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MARGINALISATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOUTH-ASIAN IDENTITY IN NOVELS BY
ROHINTON MISTRY, SHYAM SELVADURAI AND MOYEZ VASSANJI

par
Narvadha Salaye

Mémoire présenté en vue de l'obtention de la Maîtrise ès arts
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Composition de jury

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ABSTRACT

The three texts analysed in this thesis are *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai and *No New Land* by Moyez Vassanji. These novels represent characters who experience different types of marginalisation that mediate their South-Asian identity, marginalisation based on caste, class, gender, sexual orientation, race, language and exile. These novels suggest that marginalisation can take place at home or abroad, for the stories are set in India, Sri Lanka and Canada. The thesis discusses the role of diasporic writing in constructing a sense of South-Asian identity. I explore the way these fictional works by South-Asian Canadian writers construct the identity of different minority groups such as women, untouchables, homosexuals, and immigrants through realism and cultural memory.

This thesis is divided into three chapters in which marginalisation will be examined in its various forms. Chapter I is a study of how Mistry's *A Fine Balance* represents women and untouchable characters who are marginalised by both gender and caste within India during the Emergency Period in the 1970s. Mistry reconstructs history by portraying through epic realism characters who experience all types of injustices, humiliation, and violence. Chapter II studies how Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* represents a young gay character who is marginalised due to his sexual orientation in the Sri Lankan patriarchy. The novel focusses on his individual quest to understand his homosexuality. Chapter III discusses the way Vassanji's *No New Land* constructs the identity of South Asians who have migrated from East Africa to Canada because of racial tensions and political instability. Unfortunately, upon migration their situation does not improve since these South Asians remain marginalised due to race and exile in Canada. The title *No New Land* suggests several readings of the in-between space inhabited by South-Asian immigrants in Canada. The thesis draws on postcolonial and feminist theories of Othering and explores the social context of each form of marginalisation.
RÉSUMÉ

Les trois textes analysés dans ce mémoire sont *A Fine Balance* de Rohinton Mistry, *Funny Boy* de Shyam Selvadurai et *No New Land* de Moyez Vassanji. Ces textes représentent des personnages masculins et féminins qui font l’expérience de différents types de marginalisation qui sont caractérisés par le système de caste, la classe sociale, le genre, l’orientation sexuelle, la race, la langue et l’exil. Ces romans démontrent que la marginalisation peut être subie dans son propre pays, comme à l’étranger. Ces différents types de marginalisation jouent un rôle dans la remodélisation de l’identité sud-asiatique au sein de la diaspora indienne, en Inde, au Sri Lanka et au Canada.

Le mémoire est divisé en trois chapitres dans lesquels la marginalisation est examinée sous ses diverses formes. Le premier chapitre portera sur l’analyse de *A Fine Balance* ou la marginalisation touche des femmes et des intouchables en Inde durant l’ “Emergency Period” dans les années soixante-dix. Dans ce roman Mistry reconstruit l’histoire en faisant le portrait de ces personnages qui vivent toutes sortes d’injustice, d’humiliation et de violence. Le deuxième chapitre porte un regard sur *Funny Boy*. Ici, j’analyse les réactions d’un personnage qui est marginalisé à cause de son orientation sexuelle dans la société patriarchale du Sri Lanka pendant la période de tension entre les Tamouls et les Cingalais. Les tensions raciales entre les Sud-asiatiques et les Africains et l’instabilité politique sont deux raisons sur lesquelles *No New Land* de Vassanji se fonde pour construire l’identité des sud-asiatiques qui ont quitté le Kenya pour le Canada. Ces derniers, malheureusement, ne voit pas une amélioration de leur situations et certains restent des marginaux au Canada surtout pour des raisons raciales. Le mémoire parle des théories postcoloniales et féministes de l’Autre et explore le contexte social de chaque type de marginalisation.
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INTRODUCTION

Identity construction involves the establishment of a set of criteria for distinguishing between group members and nonmembers. These criteria might include skin colour, ancestry, place of origin, a cultural practice, or something else—or a lot of things at once. The point is not the specific criteria used as boundary markers, but the categorical boundary they signify—the line between "us" and "them." (Cornell 81)

In this thesis, I will explore how different types of marginalisation reshape South-Asian identity in diasporic writing by South-Asian Canadians: Rohinton Mistry, Shyam Selvadurai and Moyez Vasanji. I will investigate representations of South Asians in three novels: A Fine Balance by Mistry, Funny Boy by Selvadurai and No New Land by Vasanji. South-Asian Canadian literature is an emergent form of writing that is part of a wide range of South-Asian diasporic writings around the world.

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines a South Asian as one who is an emigrant of South Asia or a descendant of a South Asian living outside the Indian subcontinent (1388). In geographical terms the South-Asian diaspora includes India, Sri Lanka, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa and Mauritius, amongst others. "South Asian" is a term applied to a group of people from various parts of the Indian diaspora as well as India itself. The Indian diaspora developed along side the history of the colonisation of India by Britain. The "Indian diaspora" is a term used to describe Indians who travelled to different parts of the world in order to work as indentured labourers or as business investors and travellers. The use of "South-Asian" also describes generations such as my own who have never lived in or been to the Indian
subcontinent. I am of South-Asian descent and I grew up in Mauritius. My parents are of the third generation born in Mauritius. The term South-Asian Canadian helps diasporic people to situate and integrate themselves in the Canadian mosaic. For example, in my study, Rohinton Mistry from India, Shyam Selvadurai from Sri Lanka and Moyez Vassanji from Kenya are examples of members of the Indian diaspora living in Canada. They all use the coloniser’s language, English, to make their diasporic identity real, whether writing about life in Canada or in South Asia.

English is the language used by most South-Asian diasporic writers because their countries of destination were often former British colonies. Only a few write in French (Ananda Devi Nirsimloo-Anenden, the author of Rue la poudrière is from The Republic of Mauritius and one of the few South-Asian diasporic writers to work in French since at different points in history, Mauritius was both a British and French colony). In the Canadian context, the use of English helps these authors to integrate easier within the larger Canadian society (most of the provinces in Canada are anglophone, except for Quebec and pockets of French Canadian communities in other provinces such as the Maritimes, Manitoba, and Northern Ontario). English represents the modality of power in the novels discussed here though some include a hybrid use of Hindi and Tamil in their texts to give them a certain air of “authenticity.” The use of South-Asian languages also allows the authors to communicate in an insider’s language to other members of the diaspora.

To situate myself as a reader, I will say a few lines about my own South-Asian identity. I feel drawn to my ancestral origins, even though I have not yet been to India. This is perhaps one major element that has captured my interest to work in this field. As a member of the South-Asian diaspora in Canada, I feel a lot closer to South-Asian novelists as I can put myself in the
skin of these exiled authors. I understand the Hindi intertexts that some make use of. We seem to have a common ground and identity because we are all part of the Indian diaspora and may have undergone similar lived experiences in relation to our shared cultural and ethnic background even though we have not all lived in the same place. Though I have been in Canada for a while now, I doubt that Canada will replace my native land. I still feel and identify myself as Indo-Mauritian. Pier Giorgio Di Cicco says, "I'd been a man without a country for most of my life" (as quoted by Kamboureli 18). In my own case, as a migrant, I am aware that there is no "new land" for me. Canada may be only a temporary home, not a permanent one. This is so because from my point of view as an immigrant, Canada provides more economic security than anything else, but I long to find out during my temporary stay whether it will ultimately provide a sense of motherhood and identification. I remember that when I was child, I used to wonder how foreign countries were and how it felt to study in a foreign land. Now that I have experienced it, I still wonder: where do I belong? Should I pack my bags and go? These questions arise because I do not possess a stable South-Asian identity and do not feel a definitive sense of belonging either at home in Mauritius or here in Canada. Like the immigrant characters in Vassanji's novel, No New Land, I occupy an in-between space.

