was unthinkable that a woman who was on the brink of marriage could look like this and play the piano so badly.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Radha Aunty

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis


When he hears that his aunty Radha is returning from America to get married, Arjie grows ecstatic and his expectations grow wild: he fantasizes about her beauty and her wedding, which he imagines will be a real-life version of bride-ride. When he actually gets to meet her, however, Arjie is duly disappointed by her dark skin, curly hair, Western clothing, and lack of musical skill. Nevertheless, Radha proves Arjie's most compassionate and freethinking family member, and they soon grow very close.

Ironically, even though he has already bent expectations around gender and romance, Arjie's encounter with Radha Aunty is the first experience to show him that there is not one right way to be a bride; it forces him to see the gap between his ideal of romance and the reality of marriage. Whereas he thinks of marriage as a transformative, magical moment that marks a perfected woman's entry into adulthood, the reality is much messier and more complex. Radha's supposed failure to be a proper bride clearly gestures to the distance between Arjie's own life and the ideal of marriage he plays out in bride-ride, but more importantly it shows how such ideals of love, romance, beauty, and marriage are arbitrary and self-defeating, because they lead people to make decisions that are not right for them based on standards they will never meet. In reality, Radha proves an entertaining and nurturing companion precisely because she is not beholden to everyone else's prejudices and expectations about the way

things must be done; the same traits that make her “unthinkable” at first are also what lead Arjie to so value her company.

“Because he’s an engineer and he doesn’t have insanity in his family.”

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Ammachi, Anil Jayasinghe, Rajan Nagendra, Radha Aunty

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis

When Arjie finally asks Radha Aunty about her engagement, expecting her to rave about her beloved, she instead asks his opinion: does Arjie think she should marry Rajan? In response, he repeats what all his aunts and uncles have been saying about Rajan: his respectable job and lack of genetic “insanity” make him a good match. Of course, this utterly banal reasoning contrasts with Arjie’s hope for a romantic wedding between two people in love; as a child, then, Arjie is able to grasp both the idealistic storybook concept of love he plays out in bride-bridal and the family’s practical, utilitarian focus on income, genes, and reputation. He does not, however, see the contradiction between them.

While Arjie has already learned about the inconsistencies in his wedding fantasies, now, for the first time, he has to confront his family’s outlandish criteria for marriage: they are worried about providing income and good genes—sources of stability and honor—for their grandchildren. The contradiction between this conservative mindset—which Arjie soon discovers also extends to questions of ethnicity—and the love fantasies Arjie adores from movies and comic books becomes the basis for the family’s campaign against Radha’s newfound interest in Anil Jayasinghe during the rest of this chapter. Arjie comes to see both that the family’s perspective is stifling, because it chooses partners based on characteristics unrelated to personality that do not at all factor into the dynamics of a personal relationship, and that the interest in romance is self-defeating, since feelings often change with time and attract people to others who are not necessarily best for them.

“Be careful. We Sinhalese are losing patience with you Tamils and your arrogance.”

Related Characters: Anil’s Father (speaker), Ammachi, Radha Aunty, Anil Jayasinghe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

After the virulently racist Ammachi lashes out at both Radha Aunty and the family of her new Sinhalese friend, Anil, Radha and Arjie visit Anil’s home in an attempt to apologize and set the record straight. Although Radha is not yet interested in Anil romantically, he is certainly interested in her, and everyone else seems to ignore her words and assume that she reciprocates his feelings. When she and Arjie arrive at Anil’s house, Anil’s father proves just as prejudiced against Tamils as Ammachi is against the Sinhalese: he insists that his son could never “marry some non-Sinhalese” and then utters this line, an overt and generalized threat against Sri Lanka’s Tamils.

Most directly, Anil’s father’s threat speaks to Sri Lanka’s extreme ethnic animosity and ever-present danger of violence, something Arjie is only beginning to understand at the age of seven. And yet Arjie also sees the pointlessness in this conflict—not only because he is constantly surrounded by Sinhalese people, does not speak Tamil, and has relatively non-racist parents, but also because he sees the injustice in two people being driven apart by something that does not matter at all to either of them (ethnicity). But he also learns how these divisions permeate every scale of life in Sri Lanka, determining not only whom parents consider it appropriate for their children to marry but also whom they should even associate with. Ironically, interracial marriage (or forms of interethnic exchange similar to it) may be precisely what is necessary for Sri Lanka’s ethnic groups to begin understanding and stop antagonizing each other.

“Radha Aunty didn’t answer for a moment. “Until a few days ago I only thought of Rajan, but now I find myself thinking of Anil as well.”

Mala Aunty sighed. “It’ll never work.”

“But other Sinhalese and Tamil people get married.”

“I know,” Mala Aunty replied, “but they have their parents’ consent.”

“If two people love each other, the rest is unimportant.”

“No, it isn’t. Ultimately, you have to live in the real world. And without your family you are nothing.”

Related Characters: Mala Aunty, Radha Aunty (speaker), Arjie, Kanthi Aunty, Ammachi, Anil's Father, Rajan Nagendra, Anil Jayasinghe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 77


Explanation and Analysis

After Kanthi Aunty and Mala Aunty stumble on Radha and Arjie eating lunch with Anil, the entire family reacts viciously and Ammachi decides it is the last straw; she determines to send Radha north to the largely Tamil city of Jaffna for a few months in order to forget Anil. After this family fiasco, Radha Aunty and her levelheaded sister Mala Aunty have a more sober chat in the garden.

Radha honestly explains how Anil's persistence has won her over and wonders whether they could overcome their family's opposition. Although Mala Aunty has no racist words for Radha, she is resolute and realistic: love does not conquer all; losing her family would be worse than losing Anil; it is always possible to meet someone else in order to find *both* love and an adequate family match. Especially in Sri Lanka, "without your family you are nothing" both socially and economically. Although it is tragic that Radha cannot follow her heart because of her family's prejudice and her society's tensions, in her case she can hate injustice and perhaps try and fight her family's prejudice while still complying with her family's wishes when it is the most logical thing to do. This also, of course, speaks to Arjie's own future—although the logic might be very different for him, since as a gay man he might never be able to find a relationship that win his parents' approval. This remains an open, but crucial, question throughout the book.

💬 Sometimes I wonder if it was all worth it in the end. To have made all those sacrifices. Life is a funny thing, you know. It goes on, whatever decisions you make. Ultimately you have children or don't have children and then you grow old. Whether you married the person you loved or not seems to become less important as time passes. Sometimes I think that if I had gone to England with them maybe I would have met somebody else...." She clicked her tongue against her teeth and laughed. "Anyway, there's no point in thinking about that—no?"

Related Characters: Aunty Doris (speaker), Mala Aunty, Rajan Nagendra, Anil Jayasinghe, Radha Aunty

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis




Just before heading to Jaffna, Radha has another conversation about her romantic conflict with another levelheaded character: Aunty Doris, the Burgher (white colonial descendant) woman who is directing Radha and Arjie's performance of *The King and I*. Recounting her own personal experience, Aunty Doris reaches out to offer Radha advice very similar to that which she receives from Mala Aunty. When she was young, Doris explains, she fell in love with a Tamil man, which horrified her English family. She decided to marry him, and her family shunned her forever: they secretly left Sri Lanka, moved back to England, never told her, and never contacted her again.

Doris's husband has since died, and although she loved him, she wonders whether she should not have prioritized her family instead; the kind of intense romantic love Radha has with Anil, she implies here, is temporary, whereas the practical dimensions of marriage and a person's relationship to their family are enduring and essential for a satisfying life. This is the same reason traditional cultures often favor arranged marriages over love marriages. Contrary to Arjie's storybooks and fantasies, both Aunty Doris and Mala Aunty see love as a process of constructing a relationship rather than a sudden feeling upon first sight, and to this end they encourage Radha Aunty to tolerate her family's prejudice rather than take a moral stand in favor of interethnic love but risk losing them forever.

3. See No Evil, Hear No Evil Quotes

💬 "You're putting your life at risk for nothing," Amma insisted. "It's not nothing," Daryl Uncle said. "People are being tortured and killed even as we sit in all this opulence."

Related Characters: Daryl Uncle, Amma (speaker), Appa, Arjie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis



In the third chapter of *Funny Boy*, Amma's old flame, a Burgher man named Daryl who now lives in Australia and works as a journalist, shows up at her doorstep after 15 years. Appa is away, and Amma and Daryl rekindle their illicit relationship with somewhat less secrecy than the

family might have liked. Arjie falls sick with hepatitis, and when he begins to improve, Amma takes him to a bungalow in the mountains to facilitate his recovery—and then Daryl shows up. He explains that he is in Sri Lanka to cover the Sinhalese-led government's abuse of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which gives it basically complete power to detain and torture people suspected of terrorism—meaning, in concrete terms, people suspected of being with the Tamil Tigers. Knowing that Jaffna is embroiled in violence, Amma insists that he does not go.

In this passage, Daryl explains that he feels a moral calling to go cover the conflict and write about the government's abuses of human rights in Jaffna; he cannot help but feel wrong about vacationing with Arjie's wealthy family in the mountains—or living comfortably in Australia, for that matter—when he knows people are being indiscriminately tortured and slaughtered nearby, and that as a journalist he has the power to do something about it. While many of the book's characters choose to avoid conflict rather than risk their safety (like Amma when she agrees to force Arjie to play with the boys, Radha Aunty when she chooses to marry Anil, and Appa when he fires Jegan), Daryl jumps head-first into it. He ends up suffering immensely for his decision—dying at the hands of the government—but still serves as an ethical guiding light for Arjie, who takes his sense of purpose and sincere desire to right Sri Lanka's wrongs as inspiration for his own life. Instead of following everyone else's fear, Daryl shows Arjie that it is possible to choose his own path and do what he considers right, just, and necessary—something obviously easier for Daryl, a white man who now lives abroad, than for Tamils and Sinhalese who live in Sri Lanka. While Arjie does not turn out as reckless as Daryl Uncle—and Daryl Uncle's fate comes to serve as a warning for others who risk getting too close to the ethnic violence—he does learn the value of independent thought and moral judgment from him.

☞ As I looked around me, I felt an odd sensation. Our daily routine had been cast away, while the rest of the world was going on as usual. A man I had known, a man who was my mother's lover, was now dead. I was aware that it was a significant thing, a momentous event in my life even, but, like a newspaper report on an earthquake or a volcanic eruption, it seemed something that happened outside my reality, my world.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Amma, Daryl Uncle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132-133

Explanation and Analysis

After receiving news of Daryl Uncle's death, Arjie is shocked and devastated. By the end of their time together, admittedly, he was ambivalent toward Daryl Uncle—whom he found inspiring, freethinking, and accepting, but also disdained for having an affair with his mother and stealing her attention from the family. Nevertheless, with Daryl Uncle's death, Arjie feels like an important part of his life has gone and literally lacks any skills for processing the loss. Since Daryl was already away, his death simply means that he will remain away forever—something that would have been disappointing but not devastating to Arjie had Daryl simply returned to Australia. This is why Daryl's death feels “outside [Arjie's] reality.” Throughout the rest of the book, Arjie gradually learns to assimilate the horrendous violence he hears about and experiences with his everyday life as an adolescent, but clearly these incidents still linger, and at times he only truly makes sense of them long after the fact.

☞ “So what must we do?”

“Nothing, my dear,” he said sadly.

Amma looked at him, shocked. “Nothing?” she said.

“These days one must be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.”

Related Characters: Amma (speaker), Arjie, Daryl Uncle

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 137-138

Explanation and Analysis



After she processes Daryl's death and realizes that the same police force she asked to investigate it was probably responsible for killing him and covering it up, Amma feels that she must act to seek justice; when the suffering becomes personal, she feels intensely Daryl's call to action and moral sense of right and wrong. And yet she also feels her hands are tied because nobody will force the government, the ostensible bearers of justice, to right their wrongs; she visits an old family friend and civil rights lawyer, Q.C. Uncle, and asks him for advice. To her astonishment, Q.C. recommends that she and Arjie do nothing, because there is nothing to be done. Amma is devastated to simply watch her lover die and take no recourse, but she ultimately realizes that this is her only option, no matter how deeply it wounds her.

Although Arjie clearly wants to believe that good wins out over evil in the world, the fact and aftermath of Daryl's death shows—like Radha Aunty's marriage dilemma and Arjie's banishment from the girls' world before it—that the threat of violence forces people to turn a blind eye to injustice. This tragic and imperfect solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic violence is ultimately what allows Arjie's family to survive and make it out, but Arjie always wonders whether it might be possible to do something more. All in all, then, Q.C. Uncle's advice must be balanced with Daryl Uncle's apparently reckless sense of justice—one must fight for what is right, Arjie learns, but only when one is capable of doing so, and when the fight will not cause more harm than good.

4. Small Choices Quotes

☝☝ My father chuckled. “I don't see any police out there, do you?” He poured himself another drink. “It's not just our luscious beaches that keep the tourist industry going, you know. We have other natural resources as well.”

Related Characters: Appa (speaker), Arjie, Jegan Parameswaran

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

After Jegan moves into Arjie's house and begins working with Appa, he quickly gets promoted and becomes the inspector for the family hotel. When he notices numerous foreign tourists spending a suspicious amount of time with young boys from the village, he asks Appa about it—and this is Appa's response. Nobody will stop them, and the prostitution industry helps his business. Astonishingly, Appa not only lacks any moral conscience about supporting child prostitution, but also seems perfectly comfortable with housing queer tourists, yet despises, rejects, and complains to Jegan about Arjie's “funny” tendencies at every step.

These astonishing parallel hypocrisies show how Appa's moral flexibility goes too far; he is comfortable supporting the almost uncontroversial evil of child prostitution so long as he profits from it, and he is far more forgiving with his clients than his children. In fact, his very relationship with Jegan illustrates how his distant, draconian personality as a father melts away when he befriends someone only slightly older than his children in a work context. And the family's wealth, which remains a relatively undeveloped theme in

the book but is clearly visible to both Arjie and the reader at every turn, now clearly has consequences—in this sense, Arjie can see his family's own complicity in injustice

☝☝ “But we are a minority, and that's a fact of life,” my father said placatingly. “As a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game. Play it right and you can do very well for yourself. The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous. Go around quietly, make your money, and don't step on anyone's toes.” [...] “It's good to have ideals, but now you're a man, son.”

Related Characters: Appa (speaker), Jegan Parameswaran

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

After Jegan realizes that Appa has asked him not to communicate directly with the hotel staff because he is Tamil and the staff is Sinhalese—and resents his suspiciously quick promotion to the job of inspector—Jegan confronts Appa, asking why he allows the ethnic tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese to determine how he does business. This is Appa's response—as a minority, the Tamils must appease the majority in order to find a place in Sri Lankan society. In other words, he thinks that Tamils must accept the domination of their nation by the Sinhalese and live their lives quietly to avoid commotion. Of course, this clashes strongly with the idealistic and politically minded Jegan, who believes that Tamils are facing profound injustice in Sri Lanka and dedicated the first part of his career to addressing it through the Gandhiyam Movement.

Although this is somewhat like Q.C.'s advice to Amma after Daryl's death, the difference is that Appa chooses to avoid politics only so that he can make money, whereas Amma would have been genuinely unsafe had she questioned the police investigation into Daryl's death; for Appa, buying into Sri Lanka's political distinctions is a matter of convenience, but for Amma, it was possibly a question of life and death. Again, Appa's moral flexibility comes to the foreground—although by overhearing this conversation, Arjie learns how it influences his attitude towards Sri Lanka's divided politics.

“How do you know he’s innocent?” my father asked. “We can’t be a hundred percent sure.”

“You mean you honestly think he’s guilty?” Amma asked, astonished.



My father was silent. We all stared at him, angry and hurt that he would really believe this.

“Look,” my father eventually said, “the best thing is to get as little involved as possible. If they find out that Jegan is connected to the assassination attempt, we could be accused of harboring a terrorist.”

“Nonsense,” Amma said. “Why would they accuse us?”

“These days, every Tamil is a Tiger until proven otherwise.”

Related Characters: Amma, Appa (speaker), Jegan Parameswaran, Arjie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

After Jegan is arrested by the government on suspicion of working with the Tamil Tigers, Appa sheds his previous support and adoration for him and immediately grows suspicious instead. This sudden turn of opinion surprises the family, who have grown to accept Jegan as one of their own, but Appa insists the family maintain its distance from him so as to not get embroiled in the case surrounding him. Although Jegan's freedom is at stake, Appa is only concerned about the possibility that he and the family could be implicated by association, and not at all worried about the fate of the man he has spent months mentoring. Of course, Appa's reaction here shows that he might not be a very good role model at all; he takes no responsibility for Jegan, who is supposedly in his care but whom he has turned in and left at the police station alone overnight. He only looks out for his own family and draws a clear line around it; and he quite easily decides that Jegan, with whom he spent almost every hour of the day working, drinking, and chatting, might have been lying all along, a possibility that scarcely disturbs him. Although his fear of the government might be justified—and speak to the arbitrary and draconian enforcement of laws against terrorism, which were instead employed to repress Tamils in general—it shows that Appa has little interest in what is right or wrong, and instead only cares about what protects him and his family.

“You know,” she said, “I’ve been thinking about emigration.” My father looked at her in shock.

“Canada and Australia are opening their doors. It would be a good time to apply. For the sake of the children.”

My father shook his head emphatically. “I’ll never emigrate. I’ve seen the way our people live in foreign countries.”

“It’s better than living in this terrible uncertainty.”

He turned to Amma angrily. “How can you want to emigrate? You saw the way our friends lived when we went to America. They come here and flash their dollars around, but over there they’re nothing.”

“It’s not a question of wanting or not wanting to go. We have to think about the children.”

“Don’t worry,” my father said. “Things will work out.”

And then after a while, “Besides, what would I do there? The only job I’d be fit for would be a taxi driver or a petrol station man.”

Related Characters: Amma, Appa (speaker), Daryl Uncle, The Banduratne Mudalali, Sonali, Diggy, Arjie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

After it becomes clear that the local Sinhala mob boss, the Banduratne Mudalali, has orchestrated anti-Tamil riots in the past and is now setting his sights on Appa's hotel, Amma raises the possibility of leaving Sri Lanka for the first time. Appa rejects this idea immediately—having seen people like his sister Radha Aunty experience racism and discrimination abroad, he is skeptical that the challenges his family would face in Australia or Canada would be preferable to the threat of violence they face at home.



Again, this betrays Appa and Amma's differing values; while Appa cares deeply about protecting his family, he cares about his business and reputation just as much, and is confident that he can keep the family out of trouble in Sri Lanka. He thinks that he would be relegated to a dishonorable job abroad and does not consider this worth exchanging for his family's safety. Meanwhile, Amma's sole concern is the children's fate, and watching what happened to Daryl Uncle has destroyed her faith that Appa can control whether or not the family ends up at risk.

This passage illustrates not only how Amma and Appa navigate the tensions between Appa's career and the family, but also their differing attitudes toward control and

uncertainty. Whereas Appa is always cautious about avoiding involvement in the conflict and protecting his image so as not to become a target, Amma worries that violence could break out at any time and they could become targets regardless of their personal actions, relationships, or complicity in antigovernment agitations. Ultimately, of course, Amma proves right—in the final chapter, they become the rioters' target simply because they are Tamil, a fact that they can do nothing to change.

“I was angry by now, but at whom I didn't know. I thought about my father, but I couldn't feel angry at him, because, when I remembered that yellowed piece of paper and the promise he had made to Jegan's father, I actually felt sorry for him. I thought of the number of times he had abandoned his promise, how he had left Jegan in jail overnight, how he had taken the side of the office peon against him, and I wondered if he had actually had a choice in any of these matters. I thought, too, of how Jegan had said that his father was so proud of my father's achievements, and I wondered what his father would think if he were alive now and could see what a mess everything had come to.”

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Appa, Jegan Parameswaran

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

The night after Jegan receives a death threat at the hotel, Appa realizes that he is a threat to the business and starts to think about sending him away to work somewhere far from Sri Lanka and its ethnic troubles. Arjie feels betrayed and confused—he knows that Appa accepted responsibility for Jegan and is now shying away from it, but also that Appa only did so because of a distant connection from his youth and a childhood contract signed whimsically with a school friend (Jegan's father). So Arjie understands that Appa is caught between competing obligations—his oath to Jegan's father and his genuine desire to help Jegan, on the one hand, but also his desire to protect his family, his business, and his reputation, on the other. Although Appa has proven himself disloyal and morally flexible throughout this chapter, Arjie begins to understand that this might be a result of his multiple, conflicting obligations rather than his lack of a sense of obligation at all.

5. The Best School of All Quotes

“The Academy will force you to become a man,” he said. Sonali, Amma, and Neliya Aunty smiled at me sympathetically before they continued with their meal. Diggy had a look on his face that told me he understood all the things my father had not said.

Related Characters: Appa (speaker), Neliya Auntie, Diggy, Amma, Sonali, Arjie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 205



Explanation and Analysis

When Arjie learns that Appa is sending him to Queen Victoria Academy, the archaic and draconian former colonial boarding school where his brother Diggy goes, he is horrified: not only is Arjie happy at his current school, but he knows that any school that welcomes boys like his brother Diggy, who is boisterous, athletic, competitive, and unemotional, will probably be a poor fit for himself. Of course, the whole family—and especially Diggy—immediately understands what Appa means: worried about Arjie remaining feminine or turning out “funny,” he thinks the aggressive, rigid, and traditional atmosphere of Victoria Academy will make Arjie masculine, heterosexual, and presumably competitive in traditionally masculine professions (as opposed to the more feminine areas that interest him, like theater and poetry).

This passage speaks volumes about the way Appa, and Arjie's family and society more broadly, conceive of gender and sexuality. Rather than thinking individuals simply flock to what interests them and naturally develop a certain gender expression—or that they singlehandedly “choose” how to act and whom to love—Appa thinks that Arjie's gender (and by extension his sexuality) is determined, and can be reformulated, by force. Of course, Appa's belief that there is only one right way to be a man—and that femininity equals failure for a man—is what underlies this attempt to mold Arjie's gender.

Then the meaning of what Diggy had said hit me, and a realization began to take shape in my mind. A fact so startling that it made my head spin just to think about it. The difference within me that I sometimes felt I had, that had brought me so much confusion, whatever this difference, it was shared by Shehan. I felt amazed that a normal thing—like my friendship with Shehan—could have such powerful and hidden possibilities. I found myself thinking about that moment Shehan had kissed me and also of how he had lain on his bed, waiting for me to carry something through. I now knew that the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Shehan Soyza, Diggy

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

After Arjie develops a close friendship—his first real friendship—with a fellow Victoria Academy student named Shehan Soyza, Diggy gives him a series of warnings: first, he says, Shehan is notorious at school for taking breaks from class to have sex with the prefects (Arjie wonders whether this could be true, and how two men could even have sex to begin with). Later, when Arjie declares that he is bringing Shehan over to meet the family, Diggy warns that he is “going to be sorry” for getting so close to Shehan, who “could easily lead you down the wrong path.” As he realizes that he shares the traits that make Shehan a pariah—his femininity and romantic interest in men—he comes to understand not only that he and Shehan might become more than friends (and that this explains their kiss), but also that their deviance from gender norms unites them and that their relationship can become a means for them to accept themselves. Although he stops short of declaring his newfound understanding in terms of a sexual *identity*, he does realize that it is something fundamental and immutable about himself, something to be expressed instead of repressed, and that his relationship with Shehan can become a means of expressing and discovering it.

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. I glanced at Amma and imagined what her reaction would have been had she discovered us, the profound expression of hurt that would have come over her face. She noticed that I was studying her, and she smiled. I looked down at my plate, feeling my heart clench painfully at the contrast between the innocence of her smile and the dreadful act I had just committed. I wanted to cry out what I had done, beg to be absolved of my crime, but the deed was already done and it couldn't be taken back. Now I understood my father's concern, why there had been such worry in his voice whenever he talked about me. He had been right to try to protect me from what he feared was inside me, but he had failed. What I had done in the garage had moved me beyond his hand.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Diggy, Appa, Amma, Shehan Soyza

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 256-257

Explanation and Analysis

After he and Shehan have sex in the garage, they meet Arjie's family for lunch, and Appa's face immediately betrays his deep disappointment—even disgust—at Arjie's new friend. Arjie imagines that his family might know what he and Shehan have done, and he is immediately overcome with guilt, a feeling that he has somehow betrayed his family by making love with another man. While Amma's smile suggests that she sees his agony and wants to support him nonetheless, he sees it as further proof that he has committed evil and violated his family's “trust and love.” In this moment, Arjie recoils against his own desires, as he recognizes that others consider “the deed” he has committed wrong and shameful, and finds himself unable to reconcile the contradiction between his fulfillment of his own desires and his family's inability to see them as valid. Having sex with Shehan means that Arjie has to admit to himself that he will never meet his family's expectations, to both liberate and distance himself from them, and accordingly to alternate between delight and profound shame.

●● I felt bitter at the thought that the students he punished were probably the least deserving. They were the ones who had broken his rules—no blinking, no licking of lips, no long hair—a code that was unfair. Right and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were. I thought of Shehan and myself. What had happened between us in the garage was not wrong. For how could loving Shehan be bad? Yet if my parents or anybody else discovered this love, I would be in terrible trouble. I thought of how unfair this was and I was reminded of things I had seen happen to other people, like Jegan, or even Radha Aunty, who, in their own way, had experienced injustice. How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It had to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Radha Aunty, Jegan Parameswaran, Shehan Soyza, Mr. Lokubandara, Black Tie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 268-269


Explanation and Analysis

After Black Tie's punishments get worse and Shehan begins to despair about returning to school, Arjie bikes over to Victoria Academy one day and contemplates the place's cruelty and contradictions. The place, he realizes, is founded on injustice: its only value is authority, and the adults in charge get to do anything they like at the expense of the students. Might, at Victoria Academy, makes right. This, perhaps, is the same reason Appa wanted to send him there: the place revolves around respect and obedience, the apparent virtues Appa wants to instill in Arjie. But Arjie quickly realizes that these are not virtues at all: they merely lead people to accept the injustice done to others and advance by appeasing those in power rather than by thinking or acting independently. Shehan's treatment and his own ostracism are proof enough—neither deserves their fate, but both are expected to accept it as natural and right. Just like there is no good reason for society to ostracize people whose gender presentation or sexual orientation differs from the norm, there is no reason for Shehan to receive months of punishments for his long hair, and there is no good reason why Black Tie is in charge of Victoria Academy in the first place. Arjie is achieving an important independence of thought, one which he will soon combine with his newfound understanding of the school to strike out against Black Tie at the end of the chapter.

●● Black Tie needed me, and because he needed me, power had moved into my hands.

I looked at Black Tie and realized that any fear of him had disappeared.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Mr. Lokubandara, Black Tie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis



When he returns one final time to practice reciting the poems Black Tie has assigned him to perform at an awards ceremony for a prominent political official, Arjie comes to understand his power over the school's sadistic principal: Black Tie's own speech is based on the poems, so if Arjie does not deliver them correctly, he dashes Black Tie's hopes of impressing the politician and remaining Queen Victoria Academy's principal. Combined with Arjie's realization that the school's rules are constructed around power and authority, not respect and justice, Arjie sees a clear opening: if he deliberately messes up the poems and ruins Black Tie's speech, Black Tie will lose his presidency and his iron hand over the school.


The plot Arjie hatches is notable not only because it allows him to save his lover Shehan, but also because it marks an important moment in Arjie's moral development: his realization that, first, he should take a stand against injustice and, secondly, that he has to use whatever means are available to him without sacrificing his own safety. Throughout the whole book, characters who fight for justice—like Radha Aunty, Anil, Daryl Uncle, and Jegan—clash with characters who prefer to preserve the status quo and avoid the conflict that inevitably accompanies change—like Ammachi, Diggy, and Appa. The first group have been reckless and idealistic, injured themselves, or undermined their own goals; the second group have been complacent and self-serving in the face of injustice. Arjie's struggle to find a middle ground—to fight *effectively* for justice—is consummated in this last chapter, when he realizes his power lies in Black Tie's trust, and that he can undermine Black Tie's cruelty only with a ruthlessness of his own.

6. Riot Journal: An Epilogue Quotes

●● Chithra Aunty began to cry. Amma went to her and tried to comfort her. There was something ironic about that. Amma comforting Chithra Aunty. Yet I understood it. Chithra Aunty was free to cry. We couldn't, for if we started we would never stop.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Appa, Sena Uncle, Amma, Chithra Aunty

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis


The day after Arjie's family flees to the neighbors' house while a mob burns their house down, Amma and Appa's best friends, Chithra Aunty and Sena Uncle, come to pick the family up. Although Amma's house is the one that has burned down, Chithra—who is Sinhalese and therefore not in danger during the riots—ends up breaking down instead. Arjie sees that this points to the emotional distance the family must maintain from their experiences in order to live through them; instead of mourning their burned-down house immediately, they walk through it, feel a strange sense of alienation, and then move on because they have no choice—they are constantly under threat and cannot afford to linger until they make it to safety.

This turn of events illustrates the profound toll of war and conflict, as well as the immense resilience that Arjie's family needs to get through it. The war does not merely cause loss; it causes trauma, which strikes much deeper and disrupts people's very senses of self and trust in the world. This is why, for instance, Ammachi still hates the Sinhalese decades after her father's death, and why Radha grows withdrawn and silent after getting attacked on a train; now, it is Arjie's family's turn to carry this trauma with them to Canada.

●● He was trying to cheer me up, and as I listened to him talk, something occurred to me that I had never really been conscious of before—Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not. This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him.

Related Characters: Arjie (speaker), Sena Uncle, Chithra Aunty, Shehan Soyza

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 296-297

Explanation and Analysis

During a brief break in Colombo's curfew, Shehan visits the fraught Arjie at Sena Uncle and Chithra Aunty's house. Arjie is delighted to see him, even if they cannot get any privacy, and in the garden they discuss Arjie's burned-down house and their plans for the future. In an apparent attempt to "cheer [Arjie] up," Shehan abruptly declares that they should see a movie once the riots are over, and this leads Arjie to recognize for the first time that "Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not."

Arjie is pointing not to any inherent difference between him and Shehan, or even a difference in language, personality, or political attitudes. Rather, he is talking about the difference in their sense of the future, their attitudes about the riots and the possibility of things ever returning to normal. Shehan appears to see the riots as a hiccup, an inconvenience that will pass so that normal life can resume. But, for Arjie, a return to normalcy is impossible; his life is and will forever be profoundly shaped by the experiences of his last few days.

What this passage demonstrates most of all is how violence accelerates ethnic divisions by creating a gap in experience, and in turn a gap in understanding. During these riots, a Sinhalese person's inconvenient weekend means life or death for their Tamil neighbor; their understandings of Sri Lanka's political troubles is bound to diverge, as Arjie's and Shehan's begin to do.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. PIGS CAN'T FLY

The narrator, Arjie, recalls his family cherishing their monthly Sunday “spend-the-day.” After waking Arjie, his brother Varuna, and his sister Sonali, Amma brings the three children to their grandparents’ house. The children traverse the house’s eerie corridor and then meet their grandparents in the drawing room; Appachi (grandpa) scarcely acknowledges them, but Ammachi (grandma) always gives them an uncomfortably tight hug and proclaims herself lucky for having 15 grandchildren.

After the adults leave, the children are always ecstatic to be free, watched by only Ammachi and Janaki, who is busy cooking and wants nothing to do with the kids anyway. When the children fight, Janaki intervenes, and they know better than to bother Ammachi. Instead, the children resolve their own conflicts through “territoriality and leadership.” “The boys” get the area in front of the house—this group includes Meena, a girl cousin who leads one faction of the boys, and Varuna, nicknamed “Diggy” for his nose-picking, who leads the other. “The girls” get the area behind the house, and Arjie inevitably gravitates there, for he prefers “the free play of fantasy” to the boys’ cricket game.

In fact, Arjie always ends up as the fantasy games’ leader, orchestrating the girls as they make costumes out of their grandparents’ dirty clothing and always “play[ing] the main part in the fantasy.” Arjie’s favorite game is the elaborate “bride-bride,” and he especially loves getting dressed and made up for the imaginary wedding, which allows him to feel he is “ascend[ing] into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self,” becoming a revered center of attention, like the hero from a film or myth.

Looking back on the “spend-the-days,” Arjie feels nostalgic for his childhood innocence, given that his family eventually had to flee Sri Lanka because of violence and that those Sundays began leading him “toward the precarious waters of adult life.”

Although he opens with a classic kind of nostalgia for his childhood, Arjie quickly reveals that this past was far from perfect: he is clearly uncomfortable around his grandparents and their menacing house; he values his experience there, but not necessarily because his family was there. Ammachi and Appachi respond to the children according to typical gendered scripts about familial love: Ammachi with overbearing maternal love and Appachi with an indifferent paternal distance.



In contrast to the stuffy formalities they are forced to exchange with their grandparents, the children have complete freedom for the rest of their “spend-the-days.” Like Meena, Arjie plays on the opposite side, which offers the first hint that he diverges from the conventional gender expressions that the other children seem to have already learned (competitive sports for the boys, creative cooperation for the girls). And yet this does not seem to create any fuss; the children have clearly already learned to think of gender as a binary either-or, but they do not yet seem to consider it wrong or shameful for someone to end up on the unexpected side.



At this age, Arjie is not at all concerned about others’ opinions or concepts of gender; he sees his interest in playing with the girls as simply about realizing his authentic self, although he certainly sees a gap between his everyday gender expression and the “more brilliant, more beautiful” role of bride. His fixation on the wedding points to the central role of love—including unconventional and even fleeting love, like this ceremony in which Arjie is the implausible bride—in the characters’ processes of growth and self-realization in the novel.



As narrator, Arjie reveals the context from which he now writes and the scope of the chapters to come: they trace the loss of his initial freedoms but also the growth of his awareness about the world.



Things change at Arjie's grandparents' house with the arrival of Kanthi Aunty, Cyril Uncle, and Tanuja, their daughter, whom the kids call "Her Fatness" and who readily takes on the least prestigious role in the game "bride-bride": the groom. Sonali gets promoted from this lowly role to that of a bridesmaid. But their third day with Tanuja is Ammachi's birthday, and this spells trouble: all the adults are to stay around for lunch, and Arjie's family is late because Amma took so long to put on her sari. When they arrive, Kanthi Aunty accuses the rest of the kids—and Arjie in particular—of refusing to play with Tanuja.

Ammachi opens her present and the kids leave to play. Arjie finds the girls circled around Her Fatness's beautiful imported dolls, the girl's attempt to win favor in the group. But the girls pass the dolls around and quickly turn back to the bride-bride game. When it is time for the wedding, the groom (Her Fatness) marches in with a mustache and cigarette, and tries to steal the show before exclaiming in distress that she "want[s] to be the bride." The girls explain that "Arjie is the bestest bride of all" and Her Fatness insists that "a boy cannot be the bride." The girls shoo Her Fatness away, and she responds by calling Arjie a "pansy," "faggot," and "sissy," but they laugh her off and she storms out, yelling that she "wish[es] you were all dead."

The girls begin their wedding ceremony, but just as Arjie makes it to the altar, Kanthi Aunty shows up and accuses the girls: "who's calling my daughter fatty?" Seeing their game, she brings the sari-clad Arjie to the drawing room and shows him to all the adults with a sadistic delight. Everyone but Arjie's parents breaks out in laughter and Cyril Uncle calls him a "funny one." That night, Arjie's parents do not look at him—or even at each other—during the ride home. Later, they argue in their room about the danger of him turning "funny" and becoming "the laughingstock of Colombo." Appa is furious at Amma for letting their son dress up in her clothing.

As Arjie's previous narrative digression foreshadowed, Kanthi Aunty's interference in the children's game threatens to rob it of its innocence; although, as the newcomer, Her Fatness seems to accept her place at the bottom of the bride-bride hierarchy, Kanthi Aunty seems bitterly convinced that her daughter deserves better, and set on blaming Arjie because he is the only boy in the girls' group. The universe of bride-bride reverses conventional social gender hierarchies, which attests to the children's true degree of freedom in it: all the children want to be the bride, while none wants to be the groom.



Her Fatness's attention-seeking behavior reveals that her greed may have really driven Kanthi Aunty to complain about Arjie. While the girls' group decides who plays what role cooperatively, Tanuja tries to dominate the others (ironically enough) in order to win their favor. Unlike the girls, she is completely incapable of playing: she unimaginatively replaces the creative transformation of gender with rigid rules about it. By calling Arjie names he might not even understand yet—"pansy," "faggot," and "sissy"—she introduces the harsh, real-world prejudice against effeminate men that he likely has not encountered yet.



Like her daughter Tanuja, Kanthi Aunty treats play like war: she is more interested in beating the other children into submission than cooperating with them. When she exposes Arjie to the adults, the fantasies he nurtures in playtime suddenly become a public spectacle and serious cause for concern; the adults seem to think more like the vicious, unfair Tanuja than the accepting, cooperative girls' group. For the first time, the reader encounters the tactically vague word that comes to define Arjie in his family's eyes: "funny." The word is as definite in reference as it is vague in meaning: although all the adults know what Cyril Uncle is talking about, they are seemingly so afraid of the possibility that they dare not speak aloud what they really mean—Arjie's effeminacy and possible homosexuality. At least for now, this leaves Arjie in the dark about what, exactly, everyone finds wrong about him. Finally, Appa's explosive reaction at Amma reveals that he believes sexuality is made, not born; this assumption is also what leads the family to worry so much, because it would imply that Arjie's gender expression and sexuality reflect poor parenting.



On occasions that call for special dress, Arjie always watches Amma get ready; he considers her “the final statement in female beauty.” He pretends to try on her jewelry while watching her put on her sari. But, after the spend-the-day incident, Amma no longer lets Arjie in while she is getting dressed. Arjie goes to his bed and tries to figure out what his mistake was, and what it meant when the family called him “funny.” After their parents leave, Sonali tries to comfort Arjie, who is on the verge of tears. He feels uncomfortable around his mother the next day.

The morning before the next spend-the-day, Arjie can tell that Amma does not want him to bring his **sari**. After breakfast, Amma orders Diggy to make Arjie play cricket. Both the boys are distraught, but she does not budge, explaining that people always blame the mother “if the child turns out wrong.” Arjie falls on his bed and cries, but Amma does not comfort him and insists “big boys must play with other boys.” When Arjie refuses, she shakes him and he takes pride in getting through “her cheerful facade” and revealing “how little she actually believed in the justness of her actions.”

Amma tells Arjie to be in the car in five minutes, and he worries that Her Fatness will become the girls’ new leader, and that the group will not even be able to play bride-bride if he does not bring the **sari**. He also has to avoid the cricket game, and he cannot bring the sari bag into the car. So Arjie waits inside until Amma calls him to the car, then runs quickly into the back seat and shoves the sari in Sonali’s bag. Sonali is confused; Arjie explains that he is being sent to the boys today, and Sonali asks Amma why. She responds, “because the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly.”

During the car ride, Diggy’s discomfort signals that he will definitely (if reluctantly) force Arjie to play cricket. After they arrive and ritualistically greet their grandparents, Diggy drags Arjie to the cricket game. Meena and the boys are confused by Arjie’s presence and refuse to take him—the “girlie-boy”—on their team, despite Diggy’s attempts to trade him away. Arjie thinks he can avoid the game because nobody wants him, but another cousin, Muruges, agrees to take him on his and Diggy’s team (although they don’t let him bat).

Like “bride-bride,” watching Amma get dressed allows Arjie to fantasize about the feminine beauty he is socially prohibited from exhibiting. Although Amma no longer lets him watch her because of fears about his sexuality, to him it resolutely feels like punishment, and he begins to blame himself for whatever the adults thought of as “funny” about him. This inexplicable fault introduces an unprecedented tension into his otherwise close and trusting relationship with Amma.



Amma appears to see past the gender norms that the other adults take for granted, and is obviously conflicted about constraining her son to appease her prejudiced family and society. Despite his ostracism, Arjie never ceases believing he is in the right; after adult gender norms shatter his innocent play, he learns earlier than most other children to see his mother, and adults in general, as illogical and morally flawed instead of perfect and all-knowing.



Unwilling to let his mother’s arbitrary decision get in the way of his freedom, Arjie hatches an underhanded plan to win back his rightful position in bride-bride. Sonali, who is even younger than Arjie, understands his plight better than anyone and manages to advocate on his behalf. Amma’s response—the source of the chapter’s title—points to the character of social prejudice as brute fact. There is no question of explanations or principles when it comes to gender roles but merely one of conformity.



Diggy, like Amma, puts his sense of duty to his family before his sense of what is right—although he clearly is less interested in justice than simply avoiding conflict on his cricket team. It is deeply ironic when Meena calls Arjie “girlie-boy,” because of course she is the one girl who plays with the boys. Somehow, Arjie’s femininity threatens the family’s integrity and social standing, whereas Meena’s masculinity does not. Perhaps this is because the family’s property and status are transmitted through the male line, and so being a feminine man (who is, by implication, unable or unwilling to support and protect a wife and children) is more dangerous in a patriarchal culture than being a masculine woman (who can be self-sufficient instead of needing a man’s “protection”).



Diggy had struck a “fragile balance” between obeying Amma and keeping his cricket team—but Arjie quickly overturned this balance by insisting on batting when his name gets drawn first (instead of letting Muruges take his spot). Meena, the opposing team’s captain, enthusiastically supports Arjie; Muruges quits his team in frustration and Diggy kicks Arjie out of the game, wielding the cricket bat as he chases him back to the house. Once Arjie makes it inside, Diggy threatens him to avoid the cricket field, and Arjie “forever close[s] any possibility of entering the boys’ world again,” to his own delight.

Arjie makes his way to the girls’ territory, where he realizes that Her Fatness has usurped his role, and is making the wedding cake *he* designed. The rest of the girls are happy to see him, but Her Fatness objects to Arjie playing bride-*bride*—until he reveals that he has the **sari**. Arjie says he is willing to play any part in the game, and Her Fatness agrees to let him join—as the groom.

As the groom, Arjie is not allowed to help with the cooking, but instead relegated to the office, a table on the porch. At the “office,” he pretends to stamp papers and calls Sonali up to deliver an imaginary letter, then another cousin, Lakshmi, to take dictation. Her Fatness interrupts, insists on seeing the **sari**, and threatens to tell Janaki that Arjie is playing with them, so Arjie retrieves Sonali’s bag.

But the **sari** is not inside Sonali’s bag; Arjie realizes that Her Fatness has already discovered and hidden it in Janaki’s room. They race to find it—Her Fatness gets it first, then runs off, with Arjie chasing after. Arjie manages to grab Her Fatness’s arm and then get a hand on the sari, but Her Fatness does not let go of it, and it tears in half. Arjie and Her Fatness start to fight, and he rips the sleeve of her dress as she runs inside, shouting. Seeing her, Janaki yells, “Buddu Ammo!” (“Mother of Buddha”). Her Fatness blames Arjie for tearing her dress, but Sonali and Lakshmi blame Her Fatness and defend Arjie.

Against Diggy’s diplomatic attempts to keep order, Arjie recognizes his capacity to create disorder allows him to free himself from the boys’ group. He embraces his outsider status rather than trying to conform; while all the adults assume that others have made Arjie feminine, and therefore that Arjie might become masculine by being forced to play with the boys, here he shows that he is acting out of his own volition and is not merely absorbing influences from his environment.