Robert Kroetsch's idea that writing provides a site where identity can be explored ("We haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" [ Kroetsch as quoted by Strong-Boag et al. 4]) applies to South-Asian Canadian writers who need to explore diasporic identity and marginalisation from their place of exile in Canada. Mistry, Selvadurai and Vassanji use the dominant narrative form of the English novel and realist writing to represent some fragments of real life and their memories of South Asians and to construct their own diasporic identities. Social realism emerged as a narrative form in India during the nineteenth-
century soon after contact with European literature. It brought new values and new schools of thought that gradually established themselves in the hierarchical Indian society. Meenaksh Mukherjee argues that social realism explains the existing relationship between the individual and society. In *Realism and Reality*, she defines realism in the following way:

Realism is not a value in literature, but one of the many modes that narrative fiction can adopt. When the novel was emerging as a distinct genre in India, social realism had for some time been the dominant mode in the European novel, and the early Indian novelists joined in that effort, that willed tendency of art to approximate reality. This effort consisted, among other things, in the creation of characters in situations permitting individual choice as well as their mimetic representation in a manner which did not distort contemporary Indian reality. (98)

Writers are able to dramatise their collective experiences, construct their identities and give a historicised representation of themselves and their people by using this realistic form of writing. This form of art may be used to portray lives, attachment to place, appearances, social and cultural problems, injustices, customs and traditions of the marginalised. For example, the South-Asian Canadian texts that I discuss here have most probably been influenced by the popularity of realism in Indian fiction. Realism suits these writers in remembering India and the Indian diaspora because of its prominence in Indian culture. The South-Asian Canadian writers under discussion use this technique to construct a shared cultural memory of India and of the dispersed members of the diaspora. In this sense, the novels are a site of identity construction as well as a depiction of it.
In this study, I have chosen to explore three realist novels, *A Fine Balance*, *Funny Boy* and *No New Land*, because they share important similarities. They challenge social boundaries and the different degree and types of marginalisation of South-Asian characters inside and outside of India. They are remarkable for the depiction of the way minorities such as South-Asian immigrants, untouchables, women and homosexuals have limited access to certain social and cultural activities. The novels show that marginalisation does not happen in one place only. I intend to shed light on the different ways South-Asian identity construction in these texts is mediated by race, exile, gender, sexual orientation, caste and class within and outside the Indian subcontinent. I am not using only one theory of identity or marginalisation. Instead I am calling on different theories of identity and marginalisation such as those by Neil Bissoondath, Lata Mani, Himani Bannerji and Edward Said amongst others. Gender and caste are the forms of marginalisation highlighted in Mistry’s novel about South Asians in India. Sexual orientation is the form of marginalisation that causes the character Arjie to feel out of place as a homosexual in the Sri Lankan society of Selvadurai’s novel. Exile and race account for the marginalisation of South-Asian immigrants to Canada depicted in Vasanji’s novel. Although these three novels explore different types and degrees of marginalisation, the characters undergo a similar process of marginalisation through stereotyping, silencing, feelings of shame, passivity, and powerlessness.

In *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Sneja Gunew describes marginalisation as follows:

Marginality unintentionally reifies centrality because it is the centre that creates the condition of marginality. In simple terms we could ask ‘Who are the marginal?’ ‘Marginal to what?’ We might be tempted to reply spontaneously,
'imperialism marginalizes; the colonized people are marginalized.' But they are neither all marginalized nor always marginalized [. . .]. It is continuous, processual, working through individuals as well as upon them. [. . .] Therefore, despite its ubiquity as a term to indicate various forms of exclusion and oppression, the use of the term always involves the risk that it endorses the structure that established the marginality of certain groups in the first place.

(as quoted by Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 135-36)

Since marginalisation and identity are both relational, we need to locate the centre of power and dominant subjects in order to understand how others are pushed to the margins. Imperialism, colonisation, ethnicity, patriarchy, and the caste and class systems can be sources of marginalisation, which is in fact, as Gunew points out, a continuous process that applies to certain groups of people, for example, the minority characters in these texts. The South Asians portrayed in these novels are all from minority groups: untouchables, women, homosexuals and South-Asian immigrants to Canada although, clearly, not all South Asians share the same experiences of alienation. These novels reflect a genuine concern for those groups whose voices often go unheard.

In the epigraph to this introduction, from Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World, Stephen Cornell claims that the reshaping of identity does not depend solely on fixed criteria; identity is relational, built upon assumptions about the differences between “us” and “them.” We tend to forget that dislocation is also indicative of the internal colonisation of male and female subjects in some societies, caste and class in others. Although they may be of the same culture, race, and skin colour, there are boundaries other than national or ethnic boundaries that automatically dislocate certain members even from within their respective
societies. Erik Erikson writes, "Identity is the stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world. It integrates one's meaning to oneself and one's meaning to others; it provides a match between what one regards as central to oneself and how one is viewed by significant others in one's life" (as quoted by Josselson). As opposed to what Erikson implies about choosing one's identity, no one can totally construct his or her own identity alone because identity is relational. Moreover, although we try to construct a stable sense of who we are, identity is considered to be unstable as different forces affect people in a variety of ways throughout their lives. To some extent, we choose who we want to be, to accept or rebel against certain social values that may result in identity confusion. Since some values and beliefs are already ingrained in us, we only feel part of a society when we accept and conform to at least some of its rules.

As the Canadian Oxford Dictionary makes clear, the term "identity" is defined as "the quality or condition of being a specified person or thing" (707). Identity is the feeling of being someone who, despite changing circumstances and physical and mental changes in the state of being, exhibits gradual modification and continuing evolution of a stable sense of self. Renowned for his criticism of multiculturalism, Neil Bissoondath, a South-Asian diasporic writer, comments in Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada on his perception of identity. He declares, "My own roots are portable, adaptable, the source of a personal freedom that allows me to feel 'at home' in a variety of places and languages without ever forgetting who I am or what brought me here" (26). Contrary to Moyez Vassanji's characters in No New Land who do not feel at home in their host society, Bissoondath experiences identity as portable; in exile, a person can carry aspects of his past which are linked to language, cultural background, place, tradition, ethnicity, and so on. It remains to be seen, though, if a sense of belonging is as
“portable” as Bissoondath suggests, given that many immigrants experience marginalisation in the host country. This factor is amongst those that contribute greatly in shaping South-Asian identity for members of the diaspora in various countries. Identity is constructed through a certain unconscious process that reminds an individual of his past. Even if he or she decides to forget certain aspects of his or her past life, past events and memories may come back. All together, these fragments of memories contribute to the formation of both an individual’s personality and identity. Diasporic writings such as the three novels discussed here may contribute to building memories and a sense of attachment among members of the diaspora.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry paints India through the experiences of hardship and violence of his untouchable characters during the Emergency Period in 1975, the year that Mistry emigrated to Canada and the year that Indira Gandhi proclaimed a State of Emergency. Michael Henderson in *Experiment with Untruth: India under Emergency* describes an event of the Emergency Period as follows: “Farmers were forced to get sterilised or their water and electricity would be stopped, fathers likewise in order to get their children accepted in schools. Motivation quotas were imposed on teachers, civil servants and employees of all kinds. Women teachers suffered the indignity of having to motivate men to be sterilised in order even to get their salary paid to them” (69). Henderson also gives government figures; he writes: “7 million males were sterilised in India in 1976 alone [. . .] well exceeding the 4.3 million target set for the year” (66). In Chapter I, I study Mistry’s depiction of the marginalisation of individual untouchables, Ishvar, Om, Roopa and the Bhil woman, amongst others. They are marginalised not only by the complex caste system, but also by gender identity when they are forcibly sterilised or raped. Mistry also depicts the marginalisation of women in higher castes through the character Dina, a widow who has escaped the practice of *sati* (widow-burning) in India. In order to understand the social
values and norms at work shaping identity in this novel, it is necessary to understand the context of these historical practices.

In the early stages of history, the caste system referred to as varna existed as an oppressive system and affected the whole of Indian society. This oppressive system originates from Hinduism. The term "caste" was used by the British during the period of colonisation in India. It is a unique system and is perhaps the world’s oldest existing social hierarchy in which an individual is considered a member of a caste by reason of his or her birth and remains so until death. The caste system is divided into four categories: the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Kshatryyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaishyas (merchants and traders), the Sudras (labourers and artisans), and also many sub-castes. The one category which falls outside the whole varna system is known as the Dalits (untouchables). The untouchables call themselves the Dalits, which means the oppressed ones. They are marginalised not only in the religious field, but also politically, economically and culturally. They are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Indian society because of social stratification and job distribution. Untouchables are usually leather workers, street sweepers, janitors, and cobblers. In Caste Today: Issued under the Auspices of the Institute of Race Relations, Taya Zinkin compares the ever-existing caste system in India to earlier European systems. She defines the caste system in the following way:

Caste is a way of life which divides society into small groups, each of which lives in a rather different way from the rest. Because of these differences, because the groups are so tiny, and because the most important relations of life, above all marriage, take place within them, the groups have great power over their members, and thus great power of survival. To break caste is to cut oneself off from one’s group, which means from one’s family, from one’s
friends, and from all those who live exactly as one does oneself, and one cuts oneself off without any hope of being adopted by another group - one is ostracised by everybody in one’s own group and will not even be accepted by a lower group. Thus the ostracised Brahmin cannot become a warrior or even an Untouchable since one has to be born within one’s caste; only if he finds others from his own caste who have also been ostracised can he once more belong to a group because in a sect a new sub-caste has been created. (8-9)

Zinkin explains that when an individual is born within a certain caste, this individual cannot change his caste status. She also explains that class, occupation, or skin colour amongst other elements do not necessarily identify people from different castes. According to her, in each and every caste there are educated and uneducated people, some are born rich and some poor, others are well-born and still others are ordinary. “A Brahmin is no less a Brahmin if he is born jet-black; an Untouchable is no whit less untouchable if she happens to be fair.” (1) Also, commenting on the instability of these categories, Zinkin explains that “many occupations, mostly of artisans, are overwhelmingly identified with particular castes, but the main occupation, agriculture, is open to all, and many castes have priests who are not Brahmins. There have always been soldiers who were not Kshatryas, government servants have always been of various castes” (1). Zinkin gives a very concrete example to show the complexity of the caste system.

The water of the Ganges, to the outsider, appears dirty; not only are the half-charred bodies of those who were cremated along its sacred banks thrown into it, but also are the entire corpses of those who have died of infectious diseases like small pox. Yet, because the Ganges is the holy river of the Hindus, its water is considered crystal pure; not only is it used like Jordan water for ritual
but it is swallowed like Vichy water for medical purposes as well. By contrast, boiled water from a tube-well, sealed in a sterilised bottle, carried by a spotlessly clean Untouchable, is so impure that its contact, let alone its absorption, is polluting. (11)

Some Hindus believe that if an individual drinks the water carried by a clean untouchable in a sterilised bottle, it is more polluting than drinking the Ganges water which is full of dirt. Thus the caste system in Indian society is not only a social problem, it is a belief system that is deeply ingrained in both the Indian culture and the Indian mentality.

According to a recent report for the United States, Human Rights Watch 1999, caste is still practiced although caste barriers have been removed to quite an extent. Today most untouchables still live in extreme poverty. But the Indian government has implemented a quota system in education and government jobs in order to help untouchables increase their standard of living and benefit from better job opportunities. In urban areas, the Indians are less strict about the caste system than those living in the rural areas who tend to be less educated and still have a lot of prejudice. In the urban areas people tend to mix more. In today's India, the quota system represents positive discrimination. The high caste people are the ones who feel segregated by the Indian government policy which tends to reserve a certain number of positions for the untouchables in the fields of education and job opportunities. According to the Human Rights Watch report, sometimes even unqualified untouchables are accepted to fill the reserved positions, a practice which then causes a lot of tension between the two castes. I will show how, in Mistry's novel, untouchables are marginalised to the extent that they are not allowed to cross the line that separates them from upper-caste people.
The main female character Dina is a widow from the Parsi community. Her brother Nusswan reminds her of the practice of sati and says that if she were from the Hindu community, at this moment she would not be alive (52). The practice of sati accounts for the marginalisation of South Asian women in India due to gender identity. Sati is a Hindu custom in India in which the widow was burnt to ashes on her dead husband's pyre. In 1829, the British in India outlawed this practice. Lata Mani describes the practice of sati as follows:

Within the frames of a patriarchal ideology, sati, a predominantly upper-caste Hindu practice, is comprehended as the duty of a virtuous wife. By immolating herself, the widow purportedly enables herself as well as her deceased husband to enjoy "heavenly pleasures" and even, according to some scriptural texts, to escape thereafter the cycle of birth and death. The scriptural sanction for widow burning [...] is dubious and precisely part of what was under contest in the debate over its prohibition. (1)

On one hand, the practice of sati is seen by some people as a social problem. On the other hand, sati is thought to be part of the Indian culture which includes familial expectations, social and patriarchal obligations. While some consider this act as barbaric, others consider it to be a voluntary act in which the Hindu widow decides to end her life on her husband's death. Both are true. In the former case, the South-Asian woman is not only portrayed as a silenced creature whose moves are restricted, but a pathetic victim who is burnt alive against her will by the traditional patriarchal society. Some perceive South-Asian women as subjects who have no authority and can be acted upon, instead of individuals who can actually act. The act of burning the widow still contributes to quite an extent to the specific oppression of women in India. Meenaksh Mukherjee writes, "social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman
than for a man, and generally a woman’s identity tends to be defined, by herself as well as others, in terms of her relationship with men—as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother” (98). I will draw upon the postcolonial and feminist theories of Gayatri Spivak and Himani Bannerji to inform my discussion of marginalisation due to gender in Mistry’s novel.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak demonstrates the way South-Asian female subjects are doubly marginalised in the Indian subcontinent and in the West. She elaborates on issues about voice and the agency of subaltern women. She insists on the fact that subaltern women cannot speak because they take on a subjugated position in patriarchy and dominant discourse due to their gender identity. In reaction, Lata Mani questions Spivak’s theory: “In claiming ‘the subaltern cannot speak,’ does Spivak mean ‘cannot’ as in ‘does not know how to’ or ‘cannot’ in the sense of ‘is unable to under the circumstances?’” (159). Himani Bannerji wants to ban this image that the West has of South-Asian women as silent and helpless: “It ramifies into projections of non-white women as beasts of burden, mindless nurturers, and seductresses” (ix). South-Asian women as “women of colour” or “Third World Women” are labelled and stereotyped as ones who cannot voice their opinions in their society. Even if they try to do so, their ways of “talking back” are considered to be secondary. I will analyse the silencing of women in Mistry’s novel with this debate about agency and voice in mind. Through his realistic depiction of gender discrimination in India, Mistry exposes practices that silence women, one of the extremes of which is sati.

Mistry articulates skillfully events in which both male and female untouchable characters are marginalised by gender and caste in India. These untouchables are forced to work in degrading and harsh conditions. They are made to dig the village graves, dispose of dead animal carcasses and clean human excrement. They are not allowed by the upper-caste to enter and visit
places of worship, to use water from the same wells, or drink from the same glass in public places. The untouchable children are either denied education, or they are made to sit at the back of classrooms. South-Asian women characters are obliged to face the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. Some female untouchable characters are paraded naked in the village field. Others are not only sexually abused, but forced into prostitution, regardless of age. No one practices untouchability when it comes to sexual abuse and rape. In the novel, male untouchables are not allowed to refuse to do certain tasks. They are either threatened with physical and verbal abuse or burnt alive whenever they fight for their rights. They are restricted from their right to vote and are denied access to land which represents economic stability in the Indian subcontinent. Mistry shows how the masculinity of these male untouchables is taken away through a program of forced sterilisation implemented by Indira Gandhi’s government during the Emergency Rule Period. They were sterilised as part of a government program with the aim of decreasing the general population of the lowest caste. In this way, a mean-spirited, exclusionary government policy effectively slowed India’s birth rate.

In Chapter II, we will see that not only women and untouchables are marginalised in South Asia, but homosexuals as well experience another form of marginalisation that reshapes South-Asian identity. I will examine the young gay character Arjie Chelvaratnam in Selvadurai’s semi-autobiographical *Funny Boy*. This novel can be read as a homosexual boy’s rebellion against the whole of patriarchal society. I will explain Arjie’s feeling of not belonging and his sense of exclusion in his own society due to his sexual orientation. The main protagonist Arjie’s South-Asian identity is mediated by homosexuality, which causes a certain form of insecurity and instability in his life. His masculinity is colonised by patriarchal values. He suffers from dislocation as he feels oppressed within patriarchy and forced into secrecy. Yet *Funny Boy* acts
as a site that “outs” homosexual desire. It is a novel where the marginalised subject not only experiences exclusion, but also discovers an underground community of gay males and his own desire for other men. He negotiates his emerging homosexuality in Sri Lankan patriarchal society as a form of exile in the sense that he will be excluded from this society. His feminine behaviour disrupts the masculine rules of the South-Asian patriarchy. Although Arjie’s parents try to force his masculinity, he still feels that he does not fit into the Sri Lankan community and experiences dislocation. Selvadurai shows that homosexuality presents itself as a threatening factor to conservative characters like Arjie’s parents because they see it as causing the downfall of the whole of Sri Lankan civilization and the ridicule of their family. Homosexuality destabilises Sri Lankan patriarchy and heterosexuality, which are considered to be important to ensure gender power and sexual reproduction. Homosexuality does not match the societal norms and Arjie’s different sexual orientation destabilises the patriarchal norms. He is fully aware that he cannot cross certain lines imposed by South-Asian patriarchy.

Studies of homosexuality such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985), William Paul et al’s *Homosexuality: Social, Psychological and Biological Issues* (1982), and Donald West’s *Homosexuality* (1967) have explored similar data concerning the historical background of homosexuality in ancient times. In certain cultures, homosexuality appears to have been more valued than heterosexuality. Burton states that “in Rome as in Egypt the temples of Isis were centres of sodomy,” and similar practices took place among “grand priestly castes from Mesopotamia to Mexico and Peru” (as quoted by West 22). Homosexuality was legitimated in some primitive civilisations, while in others it was severely condemned. For example, in ancient Greece, homosexuality was highly ingrained and looked upon as socially acceptable. “K.J. Dover’s recent study, *Greek Homosexuality*, seems to give a strong counter example from
classical Greece. Male homosexuality, according to Dover’s evidence, was a widespread, licit, and very influential part of the culture” (Sedgwick 4). In fact, the love relationship that existed between two males had a specific educational function. In this time and place homosexuality was often a form of mentorship between a youth and an older man. But what William Paul writes in 1982 is still held by conservatives today: “homosexuality is a social corruption that can cause the downfall of civilization” (300). In some societies, homosexuality is still an embarrassing issue and is considered to be a social problem. An extreme example is Nazi Germany, where homosexuality was severely suppressed. Homosexuals were sentenced and incarcerated in concentration camps. These historical examples show that homosexual practices have been valued differently throughout history.