Arjie continues carrying out his plan to win back the bride’s role. Despite all of Her Fatness’s objections about Arjie’s gender presentation, in fact she ends up emulating him and proving that he does femininity the best of all the girls. And he also adopts her tactics, agreeing to join the game at the bottom in order to climb back to the top.



Like Her Fatness, Arjie makes a racket as the groom in order to win the girls’ attention. His strategy suggests he understands how the corporate world distributes power on gendered lines: briefly playing a man, he makes the girl cousins into his secretaries and distracts them from the wedding preparations.



Arjie and Her Fatness fight over the quintessential symbol of womanhood in Sri Lanka, which symbolizes Arjie’s long-lived struggle to express his femininity against a culture that sees him as a threat. Janaki’s line (“Buddu Ammo!”) seems like an irrelevant detail but actually points to one of the other tensions that becomes central to this book: Janaki, who is almost certainly the family maid despite never being described in detail, is a Sinhalese Buddhist, while Arjie’s family is Tamil and Hindu. While this is a non-issue in Ammachi and Appachi’s household, this ethnic division takes on a much greater role throughout the rest of the book.



As the children assemble to explain what happened, they realize that Ammachi is standing in the doorway; she chastises Janaki for failing to “keep these children quiet.” Her Fatness starts crying, Ammachi sees her torn dress sleeve, and she names Arjie as the culprit. Ammachi canes Arjie, who screams that it is unfair and calls her an “old fatty” before running away, out of the house, across the street, past the railway tracks and to the beach, where he cries and laments that “I hate them all [...] I wish I was dead.”

Eventually, Arjie stops crying and gets off the burning rocks. He wades into the ocean, silver and empty under the sun, and notes that “something had changed.” He dreads returning to Ammachi’s cane, and realizes that he can “never enter the girls’ world again.” He is no longer excited about the family’s “spend-the-days” and foresees himself lonely, “caught between the boys’ and the girls’ worlds, not belonging or wanted in either.” The church bell rings and Arjie decides to go back to his grandparents’ house, “up Ramanaygam Road to the future that awaited me.”

2. RADHA AUNTY

Ammachi informs the family that Mr. Nagendra—an old friend of Appachi’s from Cambridge—wants to marry his son Rajan to Appa’s sister Radha Aunty. In fact, the couple met in America, and Rajan requested the wedding himself. The aunts and uncles are thrilled to hear that Rajan is a well-paid, well-behaved engineer from a good family. And Arjie is thrilled: “there was going to be a wedding in the family!” Finally, he can play out his bride-bride game in reality.

Authoritarian as ever, Ammachi takes no interest in the truth of Arjie and Tanuja’s fight, which the other cousins are eager to share; instead, she arbitrarily chooses a side, whether out of distaste for Arjie’s gender expression or empathy for the crying Tanuja. Like those in power throughout this book, Ammachi has no interest in justice or fairness. As Arjie yet again faces punishment for something he feels is not his fault, he begins to feel that the world is stacked against him and that he cannot escape it.



After getting himself kicked out of the cricket game, Arjie took joy in permanently leaving the boys’ world; now, he realizes that he will only be allowed to live in that world, and that the girls’ world is being taken from him because of social circumstances outside his control. If his own disposition robbed him of belonging in the boys’ world, the family’s predilections about gender now rob him of belonging in the one place where he truly feels at home and leave him completely alone. This sense of exclusion and profound shame deeply impacts his development in the book’s coming chapters.



Like all the stories in Funny Boy, this chapter is set some time after the previous one (although the gap is shorter than those between subsequent chapters). The family’s joy at Radha’s engagement reveals the values that drive their view of marriage: they want stability, social respectability, and a healthy income in their children’s partners, rather than romance or emotional connection. Nevertheless, Arjie remains entranced by the promise of romance, which he can no longer live out through the bride-bride game. Thus, his wedding fantasy runs contrary to social norms not only because it is considered an inappropriate fixation for a boy and he eventually turns out to be gay, but also because he thinks about the wedding in the Western terms of sanctifying love instead of the conventional Sri Lankan terms of sanctifying an economic and social bond between families.



Arjie, now age seven, does not even remember how Radha Aunty looks, since she went to America four years before. He looks at old photos of her and imagines what she will look like when she returns for the wedding—and Ammachi runs into him while he does so, then sends him back to dust the furniture. After breaking the cane over his back, she has started giving him tasks every spend-the-day to “keep [him] occupied and ‘out of mischief.’” His spend-the-days are now miserable except for the hour that Janaki lets him “read her Sinhala love comics” while Ammachi naps. This time, he imagines Rajan and Radha Aunty playing the lead roles; he cannot wait for Radha Aunty to return from America and the comic book wedding to become a reality.

The first spend-the-day after Radha Aunty returns to Sri Lanka, Arjie wakes up excited to finally meet her. When his family arrives at Ammachi and Appachi’s house, Arjie is surprised to find Radha Aunty struggling to play the piano, looking completely unlike he had imagined: she has skin “as dark as a laborer,” unruly hair, an unfashionably thin build, and Western clothing instead of a sari. She briefly greets Arjie and he starts polishing Ammachi’s brass ornaments as he laments “that a woman who was on the brink of marriage could look like this and play the piano so badly.” When Ammachi scolds Arjie for not polishing hard enough, Radha steps up to defend him.

Radha Aunty asks Arjie why he is not “playing with the others,” and he lies that he does not want to—but her smile reveals that she knows there must be another reason. Arjie sees that she is not like the other aunts and uncles, due to her “cheerfulness” and lack of “terrible curiosity.” During his comic-book hour, Radha Aunty invites Arjie to play in her room. She lets him try on her makeup and pottus, then comments that he “would have made a beautiful girl.” She even shows him to Janaki, who mentions that it should stay a secret but smiles nevertheless. Arjie spends the rest of the day playing with Radha Aunty’s jewelry and nail polish.

Radha Aunty’s absence allows Arjie to fantasize even more freely about her perfect wedding, an obsession made far more understandable by his perpetual punishment, the mind-numbing domestic labor he is made to do instead of playing with his cousins. The Sinhala love comics also represent Arjie’s idealistic conception of love, one the reader likely envisions he will be locked out of because of his sexuality. But these comics also point to Arjie’s ability to freely cross between Tamil and Sinhalese social contexts, something that—like his femininity—eventually gets revoked because of social pressure.



Unsurprisingly, Arjie’s fantasy about Radha proves far from the reality. This passage also speaks volumes about the Western-influenced beauty standards—light skin and straight hair—that predominate in Sri Lanka even decades after the end of British rule. Arjie’s disappointment that Radha “could look like this and play the piano so badly” just before marriage shows, from another angle, the danger of social expectations around love and sex. By looking at the negative instead of the positive—evaluating someone against one’s own mental ideal rather than taking them on their own terms—one can become blind to others’ humanity, feelings, interests, and perspectives.



Despite her imperfections, Radha proves Arjie’s most sympathetic defender besides his sister, Sonali. While Appa’s other siblings are nosy and judgmental, taken to criticizing one another, sizing everyone and everything up, and ordering the children around like mindless annoyances, Radha is generous and understanding, the only adult who actually listens to Arjie and takes him seriously. While Amma is now too afraid to let Arjie roleplay womanhood with her, Radha sees nothing dangerous or wrong about this. The parallel between her and Arjie is clear: both are unique, independently minded, and understanding precisely because they deviate from social ideas of perfection, conformity, and respectability.



At one point in the afternoon, Arjie asks Radha Aunty when she is to marry Rajan, and she jokingly pretends not to know who he is, then asks Arjie if he thinks they should marry. He parrots his family's response: "Because he's an engineer and he doesn't have insanity in his family." She laughs and he implores her to get married, for she "will be the bestest bride ever." They whimsically plan the wedding—Arjie agrees to be a pageboy and hopes that Her Fatness will not get to be a flower girl, then recommends outfits for the whole bridal party. He decides that Radha Aunty is "definitely [his] favorite aunt."

Later that afternoon, Her Fatness talks loudly about her bride-*bride* plans, wearing a bedsheet instead of a sari. Arjie imagines Radha Aunty dressed up for her actual wedding and feels "a glow of pride" for refusing to let Her Fatness make him jealous. When she notices his nails, in fact, Her Fatness becomes the jealous one.

Some time later, Amma invites Arjie to play one of the King of Siam's children in *The King and I*, a play in which Radha Aunty will also be acting. Excited about the prospect of "wear[ing] makeup and costumes and danc[ing] around the stage," Arjie asks Amma about the play but is distraught to learn that the governess does not marry the king. Amma explains that interracial marriage was rejected at the time of the play's setting—and still remains uncommon. But she suggests that Arjie will love the songs.

On weekends, Arjie goes to Sonali's girls' school for rehearsals, where Radha Aunty introduces him to Aunty Doris, a white woman who curiously speaks with a Sri Lankan accent. Waiting in the courtyard for their turn to rehearse, Arjie watches Radha Aunty outdo a man named Anil in a suggestive argument about birds, bees, and pollination. Later, Radha Aunty is furious when one of the girls jokes that "that bee [Anil] is dying to pollinate your blossom." Indeed, Anil ends up offering Radha Aunty a ride home, although they remain silent the whole way to Ammachi and Appachi's house.

Just like he used to see Amma as a perfect ideal of beauty, Arjie still sees Radha's engagement as a perfect ideal of marriage (even though he considers her far from a perfect bride). Thus, he is surprised to see that she harbors doubts, whether real or manufactured as a way to get Arjie to express his feelings about the wedding. Even though he privately believes in romantic love, he also echoes his family's utilitarian view of what makes a good marriage, suggesting that he has not yet learned to separate the two and consider the complexities of relationships. In less than a day, Arjie goes from shock at Radha's imperfections to loving her unique perspective and freethinking personality.



Arjie and Tanuja again fight to prove their femininity. Although Arjie still appears to take some petty pleasure in outdoing her with his painted nails, he begins to learn from Radha Aunty that his self-esteem can (and should) be independent of others' opinions and expectations.



*Theater, a more structured version of what he was doing all along during bride-*bride*, now gives Arjie an opportunity to grow closer to Radha Aunty and express himself creatively. However, he continues to hope that the story will be one of romantic love and is shattered to hear that social obstacles—like racial differences—can stand in the way of two people who love each other. This also foreshadows the two tragic relationships (one interethnic and one interracial) that take front stage in this and the following chapter.*



With the play rehearsals, Arjie is thrown into a completely new social context that exposes him to people who contradict his assumptions: Aunty Doris is both white and Sri Lankan, and Anil's seemingly vulgar interest in the engaged Radha continues to suggest that marriage and romance are not as perfect and cut-and-dry as in the storybooks. Although she is reluctant to engage with Anil and expertly fends off what looks like a clumsy sexual advance, Radha also does not advertise her engagement to Rajan.



The second time Anil drives Radha Aunty home, Ammachi interrogates her about “this boy you’re taking lifts from.” Ammachi is distraught to hear that Anil is Sinhalese; she complains to Appachi about Sinhalese boys’ bad morals and laments that “people will talk,” and this might threaten Radha’s engagement to Rajan. As Arjie follows Radha away, he wonders what is wrong with being Sinhalese—he was learning Sinhala at school, and his friends and even his parents’ friends were Sinhalese. Radha calls her mother a “racist,” a word Arjie does not know yet. Janaki tells Radha not to “forget what happened” and describes a mutilated dead body, but Radha hopes they can move on and not “hate every Sinhalese” because of a single act of violence. Ammachi comes back, but Arjie “somehow [sees] her differently.”

Arjie asks his father what “racist” means and what happened with the dead body. Appa dodges the first question but explains that the body was Ammachi’s father’s, and that he was killed for being Tamil in the 1950s, two decades before. Appa is reluctant to explain the war, but simply explains that riots and killing started after the Sinhalese tried to make theirs the only official language. Over time, by listening to adults, Arjie learns about the Tamil Tigers (whom Ammachi supports) and their attempt to create a separate state. Appa, however, sends Arjie to Sinhalese class. Arjie even notices tensions between Tamil and Sinhalese students at school.

On the next spend-the-day, after play rehearsal, Janaki tells Radha Aunty that Ammachi has visited Anil’s family and told them to keep their son away from her daughter. Radha decides to go apologize later that day and Janaki suggests she bring Arjie to avoid suspicion. That night at the beach with the rest of the cousins, Arjie is nervous and excited—he and Radha head away once Janaki sends the other cousins to the ocean. Radha realizes that Arjie was eavesdropping on her earlier conversation with Janaki but does not mind. They reach Anil’s house and he comes out to greet them, seeming “more concerned than angry.”

Although Radha is pushing against Anil’s interest, Ammachi does not bother to ask for Radha’s perspective or experience before berating her for associating with the wrong type of men. For the very first time in the book, Arjie hears explicit mention of Sri Lanka’s racial divide, which—like the gender roles imposed on him—is ingrained in concepts of social normalcy and respectability, and which he scarcely understands, since he does not see language and ethnicity as meaningfully distinguishing the people he knows. Nevertheless, Ammachi’s attitude is far too typical, and her blanket condemnation of all Sinhalese boys shows how tensions can escalate as people interpret individual acts of violence, prejudice, or exclusion as reflecting an entire community of people.



As Appa explains the reason for Ammachi’s outrage, Arjie comes to understand that her racism is actually symptomatic of long-standing conflicts throughout Sri Lanka that continue into the present. For the reader unacquainted with the history of the Sri Lankan conflict, this section outlines the most important points: after independence, Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese majority took power and tried to kick the overrepresented Tamils out of government by making Sinhala the only official language; the Tamil Tigers were an armed rebel group that fought a low-level conflict with the government until the 1980s, when it turned into a full-scale civil war. While the Tamil Tigers claimed to speak for the whole community, many Tamils (like Appa) rejected the Tigers’ nationalism and tried to integrate their families into Sinhalese society.



Still overbearing and uninterested in Radha’s actual motivations, Ammachi lashes out because she perceives Anil as a threat to her family’s ethnic homogeneity and Radha’s engagement to Rajan. Ironically enough, not only does this reveal that Ammachi, too, does not fully trust Radha and Rajan’s relationship, but it is also precisely Ammachi’s reaction that draws Radha and Anil closer together, forcing them to meet each other on serious terms for the first time.



Anil invites Radha Aunty and Arjie inside, and then Anil's father comes in and sends Anil to go put on a shirt. They all sit down and Radha apologizes for her mother's visit. Anil says "it was nothing," but his father calls it "downright insulting," because they "are from a good family as well" and would never want Anil "to marry some non-Sinhalese." He rejects the apology and, as his wife calls him away, he warns that "we Sinhalese are losing patience with you Tamils and your arrogance." Anil apologizes; Radha and Arjie make to leave, but before they leave, Anil asks about Radha's fiancé. Arjie understands that Ammachi's real fear was Radha and Anil falling in love—although he thinks they are not, and that Anil was "too young" and "not serious enough" to be in love.

At the next rehearsal, Anil asks Radha Aunty why her mother is so anti-Sinhalese, and Radha explains that Ammachi's father was killed in an ethnic riot in 1958. When Anil asks, she says she would let her child marry someone Sinhalese, but would not do so herself, since she already has someone.

At lunchtime, rather than ride with Anil, Radha insists on taking the bus, to Arjie's confusion. At lunch, Radha and Arjie take the only available seat, which happens to be at Anil's table. Anil offers Radha his food, but she refuses—he decides to wait until her food arrives to eat, "because you are a lady." (When she insists that she is just "a friend," Anil's friends laugh.) Just when Radha's food arrives, the other friends pay and exit the restaurant, leaving Radha and Arjie alone with Anil, who starts asking her about her "intended." She explains that they met in America; Anil asks how they fell in love and then declares that he is taking his "only chance" to—presumably—declare his own love for her. Radha freezes: she sees her sisters—Mala Aunty and Kanthi Aunty—in the restaurant, heading for their table to greet them.

The aunts reach Anil, Radha, and Arjie's table; Kanthi Aunty asks, "what are you doing here?" but Mala Aunty escorts Kanthi Aunty out. As Radha Aunty nearly starts crying, Anil proclaims that "it's out in the open now" and they can declare their love. Radha admonishes him for staying at the table and he asks if she likes him, then smiles when she does not respond. He says that it is possible for them to get married, despite her preexisting engagement and their bigoted parents. He promises that they can "make our parents accept us" and insists on paying the bill. As they leave the restaurant, Arjie wonders how Radha feels about Anil, and where Rajan "fit[s] in" to the whole picture.

Anil's father is a spitting image of Ammachi; he, too, sees his social world as bounded by ethnicity and cannot imagine opening his "good family" to Tamils. But his threat holds a disturbing weight since the Sinhalese are Sri Lanka's majority group and have control of the government; this statement points to the constant threat that hangs over Tamils like Arjie's family. Again, he thinks in terms of entire ethnic groups, speaking on behalf of millions of people instead of considering individuals on their own terms. Curiously, while Arjie is delighted about Radha's engagement and charmed by her youthful energy, he sees Anil as too immature for romance.



Radha finally reveals that she is engaged, although this seems to be more as a way of dodging Anil's question about ethnicity—for she has no issue marrying someone outside her group but recognizes that her mother's prejudice would prove a significant barrier.



Clearly affected by Ammachi and Anil's father's prejudice, Radha consciously avoids Anil but again cannot avoid having her motivations misinterpreted, now by Anil's friends as well as her own sisters. In reality, her apparent date with Anil is completely artificial, and much like Arjie during the spend-the-days she gets blamed for being caught between the competing wills of Anil and her family. Anil's apparent faith in love not only contradicts the social norms around marriage in Sri Lanka, but also mirrors Arjie's own idealistic commitment to romance.



Radha and Anil interpret the same event in diametrically opposed ways: for him, the fact that their lunch is public means Radha can reveal any feelings she has, but for Radha, it merely means that now her family will think she is stubbornly pursuing a relationship with Anil, even though she has never pursued or displayed any interest in him. He interprets her ambiguous responses as a sign that she shares his feelings, and for the first time Arjie wonders if she may be falling for him precisely because their relationship goes against their families' wishes.



When they return to Ammachi and Appachi's house, Mala Aunty's car is out front and the whole family is waiting at the dining table. Radha Aunty briefly stops in her room and then follows Arjie to dinner. Ammachi explains that she is calling Aunty Doris to have Radha removed from the play, and laments that she is "flaunt[ing her] illicit relations in public" before slapping her in the face. Radha Aunty cries, and then Ammachi reveals her plan: she will send Radha to stay with her cousin in Jaffna until she "come[s] to [her] senses." Radha Aunty gets up and leaves, and Mala Aunty chastises her mother for "slap[ping] a grown woman like that" before following Radha Aunty to her room. Arjie gets up, too, supposedly to go to the bathroom.

From the house's side garden, Arjie listens to Radha and Mala talk. Radha admits that she was never interested in Anil until Ammachi got between them. Now, she thinks about Anil as well as Rajan. She hopes that love will be more important than their parents' differences, but Mala laments that she has "to live in the real world" and should not cross her family. She also notes that the ethnic tensions between the Tamils and Sinhalese are worsening, as the Tamil Tigers are becoming more violent. This might make a "mixed marriage" dangerous.

When Ammachi calls to get Radha Aunty kicked of the play, Aunty Doris refuses. They agree that Radha will stay in the play—but Appachi will drive her—after she comes back from Jaffna. After the next rehearsal, Doris explains her reasoning to Radha: she wants her to "get to know this boy" and "be sure you are making the right decision." In fact, Doris regrets her own marriage to a Tamil man—her Burgher family never forgave her and left Sri Lanka in secret, never to be heard from again. Since her husband has died, she is completely alone, and she wonders if her sacrifices were worth it, and whether it really matters in the long run to marry the person one loves. So she thinks Radha should use the rehearsals to consider if she wants to marry Anil. Radha agrees to "think about it carefully."

On the way home, Arjie imagines Aunty Doris's experience losing her family, and he realizes that this is "a warning to [Radha]" and she might be kicked out of the family if she does marry Anil. Afraid of losing his only friend, Arjie holds Radha's hand.

This time, Ammachi involves the whole family in her campaign to shame Radha Aunty; she again punishes Radha for something Radha has not actively chosen, and Arjie's discomfort probably testifies to his recognition that Radha's punishment is fundamentally unmerited. Although she plays a relatively minor role throughout the book, Mala Aunty appears as the voice of reason here; while she may agree with Ammachi's goals in chastising Radha, Mala clearly disagrees with her cruel method.



Radha reveals that she has developed feelings for Anil not only despite the social barrier separating them but in fact because of it: the very impossibility of their love is what draws them to pursue it. Although Mala clearly understands enough to listen patiently to her sister, she also voices the perspective of the family as a collective, taking into account the likely social ramifications of a relationship as well as Ammachi's unjustifiable but consequential prejudice. Although Radha (like Arjie) now thinks in terms of romance, Mala tries to remind her that romance is fleeting and replaceable, while family and reputation are not.



Mala Aunty agrees with Ammachi's opposition to Radha and Anil's budding relationship while Aunty Doris does not offer definitive advice, but both look past Ammachi's demands to voice their own, more logical and measured concerns. Doris clearly sees Radha as a version of her past self, about to throw her family away for love on a whim; in this sense, she and Mala Aunty offer the same lesson about the irreplaceability of family. Doris does not regret her love for her husband or attempt to justify her family's prejudice, but she sees that sometimes an unreasonable and unjust situation requires a person to suspend their ideals for the sake of social survival.



In addition to speaking to Radha, Aunty Doris's warning also more subtly speaks to Arjie, who has clearly learned that his gender expression (and eventually sexuality) might threaten his position in his family and community. With these warnings, Arjie starts to lose his previous blind faith in romance.