The construction of “funny boy’s” identity in Selvadurai’s novel by that name shows that homosexuality in Sri Lankan society is not only illegal, but shameful as well. The gay protagonist Arjie experiences marginalisation as his parents feel shameful about their son’s sexual orientation. His mother forces him into the boys’ world in order to maintain heterosexual norms. The laws of Sri Lanka as well as the patriarchal family prohibit homosexuality.

According to the Sri Lankan penal code, sex between men is punishable by 12 years in jail while the existence of lesbianism is not even acknowledged by the 1883 Penal Code. Though this law is not being properly enforced in the country, its mere existence is enough for the police and anti-gay groups to brand gays and lesbians as "perverts" and lawbreakers. Article 365 of the penal code is discriminatory and gives a stigma to those who are gay. It leads to a lot of abuses of gay people in our community.

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1 http://www.geocities.com/srilankagay/news1.html
Selvadurai’s Sri Lanka lies in-between two extremes where homosexuals are either highly looked upon or persecuted. He shows that the marginalisation of homosexuals is institutionalised in Sri Lanka, but the practice goes on “underground.” Arjie feels excluded within his own society. His feeling of dislocation prefigures the ending of the novel in which his whole family goes into exile. As Tamils, they flee racial tension between Tamils and the Sinhalese during the civil war. They decide to emigrate to Canada. I will argue that this extreme marginalisation in Sri Lanka represents a metaphorical form of exile that resembles the family’s forced exile at the end of the novel.

In Chapter III, we will discover that in Vassanji’s novel exile is lived differently. Although the South-Asian immigrants migrate to Canada, they will still have to deal with new forms of marginalisation. The notion of both voluntary and involuntary exile appear in *A Fine Balance*, *Funny Boy* and *No New Land* as the characters undergo different experiences of dislocation that are either forced or chosen. Susan Suleiman’s *Exile and Creativity* defines voluntary and involuntary exile. According to Suleiman, voluntary exile is defined as “expatriation, […] itself for many more personal reasons: social, economic, sexual or simple preference” whereas involuntary exile is “usually political or punitive” affecting “those who as private persons fled from political conditions or war” (11). Although exile is usually used to describe displacement in the physical sense of the term, in the novels under study the characters construct their South-Asian identity through different forms of dislocation inside and outside of their homeland. In *A Fine Balance*, male and female untouchable characters go through a certain form of voluntary exile. Mistry explores the fact that untouchable characters feel exiled within their societies and are represented as silenced subjects within the Indian society depending on their caste and class. They experience exclusion from a society to which they thought they
belonged. Some are physically uprooted and migrate to the big city of Bombay. In Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* the characters go through both voluntary and involuntary exile. The main character Arjie feels excluded and exiled because of his sexual orientation. The text emphasises the presence of walls to show that homosexuality exists outside these patriarchal walls. The gay character has to struggle against prejudices in a homophobic society as he does not fit into Sri Lankan patriarchal society. *Funny Boy* also accounts for involuntary exile as Arjie’s family are affected by ethnic war and racial tension between the Sinhalese and Tamils. They must leave their homeland at the end of the novel. In Vassanji’s *No New Land*, exile plays the most important role in the construction of South-Asian identity throughout the novel. Several immigrants are followed as they search for jobs and try to adapt to life in the new land.

The degree and form of marginalisation is rooted in exile in Vassanji’s *No New Land*. The South-Asian characters in this novel first migrated from India to East Africa and then from Africa to Canada due to political instability, corruption and racial tension between South Asians and native Africans. Vassanji’s representation of identity and exile relates South-Asian immigrant characters struggling in a hostile Canadian society, sometimes against racism. The South-Asian immigrant characters feel dislocated and experience exile as loss. They all feel that they are treated as immigrants first and second as South Asians. They feel a sense of restriction because of their mobility. In the beginning the characters Nurdin Lalani and his family feel that exile to a host country will provide them with better education, economic stability and better job opportunities. They also know that exile will allow them to live and learn about two different worlds. Although the South-Asian immigrant characters look at the positive side of things, the character Nurdin encounters exile through tremendous frustration while looking for a job. His wife Zera feels marginalised as she encounters language difficulties. The character Nanji feels
subjected to racism because he looks different. He notices that passengers in the public bus in Toronto prefer to stand rather than sit beside him. He feels that perhaps certain prejudices as well as his physical characteristics put him in a more disadvantageous position than other immigrants. Most of the South-Asian immigrant characters have to go through certain prejudices due to their race. The discourse of race can be used to inferiorise, exoticise, and exclude the Other in Vassanji's text. The exiled South-Asian Canadians feel out of place, discriminated against and stereotyped, not only because of their lack of language skills, inadequate qualifications, and foreign work experience, but also because of skin colour and facial traits.

The course of history is evidence of immigrants being subjected to racism in Canada, as attested by numerous studies on the history of South Asians in Canada. For example, with the arrival of South Asians in Canada, the incident of the Komagata Maru, the Japanese ship, carrying South Asians has marked a dark chapter in Canadian history. 376 South Asians were not allowed to dock in Vancouver in 1914. They had to stay for two months on the ship. After the Canadian Supreme Court ruled against their landing in the country, they had to go back to Calcutta, India. Chandrasekhar in From India to Canada stated, "Canadians tend to be prejudicial against Oriental immigration" (55). He believes that this is so because many Canadians base their opinions on assumptions that South Asians are different mainly because of: "social customs, ways of doing business, wage standards, family life, religion, and skin pigmentation of the people" (55). There are unfair distinctions between the minority and majority groups, with the majority tending to inferiorise the visible minority because of their race, skin colour and their physical and cultural differences.

In Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples, Jean Burnet writes, "Most permanent external symbols of ethnic identity are physical traits. A person can
change his or her behaviour, including linguistic behaviour; he or she cannot change skin colour, hair form, or other physical characteristics except by procedures that are often painful and costly. Thus it has been possible to single out members of the visible minorities for discrimination” (218). In this case, skin colour acts as a signifier. It remains a distinguishing feature. Visible minorities undergo more discrimination and social prejudice than white immigrants. Vassanji’s novel shows how these visible inherent characteristics set South-Asian immigrants in Canada apart and limit them to certain activities in society. Colour is indeed a fundamental element as it may lead to various forms of prejudice based on preconceived notion about people who have a different skin colour. Floya Anthias writes of the concept of colour:

[. . .] colour of skin as an inherited characteristic lends itself easily to crude ‘scientific’ racist genetic theories. [. . .] blackness is visible. Once the powerful dynamic of hostile stereotyping has been established, it is very resistant to change; this is a result of the selective perception of prejudiced people. Thus visibility reinforces racist classification as a salient factor in every social interaction. (136)

Unfortunately, the South-Asian immigrant characters in No New Land feel othered, marginalised and dislocated in their host country as they have to face the unexpected harsh Canadian reality in terms of racism as well as climatic and cultural differences. They struggle against feelings of dislocation and protest rather than take on a subordinate role. The marginalisation of characters in all three novels shows that South-Asian identity can be constructed differently inside and outside the Indian subcontinent in reaction to different social beliefs and norms. By looking at the marginalisation of certain South-Asian characters in diasporic writing, I hope to see how social boundaries between “them” and “us” are maintained and challenged.
CHAPTER ONE: In Search of a Fine Balance within Existing Boundaries in Indian Life

Some people might say it's arrogant of me not to live there and assume that I know everything from a visit every five or six years. But I'm confident that I do know. It's memory. Well - I suppose that when one says memory plus imagination, which creates a new memory. When I don't have that, I will not write about it. I have promised myself that (Mistry as quoted in Stephen Smith 65).

In this study, I will be analysing how Mistry exposes social boundaries in the Indian subcontinent in A Fine Balance (1995). In this novel, Mistry creates characters to represent subalterns. They feel dislocated within the Indian subcontinent because of boundaries based on caste and gender. The caste system plays an important role in the construction of South-Asian identity in Mistry's novel by drawing an invisible line between upper and lower castes that is hard to cross for both male and female characters. On the one hand, it is important to recognise the ways in which his female characters share South-Asian women's marginalised experiences and feelings of dislocation within their homeland, despite caste. On the other hand, males of the upper caste have more agency and they oppress both male and female untouchables in the world of the novel.

The story relates the lives of four main characters from different backgrounds. Dina Dalal is a widow from the Parsi community who goes through a lot of misfortune. Maneck is a refrigeration-and-cooling student, also a member of the Parsi community. Ishvar and Om are two unlucky untouchables, forced to become tailors in order to migrate to Bombay and seek better opportunities. A housing shortage brings the four characters together to live in a small apartment
until the Emergency Period, which began in the 1970s, is proclaimed by Indira Gandhi’s
government. Mistry voices a variety of the various horrors both untouchables and women had to
go through in India during that period. His characters tend to suffer from all types of loss:
injustice, prejudice, disillusionment, dislocation and lack of a sense of belonging.

*A Fine Balance* is a richly textured fictional story within the context of a consistently
unstable Indian society. As the title itself indicates, its characters are trying and hoping to
maintain social balance and stability in their personal lives. *A Fine Balance* can be read as
evidence that dislocation and marginalisation are not experiences that one goes through in a
foreign land only. Mistry’s novel bears an epigraph by Honoré de Balzac which applies to this
novel as testimony:

> Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will
say to yourself: perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of
great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your
own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But
rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true. (n.p.)

Mistry uses epic realism to depict not only Indian life, customs, social and cultural practices of
the marginalised classes within their own society, but also the historical fate of India as a
community and nation. In this novel, the marginalised characters represent the subaltern within
the community by virtue of caste, class, and gender. First and foremost in this chapter, I find it
interesting to analyse the female character Dina, as a woman and a Parsi who goes through
various exilic and marginal experiences to construct her South-Asian identity, although she does
not belong to the lower caste within India. Female characters are eroticized as another form of
marginalisation. Then, I examine the construction of identities of female untouchables in
Mistry’s novel: for example, Roopa, the Bhil woman, and the ayah amongst others who are eroticized, doubly marginalized, and feel exiled within their own turbulent society. Eventually, I explore the reshaping of the identities of male untouchable characters, who were sterilised as part of an unfair government program to slow down India’s birth rate by targeting untouchables.

Mistry represents Dina, a member of the Parsi community, alongside untouchable women to show how some women are doubly marginalised by caste and gender, while others are marginalised due to gender alone. Dina occupies both subject and object positions in the narrative because as a South-Asian female character, she is allowed to voice her opinion but unfortunately remains unheard. She is condemned to go through certain injustices in reshaping her identity within Indian life. Since her youth, Dina’s identity has been affected by injustices against women and misfortunes also. She is one of the major female characters in Mistry’s fiction who feels dislocated and disempowered within her own country, for she is denied physical autonomy. Her personal freedom is taken away from her. For example, she is not allowed to cut her hair.

“If you let me cut my hair, I’ll swab the dining room every day instead of alternate days,” she tried to bargain. “Or I can polish your shoes every night.”

“No,” said her brother Nusswan. “Fourteen is too young for fancy hairstyles, plaits are good for you. Besides, I cannot afford to pay for the hairdresser. But he promptly added shoe-polishing to her list of chores. (22-23)

Her body is controlled by her brother. She represents a woman who is an object of male domination, but who does not accept it passively. She appears to be imprisoned in a female role and trapped in patriarchy. As a female character, she can only beg for her rights privately rather than being able to voice her opinion within the public world. Both her place and movement are
restricted. Clearly, Dina represents a South-Asian female character who is obliged to take on a submissive role. Besides not having control over her own body, she is also marginalised by being denied any education.

Education might be a good means for Dina to develop a stronger personality and identity within a fast growing Indian society. She might acquire more self-respect and confidence through education and broaden her horizons. For these reasons, her brother Nusswan does not allow her to continue schooling. When Dina is withdrawn from school against her will, she is accused of having no desire for education. "And you are complaining? What's lacking in you is the desire for education. This is it, enough schooling for you", says Nusswan (27). As a female character in India, Dina has to face a lot of constraints and difficulties because she is fully controlled and dominated by her brother Nusswan who represents Indian patriarchy. How can her brother Nusswan judge her lack of desire for education? How will she possibly be able to analyse, structure, decide and discover the various ways in which she can evolve and which in turn will eventually reshape her identity? How will she have access to well-paying prestigious jobs? Ruthellen Josselson in her discussion on woman's identity claims: "The most important developmental task facing women today is the formation of identity, for it is in the realm of identity that a woman bases her sense of herself and her vision of the structure of her life. Identity incorporates a woman's choices for herself, her priorities, and the guiding principles by which she makes decisions" (3). As a female character who represents the traditional South Asian woman in India, Dina is portrayed as a powerless creature who is allowed to make personal decisions only after restrictions are imposed by her brother Nusswan. She is conditioned by old societal and communal obligations that restrict the formation of her identity. She feels obliged to accept the family values imposed by the Indian culture.
Dina is also subjected to the humiliations of physical and verbal violence. Her brother Nusswan, "stepped back and flung a mugful of cold water at her from the bucket. Shivering, she stared defiantly at him, her nipples stiffening. He pinched one, hard, and she flinched. 'Look at you with your little breasts starting to grow. You think you are a woman already. I should cut them right off, along with your wicked tongue' (24). She feels exiled and humiliated, for her bodily space is taken over by the male authority who represents the god figure in India. As a silenced female character, she can only stand and stare at her brother. He threatens to cut off her breasts and her tongue as if it were a natural thing to say and to do. Nusswan does not show any respect towards her and treats her as an object of secondary importance. Representing male self-centeredness, he identifies her as "Other" by her body parts.

Charles Taylor in his discussion on women in a patriarchy says that the inferiorisation of women is internalised:

[...] feminists have argued that women in patriarchal societies have been induced to adopt a depreciatory image of themselves. They have internalized a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities. And beyond this, they are condemned to suffer the pain of low self-esteem. (25)

Taylor’s observation applies to the South-Asian female character Dina who lives within a traditional Indian patriarchal family. Although she is told that it is not normal to accept such injustices, she tries to overcome the imposed barriers, yet is not capable of crossing these invisible barriers that separate "us" and "them," men and women. Dina is condemned to suffer from humiliation and low self-esteem and pictures herself as an inferior being.
Dina has to struggle and rebel against sexism in the family. Her brother Nusswan tries to arrange her marriage. Dina says, when she was eighteen, “he started inviting eligible bachelors to their home” (28). On one hand, Nusswan is thinking of placing his sister in a secure home. He wants her to have a mate who would take care of her. On the other, she is seen as a material object possessed by the male subject as property. As property, she is bound to follow rules. She has to take care of the household chores and limit herself to her family and traditional values. Her life is complicated by the various demands of family life. She has little say in a patriarchal society, for she is categorised as the weaker sex who cannot make her own decisions. Dina is treated as the female ‘Other’ which is a symbolic means to marginalise South-Asian women who are attempting to have personal freedom. Mistry shows South-Asian male characters who have more authority and power than women through patriarchy. Male characters tend to dominate and exploit women characters such as Dina. Dina is identified as an object possessed and oppressed by the dominant males in her caste. Like the untouchables, she is colonised and treated as “Other” in her own country. Dina explains similarities in the rules and regulations that South Asian women have to follow in their husbands’ homes to the male untouchable protagonists who in turn will have to respect the same rules while living in her home. She says, “But one thing she will have to understand it’s my house, and follow my ways, like you and Ishvar and Om. Or it will be impossible to get along” (482). Some of the same rules and regulations that apply to the female characters also apply to the two male untouchable characters Ishvar and Om. South-Asian female characters are trapped in the male discourse as they are living within a society in which rules and regulations are made and imposed by both men and women in the interest of male privilege. The result is that female characters are not able to participate actively in the
construction of their identities. Instead they accept the various injustices that the male authorities and the Indian community do to them.