Radha Aunty continues meeting with Anil in secret—even Arjie’s bathroom break at the zoo turns into a rendezvous at the “elephant-dance arena.” When she rewards Arjie by promising him the job of “chief pageboy,” he realizes she is now thinking “about her wedding to Anil and not to Rajan.” When they return to the rest of the family after an hour and claim they got lost, Mala Aunty is suspicious and Radha Aunty tells Janaki that she and Anil will marry after she returns from Jaffna.

After Radha Aunty leaves for Jaffna, Arjie has to go to the play rehearsals alone, but feels “lost and alone” and does not know who to talk with. He decides to stand by Anil and soon takes a liking to him; Anil is genuinely friendly, in a “casual and effortless” way that most men cannot match.

One day before Radha Aunty is set to return from Jaffna, the family hears of violent unrest there. Ammachi arranges a police escort to take Radha to the train station. After rehearsal, however, Amma does not come get Arjie, and Anil gives him a ride to Ammachi and Appachi’s house, where the whole family is gathered. Diggy reports that “Radha Aunty’s train was attacked” by Sinhalese people and that she was “hurt and everything” because of the trouble. They worry that the violence will spread to Colombo. When they learn that Anil gave Arjie a ride, Ammachi and the aunts are horrified, but Amma goes and thanks Anil before explaining that a family friend managed to save Radha when the train was attacked. But she also tells Anil that he will not be able to see Radha when she returns.

Back in the house, Arjie notices a photo of Ammachi’s father, who was murdered in the 1950s riots, and realizes that this violence might be “happening all over again.” At lunch, everyone is silent and only listens to the radio, which reports a curfew in Colombo. During the meal, Radha Aunty arrives and reveals that, under her scarf, “the right half of her face [is] dark and swollen.” Ammachi embraces her, but Radha does not hug back. Arjie scarcely recognizes her.

Like much young love, Radha and Anil's relationship only takes off once it is forbidden; as Radha's friend and chief alibi, Arjie becomes privy to all her secrets. While he previously felt outraged at the injustices against Radha, after contemplating Mala Aunty and Aunty Doris's warnings, Arjie has no clear sense of which would be the ideal wedding—the one between Radha and Rajan that he used to imagine, or the one that would fulfill Radha and Anil's newfound love but threaten the family.



For the first time, Arjie develops his own relationship with Anil and begins to understand what Radha sees in him. This is the same thing Arjie sees in Radha: an unpretentious honesty that few Sri Lankan adults seem to share.



In a horrifying recapitulation of the violence that ended Ammachi's father's life, the attack against Radha is all the more horrifying because it is random and unpredictable; it demonstrates that ethnic tensions can boil over at any moment in Sri Lanka. As when she reluctantly forces Arjie to play with the boys in the first chapter, Amma takes a middle ground by meeting Anil outside: she recognizes that he means well and has nothing to do with the attacks, but also that the irrational social pressures to follow will likely draw a final and resolute line between him and Radha.



Now that he understands Sri Lanka's ethnic turmoil, Arjie begins to feel the constant, low-level fear that he realizes the adults in his family have endured all their lives. Of course, this ends up foreshadowing the rest of the book, in which ethnic violence emerges as a driving force in the Chelvaratnam family's lives. The attack has clearly left Radha with an emotional wound as well as her physical one; it remains to be seen whether she can recover her previous carefree, independent idealism, or whether her experience will forever turn her pragmatic or cynical.



Ammachi leads Radha Aunty to her bed, where Mala Aunty, who is a doctor, examines her wound and determines that she will not need stitches. Arjie goes to get her a new bandage but stops in the dining room to hear Mr. Rasiah, the family friend, describe Radha's assault at the Anuradhapura train station. Arjie brings Radha the bandage and contemplates "how people could be so cruel, so terrible."

Anil shows up at the house, asking for Radha Aunty, whom Kanthi Aunty says is not at home. Ammachi and Kanthi yell at Anil and curse the Sinhalese. Hearing the whole episode, Radha breaks down and cries for a long time.

Because there was already violence near Arjie's grandparents' house, his immediate family brought Ammachi, Appachi, and Radha Aunty to stay with them for a while. One night, Arjie and Sonali wake up to find Radha Aunty looking out the door into the garden. She is more serious and harsh than before.

Over the next week, riots spread and stop, but Colombo remains safe. At play rehearsal on Saturday, Anil asks Radha Aunty about her wounds and then explains that he chose not to visit again because of Kanthi Aunty's obvious anger. The play's whole cast crowds around to hear Radha's story. That day, she is standing in for the part of a concubine, and Anil's role is to play the guard who captures her. He and the other guards throw her onto the stage, but they do it too hard and hurt her. She avoids him for the rest of the scene, and he starts to look at her differently.

After the next scene, Arjie and Anil notice that Radha Aunty is gone, and then find her crying outside the classroom. She sends Arjie back and returns, without Anil, while Aunty Doris is cleaning up after the rehearsals. Radha asks Aunty Doris to let her quit the show, and Arjie realizes that Radha and Anil can never be together after the attack. They take the bus home.

Radha's fate forces Arjie to cope with profound moral evil for the first time; far beyond his sense of injustice at getting kicked out of the girls' group or watching Ammachi retaliate against Anil's family, here he sees that senseless suffering can occur without any apparent purpose, precipitating circumstance, or even discernible perpetrator.



Although they apparently think they are defending Radha, Kanthi and Ammachi's behavior leaves her again caught in the middle of a conflict she has not asked for, forced to watch someone she cares about get hurt, supposedly for her own good.



Radha Aunty's trauma has now made an enduring imprint on her personality; Arjie sees how the conflict injures even its survivors and begins to understand the lasting toll of violence.



Having already lost much of her optimism and innocence, Radha's relationship with Anil now hangs in the balance; the overarching questions are, first, whether she can bring herself to continue pursuing romantic love, and secondly, whether the attacks might change her mind about marrying a Sinhalese man. When he throws her onto the stage, Radha is forced to act out the same kind of physical violence she just genuinely suffered, and likely to relive her trauma—just as Anil's presence and rigidly pro-Sinhalese family are likely to make her endlessly relive her attack.



Although she has certainly reached a breaking point, it is still unclear whether Radha feels genuinely repulsed by Anil or simply realizes that it is impossible for her to be with him. In quitting the show, she is not only deciding once and for all to end things with Anil, but also giving up on the whimsy, fantasy, and imagination that her participation in theater partially represents.



Radha Aunty and Rajan soon get engaged, and on the night of their engagement, Radha is beautifully made up and dressed, finally looking like Arjie imagined when he first heard about her return from America. The Nagendras arrive; Rajan is handsome and Arjie realizes that, although he will finally be able to participate in the wedding he had hoped for, “there would be something important missing.” As Rajan gives Radha her ring, Arjie slips away to the back garden and remembers playing bride-bride just months before. As he listens to Janaki work in the kitchen, he realizes that he can no longer truly believe “that if two people loved each other everything was possible.”

In the end, Radha Aunty is ultimately poised to fulfill the fantasy on which Arjie was fixated at the beginning of chapter: her marriage to Rajan. But ironically, in the process of getting there, she has actually broken Arjie's faith in romantic love, the foundation of his wedding fantasy in the first place. In addition to learning about the evils of racism and random violence (especially when paired together), Arjie also learns that love seldom looks like it does in storybooks. Arjie seems to still believe in love, but not necessarily in its power to overcome external social constraints. In her own roundabout way, Radha ends up following Aunty Doris's advice, choosing stability over romance in the faith that love will eventually develop either way.



3. SEE NO EVIL, HEAR NO EVIL

Arjie's parents begin going with their friends Sena Uncle and Chithra Aunty to the Oberoi Supper Club. On Saturdays, they all take the children (including Chithra's son Sanath) for American food, and then to Sri Lanka's “first American-style supermarket,” which reportedly emerged from what Appa called “the end of socialism.” On one Sunday, they go to the beach, but Arjie is confused when they neither bring a picnic basket nor stop in their usual place, but instead stop at a partially finished hotel called the “Paradise Beach Resort.” After they go inside and meet the manager, Sonali tells Arjie that the resort is *theirs*, and Appa confirms that he has quit his job at the bank to become a part owner of this new hotel.

The beginning of this chapter reveals two important, mutually reinforcing forces that underlie much of Arjie's experience but remain invisible for much of the book: market changes in Sri Lanka and the Chelvaratnam family's economic class. Despite the discrimination and violence Arjie's family faces, the Chelvaratnams are also very wealthy and can access myriad privileges that most Sri Lankans cannot. However, as Arjie later learns, the family's wealth also implicates it in certain injustices.



As Arjie's family grows wealthier, Appa goes to Europe, and he asks the children what they want him to bring back. Ever since Amma's elderly and traditional sister, Neliya Aunty, moved in with the family, Arjie has been reading her old copy of *Little Women*, so he asks his father for the three sequels (even though Appa chastises him for reading “a book for girls”). Amma starts spending more and more time going out with Chithra Aunty and is thrilled about their lives.

Unfortunately, Appa's newfound wealth just makes him even more distant as business draws his attention away from the family. Arjie's fascination with [Little Women](#) shows that he continues to pursue traditionally feminine interests; and Appa still both sees this as a source of shame for the family and attempts to shame Arjie into changing, without considering this behavior's effect on his son.



“As if to contradict [Amma’s] optimism,” the family soon has a visitor: Daryl Uncle, an old family friend who speaks perfect Sinhalese. After 15 years away from Sri Lanka, Daryl—a white Burgher—returns on vacation, on a day when Arjie is sick with fever. Everyone is glad to see him until Amma comes home—she reacts to his presence as though she is dreaming, and then soberly asks him to sit. Arjie is confused at his mother’s reaction. When she returns outside and awkwardly greets Daryl, Arjie realizes that he does not know about her life before she had kids. Amma later introduces Diggy and Sonali to Daryl Uncle—they are also confused at first—and Arjie’s fever worsens that night. While taking care of him, Amma and Neliya Aunt chat about Daryl, which makes Arjie realize he had some sort of fight with Amma in the past.

In the morning, Arjie’s fever and Amma’s concern evaporate. But Daryl Uncle visits soon again, and he asks Arjie about his book. Arjie is embarrassed to show him *Little Women*, but Daryl reveals that it “used to be one of [his] favorite books.” Daryl promises to look for the sequels to [Little Women](#) in a bookshop later that day. Amma comes out, insists that Arjie is sick again, and sends him back inside. But Arjie soon hears the adults talking about politics—there is an ethnic war between the Sinhalese and the Tamil Tigers in Jaffna, and Daryl, who is a journalist, has come to investigate claims of torture and government abuses, especially using the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Neliya Aunt comes into the room, and Arjie calls out to Amma in an attempt to stop her argument with Daryl Uncle. Amma sends Arjie to bed and, confusingly, invites Daryl to stay for lunch. After this lunch, Neliya Aunt says she hopes Daryl will not return, but Amma laughs her off, because “it’s not as if he were a stranger.” Arjie grows more and more confused about his family’s relationship with Daryl, whom he has decided he likes. That night, when his fever worsens again, Arjie asks Amma about Daryl Uncle, and Amma explains that they simply “have different opinions” about politics in Sri Lanka. She is surprised to hear that Arjie likes him. That night, Arjie gets sicker and sicker, and then Daryl visits again—this time, with the three sequels to *Little Women*. Amma is wearing “an expression on her face [Arjie] had never seen before.”

Like Doris Aunt, Daryl Uncle is a burgher who straddles the boundaries between European and Sri Lankan identities, but is largely removed from the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict and, like Arjie’s family, has significant social and economic privilege in relation to most Sri Lankans. In watching Amma react to Daryl’s arrival, Arjie begins to come to terms with adults’ fallibility, vulnerability, and individuality. Rather than simply seeing her as an authority figure, when Arjie realizes that a man unknown to him has played a significant part in her life, he begins to see that Amma has grown and changed throughout her life. In other words, Arjie is beginning to see adults as morally complex, with the same kind of internal struggles that he himself faces.



Like Radha Aunt, Daryl proves empathetic, generous, and understanding; he wants to hear Arjie’s perspective and develop an individual relationship rather than just treat him like any other child. Daryl’s interest in [Little Women](#) is important for Arjie, because it suggests that his interest in literature traditionally for women does not necessarily exclude him from being a man. And Daryl is also unique to Arjie because he promises to actually help address Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict; his sense of ethical obligation ultimately proves an important inspiration for Arjie. However, his planned story also shows that the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict is not merely about dueling ethnic groups: it is also about the government actively repressing the Tamil minority.



Still in the dark about the family’s relationship to Daryl, Arjie recognizes not only that Amma’s experience has been much deeper (and probably more interesting) than he previously imagined, but also that he is resolutely blocked out of some of that experience because of his youth. To the reader, it becomes increasingly apparent that Neliya Aunt’s suspicion towards Daryl stems from a sense of protectiveness toward Amma (her sister), and that Daryl and Amma were more than just casual acquaintances in the past.



Mala Aunty confirms that Arjie has hepatitis, and during the subsequent two weeks he is extremely ill. During this time, Daryl Uncle is sporadically present and helps care for him. When Arjie comes to his senses, he notices that Amma and Daryl's relationship has changed, and that Amma seems to be going to work. But Neliya Aunty seems angry at Amma, Sonali is now "secretive, as if she had done something very bad," and Diggy is cold and mechanical, fond of shooting a tin can with his air gun. Soon, Neliya and Diggy turn against Daryl, and Diggy starts shooting the neighboring house's chickens. It is a sweltering May, and to Arjie's delight, Amma decides to take him to the hills for a holiday.

Amma and Arjie rent a beautiful bungalow in the hills. They pass the first day quietly, enjoying the view of tea plantations and their freedom from the rest of the family. The next day, Daryl Uncle shows up, and Arjie resents "no longer hav[ing] Amma's entire attention." But Daryl sees and acknowledges Arjie's concern, and the boy starts to feel slightly better. That night, Daryl explains the history of Sri Lanka's Burghers, many of whom left in the 1950s because they did not speak Sinhala, which the government declared the only national language. Daryl explains that they could not simply intermarry with Sri Lankans, and he revealingly glances at Amma, while Arjie starts to think of him as a better father than his own—more personable, not to mention more attractive.

At the hill bungalow, Amma is happier than ever because of Daryl's presence—but, shortly before they are set to return to Colombo, Daryl and Amma get into a huge argument because of his plans to visit Jaffna, where he feels obligated to go to cover the war, even though he loves her. Suddenly, Arjie understands Daryl and Amma's relationship, and he feels like "an unwitting accomplice" in their affair. He worries that the community will shun his family if his parents separate and dreams about his family being the characters from *Little Women*. The next morning, Daryl leaves early, and Arjie and Amma head back to Colombo, where they meet Sonali, Diggy, and Neliya Aunty—although Arjie feels "a terrible sense of distance." At home, Amma finds and hides a letter from Appa.

Although Arjie is mostly left in the dark about what happens during this time, it is clear that Daryl's presence transforms the family's dynamic, alienating and frustrating Diggy, Sonali, and Neliya Aunty. Daryl seems to be taking over a paternal role, challenging Appa's authority over the family and perhaps stealing too much of Amma's attention. Diggy's violent outbursts, consistent with his unemotional masculinity, suggest that he is trying to make sense of this new paternal figure who seems to have replaced the father who virtually abandoned the family.



Arjie begins to struggle with ambivalent feelings toward Daryl, who intrudes on his one-on-one vacation with Amma but also continues to be attentive and thought-provoking. He explains the circumstances that kept him and Amma apart, which also clearly parallel the situation of Sinhalese and Tamils in the present. Arjie's fleeting attraction towards Daryl hints at his impending sexual awakening, and his fantasy of a more fulfilling family shows that he clearly understands what Amma sees in Daryl Uncle—he is everything the cold, distant, managerial Appa is not.



As the young Arjie finally realizes that Daryl and Amma are definitely and openly having an affair, he learns why the rest of his family grew so frustrated and cold during his period of illness. This time around, Daryl and Amma's love is not only transgressive because it is interracial, but also because it threatens the family's integrity. This holds an interesting mirror to both Radha's relationship with Anil and Arjie's own "funniness," both of which his family sees as threats to their status and wholeness. While he felt it wrong for Radha to leave Rajan (the man she was duty-bound to be with) for Anil (the man she seemed to genuinely love), now Arjie sees a parallel situation from another angle, the perspective of someone affected by the outcome of a relationship. Amma's worry about Daryl visiting Jaffna suggests that she is worried about his safety and raises questions about whether work was truly his primary motivation for visiting Sri Lanka.



Arjie returns to school, and Amma comes with Daryl to pick him up on the first afternoon. There is clearly a tension between them, and Amma drops Daryl at the railway station. He says he will be gone for a week; Arjie and Amma go home and try not to talk about him. Amma starts going out with Chithra Aunty again, and Daryl does not return. They hear news of violent riots in Jaffna, and Arjie wonders if Daryl might still be there. Amma insists that he “can’t be” and, pained and shaking, says she is “sure he’s back” by now.

The next afternoon, Amma reports that she wants to check on Daryl Uncle, since the police have just burned down the Jaffna library. At Daryl’s house, the servant boy Somaratne says Daryl has not returned, nor has he left a note; Amma looks around for one, and she finds Daryl’s room completely disheveled, with drawers and clothes everywhere. They rush away and tell Neliya Aunty, who insists “there’s no proof that anything has happened” and warns them against talking to the police. Clearly, however, Neliya is also concerned.

The following day, Amma takes Arjie to the police station. When she says her friend is a “white man,” the officer “immediately changed” and started taking her seriously, giving her a form to fill out. The officer’s superior came and addressed her in English, then went into a back room for some time before returning to assure Amma that they would check on Daryl Uncle’s house and call her to Jaffna.

When they meet at Daryl’s house, the police assure Amma that “it’s simply a case of break and enter,” and she reveals Daryl’s real occupation and her real fear about his fate. Other police officers bring in the servant boy Somaratne, whom they found running away and they declare “the culprit” responsible for the state of Daryl’s room. The boy and Amma both insist that he is innocent, but the police take him in for questioning, accidentally knocking off his sarong and exposing him in the process. Arjie wonders whether it was right to trust the police.

Daryl and Amma’s conflict reveals that Daryl chooses to put his sense of moral and professional duty above the love that he and Amma have apparently rekindled behind Appa’s back. The new stories of violence in Jaffna confirm Amma’s worst fears and recall Radha Aunty’s horrifying assault on the train.



The burning of the Jaffna library, a 1981 watershed moment in the build-up to Sri Lanka’s Civil War, signals that the government has begun to openly persecute and deliberately stoke animosity toward Tamils—precisely what Daryl feared and had gone to investigate. While the state of Daryl’s room understandably makes Amma and Neliya afraid, they also recognize that the very fact of government abuses means they should be cautious about involving the police.



As Amma expected and contrary to their ostensible mission, the Sri Lankan police are clearly neither impartial nor interested in justice; Daryl’s social and economic privilege as a white burgher opens doors, but also may lead the reader to wonder what kind of treatment someone with little social capital (and perhaps even little knowledge of Sinhala or English) would face at the police station.



Just as Amma begins to trust the police who pretend to take Daryl’s disappearance so seriously, it becomes clear that they are more interested in finding an easy explanation than a valid one. The poor servant boy, Somaratne, becomes a scapegoat, and Arjie and Amma have to cope with their accidental complicity in this injustice. Just as Arjie has experienced within his family, the most marginalized and vulnerable people often receive unjust punishment in such contested circumstances.



Appa calls that night, and Amma talks to him “as if nothing unusual had happened in our lives.” The next morning, the same police officer proudly tells Amma that he “play[s] squash with [her] husband from time to time.” The police have not found Daryl, he reports, but they have confirmed that the servant boy, Somaratne, was stealing from him. Amma returns home distraught, worried that Appa will find out about her concern for Daryl. That night, Amma receives a phone call and learns that “they’ve found Daryl’s body.”

In the morning, Amma and Neliya Aunty have to go identify Daryl Uncle’s body, which “washed ashore on the beach of a fishing village.” Arjie struggles to process the shock of Daryl’s death, as everyone else around him continues their normal routines. Amma and Neliya Aunty return and explain that Daryl will be cremated and sent to Australia. Amma and Arjie both only begin to recognize that he is really gone, and Amma explains that “he was killed, then thrown into the sea.” But officially, “they have witnesses who saw him go swimming.” Amma insists that they must do something: “this is a democracy, for God’s sake.”

That night, Amma falls sick with a headache and laments that she did not save Daryl Uncle, who turned out so disfigured she could only identify him from his wallet. She wonders why she did not believe what he said about the fighting, and why she was so optimistic about the new government. She is still in shock, and Arjie wishes she could cry, which “would have seemed more natural.” After another dream about Little Women, Arjie awakens to finally understand Daryl Uncle’s death.

Amma’s apparent normalcy on the phone belies her dual loyalty to both Appa and Daryl and evidences to Arjie her capacity for deception. Similarly, the police chief’s jovial mood is doubly disturbing. First, his capacity for such normalcy after so cruelly abusing Somaratne and while the family is worried about Daryl’s disappearance (in which he may be involved) suggests that he does not process the personal consequences of Sri Lanka’s violence, including his own actions. Secondly, his friendliness to Appa suggests to Arjie’s family that the same people responsible for much of the inhuman cruelty in Sri Lanka are seemingly innocuous members of their own privileged class. What is serious for the victims of violence is casual for its perpetrators.



Daryl’s death is particularly distressing precisely because he was trying to heal Sri Lanka’s ethnic divide and force the government to act fairly, and then became evidence of the government’s profound commitment to perpetuating injustice in targeted ways. Just as Radha gets chastised by her family, Daryl suffers from the cruelty of those who declare themselves moral authorities and faces unpredictable, unmerited, agonizing punishment precisely because he embraced honesty and vulnerability in his quest to make democracies do the same. And yet the government’s shoddy cover-up suggests that the government is more interest in buying plausible deniability than actually convincing anyone that Daryl really might have died in an accident.