One of the extreme examples of oppression invoked in the novel is the ritual of widow-burning, sati. For some people, the Hindu practice of sati can be seen as a man-made practice and possibly a criminal act against women. For others, the practice of sati may simply be considered a part of ancient Indian customs. Mistry shows that Dina is deeply affected by the tragic death of her husband, Rustom, but Nusswan’s choice of words regarding sati show the violence against women inherent in the ritual. Nusswan warns Dina: “Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband’s funeral pyre, be roasted with him” (52). Nusswan is trying to explain to his younger sister that she is lucky to be a Parsi, in contrast to some of the characters such as Hindu widows who are shown to be mere victims. They are not given the same treatment, but it is a question of degree. How can a woman accept this kind of identity and treatment in Indian life? Is she obliged to accept self-annihilation because she is of the female gender? Has there been a case where men were thrown “like garbage” on the pyre? Rajan states, “In Indian culture, a widow has no exchange or use value, that is, no identity in society except through lack” (198). Mistry shows that a widow is less valued in Indian society. She is considered and portrayed as a worthless object. Sati, then, may correspond to religious values, but is also a social practice which reflects male economic interests in ridding the patriarchal family and society in general of female dependents when their male supporters have died. This answers the question of why we have never heard of the practice of sati on men.
In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry represents female untouchable characters in India as doubly marginalised, first because they are women and second because they are untouchables. The author dramatises and heightens the distress untouchable South-Asian female characters experience throughout his novel. For example, female births are not regarded favorably (99). In some Indian families, the birth of a daughter may not be well perceived by everybody whereas the birth of a son might create feelings of resentment between the upper and lower castes. The husbands prefer the birth of sons to that of daughters to keep the heritage within the family and the father's name active. Some of the female characters are considered to burden their parents until marriage. After being a burden to their parents, they are considered to be more of an extra load than a normal responsibility to their husbands. The narrator says,

> the birth of daughters often brought women beatings from their husbands and their husbands' families. Sometimes the women characters were ordered to get rid of the newborn discreetly. Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with her swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death. (99)

Also, Mistry further draws attention to the doubly marginalised female character through his characterisation of Shankar's mother. Here the novel testifies to atrocities:

> It was said that when she was born, her drunken father had slashed off her nose in his rage, disappointed with the mother for producing a daughter instead of a son. The mother had nursed the wound and saved the newborn’s life, though the father kept saying let her die, her ugly face was the only dowry in store for her, let her die. Because of his continuing harassment and persecution, the child was sold into the begging profession. (446-447)
These passages identify physical and verbal abuse, abandonment and violence against women within their own community. Both these mothers and daughters are unable to voice their opinions, especially Shankar’s mother who is confined to fulfilling both her husband’s and family’s obligations against her will as she is not able to change the imposed values. Is it not mortifying for women to live and bear such harsh conditions? Salman Rushdie has argued that the word “woman” itself bears the marks of such oppression: “‘Woman,’ [. . .] what a term! Is there no end to the burdens this word is capable of bearing? Was there ever such a broad-backed and also such a dirty word?” (62-63). Mistry represents the lives of many unfortunate mothers’ through Shankar’s mother. He shows that women are victimised despite the fact there are laws which are actually designed to protect them. Societal pressure and injustice lay like a heavy load upon them. Mistry’s A Fine Balance shows how Indian women are considered to be a burden to their families at birth, marginalised victims of both their husbands and also of Indian society. The novel also shows that the life of an untouchable woman is worse than that of higher caste women.

In one dialogue the characters discuss a woman who has been publicly humiliated for disobedience. “‘Have you seen Buddhu’s wife recently?’ She shook her head. ‘Not since many days.’ ‘And you won’t for many more. She must be hiding in her hut. She refused to go to the field with the zamindar’s son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square’ (97). According to the traditions of the caste system, Bhuddu’s wife is supposed to obey as she is an untouchable, but she refuses to go work in the field to plant crops. Despite her feeble resistance, she suffers from severe punishment by the zamindar’s son who is from the upper caste. Her physical space is restricted and she is treated like an animal and publicly shamed under patriarchal power, which forces her to isolate herself from the rest of the community.
Being an untouchable male in his society, Buddhhu has no power to protect his wife from the "imaginary crimes a low-caste person could commit, and the corresponding punishments" (97) inflicted by the upper caste people. The male untouchable character Buddhhu feels shamefully helpless and it is impossible for him to fulfil his duty as a husband.

The narrator writes about more incidents of persecution to show that these characters experience marginalisation and feel oppressed within their society. "Elsewhere, during the religious procession of Mata Ki Sawari, someone had entered a trance and identified a Bhil woman as the witch causing the community's woes. She was beaten to death, and the village was expecting better times; unfortunately, a year later they were still waiting" (517). The poor Bhil woman, an untouchable female character, suffers from tremendous humiliation, injustice, and even death. She is subjected to a certain ritual form of abuse. She is not given the opportunity to plead guilty; instead she is beaten to death. She is seen as a wild woman and considered to be a witch against God and nature. The Bhil woman and the other female characters in Mistry's *A Fine Balance* are not only owned by male protagonists, but also the identity of slave and witch is imposed upon them. The female characters are merely objects who are not allowed to name themselves or construct their own South-Asian identities and define their own histories. Is it because they are women? Beli hooks says, "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subjects" (as quoted by Agnew 26). Instead, the histories, identities, and "imaginary crimes" against a harsh patriarchy are unfortunately imposed upon them.

Sarah Suleri argues that women are considered to be invisible subjects in Indian society. She states, "There are no women in the Third World" (20). Mistry reflects on the "non-
existence” of female subjects in his writing. Dina Dalal who can voice her opinion, although she is still subjected to various forms of marginalisation. Nusswan decides to cut back on some of the people who were hired to help in the house. The ayah Lily who was the live-in servant was let go as Nusswan could not afford the wages. But Dina knew there was more to this situation.

[. . .] she had noticed her brother with the ayah: Lily sitting on one end of the kitchen table, her feet resting on the edge; Nusswan, his pyjamas around his ankles, stood between Lily’s thighs, clasping her hips to him. [. . .] But she must have lingered a moment too long, for Nusswan had seen her. Not a word spoken about it. Lily departed [. . .], tearfully declaring that she would never find a nice family to work for ever again. (18)

Mistry shows the ill-treatment of women in India in order to show silent suffering. The ayah is sexually abused as she is both a woman and an untouchable. She has no control over her physical space. The female body is controlled and taken possession of by male subjects, even by a boy. She is bound to suffer dislocation from her own community, her own family, and her own body. She is identified as both a marginal and a silent person. The ayah is portrayed as a powerless creature, a passive object, and a silenced subject. Perhaps she thought that to be sexually abused was part of her household tasks, but she knows it will be difficult to find another “nice family” to employ her. Although Nusswan is the one to blame, he still has the power to hire and fire female domestics.

The body of the untouchable female character Roopa is represented as a desired sexual object because of her helplessness. For the sake of her child, Roopa decided to take risks and steal oranges from the orchards. Unfortunately the watchman catches her stealing oranges and
after allowing her to pluck fruits, asks her to give sexual favours in return. But first he threatens her with worse punishments that could feasibly result:

After whipping you, they would probably show you disrespect, and stain your honour. They would take turns doing shameful things to your lovely soft body.

[. . .] “I gave you so many oranges. You won’t even let me taste your sweet mangoes?” “Please let me go.” [. . .] “I only have to shout once.” She wept softly while undressing, and lay down as he instructed. She continued to weep during the time he moved and panted on top of her. [. . .] Dukhi pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. [. . .] He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew from her smell, what had happened to her while she was gone. [. . .] He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night. (98-99)

The scene shows that Roopa feels exiled, depressed and isolated socially after being raped as there is no place to turn for help. Roopa does not have a lot of support within her family and members of her community with whom she can confide her misfortune. She does not seem to feel secure to share her personal experiences. She feels they cannot be safely discussed within her family as she will be looked down upon. She also finds it hard to discuss this rape with her husband Dukhi. Once again the lower caste man is shown to be unable to defend his wife. The result is the shame and especially the helplessness of being an untouchable woman.

According to Rushdie’s Shame, the woman’s body brings a person nothing but babies, pinches and shame (114). She takes on an oppressed role. “South-Asian” women are doubly marginalised and then silenced as Spivak’s theory of the subaltern shows. Nevertheless some people critique this view of Indian woman as silent victims. Rajan writes,
Spivak’s agenda is to posit a theory of cultural discourse centered on the oppressed class in order to show two things: one, that the oppressed person is indeed silenced, and two, that the situation reveals instances of colonial discourse in which mimicking the master discourse has been misread as authentic colonial voice. Along the lines of such a hypothesis Spivak proves that the subaltern woman can be viewed only as a ventriloquist’s dummy - never as a speaking subject. (203)

Spivak’s theory of the subaltern woman does not correspond to Dina’s character. As a Parsi woman, the character Dina cannot be fully considered to be a ventriloquist’s dummy as she is allowed to voice her opinion. Although her brother mistreats her, she still has some power and tries to voice her opinion and defend her rights. In the course of the novel, Dina fights back, which suggests that she is not always a silent victim. In contrast, Roopa is a female character who is portrayed as doubly marginalised. She is seen as a powerless subaltern woman who has no authorial power and no choice, but to remain as a silent figure. Roopa is perceived as no more than an exotic fruit; thus, the narrator uses the word “mangoes” as a metaphor to describe her eroticism.

Eroticisation also constitutes another form of marginalisation for Indian women both inside and outside India. Eroticisation represents a form of objectification which affects the identities of female characters in Mistry’s novel. The narrator says, “[...] she was young then, about fifteen, with a perfect body that would have fetched a decent price, the brothel-keepers had agreed, had it not been for the disfigured face” (446). Mistry shows that women characters, no matter the age group, are amongst the various things that can be bought and sold in Indian society. Also, in Jeevan’s Advanced Tailoring Company, Om and Maneck joke about women:
"It gives me no chance to measure women. [...] Because you cannot measure women for refrigerators.' [...] 'Madam, how deep are your shelves?' Maneck laughed. 'I could ask Madam, may I examine your compressors?' Or 'Madam, you need a new thermostat in your thermostat cavity.' [...] 'Madam, your meat drawer is not opening properly'" (404-405). Although meant to be humorous, the language the two male characters use degrades women. They describe the opposite sex with irony and reduce it to objects such as refrigerators, shelves, compressors and thermostats. The association of the female body with thermostats, refrigerators and compressors shows a lack of respect towards women because they are identified as a measurable object. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak talks about the different forms of injustices, prejudices and violence subaltern subjects have to face. She believes that the intervention of people from outside is liable to cause more trouble, rather than improve the conditions of the subalterns involved. Spivak thinks that subaltern subjects should not take on the role of passive silenced objects. Instead, they should be able to voice their opinions, but Spivak does not hold out much hope of their using dominant discourse to express their subaltern identities. Gita Rajan states the following theory of the silencing of South-Asian women: "From a theoretical perspective the subaltern woman cannot speak, as Spivak so elegantly argues, because she is relegated to an always-already object position; she is either spoken for or spoken at. She lacks agency according to Spivak, in the subaltern position" (202). The female subject seems to be identified, objectified and defined by man as an essentially eroticised 'Other'. Yet Mistry, as male author, does manage to represent South-Asian women's silencing through his realist novel.

The female character's body is sexual property here. She is thought to be passive and readily made available to be used by the powerful masculine forces. In No New Land, Moyez Vassanji also discusses the issue of eroticisation, but here the setting is Canada.
Nurdin’s lusty eye, he had discovered, hovered not only on the ample but forbidden body of his wife – which God would surely excuse – but on practically all women, it seemed. Like a boy at puberty he had become aware of Woman, the female of the species, and he found her diverse and beautiful. [. . .] Bra-less women with lively breasts under blouses and T-shirts that simply sucked your eyeballs out. Buttocks breaking out of shorts. And when you saw these twin delights nuzzling a bicycle seat, doing a gentle rhythmic dance of their own [. . .]. (141)

Female characters are perceived as alien creatures by the South-Asian male in this scene. A lot of emphasis is put on the breasts and buttocks of the female subject. Bharathi Harishankar writes, “Why is woman the Other? Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* that ‘Woman is defined and differentiated with deference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other’” (166). In “Swimming Lessons”, Mistry emphasises a similar issue concerning the female eroticised Other. The narrator says, “She does very well. And as we all regard her floating body, I see what was not visible outside the pool: her bush, curly bits of it, straying out at the pink spandex V. [. . .] I could watch this forever, and I wish the floating demonstration would never end” (238). The female ‘Other’ is described as an object of desire. She is eroticised as a desirable sexual creature without a voice. Thus the identity of this female character is constructed entirely through the male gaze because she barely speaks as subject. In the latter case, however, a South-Asian male describes a Western woman.

In reflecting marginalisation within Indian society, Mistry uses characters to represent male untouchables who are also objectified, marginalised and exiled through the various
injustices they undergo. In *A Fine Balance* Mistry tends to represent the social system of India as being quite complex, by dramatising the fact that not only women characters are objectified by the opposite sex, but also male untouchable characters who go through injustice and ill treatment on a daily basis. These male untouchable characters negotiate identities through torture, battery, and forced sterilisation. By considering these different forms of injustice, we realise once again the effects of the repressive caste and class system to which they belong. The caste system is ingrained in Indian culture and is still present today. The Indian government has implemented programs and quotas in order to raise the living standards of untouchables. The government has reserved places in government jobs and schools which force social interaction between the two castes. As members of the upper caste inflict a lot of injustices on the untouchables, the victims experience dislocation to the extreme margins of Indian society and a form of internal exile which affects their place in the community. Thakur Premji’s wife shouts to her husband, “The Chammar donkey has destroyed our mortar!”, “What have you done, you witless animal!”, “Listen, you stinking dog!” (104). Dukhi and his friends say, “The zamindars have always treated us like animals. Worse than animals” (123). These passages illustrate the ill-treatment of untouchable characters who are called many names and identified as animals. As well as undergoing verbal harassment, they undergo physical exile when beggars and poor people were swept off the pavements and taken to slave in labour camps. Mistry’s novel testifies to historic incidents of oppression. He also lets his characters talk back against that oppression. In the caste system as Mistry represents it, there is a distinct boundary based on beliefs that separate the two castes. They are perceived as Other due to their class and caste positions. For the men, it has nothing to do with the weakness of their gender. The untouchable characters’ space is colonised, which explains their Otherness and why they do not feel a sense of belonging. As the story
progresses, they become more aware of their difference as they are prohibited from doing many activities in the village.

For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death - the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate, he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged. (108)

These punishments are unbearable, violent and inhuman. They represent the violation of human decency. The actions taken by the upper caste people even seem to be made-up stories. Yet the realist context of the narrative, which names many historical dates and places, suggests the stories must be life-like. Although the crimes may often be imagined, the punishment is harsh and physical.

Some untouchable characters are depicted being tortured to death. The narrator says: "In the evening when the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still, silent bodies were taken down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged" (146). These untouchable male characters are killed because they are asking for their right to vote. How can the upper caste people in India hang those of the lower caste? Do they
have the right to do that? Is this not against human rights and dignity? The novel evokes such questions from readers. The untouchables, crimes may be slight and imagined. Untouchables are not allowed to meet the eyes of a Brahmin. They cannot walk on the same side of the road as those of the upper-caste. Other untouchables are accused of theft and their fingers are chopped. At times the punishment may result in long-term mutilation or even death (96-101). These characters suffer from various forms of violence and injustice. These violent experiences construct their South-Asian identities through the body in pain and through humiliation. Are these people representative of Indian culture? Mistry tries to create awareness of difference among South Asians so that we can distinguish between the construction of identity of upper caste characters and those from the lowest stratum of the Indian society.

The South-Asian identity of these poor untouchables is based on the violation of their human rights. Mistry's untouchable characters also have to face all sorts of situations within a turbulent society. Emergency Rule increases their marginalisation. How can they accept these kinds of injustices? There are increasingly critics of the caste system. Ghandhiji declares: "Untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk" [. . .] No one is untouchable, for we are all children of the same God" (107). Untouchability is an oppressive system of social order created by man within Indian society to make the poor stay in their place and keep their distance from priviledged subjects. Ultimately the system denies them dignity. Although it is deeply ingrained in Indian culture as the oldest form of marginalisation, today due to education and various government programs many untouchables realise success despite the caste system.

Mistry's novel focuses on a particularly marginalised group of individuals that constitute certain parts of Indian society to show different means of creating invisible boundaries, the "us"
and "them" of marginalisation. In *A Fine Balance*, the author dramatises the fact that not only female characters are marginalised in India, but both male and female untouchables as well. The novel shows that during the Emergency Period, from 1975 to 1977, Indira Gandhi's government implemented a program of forced sterilisation within the Indian society where beggars and poor people were swept away from the pavements. They were taken to slave in labour camps. Mistry's novel testifies to historic incidents of oppression. He also lets his characters talk back against that oppression. "Actually, we tailors take more pride in our work. We show more consideration for fabric than these monsters show for humans. It is our nation's shame" (514). Untouchables are worth nothing compared to material goods in the Indian society. Mistry tries to show how humans are deprived of their human rights within a dictatorial society. He also shows the frustration and shame of a whole nation. Ravind Grewal states of the events in the novel:

The trucks take them, along with scores of others, to a sterilization camp. Here everyone is unloaded, and regardless of age or sex, is sterilized. Abuses are rampant: the operation is carried out on a sixteen-year-old boy while his father's tearful pleas for mercy are ignored, a man is vasectomized over his protestations that he has already had the procedure, an elderly woman is tubectomised despite the fact that she is obviously well past child-bearing age.

(26)

Certain male untouchables and most female characters are alienated from their physical space as the society takes over their bodies. Om is condemned for life as his masculinity is forcibly taken away. This forceful act produces a sense of loss of identity because he will not be able to produce any children. These characters suffer not only physically, but also psychologically.
Certain conventions are imposed on the lives of these characters which in turn affects the way they experience their bodies, their space, their identities and marginalisation itself.