The shock of Daryl’s death hits Amma so profoundly because she had encouraged him not to go to Jaffna; although she strongly opposed his plan to go in the first place, now she begins to blame herself for not trying harder, even though Daryl was dedicated to going the whole time. Consumed by guilt, confusion, and self-loathing, Arjie notes, she is too traumatized to grieve.



By the next afternoon, Amma has a plan: they go to see Q.C. Uncle, an elderly civil rights attorney and old friend of Appachi. When she explains what happened and mentions Daryl's name, Q.C. Uncle recalls that she "wanted to marry [Daryl] at one time" until her parents sent her away to stay with Q.C. for three months. Q.C. says that, were he still practicing law, he "wouldn't be doing civil rights," which is "too dangerous." There is nothing to be done; one must only "be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Amma's focus, Q.C. insists, should be saving her family from harm. As they leave, he tells them how to tell if the government is tapping their phone, by listening for a click.

On their way home, Amma grapples with anxiety and decides to return to Daryl's house to see what became of the servant boy, Somaratne. When they arrive, a woman tells them that the boy has gone back to his village, and after Amma mentions the boy's mother's heart problem, the woman tells her the name of the village. Back at their home, Amma hears the click Q.C. Uncle warned her about when she calls Mala Aunty. That night, she tells Arjie she is going to find Somaratne, the servant boy, in his village. She agrees to let Arjie accompany her.

During their drive to Somaratne's village, Amma and Arjie notice a blue car following them. Fortunately, when they pull over, it continues past them. They reach the village and ask for Somaratne, then make their way to his mother, who explains that he is not there, but appears to be lying, and yells that they (as "rich folk from Colombo") do not care about her son. Amma insists that they just want Somaratne to help them identify Daryl Uncle's murderer, but Somaratne's mother says they will end up sacrificing her son in the process, and accuses them of seeing village people as "not even human beings." The woman reveals that the army killed her first son in 1971, and that Somaratne returned home with a paralyzed arm. She assumes Amma and Arjie are just there to injure him further.

Q.C. Uncle's unfortunate advice highlights Amma's continued, forced choice between ideals and safety—her belief in justice and love for Daryl, on the one hand, and the practical consequences of speaking out for herself, her community, and her family, on the other. Neither is anywhere close to a morally perfect option, but both justice for Daryl and loyalty to the family are important ethical obligations for Amma, but when they conflict, she has no choice but to put her family's safety first.



Despite her promises to Q.C. Uncle, Amma starts investigating Daryl's death on her own, although the click on her phone line (indicating that the government is surveilling her calls) appears as almost a direct punishment for her freedom. Her familiarity with the story of Somaratne's mother also reminds the reader how intimate she was with Daryl and how much of their past will forever remain off-limits to Arjie.



In her crazed effort to find out about Daryl's death, Amma completely overlooks the way other Sri Lankans are deeply wounded by systematic injustices, similar to the one that killed Daryl and perpetuated by a government that sees itself as charged to protect only a certain subset of Sri Lankans. In fact, the villager's reaction shows that Amma and Arjie are part of the wealthy capitalist class responsible for perpetuating these injustices against the rural poor. Although it is unclear how much Arjie empathizes with the villagers, this encounter could allow him to see that others legitimately view him as an enemy, and that his family's own suffering is not unique and does not justify putting others in danger (even if unintentionally).



As Arjie and Amma head back to their car, the villagers start throwing stones at them. One hits Arjie and he explodes at his mother, calling her selfish for choosing this trip and blaming her for “nearly [getting us] killed.” In turn, Amma accuses Arjie of not listening. On the highway back, Amma pulls over to cry, and Argue gazes out at the mountains, whose “beauty and serenity seemed [out of place] with all that had happened.” They return home around sunset, and Neliya Aunty explains that an Australian journalist from Daryl’s paper came looking for Amma during the day—but warns her against involving herself in whatever he is looking for. Neliya and Arjie both worry about Amma: “where will all this end?” That night, Arjie dreams about his mother pushing him to run into a huge wave instead of away from it.

The next day, the same journalist from the *Sydney Morning Star* stops by to see Amma. She gives him little information about Daryl’s project or his death, and he leaves. Arjie feels “a terrible sadness” at seeing his mother lie and realizing that “Daryl Uncle’s killer would never be brought to justice.” He reads one of his favorite chapters from *Little Women* but loses faith in its message and its neat universe “where good was rewarded and evil punished.” He wonders how the family will try to adapt back to normalcy when Appa returns. And he does return the next week—they throw a party in his honor, and Amma puts on a beautiful sari and cheery attitude, but Arjie sees her intermittently show exasperation. In the party’s flickering lamps, everything there “seem[s] insubstantial.”

4. SMALL CHOICES

A deceased friend’s widow writes to Appa from Jaffna, asking his help employing their son Jegan, who had been working with the Gandhiyam movement. She includes a childhood blood pact that Appa signed with her husband, in which they promised to “always protect each other and each others’ familys.” Appa voices his regret at making the pact and worries about the boy’s involvement in the Gandhiyam movement, whom he worries are “in league with the Tigers.” He decides he will ask the boy about politics before hiring him. As Appa walks away, Arjie considers how distant but powerful he always had been to the children.

Arjie’s outrage at his mother reveals that he continues to grow out of his childhood faith in her infallibility. Amma’s conversations with Neliya and C.Q. Uncle look remarkably like Radha’s conversations with Aunty Doris and Mala Aunty in the previous chapter; both struggle to reconcile their ideals with their commitments to family. Arjie’s dream represents his fear and dismay at realizing that Amma has put him in danger (especially during the visit to Somaratne’s village). Like all children, he begins to lose faith that she will always be able to protect him.



Despite her instinct to help avenge Daryl’s death and hold accountable the evildoers responsible for it, Amma ultimately takes Neliya and Q.C. Uncle’s advice and chooses to put her family’s safety above her moral ideals. Like both of the previous chapters, then, this one ends on a tragic note: Amma is forced by poor circumstances to choose between two unquestionable goods (justice and her family). In order to save one, she has to sacrifice the other. While Arjie thereby learns that good does not always triumph over evil, this does not mean he gives up on pursuing what is good altogether; rather, he comes to understand the sacrifices and dangers inherent in pursuing moral ideals, which sometimes people can’t afford to put ahead of concrete commitments.



Out of the blue, Appa suddenly finds himself morally responsible for someone he has never met because of a promise he may not even remember making. While he is clearly willing to make good on his promise, he feels that it will conflict with his self-interest and turns Jegan into an ethical dilemma before even meeting him. Arjie’s note about Appa’s usual distance, however, suggests that this sense of duty might be his way of being: Appa does only what he must, but often falls out of the picture in matters concerning anything less than necessity.



Jegan Parameswaran comes to the family's house a few days later. While Neliya Aunty goes inside to fetch Appa, Arjie "smile[s] shyly" at Jegan and explains that he and Sonali are picking snails out of the garden. When Appa comes out, he is initially serious and then astonished at Jegan's resemblance to his father. Jegan explains that his father often talked about Appa and was proud of his friend. Appa tells Jegan he will try to "arrange something" without even waiting for Jegan to talk about his past—and, of course, without even mentioning politics.

Instead, Amma is the one who asks Jegan about the Gandhian movement—which resettles Tamils uprooted by the riots—and then flatly asks if they are "connected with the Tigers." Appa interrupts, yelling, "no politics." Jegan says some are "sympathetic," Amma asks if Jegan is, and Appa suggests that even *he* might be "if the Tigers had such fine chaps [as Jegan] in it." Jegan does not answer.

Arjie sits and watches Jegan, fixing his gaze on his muscles; although Jegan notices Arjie looking, he just smiles back, "as if to say that it was all right." In fact, Arjie has started paying attention to men's bodies and mannerisms, and even sees them in his dreams; he thinks this has to do with his own entry into puberty. At dinner, Appa apologizes to Jegan for never attending his father's funeral and recalls how close they were before he left to study in England. He decides to let Jegan stay in the empty room above the garage, and Arjie feels "an unaccountable joy" at the chance to be "in constant contact with him." Jegan moves in a few days later, and Diggy is excited to meet him. Arjie feels that "the place seemed to have become sacred by [Jegan's] presence."

After Jegan starts working with Appa, the two become "inseparable," even taking drinks together every evening. Arjie starts listening to their conversations from the verandah, and Appa soon starts revealing details from his own past, like a love affair with an English girl while he was in university, which flew in the face of Sri Lanka's social expectations. Some time later, Appa reveals that the other employees are taking issue with Jegan, but he shrugs it off.

Despite his promise to interrogate and test Jegan before hiring him, Appa is overcome with an uncharacteristic sentimentality about his old friend and completely changes his thinking. While his loyalty is admirable, his quick about-face raises the question of how reliable his promises are in the first place. Fortunately, however, he does not let politics get between himself and those important to him.



Recognizing that Appa might be missing something important by entirely giving up on politics, Amma butts into the conversation and asks what is on everyone's mind, likely out of concern that the family might become targets of government persecution. Appa's excessive flattery begins to make him look insincere, especially given that he usually hates the Tamil Tigers.



With Arjie's apparent crush on Jegan, the reader finally gets some indication that his longstanding femininity does in fact have something to do with his sexuality; Arjie seems excited to have Jegan around because he welcomes the attention and does not recoil at the prospect of being around someone queer. Jegan's presence also promises him a male role model besides his distant father and obnoxious brother Diggy. Diggy, of course, is also thrilled to have a potential older brother figure in the house.



Jegan's friendship with Appa gives Arjie a window into Appa's past and emotional life, just as Daryl Uncle's relationship with Amma allowed Arjie to see her as a complex and imperfect person. Appa's relationship with the English girl (which is also an obvious parallel to Amma and Daryl Uncle) shows that, despite his insistence on conformity, he, too, was willing to transgress social norms when it came to his own romantic life. He also does this with his children: Appa seems to be treating Jegan with far more attention and affection than he grants Diggy, Sonali, and Arjie.



Jegan also grows close to Arjie, recounting his time in the Gandhian organization and inspiring Arjie to live more purposefully. Over tea one night, Appa mentions Arjie's "certain tendencies" and suggests Jegan might help him "outgrow this phase." Arjie is horrified, but delighted to hear Jegan defend him.

One day, Arjie, Sonali, and Diggy see someone sticking a poster of a lamp on their wall—in the upcoming "referendum" (held to avoid a real election), voting for the "lamp" meant choosing to extend the existing government for six more years. Jegan and Appa come out to confront the man, who does not stop, and then Jegan grabs and holds him on the ground before tearing the poster off the wall, and then in half—all as the man complains he is destroying "government property." The man runs away and threatens, "you don't know who you're dealing with." The neighbors come outside and praise Arjie's family—the government has done the same thing, illegally putting up posters, all around Colombo. But Appa tells Jegan he "shouldn't have done that" because "these days it is necessary to be discreet." He may have endangered himself by "antagoniz[ing] the wrong people."

Appa promotes Jegan to take over his hotel inspection duty, and then brings him with the family for the next inspection. The hotel is in a small, poor town three hours from Colombo. After their inspection, Jegan and Appa invite Arjie to sit with them for their evening drink; Jegan mentions that he noticed a lot of the foreign men staying at the hotel spending time with young village boys. Appa laughs him off and says that it makes no sense for him "to stop it," and that the police are not around to do anything. But Jegan simply responds with "a stern expression."

Arjie worries that Jegan's relationship with Appa might undermine his relationship with Arjie, if Appa is using Jegan to try to manipulate his son. Like Daryl Uncle's affirmation of Arjie's interest in [Little Women](#), Jegan's defense of Arjie's effeminacy again proves that the social norms of masculinity can be circumvented, and do not exist with full force everywhere. In fact, Jegan helps show Arjie that norms should be changed, not obeyed: unlike Appa, Jegan puts his values first, and he encourages the young protagonist to do the same.



For the sake of historical context, it is worth noting that this referendum marked an important stage in the Sri Lankan government's shift from an ordinary democracy to the arguably deceptive, centralized, Sinhalese-run police state that fought the civil war. Accordingly, Appa's worry is not that Jegan is taking a wrong political stance—he certainly agrees that the referendum is an illegitimate power grab—but instead with the fact of taking a political stance at all. Like with Daryl Uncle's courageous but ultimately careless decision to go to Jaffna, this becomes a central ethical question throughout this chapter: is it necessary, worth it, or even safe to put one's political beliefs before one's personal safety and the safety of those one cares about? If not, how can a society effectively resist oppression, and will only the privileged end up saving themselves?



Appa's behavior raises two related moral questions: first, whether Jegan actually deserves his promotion, and secondly, whether there is any real justification for his supporting sex tourism—especially when its victims are young boys and most of all when he repudiates Arjie out of his intense homophobia. Appa seems to make exceptions to moral rules for himself, and Arjie now has the capacity to see that his family not only suffers from injustice, but also perpetrates it.



The next day, Arjie sees Jegan bring the manager to Amma and Appa's room at the hotel. Jegan complains that the manager has told him not to directly correct the staff; Appa sits Jegan down and explains that "that's the way we do things here." Jegan decides "it's a Tamil-Sinhala thing, isn't it?" and calls the policy "ridiculous," but Appa explains that the region is unstable—the hotel was nearly destroyed during the last riots because the community knew he, its owner, was Tamil. Another local hotel owner, the Banduratne Mudalali, is a "very anti-Tamil" Sinhala and ordered mobs to murder many Tamils during the last riots. Jegan is in danger, too, because people think he only got the position because he (like Appa) is Tamil. To succeed as a minority, he says, Tamils have to keep a low profile. Appa implores Jegan not to "spoil" his "bright future."

Arjie now sees "an immediate and frightening dimension" to the riots that were previously a distant worry. He remembers first hearing news about the violence in the rest of the country, but feeling relatively safe in Colombo. But the riots were sudden, and more could happen at any time.

Arjie calls Jegan over, and Jegan suggests they go for a walk on the beach, which he says reminds him of going with his schoolmates in Jaffna. Arjie mentions that he knows about the torture in Jaffna, and Jegan says he knows someone from the Gandhiyam movement who was tortured—and of whom Arjie reminds him. This friend migrated to Canada, while Jegan joined the Tamil Tigers—which Arjie is astonished to hear, but promises not to recount. Jegan has since quit, because he could not stand the Tigers' refusal to accept dissent. But he thinks the Tamils need their own state. He tells Arjie more about his friend, and Arjie "could tell that [Jegan] had loved him very much."

Arjie and Jegan grow closer; after they return to Colombo, they start going jogging every evening. (Diggy is jealous, which Arjie savors.) One day, Jegan mysteriously talks with two strange men on the track, whom he calls "old school friends." But he is clearly worried; there are also three other ominous men, one of them in an expensive tracksuit, and an official-looking car with uniformed men outside the track. Later, through the newspaper, Arjie learns that the man with the tracksuit is a Tamil government minister. On the next day, Jegan starts going to a different park.

Again, Appa tries to circumvent political issues—here, the tension between the hotel's Tamil leadership and Sinhala staff and community—rather than confronting them and following moral principles. At the same time, he has practical reasons for doing so, and while his lack of principles leads him to make many questionable decisions (including passing up many qualified Sinhalese staff members to give Jegan a promotion), this passage also makes it clear that Jegan's idealism is not sustainable in the real world. When Appa speaks about Jegan's "bright future," however, he is almost certainly thinking in terms of financial success, something unlikely to matter very much to Jegan.



In the past, Arjie has only ever seen the effects of ethnic violence—Radha Aunty's attack, the deaths of Ammachi's father and Daryl Uncle—from a distance. Now, for the first time, he sees that it is possible for him to actually experience it and begins to grapple with the uncertainty that underlies life in Sri Lanka (and drives his father's caution and conservatism).



Jegan's firsthand accounts give Arjie a window into the conflict that his parents have mostly kept secret from him; Arjie's affection for Jegan seems now to stem from the fact that Jegan treats him as an adult, even more than from his initial attraction to Jegan. Indeed, Jegan would never admit to Appa that he used to be a Tamil Tiger; his willingness to confide in Arjie shows that their relationship is genuine, and not merely the result of Appa's prompting or Jegan's sense of obligation. Finally, Jegan's love for his friend is a foil for Appa's love for Jegan's father; it helps Arjie understand the sense of deep obligation that binds Appa and Jegan, but also suggests that Appa may be wrong to think politics and personal relationships can be completely separated.



Jegan quickly becomes Arjie's closest friend and confidant since Radha Aunty many years before. For the first time Arjie beats Diggy at one of the rare things that matter to both of them—befriending Jegan—which challenges the family's clear and longstanding assumption that Diggy's masculinity makes him a better son. However, Jegan's suspicious behavior suggests that he may still be hiding important details about his political activities from Arjie's family.



After a few days, Arjie learns what was bothering Jegan. The police visit the family's house during the day, trying to talk to him. Arjie is distraught at this news, and when Jegan and Appa return from work, Appa asks if Jegan has ever been "connected with the Tigers." Jegan explains his history with them and Appa calls a friend in the police, who will "look into it" but advises them to show up at the police station, which would suggest Jegan's innocence. He tells Jegan not to worry, but also "not to mention this Tiger business."

After the family waits all evening for Jegan and Appa to return, Appa's car comes to the gate at night. Jegan is not there; Appa explains that Jegan is spending the night at the police station, but promises that this is "just routine stuff." They justified this through the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and Appa stops the family when they insist that Jegan is no terrorist: the two men he talked to at the racetrack were Tigers "planning to assassinate a prominent Tamil politician." He makes Arjie recount "exactly what [he] saw" that day. After, Amma declares that Jegan must be innocent, but Appa questions her and tells them "to get as little involved as possible," so nobody accuses them "of harboring a terrorist." He will not try and save Jegan because he has "a business to maintain" and must "be very careful."

The next morning, the newspaper reads: "KEY SUSPECT IN ASSASSINATION PLOT DISCOVERED." It is Jegan, and the article says he "resides with a well-known Tamil hotelier." Amma and Appa field phone calls all morning, and at lunch he explains that his office staff knows about the article—and the hotel staff soon will. He also found a note on his desk "accusing [him] of being a Tiger" and got hateful phone calls all day. And then, the police let Jegan go, without charges, later that day. Everyone asked how he was treated, but Appa told them to let him be in peace and Amma sent him upstairs for a bath—and Arjie to bring him a clean towel. Upstairs, Arjie finds Jegan crying, motionless, on the bed. Jegan tells Arjie to keep this a secret.

As they have their drink in the yard, Appa suggests that Jegan take a vacation to Jaffna, but Jegan says that "the best thing for me is hard work." Appa shows him the newspaper article and laments that the whole office read it, and "the Sinhalese staff [...] were silent," while everyone else offered words of support. Jegan asks if they can sue the newspaper, since he is innocent, and then asks if he is fired; Appa says he merely needs to take a vacation, but that Jegan can decide what he wants to do. Jegan decides to go right back to work, and on their jog that night, Jegan is strangely quiet and runs well ahead of Arjie, who "realize[s] that something had indeed happened at the office." At work, Jegan gets into an argument with an employee, but everyone—including Appa—sides against him.

Unsurprisingly, as Amma and Appa worried even before Jegan came into town, Jegan's past catches up with him; Appa initially seems steadfastly dedicated to helping extricate Jegan from his situation, but from the previous chapter (when Amma, Arjie, and Neliya Aunty attempted to learn about Daryl Uncle's death) the reader already knows better than to instinctively trust Sri Lanka's corrupt and anti-Tamil police force.



Astonishingly, although Appa threw out his political suspicions about Jegan the moment he arrived and appeared dedicated to defending him at the police station, he suddenly seems to lose all sense of loyalty to Jegan, whom he now treats as a threat to the family and—perhaps more importantly to him—his business. This further complicates Appa as a character, as he continues to look more and more self-serving, deceitfully flattering, and ethically unprincipled. At the same time, Arjie must confront the possibility that Jegan truly had lied to him, and that their apparently close relationship was somehow underlain by deception.



Jegan's release—under no less than the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act that would have let the government detain him for as long as they liked—means that there is no credible evidence against him. However, the media, not the truth, incurs the real and irreversible damage, which threatens to implicate Appa's business as well. Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict feeds on the priority of rumor over reality, and in retrospect Appa's warnings now seem to make perfect sense; he clearly understands that it is difficult to abide by principles when one has no choice but to deal with an irrational and unjust society.



Again, Jegan insists on what he knows is fair—his right to return immediately to work and force the newspaper to acknowledge the truth—instead of listening to Appa's pleas to manage his image and try to avoid conflict. The divisions within Appa's office show that Tamil-Sinhalese animosity easily crosses all social contexts, and while Appa trusts Jegan to make his own decisions, he is clearly no longer committed to backing Jegan in every circumstance. Jegan's arrest, then, was a watershed moment: it showed that Appa would continue to see a conflict between Jegan's interests and his family's, and that he would always prioritize the latter.



That night, Arjie hears Appa explaining the incident to Amma, who thinks he “should have taken Jegan’s side.” But Appa explains that “as Tamils we must tread carefully,” which is the only “realistic” thing to do. Amma laments that she no longer feels comfortable speaking Tamil in public, and Appa hopes that “once the government destroys these damn Tigers, everything will go back to normal.” But Amma thinks “these Tigers and their separate state” might actually make sense—she does not want her children to keep living in constant fear for the rest of their lives. Arjie realizes this might have something to do with what happened to Daryl Uncle.

After a week, it is time for Jegan’s inspection duty, and Appa goes with him to “discourage any dissension among the staff.” They end up bringing the whole family along. During the day, everyone seems perfectly cordial to Jegan. At night, they walk by some drunk students on their way to a monumental rock, but Chithra Aunty insists there is no trouble, and they encounter none until their way back, when one man calls Jegan “Tiger” and throws a bottle at them. They run back to the hotel and Amma recounts the incident, first to Appa, and then again to the hotel manager, who explains that the boys are relatives and friends of the Banduratne Mudalali. Appa asks Mr. Samarakoon to alert the night watchman. Amma is confused—Appa explains that, in the riots of 1981, the Banduratne Mudalali orchestrated “all the killings and burnings” of Tamils in the area.

After Appa’s explanation, Amma breaks the news that she has been considering immigrating to Canada or Australia, “for the sake of the children.” Appa refuses, insisting that Sri Lankans are treated like “nothing” abroad and that he would have no job opportunities beyond “a taxi driver or a petrol station man.”

Amma, like Jegan, wishes Appa would stand for his principles instead of trying to conform to a society already stacked against him. Appa, on the other hand, sees the very fact of society’s bias as a reason why his survival depends on conformity. For Amma, though, conflict seems to be inevitable, and perhaps even for the best—for her, this is precisely a reason why it does not matter whether or not Appa speaks his mind: no matter how much he tries to manage his image, he will never save himself from injustice (nevertheless, Appa is much more interested in success than in justice).



For the first time since his visit to Somaratne’s village, Arjie confronts a legitimate threat of physical violence. Even though he has clearly done nothing wrong and Jegan has been exonerated, news of the arrest has clearly spread and the whole family is considered guilty by association—not only with the people who were plotting the politician’s assassination, but also by virtue of being Tamil in the first place. The precedent for killings makes the danger all the more palpable.



Although Arjie’s family would obviously rather stay in Sri Lanka, Amma’s fears that the violence might worsen lead her to consider alternatives. It is important to note that Arjie’s family is well-connected and already has many members, like Radha Aunty, living abroad; they accordingly have an opportunity to immigrate available to few other Sri Lankans. But Amma and Appa’s conflict appears here as the conflict between acting for the sake of the children and acting for the sake of material wealth (Appa’s business success and job opportunities). Appa sees moving abroad as entering another society at its lowest rungs, trading safety for shame and ostracism that may be just as severe as the dangers they face at home.



Before dinner, Arjie, Diggy, and Sonali worry about whether they will be attacked. They eat solemnly and, afterward, see a crowd forming at Jegan's patio. In Sinhalese, the words "Death to all Tamil pariahs" are written on his window. Appa refuses to translate for a guest who asks what the graffiti means, and he tells everyone to return to their rooms, but the crowd does not disperse. Appa has the "guest-relations officer" explain that "it's just a prank," but people do not believe her at first, although they eventually leave. Inside, Jegan finds his belongings scattered around the room, and the manager Mr. Samarakoon declares that it was an "inside job." But he does not trust the police to help.

The guest-relations officer returns and declares that all the guests are leaving because they think the writing proves that "the hotel is going to be bombed tonight." Appa decides to "salvage the situation" himself and tells Jegan to move rooms. Later, the lead housekeeper comes by and asks for Appa, because none of the housekeepers is willing to wash off the writing: "if we do it, we might be in trouble next." Amma says she will do it herself and Arjie goes with her. She tells Jegan to pull himself together so the staff does not lose respect for him, but he replies that he is inevitably going to get fired anyway. At night, Sonali cannot sleep alone, so Arjie joins her, and they hope they will make it back to Colombo unscathed the next afternoon.

Appa does not come to breakfast, which is tense. They see him on his patio with a glass of whiskey, and Sonali reports that she saw Amma crying in her and Appa's room. They go to the beach and swim—it is beautiful but joyless, and when they return, Appa has not moved and is still holding his whiskey. Later, Arjie overhears Sena Uncle and Appa talk about firing Jegan and sending him abroad to the Middle East.

Arjie goes for a walk on the beach and is angry, "but at whom [he doesn't] know." He feels betrayed by his father but also understands that Appa was in a tough position because of his childhood pact with Jegan's father. He wonders how his and Jegan's relationship will progress after Jegan gets fired, and whether "he [would] become for me what his father had become to my father [...] a distant memory." He tells himself that he will not, and he realizes that he has had more honest conversations with Jegan than with anyone else.

The specific and targeted threat against Jegan, no doubt tied to the Banduratne Mudalali just like the bottle-throwing students, suggests that the hotel is reaching a breaking point because of local opposition to Jegan's presence; indeed, if Mr. Samarakoon is right and one of the staff is really responsible, then this suggests that Appa's organization, and not just his reputation, is beginning to fall apart from the inside. Again, Arjie's family finds nowhere to turn in a situation of injustice, since every institution—especially the police—is deeply affected by the same anti-Tamil bias that drove the crime.



Ultimately, Appa's worst fears come true: the controversy surrounding Jegan begins to threaten his business. Ironically, however, if one of the staff truly is responsible, then they are undercutting their own job—this illogic is one of the many ways in which intercommunal violence so often becomes self-defeating. Just as the police and Sinhalese community scapegoat Jegan—who specifically disavowed the Tamil Tigers for their violent methods, and yet is assumed to participate in them—now the hotel suffers unfairly because of something Appa has no role in precipitating.



Appa's morning of drinking illustrates the gravity of his dilemma: should he keep his oath to Jegan's father or punish the innocent Jegan in order to save himself? He is forced to choose between an ethical commitment and his livelihood; it is now clear that he cannot have both, and will unjustly victimize either Jegan or his own family.



Arjie's inability to direct his anger shows that what he is really angry at is the tragic character of the family's situation, the fact that they must choose the lesser of two undeserved evils and that he might have to lose one of his best friends in the process. It is telling that, as he surveys his feelings about Jegan, Arjie comes to dwell on Jegan's openness and honesty—something that Appa quite frankly lacks, and something that shows Arjie to put relationships above status, a person's genuine self over one's expectation of what they are or should be. It is a trait Jegan shares with Arjie's other role models so far, Radha Aunty and Daryl Uncle.



Back at the hotel, Arjie sees Jegan packing his things onto the car. Jegan dismissively mentions his firing, and Arjie mentions the possibility of working in the Middle East, but Jegan talks about “other alternatives” and tells Arjie, “you’re just a boy.” Jegan refuses to make eye contact. Furious, Arjie throws a rope at him and Jegan ignores him, ties his things to his car with the rope, and walks away. Arjie realizes they cannot be friends and begins to hate Jegan.

Although Arjie hopes to try to cheer Jegan up, and therefore show him that his firing should not sever their personal relationship, Jegan turns Appa’s decision against Arjie. In fact, Jegan’s response hurts Arjie most of all because it belittles him and suggests that their friendship was never equal, or about more than circumstance; although perhaps he cannot be expected to do so, Jegan does not recognize that both of Appa’s alternatives (firing him or sacrificing the business) were far from just or harmless.



Back in Colombo, Jegan avoids the family and then moves out the next day. Arjie asks Amma if he said anything before leaving, but she says he did not. Arjie is devastated that “Jegan had left without even saying goodbye.” Briefly jumping out of his remembered narrative, the adult Arjie interjects that “we would never see Jegan again.”

Jegan’s resentful, abrupt, and permanent exit ends another chapter on the same tragic, unfortunate note as the previous three: just as family pressures suffocated Arjie’s self-expression and Radha’s relationship, politics has cut Daryl’s life short and now done the same to Jegan’s new life in Colombo. In all these cases, characters are the victims of circumstance and prejudice, frustrated most of all because they lack the means to improve their situation—and, in the last three cases, become victims precisely because of their attempts to create understanding between the Tamils and Sinhalese.



During the government referendum, armed thugs led by a member of Parliament “stuff the ballot boxes with false ballots” when Amma and Appa go to vote. The government “wins,” meaning it gets to rule for six more years. That night, Amma brings up immigration again, but Appa refuses to consider it. Looking at Appa, Arjie feels he understands his father’s feelings. Appa skips dinner and drinks late into the night.

The outcome of the rigged referendum is no surprise, and only promises Sri Lanka’s Tamils another six years of repression and accelerating authoritarianism. And yet Appa’s reluctance to consider immigrating to another country suggests that, despite the blows his business and his conscience have suffered in this chapter, Appa retains faith in the possibility that life will improve in Sri Lanka.



5. THE BEST SCHOOL OF ALL

Just before the new school term, Appa declares that he is transferring Arjie to Diggy’s school, the Queen Victoria Academy, because it “will force [Arjie] to become a man.” Diggy clearly understands what Appa really means, and Arjie asks him later that day. Appa “doesn’t want you turning out funny,” Diggy says. When Arjie blushes, Diggy asks if he is “funny,” but soon changes the subject and tells him to be careful about the abusive and sadistic principal, whom everyone calls “Black Tie.” Black Tie beats children senseless for winking or licking their lips, and nobody complains because doing so is unmanly. Arjie grows terrified of Victoria Academy, and his only solace is knowing that Black Tie’s vice principal, Mr. Lokubandara, has political power and might take over his job. But Diggy says that Lokubandara is dangerous too, “a snake in the grass.”

At least to the reader, Appa’s motivations for transferring Arjie to Victoria Academy are thinly veiled, simply a new iteration of his attempt to make Arjie play cricket as a young child: he believes that sexuality and gender expression are reflections of the external environment rather than products of one’s internal disposition, desires, and creativity. And yet Diggy describes school’s insistent masculinity as something closer to a culture of cruelty, which (beyond highlighting the cruelty in Appa’s attempts to “convert” Arjie) simply calls into question the very value of the concept of masculinity as strength—including, apparently, the strength to tolerate pain and injustice without speaking out.



The first day of school, Arjie dons his new uniform with long trousers, unlike the shorts he used to wear and wishes he could return to. When he and Diggy arrive, he marvels at the school's ominous colonial building—Black Tie stands on the balcony, wearing an old British colonial topee hat and an old white suit. Arjie and Diggy pass boys playing rugby violently in the courtyard and head up to the classrooms, where the other boys are loud and tough. Diggy leaves Arjie in Sinhala class with a threatening boy named Salgado, who says Arjie is not welcome because he is Tamil (even though he does not speak Tamil and has always been in Sinhalese medium classes). Another boy, Shehan Soyza, points out that the bigoted Salgado is “always saying that Tamils should learn Sinhalese.” At Queen Victoria everyone uses last names, so Arjie is now “Chelvaratnam.”

Arjie sits next to Soyza, who points out the nail someone has planted on his chair and exchanges a shy glance with him. Arjie writes him a thank-you note, but Soyza does not acknowledge him again until much later, although Arjie stares at him frequently during class and decides he is attractive. Arjie also realizes that “Soyza had a certain power which gave him immunity from bullies,” a power that was not physical—his face “looked like it could easily be shattered”—but rather came from his confidence, daring, and long hair.

One day, while a prefect substitutes for a physical education teacher who recently left, Soyza goes to the bathroom for about 15 minutes and returns with rumpled clothing. After another week, Arjie watches Salgado and his posse drag Cheliah—a Tamil student—into a bathroom stall, presumably to beat him up. In the hallway, Arjie meets Soyza, who takes him to the playground and explains that Lokubandara lets Salgado and his friends “do whatever they like.” Soyza reveals that the whole school is “divided into two factions” between Lokubandara (who wants to make the school officially Buddhist, like most of the Sinhalese) and Black Tie (who is Buddhist but “want[s] the school to be for all races and religions”). Later the same day, Lokubandara visits Arjie's class, but—to Arjie's bafflement—seems innocuous and kind.

Queen Victoria Academy (as its name suggests) derives much of its prestige and draconian disciplinary practices from the colonial era, which Black Tie specifically alludes to through his clothing. This illustrates the strange paradox of post-colonial Sri Lanka: although the nation is proud of its independence from brutal, exploitative colonial rule, the relics of colonialism are still objects of fascination and imitation, and association with the former colonial government still confers status and power. While the Tamil-Sinhala divide is clearly stark at Victoria, the reader is again reminded that, far from a typical Tamil, Arjie has actually been surrounded by Sinhalese students and the Sinhala language his whole life. This, and Salgado's embarrassing contradiction, show that convenient narratives about ethnic differences have no basis in reality.



Soyza clearly has a unique, liminal place in the school: he is not an insider to any of the groups in Arjie's class, but everyone seems to respect him and keep a healthy distance. Unlike the rest of the boys, Soyza is neither competitive nor aggressive, but his confidence suggests that this is out of choice, not inability. In a sense, while he lacks the external, physical traits of conventional masculinity, he still has the bravery and moral strength that characterize it at its best.



Although he cannot explain Soyza's trip to the bathroom, the sight of Salgado bullying Cheliah suggests that Soyza might be suffering something similar. Fortunately, Arjie seems now immune to Salgado's cruelty, whether because of Soyza's protection or the simple fact that he speaks Sinhalese. The school's split between Black Tie and Lokubandara's factions is a clear metaphor for Sri Lanka's split as a whole—not only in terms of the Tamil-Sinhalese divide, but also with regard to the more fundamental question of who owns and belongs in the Sri Lankan nation.



After about two months, Arjie finally sees Black Tie, who visits class during “a rubber-band-and-paper-pellet fight.” Everyone pulls out their books and Soyza pins up his hair. When Black Tie walks in, he wears a sour frown under his topee hat, and he pulls Soyza aside because a lock of his hair was out of place. Black Tie smacks Soyza twice in front of the whole class and declares that “we will have discipline in this school.” He drags Soyza off and the other students speculate about whether the boy will end up among the group of students Black Tie has dubbed “the future ills and burdens of Sri Lanka.” After Black Tie and Soyza leave, Salgado runs to the front of the classroom, grabs another student, and imitates Black Tie’s slaps, which leave the whole class laughing.

At the end of the day, Black Tie releases Soyza with short hair cut in “jagged layers.” Soyza knows that there is nothing to be done and calls his condition “extremely funny.” Arjie, who waited alone for Soyza in class, suggests Soyza complain or tell his parents, but Soyza recoils in anger. Arjie touches him on the head, Soyza walks out, and Arjie follows him to the bicycle shed, where Soyza asks and then takes back a mysterious question: “What do you know about me?”

At physical training class the next morning, a new teacher writes a rhyming honor code about “the best School of all” on the board and makes each boy recite it in turn. Afterwards, he makes Arjie do it again, and then read a poem to the class. The teacher walks out and Salgado asks the prefect what just happened—the prefect explains that this old teacher, Mr. Sunderalingam, teaches English and drama, and likely wants “to rope [Arjie] into some play or other.”

In social studies class that day, a prefect and favorite of Black Tie nicknamed “the Angel of Death” (because he always delivers bad news) comes to bring Arjie to the principal’s office. Soyza is sitting outside; inside are Mr. Sunderalingam and Black Tie, who is now smiling and nearly bald without his hat. Black Tie hands Arjie two poems, which he is being asked to recite at a prize ceremony.

The classic image of schoolkids scrambling to hide their fight from a feared authority figure already hints at the extent of Black Tie’s power over his students; as Diggy had promised, he turns out to be needlessly and inexplicably cruel, singling out students for infractions with no consequence for the learning environment while ignoring great problems like systemic bullying. In fact, Salgado’s imitation of him suggests that one of the reasons Victoria Academy’s students seem so cruel is that their authority figures are modelling this behavior.



Soyza turns his jagged haircut, intended by Black Tie as a sign of the boy’s shame, into a sign of the school’s excesses. And yet Soyza’s violent reaction to Arjie’s attempts to help him show both that Black Tie’s cruelty truly has wounded him, and that—perhaps as a result of Victoria Academy’s hypermasculine culture—he feels unable to admit how he feels. Outside, Soyza declares that his newfound tension with Arjie symbolizes a deeper, unspoken understanding between them, but Arjie is baffled; it remains to be seen whether they are completely talking past each other, or Arjie understands something about Shehan Soyza without recognizing what he knows.



Again, Victoria Academy’s methods rely on teachers’ absolute authority over the students, who are not even told what they are being asked to do or why, but are instead merely expected to blindly obey Mr. Sunderalingam’s request. In fact, even the prefect does not take Sunderalingam seriously as soon as the man has left the room, which suggests that the culture of feigned absolute respect for authority actually breeds a fundamental disrespect towards others.



Ironically, although Arjie is one of Black Tie’s favorites and Soyza one of the “ills and burdens,” they both end up in the same place, which further underlines the way punishment, wrongdoing, and justice essentially have no connection to one another in Arjie’s universe. Arjie’s long-standing talent for performance and theater—from bride-ride to The King and I—finally wins him appreciation and status.



After school, Arjie tells Soyza about what happened in Black Tie's office, and then Diggy tells Arjie not to associate with Soyza, who is known for leaving class during free periods to have sex with the head prefect. Diggy tells Arjie not to win himself the same reputation. Arjie assumes Diggy must be lying and accuses him of doing so, but also thinks that Soyza's mysterious question from the day before—"what do you know about me?"—might be somehow related to this.

Arjie starts studying the poems he is supposed to recite, but has difficulty understanding them, especially because they valorize school, which he does not particularly like. In bed, he wonders how it would even be possible for two boys to have sex with each other.

The next afternoon, Arjie visits Black Tie for a practice run at reciting the poems. He runs into Soyza, still with the "ills and burdens," and briefly practices, forgetting the lines until Soyza calms him down. Black Tie comes back and decides to bring Soyza to his office with Arjie, then pull out his cane and order Soyza to stop Arjie for every mistake in his recitation. Arjie's mind goes blank and Soyza feeds him the first two lines; Black Tie accuses Arjie of never having learned the poems. Arjie begs for a second chance, and then bungles that second chance by mixing the poems together. Black Tie accuses him of lying and gives a speech about how falsehoods are responsible for Sri Lanka's problems. He canes Arjie repeatedly on the thighs and orders him to return the next day with the poems memorized.

Arjie and Soyza walk back to the classroom to get their bags, but in a fury, Arjie tears up the poems, which he then realizes he still needs to memorize. Soyza shyly agrees to take him to the British Council library, and they meet there soon thereafter. Soyza's clothes are ironed, and he has carefully coiffed his hair to hide the horrible cut Black Tie gave him. Arjie wonders what Soyza's home life is like, and they go inside, where they easily find the poems and start making fun of their author, who seemed to have "really loved school." They joke that the poem's author must have been the captain of pretty much every club, and they mockingly read out his Latin lines, bothering everyone else in the library. While they wait in line to photocopy the poems, Arjie notices Soyza watching him and smiling. He smiles back.

Yet again, those around Arjie employ shame and intimidation to try and get him to change his behavior and censor himself; now, Diggy is explicit about precisely what the family has feared all along and always meant when they called Arjie "funny"—they worried he would turn out to be gay. When he sees Soyza's question take on a new meaning, Arjie understands his own behavior in an entirely new way, too; he realizes that he has been flirting with Soyza all along, or at least has expressed something more fundamental than his words, even if he did not realize it at the time.



Arjie confronts two separate spheres in which his experience contradicts the expectations of those around him—he hates the school he is supposed to praise, and he is only more intrigued by Diggy's warnings about Soyza. Arjie's thoughts about sex prove that, although he realized his attraction to men some time before, he has not yet thought of this in sexual terms or developed a concept of his own sexual identity or orientation.



Although Arjie clearly has a talent for recitation and performance, what Black Tie fails to understand is that the circumstances of this practice session—and especially the threat of caning—interrupts Arjie's ability to perform the poems that he has, in fact, memorized. As a microcosm, this event illustrates what is wrong with both Victoria Academy as a whole, in which discipline appears to hamper rather than facilitate learning, and Sri Lanka's contemporary situation, in which many put their lives on hold and restrict their own potential because they are preoccupied by violence, paralyzed by fear, or unwilling to freely express themselves in a police state.



As they get to know each other outside the walls of Victoria Academy, Arjie and Soyza remind themselves and the reader that there is much more to their lives than their draconian school. Arjie sees how Soyza diligently manages his appearance and realizes how much lies behind his friend's cultivated, stable facade. In turn, he sees that he will have to play a similar game, feigning love for the school, in reciting the absurd poems he has been assigned by Black Tie. There are clear homoerotic undertones to Arjie and Soyza's friendliness—they seem to understand and organically relate to one another's experiences and emotions, whereas most of the interactions between boys at their school are competitive and deliberately unemotional.



On their bicycle ride home, Soyza asks whether Arjie's family calls him "Arjun" (no—they call him "Arjie") and Arjie asks Soyza the same (they call him "Shehan"). They adopt these familiar names for one another and part ways. On his way home, Arjie thinks about Shehan—his name, their playful relationship, and Diggy's rumor about the head prefect. That night, he dreams about wrestling in the pool with Shehan, and in the morning, he "notice[s] the familiar wetness on [his] sarong."

The next day, Arjie and Shehan take up their same roles for Black Tie. Arjie "studies" Shehan's body and notices his smell; again, he forgets the poems and Black Tie canes him. This time, he has to kneel on the balcony until he learns them—and Shehan has to join him. Arjie tells Shehan, "I know those poems. I just can't recite them with that cane on the desk." Arjie looks down on the school's empty lawn, feels hopeless, and hears his old school's bells sound in the distance. An hour later, they go back in, and then Black Tie canes them both after Arjie still cannot recite the poems and Shehan proves he failed to help Arjie learn them. They are forced to return to the balcony and exchange apologies; Shehan is on the verge of tears.

After another hour, Arjie and Shehan return inside again, but now Arjie has a plan. He asks Black Tie if he can go to the bathroom, then runs to the staff room and finds Mr. Sunderalingam, who explains that Black Tie's beliefs are "old school"—in fact, Black Tie was an orphan, raised by the school's previous principal. Mr. Sunderalingam insists that, as Tamils, they must both support Black Tie in his power struggle with Lokubandara. In fact, Arjie is to play a crucial role in this fight: his poems were the favorites of an important minister, a Victoria Academy alumnus who recited those same poems in his own youth and was allegedly "next in line for the presidency." Thus, Arjie's recital is supposed to be the centerpiece of a ceremony designed by Black Tie to win this future president's support. In other words, Arjie can "save the school."

As they switch from last to first names, Arjie and Shehan reach a new degree of familiarity—in fact, Shehan appears to be Arjie's first true friend (besides his cousins and compassionate adults like Radha Aunty). Arjie is both in the early stage of recognizing that his interest in Shehan is sexual, and also just beginning to understand that his difference from other boys has anything to do with sex at all; contrary to the experiences of most contemporary readers, Arjie's lack of a vocabulary surrounding sexuality and queerness makes these feelings even more confusing and difficult for him to process.



Arjie finally acknowledges his sexual attraction to Shehan, forgetting his assignment because of a new distraction, this time. Again, Arjie and Shehan end up receiving the same treatment even though Black Tie ostensibly sees Arjie as exemplary and Shehan as an "ills and burdens;" Black Tie fundamentally sees all his students as blank slates over whom he has absolute and unquestionable authority, and his own mission as crushing their individuality and emotionality, producing the same kind of citizens who are responsible for much of Sri Lanka's communal violence. Indeed, Shehan's punishment for Arjie's mistake mirrors the inversions of justice that Arjie has seen in Sri Lankan society, when—for instance—Jegan gets punished for being declared innocent, or Radha Aunty gets ostracized despite trying to reject Anil's advances.



Arjie's plan recalls his childhood plot to win back his role in "bride-bride;" once he realizes that nobody else is looking out for his interests, Arjie uses deception and manipulation—the tools of injustice—in order to pursue what he knows to be just. Mr. Sunderalingam's explanation also shows Arjie a vulnerable and sympathetic side of Black Tie, a trauma that explains the man's current resistance to expressing any vulnerability and sympathy whatsoever. And the circumstances of the ceremony also demonstrate a different kind of vulnerability for Black Tie—although Arjie thinks that he is at the principal's mercy, in fact it is the other way around. Arjie discovers a power, in other words, that he never realized he had.



Mr. Sunderalingam agrees to talk to Black Tie, and Arjie starts making his way upstairs. Thinking about Black Tie's cruelty toward Shehan and himself, and then Salgado's cruelty toward the Tamil boys (which Lokubandara sanctioned), Arjie feels like he has no good option. When he gets back to Black Tie's office, the principal asks what took him so long and sends him back to kneel on the balcony.

After school, Mr. Sunderalingam visits Black Tie, who then calls Shehan and Arjie inside and releases them. They run downstairs and, in their whirlwind of surprise and delight, Shehan kisses Arjie for a brief moment. They run to the classroom, but Shehan grows distant and surly—Arjie is just as confused by this shift as he is by their kiss. Outside, as Shehan unlocks his bicycle, Arjie asks if he has plans for the evening. They agree that Arjie will go over to Shehan's house.

At home, no longer stunned by Shehan's kiss, Arjie starts to savor it—he tries to remember it perfectly, then imagine what a slower and more passionate one would be like. He hopes they will have another one soon.

Shehan is nervous when Arjie arrives at his poorly maintained house, which makes Arjie immediately realize that Shehan "[doesn't] have a mother." They awkwardly meet the old servant woman and go to Shehan's room, where they sit on his bed. Shehan seems to be expecting something; unsure what to do, Arjie says, "do you have a mother?" Shehan gets up and Arjie tries again: "I mean, where is your mother?" Shehan explains solemnly that his mother lives in England, but Arjie realizes that "the reason for this tone was not his mother but what had just happened between us." Arjie decides that he should leave, and Shehan politely sees him off. On his way home, Arjie feels like a failure.

Arjie's feeling that cruelty and corruption are all-encompassing in Victoria Academy again helps illuminate the condition of Sri Lanka as a whole, in which both sides—Tamils and Sinhalese, whom the Tigers and government claim, respectively, to represent—are untrustworthy and responsible for horrible atrocities, but are also the only two options.



When Arjie's plot to save himself and Shehan proves successful, their authentic feelings for one another come out unexpectedly. Realizing that he has almost completely revealed the unspoken foundation of their friendship, Shehan withdraws as though out of guilt and fear; Arjie is as baffled by Shehan's mixed messages as he is by his own lack of clarity about his feelings.



Given privacy and time to think, Arjie admits and accepts what he really feels about Shehan, despite his awkwardness when they are together.



Arjie continues to learn about the complex experiences that stand behind people's surface presentation; Shehan's house immediately reveals one of the personal struggles that underlies his simultaneously generous and glib personality. Of course, Arjie's ability to see that an unkempt house means no mother (even though a servant woman also works there) reflects how ingrained the gendered division of labor is in this time and place. Arjie's classic teenage awkwardness demonstrates his discomfort admitting his feelings to someone else—even the target of those feelings—and recalls Shehan recoiling after kissing Arjie just a few pages before.



When he returns home, Arjie's family is in the middle of dinner and ask where he has been. They are curious to hear he has a friend—his first friend ever. Amma says the family should have Shehan over for lunch that weekend, and Diggy shakes his head at Arjie, who defiantly agrees to his mother's proposal. Later, Diggy approaches Arjie and tells him he is "going to be sorry" for his friendship with Shehan. He begins to warn about what will happen when Appa meets Shehan, but then trails off, although Arjie clearly understands the message. Arjie deliberately exclaims that he likes Shehan "very much." This concerns Diggy, who asks "how do you like him?" Arjie pretends not to understand the question and Diggy warns that "Soyza could easily lead you down the wrong path."

Arjie realizes that he and Shehan are both different in the same way, and that there are "powerful and hidden possibilities" in their friendship. He now understands that "the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along."

Arjie is "excited but scared" about Shehan's arrival on Sunday. After he arrives, Shehan is quiet, and he and Arjie join Sonali and her friends in hide-and-seek. Arjie and Shehan hide together in the garage, and Arjie hears Shehan's breathing quicken and realizes he was getting "another chance to make up for [his] inability to act the last time." He puts his hand on Shehan's stomach, and Shehan holds it in his own. Then, they slowly kiss until Sonali yells, "ready or not, I'm coming." Sonali comes to the garage briefly, then runs away to look for other people hiding. Arjie kisses Shehan back and feels like he is discovering a new world of physical sensation as Shehan guides his hand downward. They take off their pants and have sex against the garage wall, but Arjie slips from pleasure into discomfort and pain just before Shehan finishes.

Although he seems to fully understand and even anticipate Diggy's criticism, Arjie has grown much more fearless—reckless, even—and agrees to have Shehan over as if as a means to indirectly come out to his family. For the first time, then, he rejects his family's attempts to prevent him from being "funny," to make him follow the heterosexual, masculine formula that is the only kind of manhood they know. In fact, just as he learns that his recitation assignment gives him the power to save Black Tie's job, Arjie realizes that his deviation from his family's expectations gives him the power to make them feel and confront the shame and guilt they usually try to avoid by trying to control and manipulate him. Accordingly, he plays along with Diggy's overwrought concern, embracing the "wrong path" and forcing his family to learn to see it as an accepted one.



In this passage, which is as close as Arjie gets to a coming out moment, he realizes that, apart from their mutual attraction, he and Shehan have been able to bond because they share the experience of being ostracized and misunderstood. While he seems to understand the connections between his gender expression, attraction to men, and differences to other boys in terms of a unified identity, he does not explicitly formulate this as such or get anywhere near using the word "gay." Instead, he remains focused on his experiences and feelings, but has little interest in categorizing himself.



Like many first sexual experiences, Arjie's is abrupt, hesitant, and vaguely uncomfortable, although perfectly consensual. Of course, the time and place in which they first have sex makes it even more transgressive. But Arjie's decision to initiate shows that he has finally decided to embrace rather than continue denying and fighting his desires; his process of self-realization, although not necessarily self-acceptance, is now complete.



They get dressed, and Shehan gives Arjie an uncomfortable kiss. They return outside and Arjie worries about stains and wrinkles on his clothes, but Shehan promises him he has nothing to worry about. They find the family inside, eating lunch, and declare that they were simply on a walk. Appa's expression to Amma immediately demonstrates "that he disapproved of Shehan." Arjie imagined his father walking in on him and Shehan in the garage, and then sees Diggy's vicious smile, which reminds him of the story about Shehan and the head prefect and makes him realize that "I had let Shehan do to me what the head prefect had done to him." Arjie feels profoundly guilty, like he has betrayed his family's "trust and love" with his and Shehan's "dreadful act." He feels that his father's attempts at protecting him have now definitively failed.

After lunch, in Arjie's room, Shehan points out that Appa did not seem to like him. Arjie asks if Shehan "want[s] to play a game," and Shehan hugs him from behind, but Arjie dismisses him. They decide to play Scrabble, but Shehan does not draw out any letters, and instead points out that Arjie seems to be "feeling guilty about what we did." Arjie denies it and then asks, "what do you think? What does your head prefect think?" Shehan is shocked and denies this accusation in turn, but then accuses Arjie of being jealous, and finally declares he is proud to at least not be ashamed by his own desires.

Arjie calls Shehan "revolting" and says he regrets initiating in the garage. Shehan accuses Arjie of being one of the "type" who pretends he's "normal or [...] can't get a girl" but is really gay, and Arjie hits Shehan, knocking him to the ground. They are both surprised, and after a pause, Shehan walks out the door.

Arjie dreams of Shehan again the night after this entire episode. In the dream, he meets Shehan in a dark classroom and they begin to have sex again, but then he realizes that it is actually the head prefect, who restrains him despite his attempts to escape. When he wakes up, Arjie remembers "the tender look on Shehan's face before he had kissed me, the feel of his body against mine after he had opened the buttons of his trousers." Arjie feels both "desire for Shehan and disgust at that desire," and he has trouble sleeping that night.

As soon as they finish, Arjie is overcome with guilt, as much for his own actions as for the possibility that his family will be able to tell what he and Shehan have done. He sees his desire for Shehan and his love for his family as opposed and incompatible, much like Radha Auntie's love for Anil or Amma's love for Daryl Uncle. Appa, around whom Arjie must walk on eggshells, is more interested in whether Arjie's friend meets his own standards of masculinity than what this friend does for Arjie; the family's disapproval again infects Arjie, despite his fearlessness just a few pages before. Curiously, along with this return to shame, Arjie also slips into a conventionally gendered way of thinking, imagining one partner as defiling another, rather than seeing the mutuality in his experience with Shehan.



Quite aware of Arjie's dilemma, Shehan tries to comfort and support him, but Arjie is already on the offensive. Ultimately, Arjie only attacks Shehan because he is unable to reconcile his own behavior with his family's attitudes; he finds it easier to see his queerness as a kind of deviant infection, the result of something like a spell Shehan cast over him (like the head prefect has done to Shehan). Shehan's honest acknowledgment of his sexuality looks quite similar to Arjie's before they had sex, just a few pages before.



Shehan points out how Arjie parrots Diggy and Appa's homophobia, conflating same-sex desire with weakness and failure, as though it is a consolation prize for those who cannot fulfil their heterosexual desires rather than an entirely different structure of desire in the first place. Ironically, this destructive rage is probably Arjie's most stereotypically masculine moment.



As he allows himself to process the day's experiences, Arjie again admits to himself in private that he really takes issue with his own internalized homophobia, not with Shehan's treatment of him. He is gradually progressing toward a full acceptance of himself: whereas in the past he oscillated between confused desire and confused disgust, now he recognizes both halves of this emotional response clearly and at the same time, and sees that he must overcome one in order to fulfill the other.



Arjie mulls over his dream on his way to class the day after. When he arrives, he finds Shehan with a new attitude, “his emotions [...] clearly visible” instead of hidden by pride. He also does not leave class, as usual, or go to the principal’s office. In a fury, Black Tie visits to retrieve him: Shehan was only set free *yesterday*, but expected to continue his normal punishment *today*. As Black Tie drags Shehan by the ear out of the classroom, Arjie feels a sudden care and concern for him.

Apparently relieved by his newfound freedom and at least outwardly unbothered by his argument with Arjie, Shehan gets victimized because of a simple misunderstanding—indeed, one that Black Tie should have been responsible for clarifying the previous day—now leads to him being punished in an even more draconian way than ever before and proves that Black Tie’s momentary leniency was only an exception to the rule of his unjust and gratuitous cruelty.



Arjie cannot stop thinking about Shehan for the rest of the day and worries that he has mistreated the friend who “had not debased me or degraded me, but rather offered me his love.” After school, Arjie waits for him, and when he comes into the classroom for his bag, Shehan is “close to tears.” Arjie apologizes and Shehan yells at him: Arjie turned out fine, while Shehan is stuck in “ills and burdens,” and what they did in the garage can remain a secret. Shehan storms out of the classroom. At home throughout the afternoon, Arjie waits to somehow hear from Shehan, but realizes that the only thing he can do is visit Shehan’s house.

Realizing that he has added another layer of pain and rejection to Shehan’s already difficult life, Arjie feels an intense sense of responsibility and deeply regrets lashing out at his friend the day before; he understands that it is his own internalized prejudice, not something wrong with sex, that so bothered him after the fact. However, Shehan’s reaction shows Arjie that an apology is not enough in their situation, but that his pointless punishment as one of the “ills and burdens” is ongoing and seemingly only getting worse. In other words, what Shehan needs is help, not appreciation and an apology.



When Arjie arrives at Shehan’s house, the servant woman tells him that Shehan has not left his room since after school. He has only ever done this once: “when his mother left.” Afterward, the servant woman explains that she was the only reason Shehan made it, since Shehan’s father “never had time for his family.” Arjie goes inside and calls to Shehan through his room door. Shehan lets Arjie in after Arjie sends the servant woman away, and Arjie and Shehan sit down on the bed. Arjie apologizes, but Shehan “had already forgiven [him].” Shehan explains that he “can’t bear” to be with the “ills and burdens” without Arjie there. Seeing his solemn expression, Arjie grows worried: like the servant woman, he realizes that Shehan has “reached his limit.”

Although Arjie is never particularly happy with his family, his conventional household contrasts sharply with Shehan’s utter loneliness; Shehan’s punishments at school are only compounded by his lack of love, understanding, or community at home. Arjie sees that, despite Shehan’s anger towards him at school and his fear that Shehan was just using him sexually, he plays as or more important a role in Shehan’s life as Shehan does in his. This passage makes clear, in other words, that Arjie and Shehan need one another’s love and are fully capable of providing it.



On his way home, Arjie feels “a despair [...] fueled by [his] inability to relieve Shehan of his pain.” He thinks about how Shehan helped him with Salgado’s bullying and the poems, and then shared his punishment for forgetting them. Impulsively, Arjie turns to go to his school instead of continuing home. He watches the sunset over the sea, which illuminates the school building and makes it look tranquil instead of ominous. He remembers the ridiculous poem “The Best School of All” and admits that he could eventually look back on Victoria Academy fondly, but promises he will not.

Contrary to the hardcore individualism and masculine toughness that Victoria Academy tries to instill in its students, Arjie genuinely feels both Shehan’s pain and a sense of responsibility for it. His attitude, while misunderstood by those around him, shows how empathy and vulnerability are often more courageous than strength. In fact, Shehan is the only one to teach Arjie anything of value at Victoria, the only reason he might later remember his time there fondly.



Arjie wonders “how many boys like Shehan [have] passed through this school” and have become the school’s “prisoner.” Most probably did so in secret, or were deliberately forgotten. Arjie realizes that the school’s rules—especially Black Tie’s rules like “no blinking, no licking of lips, no long hair”—have nothing to do with what is truly right and wrong. And then he realizes that his love for Shehan—and their tryst in the garage—could not be wrong, even though they “would be in terrible trouble” if anyone found out. He thinks of Radha Aunty’s love for Anil and Jegan’s fate at the hotel, both of which are similar injustices. He wonders why “some people got to decide what was correct or not” and realizes it is just about power—can he change these rules, he asks, if he gets power? These questions stay with him until the next day.

At school the next day, Shehan is cheery and energized. He announces that he has a plan to save himself: “I’m going to England to be with my mother.” Arjie wonders if this is practical, but Shehan promises that he can get the money for a plane ticket from his father and that his mother will accept him, although “he didn’t sound so sure.” Arjie promises to support him, but Shehan can tell that Arjie does not believe in him, and Arjie can “sense the idea crumbling in his mind” as they walk up to class.

During second period, Black Tie calls Arjie to his office, where Shehan is still kneeling on the balcony, and makes him recite the poems—but this time, without the threat of caning. Arjie does it perfectly, and Black Tie asks him about “the values these poems speak of,” which “may soon disappear” if the school’s leadership changes. Arjie realizes that Black Tie has only put away the cane because he so desperately wants to beat out Lokubandara. And then Arjie has an epiphany: “Black Tie needed me, and because he needed me, power had moved into my hands.” With this, his fear of Black Tie vanishes.

Arjie now understands the dark side of Appa’s desire to turn him into “a man” through the school’s discipline. In his epiphany about power, he shows that the school’s authoritarian culture, Sri Lanka’s political injustices, and his family’s attempts to change his gender expression all rely on the same principle: might makes right. Although he remains committed to a vision of moral justice that treats those marginalized or excluded from power and privilege equally to those who have it, he also sees that it is often the nature of those in power to scapegoat and victimize the same populations who most need help. Accordingly, he sees a paradoxical way out of this predicament: in order to dismantle the tyranny of brute force over morality, those with a moral conscience—and those most affected by injustice—need to seize and rework the system. Rightly or wrongly, he seems to think that if force does not listen to justice, then justice must be implemented with force.



Shehan’s sudden burst of enthusiasm demonstrates that he has developed his “plan” out of misery and desperation; he has created a fantasy in order to help himself get through his unhappy and unjust present. Of course, his speech also belies the disheartening truth that his family has essentially abandoned him and shows how important Arjie has become to him as a source of emotional support.



The irony in Black Tie’s appeal to the poems’ “values” is that he clearly espouses no true principles whatsoever, but merely doles out rewards and punishments however he sees fit, and is using Arjie as a tool for his own personal gain rather than trying to educate him or treat him fairly. In other words, Arjie sees that Black Tie cares only about power, and not at all about values, but also that he has given up some of that power by relying on Arjie. Using his newfound understanding of power, Arjie realizes he can now change his school’s values.



On his walk back to class, Arjie thinks about all of the ways he can use this power to save Shehan or get back at Black Tie. He realizes he can completely mess up the poems and throw off Black Tie's speech, which is supposed to be structured around them. Black Tie would lose the minister's favor and Lokubandara would take over and free Shehan from his eternal punishment. After school, Arjie grows both worried about and committed to this idea; when Shehan comes to the classroom to collect his bag, Arjie feels that he has no choice and his "destiny had now passed out of [his] hands."

The next week, on the day of the ceremony, Arjie has not informed Shehan about his plans, but asks if Shehan will come. Shehan says he will be there—but does not show up. Arjie's parents and Mr. Sunderalingam greet him, and he sees his name on the program and begins to feel "a flutter of fear." Black Tie brings the minister to the front row, the choir sings the national anthem, and then the school's Sinhala Drama Society performs a Sinhalese origin story about Vijaya and Kuveni, which ends suddenly and signals that it is Arjie's turn.

Arjie climbs to the stage and stares at the microphone, then at "the expectant faces" in the audience: Black Tie, the minister, Mr. Sunderalingam, Amma and Appa, and—to Arjie's surprise and delight—Shehan, on the second floor balcony. Arjie recites the poems, completely out of order, as he intended. Black Tie is visibly distraught, the minister visibly "bemused," Shehan filled with "dismay and bewilderment." The teachers are clearly disturbed when Arjie returns to his seat, but Mr. Sunderalingam compliments him for trying his best.

Arjie sees an opportunity at what might quite literally be called poetic justice, the chance to give Black Tie a taste of his own medicine—to treat him the way he treats all those under his power, by using the self-serving manipulation that he has taught so well at Victoria. Of course, the crucial difference is that Arjie is using these unjust tactics for the sake of justice, in order to save Shehan. And yet his internal conflict about doing so probably relates to his knowledge that Lokubandara would be far worse for Tamil students like himself. Despite this, Arjie decides to put his individual, experiential knowledge above the group identities with which so much of Sri Lanka remains obsessed.



In the decisive moment, Arjie commits to making good on his promise to himself even though Shehan appears to have broken his promise to attend. Between the national anthem and the Sinhalese Drama Society's performance, a story about the first Sinhalese prince invading Sri Lanka and conquering its native inhabitants, it becomes clear that Sinhalese nationalism is growing in Sri Lanka, with Sinhalese identity increasingly equated with the country's identity.



Arjie is remarkably brave in facing his audience before knowingly making a fool out of himself; for the first time, he is comfortable in his own skin at Victoria Academy, and this time precisely because he has consciously rejected any pressure to succeed or conform. His willful failure more subtly points to the actual culture and character of Victoria Academy, which bungles instead of forming students, teaching them dishonesty and overconfidence (the vices Arjie deliberately inflates here) rather than morality and good citizenship. Black Tie and Mr. Sunderalingam's opposite reactions to Arjie's recitation betray their fundamental differences; Black Tie is still only interested in holding power, Sunderalingam in educating and supporting students.



Black Tie begins his speech and accuses Arjie of “defil[ing] a thing of beauty, wreak[ing] havoc on fine sentiments,” by messing up the poem. He claims that the school is producing failed students like Arjie, “the kind of scoundrel who will bring nothing but shame to his family and be a burden to society.” The nation is going this way too, he says—the minister is momentarily uncomfortable. Black Tie pauses and begins his prepared speech, which comically contradicts his angry prelude. The audience breaks out in laughter over and over as Black Tie now starts praising Victoria Academy and his values. Facing a confused audience, Black Tie abruptly ends his speech and invites the minister up.

While the prizes are being given out during the last part of the ceremony, Arjie runs upstairs to see Shehan, whom he brings into an empty classroom. Shehan is confused; Arjie explains his plan and realizes how much he has changed in his two months at Victoria Academy. Arjie declares that he “did it for you [Shehan],” because he “couldn’t bear to see you suffer anymore.” Shehan is surprised, but they embrace. After the audience stops clapping, Arjie and Shehan head back to the gallery; Arjie feels “a sudden sadness” when he sees his Amma, with whom he can never have the same relationship. He realizes he is “no longer a part of [his] family in the same way” because he “inhabit[s] a world they didn’t understand.” As the audience starts leaving, Arjie and Shehan walk together out of the auditorium.

As planned, Arjie manages to completely undermine Black Tie’s speech. When he speaks impromptu, likely with the intention of prefacing his planned speech and establishing the errors in the poems, Black Tie instead reveals his true, vicious character, his abusive attitude towards his students, and his open disdain for the government whose support he is supposed to be winning. The content of his usual speech shows the gap between his feigned and true selves, and through Arjie’s mistakes Black Tie—of all people—becomes the school laughingstock.



The reader never learns whether Arjie got Black Tie replaced, how his parents reacted to his failure, or what happens to Arjie and Shehan’s relationship in the short term. However, this story is less about the outcome of Arjie’s daring experiment and more about the courage and moral purpose that led him to attempt it—it is about his recognition that he has the capacity to change the world and his decision to use that capacity to save the person he loves. Having chosen love, a product of his own individual volition, over school and family, two institutions in which he is embedded whether he likes it or not, Arjie has also undertaken this mission in order to banish his shame and prove that he will think for himself rather than letting the expectations and fears of others set an absolute limit on the possibilities available to him.



6. RIOT JOURNAL: AN EPILOGUE

The final section of *Funny Boy* consists of a number of Arjie’s journal entries from July and August of 1983. The first entry begins on July 25 at 6 AM. Arjie writes that the phone rang in the early hours of the morning and Appa informed the family that “there was trouble in Colombo. All the Tamil houses near the Kanaththa Cemetery had been burnt.” The family is dumbstruck and Amma wonders why; Appa explains that it is in retaliation for a Tamil Tigers attack against some soldiers, whose funeral took place the previous night. But Appa says not to worry, and that the reports are probably being blown out of proportion. Arjie feels that writing is the only thing he can do. Neliya Aunty and Amma have breakfast as normal in an “attempt to provide some normalcy,” but this only shows Arjie “how frighteningly different” today is.

Although this chapter is listed as an epilogue, it is actually an integral part of the novel, essential for understanding Sri Lanka’s history and Arjie’s retrospective narrative voice in light of the other chapters. However, as a series of journal entries, this chapter is also narratively distinct, because it is the only one that Arjie narrates during the action, in the present tense. This contributes to his sense of urgency but also forces readers to fill in the gaps between entries. It also helps account for Arjie’s decision to narrate his past: he notes here that, when overcome by fear and anxiety, he naturally gravitated toward writing to find solace. Readers may already know that July 1983 was when the Sri Lankan Civil War began; regardless, Arjie immediately realizes that the family’s longstanding fears of violence in Colombo have finally come true, and they know this could have profound consequences for their future.



At 9:30 AM on the same day, Arjie writes that Sena Uncle and Chithra Aunty visited the site of the riots and confirmed that the Tamils' houses really were burned down, and the violence is spreading. The adults finish their conversation in Appa's study, and the children hear Amma sounding concerned inside. When they come out, the adults announce that the family will stay with Chithra and Sena for some time. Amma promises it is "just a precaution" but the children do not believe her; Amma has even sent Anula away. They each bring a backpack with clothes and one important personal item. Most of the family is okay, but "Ammachi and Appachi's area is particularly bad" and they might have to hide in neighbors' houses. The radio transmissions do not mention violence, and even announce that there is no curfew.

At 11 AM, Arjie learns what the adults were talking about in secret: he overheard the adults in the garden explain that the government is supporting the riots, which is why there is no curfew, police attempts to stop the violence, or information on the radio. In fact, "the mobs [got] electoral lists" from the government and used them to find Tamil families—which means Arjie's family has to leave their house, or they will remain at risk.

At 12:30 PM, still on July 25, Arjie writes that he is "frightened" because the family's phones are not working and Sena Uncle has not come to pick them up.

At 1 PM, Arjie writes that "the government has now declared curfew," which is a relief "because this means that the government is not behind the rioting." Because of the curfew, however, Sena Uncle cannot come get the family. Appa and Arjie think "the situation will soon be under control," but Amma still wants to go to Chithra's house.

After learning about Amma's personal flaws, moral conflicts, emotional history, and judgment errors throughout the book, Arjie easily sees through her attempts at feigning normalcy. Given his knowledge of the unpredictability of violence and memory of visiting Somaratne's village, Arjie can no longer trust that Amma will protect him—he is now old enough to know better and recognize that nothing can guarantee the family's safety. While their fear stems from others' possibility of treating them as homogeneous representatives of an ethnic group rather than complex human individuals, their faith in neighbors suggests that their interpersonal relationships with those around them can serve as a humanizing force to counterbalance against the reductionism of nationalist violence.



As the police's sinister persecution of Daryl Uncle and Jegan foreshadowed, now Sri Lanka is caught in conflict not only between certain Sinhalese and certain Tamils, but between the government and the Tamil population. The government uses the Tamil Tigers as an excuse to try and ethnically cleanse its own population, and this makes the family's situation all the more frightening: now defined as the enemy, they cannot turn to the government that is supposed to protect them against violence.



Waiting appears to be the most grating part of the riots, because it forces Arjie to process his own fears and recognize his ultimate vulnerability to violence. Sena Uncle's delay suggests that something may have gone wrong.



Arjie and his family's momentary relief demonstrates how accustomed they are to living through threats of violence; in the past, any escalation has been small-scale and momentary, and (besides the trouble reaching Colombo) there is no obvious indication that this time should or will be any different.



At 3 PM, Arjie explains that the riots have actually worsened since the curfew, and describes what happened to Sena Uncle: A man stops at the family's front gate and Appa cautiously goes outside to meet him. The man, an employee of Appa's, tells him that "thugs stole all the petrol from" Sena Uncle's van. In fact, the man rushed out of work when he learned of the riots—which he passed on his way, and where he saw the police doing nothing. Appa's colleague came across people pouring the oil from Sena Uncle's van on a car with a family inside, and then a man asking around for a match. Appa's colleague left as fast as possible and came to inform Arjie's family, who now cannot stop thinking about the family in the car but try to go on with their days as normal.

At 6:45 PM, still on July 25, Arjie writes that Amma and Appa told the children how to escape the house in case the mob shows up at their doorstep. They will climb a ladder and hide with their neighbors, the Pereras, who have already taken their valuables and birth certificates. The whole family is "certain that the mob will come," only unsure *when*.

At 11:30 PM, Arjie writes that he cannot stand waiting for the mob to show up, and almost wants them to come now and "put [the family] out of this misery." Everyone went to bed with day clothes on and nobody has fallen asleep. The adults will wake the children up during the night if the mob comes.

At 12:30 PM on July 26, Arjie writes that "it seems unbelievable" that so much has passed since his last journal entry 13 hours before, and that "our lives have completely changed." Neliya Aunty woke him up in the middle of the night, and they quietly made their way to the dining room as the mob's chants approached the house. The family made their way to the backyard and, one by one, climbed the ladder up the wall and jumped into the Pereras' yard. Appa and Diggy hid the ladder, and then the family hid in the Pereras' storeroom, which has a small window high on the wall.

In fact, Arjie sees that the government is far more sinister than he thought, and that the curfew is likely the opposite of what it looked like: a way of ensuring that Tamils will be at home and therefore vulnerable to mob attacks. Appa's employee's report—which clearly implied that the mob was going to burn alive the Tamil family in the car—is frightening not only because of the extreme violence but also because of the senselessness and sheer anonymity of this violence, which testifies to the utter inhumanity of killers incapable of seeing their victims as human.



The very fact that the Chelvaratnams rely on their Sinhalese neighbors to shield them against a Sinhalese mob exposes the patent absurdity of the race riots, which turn individuals into the pawns of political movements and personal rage on the basis of ethnicity.



As the anticipation of violence hangs over its head, the family's habitual attempts to keep up even the most rudimentary appearances of normalcy—by going to bed when they expect to be attacked by an angry mob—no longer serves any function.



Unfortunately, the family was correct to predict the mob's imminent arrival and prudent to develop an escape plan. Although they were prepared for it, writing the day afterward, Arjie seems shocked that they could face such a direct threat in such an unpredictable context. Like the punishments doled out by Ammachi and Black Tie, the beating Radha Aunty suffers, and Daryl and Jegan's surprise arrivals in Colombo, what proves to be the most consequential moment in the lives of Arjie's family members has no real connection, ethical or causal, to their own behavior. They are being punished and made to suffer, but not for any distinct reason, and to Arjie the utter meaninglessness of their suffering is perhaps the most disturbing part of their fate.



The same journal entry continues. The mob has stopped yelling, but Arjie and his family hear their front door shatter and their house get ransacked. And then they see smoke out of the small window and realize that the mob is **burning their house down**. The room gets intensely bright for a while, and then dark again, and the mob has left; all the family can hear are the beams of their house falling down. After the commotion, Perera Uncle opens the storeroom door. Appa wants to check out the house immediately, but Amma insists he wait until the morning. The family goes out for tea with the Pereras.

In the morning, the family goes to survey their **burned-down house**, which is unrecognizable except for the gate out front and generally seems much smaller. They go inside and look at their old possessions, now completely destroyed, but Arjie feels “not a trace of remorse, not a touch of sorrow for the loss and destruction around [him],” because his “heart refuses to understand” that his house is gone. Finally, Chithra Aunty and Sena Uncle stop by in their van—Chithra Aunty cries and, ironically enough, Amma comforts her. Neighbors stop by and pay their respects. The family’s women collect their few surviving possessions; the men do not. As they head off with Sena Uncle and Chithra Aunty, the neighbors bring them provisions.

At 3 PM, still on July 26, the family learns that Ammachi and Appachi have also had their house burned down—their whole street, full of burned houses, “looks as if someone has dropped a bomb on it.” Ammachi and Appachi go to stay with Kanthi Aunty. Arjie remembers passing spend-the-days there in his childhood and cries.

At 6 PM the same day, Arjie writes that “something awful has happened.” Someone anonymously called Sena Uncle and said they knew he was sheltering Tamils, and that that night they would all be killed and his **house burned**. Amma and Appa want to go to a refugee camp, but Sena Uncle insists they stay, so they make another escape plan: they can go through a hidden door to Sena Uncle’s mother’s neighboring house and hide in her library. Arjie is “tired of these escape plans” and “just want[s] it all to end.”

The burning of the Chelvaratnams’ house is particularly distressing because it serves as a message that they are no longer welcome in their own country, and that their identity is being forcibly uprooted by political conflicts. Although he already knows what he would see if he went outside, Appa’s impulse to go look at the ruined house when the mob may still be nearby reflects his desire to salvage what he can of their physical possessions as well as their place in Sri Lankan society. Again, faced with circumstances that promise to drastically upend their futures, the Chelvaratnams do what little they can—have tea with the Pereras—to live normally in the meantime.



Burned to a shell of its former self, the house loses all the defining characteristics that would have previously made it identifiably Arjie’s. Its loss is more bleak than heartbreaking, and the men and women differ over whether to try and salvage what they can to bring continuity into their new lives, or to leave everything behind and start anew. Because she is slightly further removed from the events, Chithra is able to process her emotions in a way the Chelvaratnams remain too traumatized—and perhaps too afraid—to do.



The apocalyptic imagery of the bomb suggests a kind of finality to the Tamils’ experience in Colombo, a sign that life can and will never be the same again. The destruction of Ammachi and Appachi’s house is significant not only because it shows the family continues to suffer even more seriously than before, but also because the house was so significant to Arjie’s childhood, as a place of both freedom and gender socialization.



Arjie’s family gets no chance to rest and process what has happened; the phone threat forces them back onto the defensive, and they appear poised to relive the horror of their previous night. Again, the threat to their lives is completely anonymous, unpredictable, and unconnected to anything that the family has itself done to deserve punishment.



At 11 PM, Arjie explains that they had another “scare” two hours before. After dinner, a group of men came to the door and the family had to hide in Sena Uncle’s mother’s library for an hour until they left. The men claimed to only have been “collecting funds for a sport meet,” but Arjie thinks “it is obvious that something odd is going on.” Sena Uncle thinks the men are only after money, but Appa and Amma still want to go to the refugee camp.

On the next day, July 27, at 6 PM, Arjie writes that the brief break in the curfew—for the purpose of buying groceries—was useless, because so many grocery stores were Tamil-owned and thus burned down. Many people visit Arjie, but “only bring dismal and depressing news.” The only person Arjie is happy to see is Shehan, whom he “wanted more than anything else to hold” but could not because of his family’s presence; Amma tells Diggy not to follow them out into the garden, where Shehan tells Arjie he visited the house only to find it **burned down**. Shehan changes the subject and they make plans to see a movie, but then Arjie realizes something: “Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not.”

The same entry continues. An uncle from Canada, Lakshman, calls to explain that there are protests in Canada, India, and England over the riots, and that the family can get refugee status and go to Canada. The family is hopeful, and Appa says that they should “watch the situation for a little longer and then decide.” But Arjie hears him later quietly telling Amma to apply for the children’s passports.

The next evening, on July 28, at 8 PM, Arjie writes that the family has learned that Appa’s hotel was attacked and almost burned down, although the guests had been moved out. The president gave an address which “expressed no sympathy for what we Tamils have suffered, nor [...] condemn[ed] the actions of the thugs.” In the garden, Appa tells Amma that “it is very clear that we no longer belong in this country.” In retrospect, Appa says, he should have known that this would happen. He asks Amma how she, on the other hand, clearly knew that this violence was coming. They decide that they will plan for Canada after the violence ends. Arjie is “glad,” as he “long[s] to be out of this country” because it is not safe for him and no longer his home.

Although they cannot know the intentions of the group of men who “visit” Sena Uncle, the family continues to expect violence and ends up reliving their previous night. Uncertainty—about whether these men are innocent or bloodthirsty, whether the phone threat was real or random, and whether they remain targets—becomes the Sinhalese and the government’s most powerful tool against the Tamils.



The futility of the curfew shows that different ethnic communities in Sri Lanka are economically interdependent, and therefore exposes the socially self-destructive nature of the anti-Tamil riots. Now that he is forced to share Sena’s home, Arjie encounters yet another burden that gets in the way of his processing his grief and spending quality time with Shehan: his lack of privacy. Arjie’s recognition that “Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not” reflects Shehan’s desire for normalcy—to see a movie—which is something Arjie knows he cannot easily return to, even though his family has been feigning normalcy since the beginning of the riots. Arjie also realizes for the first time that, no matter how little the Tamil-Sinhalese divide means to him, the simple fact that it matters so much to so many others means it creates a gap between the experiences of Tamil and Sinhalese Sri Lankans, further driving the groups apart in a vicious cycle.



Now, immigration looks far more attractive than it did last time; the international community’s outrage underlines the moral horror of the government’s stance but also suggests that the family has a brighter future to look forward to outside of Sri Lanka. Appa clearly fears leaving behind his country and business, but he also recognizes that the family can no longer continue fighting for a place in a country that has resolutely decided not to accept them.



As things begin to fall apart on a national scale, Arjie’s family loses both faith that the government will try to quell the protests and their main economic reason for staying in Sri Lanka (their hotel). For perhaps the first time in the book, Appa acknowledges Amma’s superior wisdom—perhaps because his thinking was so clouded by his desire for his business to work out, and because of her experience with Daryl Uncle. After insisting for years that only the Tamils or Sinhalese can belong in Sri Lanka, nationalist forces on both sides have turned this false choice into a reality.



On July 29, at 10 AM, Arjie writes that the visitors continue—this time, it is Ammachi and Appachi, who are just talking about losing their own house. Arjie is “irritated and lethargic,” but not “sad and nostalgic,” about losing his house. He misses only his things and his private space, and especially Shehan. Amma has started crying in the bathroom about losing the house.

At 1 PM on the same day, Arjie writes that the rioters have returned, yelling that the Tamil Tigers are now in Colombo—a story that the radio denies. Ammachi and Appachi left for Kanthi’s house, but did not arrive, and everyone is worried and praying. There is a curfew again.

Four days later, on August 2nd, Arjie writes that “so many things have happened.” Sena Uncle came back shortly after the previous journal entry and reported that a mob burned Ammachi and Appachi’s car, with them inside. Amma broke down crying; Appa insisted on going to the scene of the crime to investigate what happened to his parents. The rest did not let him; Sena Uncle went back, instead, to “look out for [...] stray dogs and cats.” The family was silent; Amma said they should “inform the rest of the family.”

In the same entry, Arjie’s narration jumps to the day before, three days after Ammachi and Appachi were killed, and the day of their funeral. Radha Aunty came from America, and the way she held her head reminded Arjie of Ammachi. The funeral seemed “unreal,” and out of shock and disbelief, nobody cried; Arjie feels that the world is forever changed.

Almost a month later, on August 25, Arjie writes that he has gotten his passport and now “finally realize[s] that we are really leaving Sri Lanka” and heading to Canada in two days. He remembers fantasizing about foreign lands as a child with Diggy and Sonali, but recognizes “that great difficulties lie ahead.” Appa is staying in Sri Lanka for some time to “settle many things.” They will go to stay with their Lakshman Uncle, whom they barely know. And they can barely bring any money. Arjie sees a beggar at a traffic light and “wonder[s] if this would be our plight in Canada.”

Inundated with his experiences and his grandparents' stories of violence and loss, Arjie finds it difficult to continue feeling the constant stream of negative emotions that his situation warrants; in fact, the things he misses are not only symbols of the normalcy he can never recover, but also the very things that would allow him to emotionally process his pain: time and space alone, plus the chance to converse with the only person around whom he can truly be vulnerable.



The radio—and, by extension, the government—officially denies the rioters' tall tales, but it is clear that the government has both little genuine interest in saving Tamils and little power over the rioters it has unleashed.



The epilogue's final and most horrible act of violence brings the book full circle: back to Ammachi and Appachi, in whose care Arjie has his fondest memories of Sri Lanka. Like after the house burned down, Appa seems unable to accept the fact of his parents' deaths unless he sees it with his own eyes. Knowing how Appa would react but also that the bodies must be guarded from animals, Sena Uncle again steps up to help the family when it is too dangerous or painful for them to go out themselves.



Again, the funeral is so far outside the realm of Arjie's normal experience that he seems unable to emotionally process it at the time, especially since the threat of violence continues. Ammachi and Appachi's violent end helps explain the sense of nostalgia Arjie (as narrator) feels about his childhood with them, and Radha Aunty's arrival gestures to the long-term trauma she suffered after her attack, raising the question of how Arjie will adapt to his experiences in the long term.



Although he has had some time to process the trauma of losing his house and his grandparents, now Arjie is again thrown into a whirlwind, forced to pack up and reenvision his life in order to move into yet another uncertain future. When he contemplates Canada, he wonders about the possibility of a pluralist democracy: whether people like his family will be accepted in North America or will simply be treated yet again as outsiders to be controlled.



On August 27, Arjie writes that he has visited Shehan for the last time and “can still smell his particular odor on my body, which always lingers after we make love,” and which this time he does not want to wash off, lest he “lose this final memento.” Their lovemaking was “passionless, uncoordinated, and tentative,” emotionally withdrawn because they were both afraid of getting hurt.

Like Radha's relationship with Anil and Amma's with Daryl Uncle, Arjie and Shehan are driven apart by political circumstances out of their control. When they have to break up, both of them clearly recognize what they are losing, but neither is devastated to see the other go; by maintaining an emotional distance, they sacrifice the chance to express their feelings a final time in addition to saving themselves from hurt. And yet, in retrospect, Arjie neither yearns for Shehan nor laments leaving him, but rather sees their relationship as an important growing experience. In this sense, throughout the book Arjie progresses from idealizing the romantic love of “bride-bride” and Sinhala love comics to recognizing that, although loss inevitably follows most love, it can still be a positive experience, worth enduring even if it does not itself endure.



On his ride home from Shehan's house to Sena Uncle's, Arjie realized that he had forgotten something, and went to visit the remnants of his family's old **burned-down house**, which “looked even more bare, even more desolate than before.” He was astonished to see that “everything that was not burnt had been stolen,” from doors and furniture to rain pipes. Arjie began to cry loudly, out of anger, until he exhausted himself. He turned around and realized that even the flowers in the garden were stolen, probably for pooja (prayers) by people hoping “to increase their chances of a better life in the next birth.” As it began to rain torrentially, Arjie left the gate open and biked back to Sena Uncle's house. From the top of a hill, he looks back to the house, which he sees momentarily before “the rain fell faster and thicker, obscuring it.”

In the closing passage of Funny Boy, Arjie confronts the house that represents his traumatic uprooting for the last time. The house's desolation stands for how his own life has been reduced to nothing; everything that has mattered to him has now become insignificant in the wake of the riots. His crying appears cathartic and suggests that he is finally beginning to process the trauma and suffering of his experiences on an emotional level. Arjie's musings about the stolen flowers point to the “next birth” he is about to undergo, when he moves halfway across the world to start over in an unknown place. In this vein, it is noteworthy that Selvadurai does not follow Arjie to Canada (and has also clarified that he has no plans to write a sequel). Instead, he leaves the boy's future open at the end of the novel, offering the reader a sense of Arjie's wonder, confusion, and anxiety; the reader knows what Arjie's future may hold just as well as he does, and he leaves Sri Lanka on the cusp of adulthood's radical uncertainty, carrying with him only the moral fortitude he has developed through his difficult childhood and adolescence.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Jennings, Rohan. "Funny Boy." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Apr 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Jennings, Rohan. "Funny Boy." LitCharts LLC, April 17, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/funny-boy>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Funny Boy* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. HarperCollins. 1994.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Funny Boy*. New York: HarperCollins. 1994.