The untouchables are trying to negotiate their survival in a system where lives and bodies of human beings are being auctioned for sterilisation. This dialogue between Om and Ashraf explains the auctioning of patients sterilised at the clinic:

"Yes definitely. But tell me, how much money can he make from that place? The operation bonus is not very big." "Ah, but it's not his only source. When the patients are brought to the clinic, he auctions them." "What does that mean?" "You see, government employees have to produce two or three cases for sterilization. If they don't fill their quota, their salary is held back for that month by the government. So the Thakur invites all the schoolteachers, block development officers, tax collectors, food inspectors to the clinic. Anyone who wants to can bid on the villagers. Whoever offers the most gets the cases registered in his quota." (510-511)

The employees working for the state and performing the operation are also slaves in their own country. They are forced to obey certain rules and regulations if they do not want to lose their jobs and starve to death. They are forced to perform sterilisation with unclean instruments under poor economic conditions, putting the life of the victims at stake. Mistry wants the world to be aware of the exclusion of these people and the injustice they have to go through in their own country. The untouchable characters are objectified. They are given the same treatment as female characters and are similarly reduced to objects. They are victimised by communal oppression. The narrator writes, "In villages, they say they will dig wells only if so many sterilizations are done. They tell farmers they will get fertilizer only after nussbandhi is performed. Living each
day is to face one emergency or another” (571). The villagers are not able to voice their opinions; even if they do, they will not be taken into consideration as they are not part of the elite. The feeling of being silenced, internally exiled and marginalised becomes part of their identity.

In Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, Ishvar and Om are two untouchables who have to migrate from their native village to Bombay. They have to exile themselves to a big city in search of work and better opportunities because they feel the need to escape from the various injustices they undergo in their village, for example at the hands of the schoolmaster.

“You Chamaar creatures rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!” He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry.

[. . .] “And what is this on your foreheads, you shameless creatures? Such blasphemy!” He slapped them again, and by now his hand was sore [. . .]

When the two had received a dozen strokes each, the teacher stopped. “That should teach you,” he panted. “Now get out, and don’t let your unclean faces be seen here ever again.” (110)

These injustices cause these two untouchable protagonists to experience a feeling of exclusion within their rural village in which they thought they belonged. Ishvar and Om are tortured for having simply entered the school. This harsh punishment is clearly unjust. Ashraf, a critic of the caste system, says, “To listen to the things happening in our lifetime is like drinking venom. It poisons my peace. Every day I pray that this evil cloud over our country will lift, that justice will take care of these misguided people” (511). They feel excluded, obliged to endure frustration and humiliation, and subject to economic instability. They experience their South-Asian identities cut off from both the family and communal lives.
Ishvar and Om are obliged to leave their rural village as they try to rise out of the caste and class systems. Partha Chatterjee declares, "The Indian peasantry defines its identity in a way fundamentally opposed to the individualist bourgeoisie. Rather than seeing themselves as members of a social order predicated on 'a contact among individuals,' the rural classes derive their individual identities 'from membership in a community' (Chatterjee as quoted by Grewal 26). The influence of the upper-caste characters forces Ishvar and Om to relocate to a bigger city, which in the long run recreates their South-Asian identity. As they feel isolated and inferior within their own community, the urban experience seems an alternative. It is a city which promises a lot of opportunities.

Unfortunately it does not take them long to realise that their misfortunes tend to follow them even though they migrated to another place. Om and Ishvar are forced to work in a labour camp along with other beggars, drunks and mentally disturbed individuals. One of the drunks talks back:

"'Rabid dogs!' he shouted. 'Born of diseased whores!' The constables stopped laughing and set on him their sticks; when he fell, they used their feet.

'Stop, please stop!' beseeched the Facilitator. 'How will he work if you break his bones?' [. . .] "These are not hidden injuries!" the Facilitator protested to Sergeant Kesar. 'Look at all that blood!'" (318)

This passage evokes torture, brutalities and beatings. The tailors, Om and Prakash are identified as beggars. Although they are living far away from their native village, they are still denied their rights and their space.

François Lionnet says, "In a state of constant change and perpetual motion because of population migrations, changing topographies, and evolving skylines, cities can signify either
dynamic transformation or decomposition, progress or decay, abundance or violence” (50). Life in the big city of Bombay seems to be full of insecurities, especially for Ishvar and Om who are from a small village. They are not accustomed to it. The two untouchable characters are fully aware that they need to adapt quickly to these new and rapid changes to determine whether they will eventually accept the changes or not. But this is an experience that can also be fruitful as it allows Ishvar, Om and Maneck to realise and see the difference of what life is like in a big city compared to their small village.

"I’ve been living in this city for two months,’ said Maneck, ‘but it’s so huge and confusing. I can recognize only some big streets. The little lanes all look the same.’ ‘We have been here for six months and still have the same problem. In the beginning we were completely lost. The first time, we couldn’t even get on a train - two or three went by before we learned how to push.’ Maneck said he hated it here, and could not wait to return to his home in the mountains, next year, when he finished college. ‘We have also come for a short time only,’ said Ishvar. ‘To earn some money, then go back to our village. What is the use of such a big city? Noise and crowds, no place to live, water scarce, garbage everywhere. Terrible.’" (7)

Ishvar and Om think they are going through a temporary exile only in order to look for economic security, but it ends up being a permanent exile because they could not go back to their village. The experience of physical exile causes a certain change in their sense of identity. This is mainly because living in a big city also means isolation and dislocation which tends to affect one's identity. Even the character Maneck is frustrated as he cannot go back. He says, “You sent me away, you and Daddy. And then I couldn’t come back. You lost me, and I lost – everything”
(581). Maneck puts the blame of not knowing where he belongs on his parents. He accuses them of being responsible for his loss of identity. Rajakrishnan states, "Long absence from home and separation from one's own people, turn the exile into an eternal outsider and his plans of rebuilding his life after his return to the native land sometimes go awry because he soon discovers that he simply cannot start from where he left off" (146). The character Maneck finds it hard to go back to his native place after a very long absence. He blames his parents who thought that he needed to go to Bombay for further education. As Mistry points out: "The upper classes, they never thought of leaving [...] because life was, and is, so cushy for the very rich in a place like India. But lower down, the feeling was then that there was not much of a future in India for someone like me" (Mistry as quoted by Stephen Smith 65). Mistry tries to represent fragments of real life in India through his texts by stating that mainly those who feel marginalised and exiled within their society such as the characters Ishvar, Om and Maneck feel the need to leave. But those who are living comfortably do not feel the need to do so as they do not have to face any sort of injustice. The process of marginalisation makes some subjects internally exiled or internally colonised within their homeland. The next two novels I will discuss show other forms of internal colonisation that eventually lead to exile from the homeland and also other forms of marginalisation within the experience of exile.
CHAPTER TWO: A Sense of Belonging and Dislocation of ‘Funny Boy’ in Sri Lankan Society

Funny Boy was written in 1994 by Shyam Selvadurai who was born in Columbo, the capital of Sri Lanka. So far, Selvadurai has published two novels, Funny Boy and Cinnamon Gardens. The novel I am interested in exploring in this chapter is Funny Boy, which is semi-autobiographical and a coming-of-age story in which a young Sri Lankan boy discovers and questions his gender identity and his emerging homosexuality. Through psychological realism, the book shows: the effects of gender on identity construction through homosexuality, patriarchy, masculinity, sexual politics, family, and hierarchy. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how these forces contribute to shaping the South-Asian identity of the young and innocent narrator, Arjie Chelvanatnam. The narrator experiences gender as an in-betweenness in Sri Lankan society, in which homosexuality is taboo. Homosexuality in Funny Boy is represented as a certain form of displacement as it causes ‘funny boy’ to experience dislocation and the crisis of not belonging in the South-Asian patriarchy. For example, homosexuality results in exile from the Sri Lankan family and society as the gay male is forced to go “underground” to explore his sexuality. The awakening homosexuality of the protagonist Arjie is not only a matter of displacement, but also a form of exclusion similar to exile. I will focus on how South-Asian identity is mediated by homosexuality in the representation of the protagonist, Arjie, and various representations of walls and exclusion that make him feel “othered” due to his gender identity. As the novel ends, the entire family goes into exile as the whole Chelvaratnam family decides to emigrate to Canada due to ethnic strife and civil war between Tamil and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. The decision to emigrate to Canada has provided space for the writing of Funny Boy. If the author had stayed in Sri Lanka, Funny Boy would not have been written. (Selvadurai, homepage)
The novel deconstructs traditional gender roles by showing the protagonist exploring the in-between space of homosexuality. In Arjie’s case, the masculine world takes another dimension as masculine femininity. From a very young age and the first scene in the novel, he plays “bride-bride” with his female cousins.

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 myself 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. (4-5)

When dressed up as a bride, the character Arjie feels and perceives himself differently and gets to discover his deeper self. He seems to be proud of himself as he thinks that the world revolves around him, but it does not mean that all homosexuals perceive themselves like he does. The text suggest that Arjie is naturally born gay. He acts as a member of the opposite sex, for he prefers to wear the sari, the palu, flowers, jewellery, and make-up to mimic both his mother and the Sri Lankan female movie artists. When he cross-dresses, Arjie shapes his identity with regard to what he wants to be and not what the society expects him to be. He would like to resemble the goddesses of the Sinhalese and Tamil cinema who are famous in the adoring eyes of the world.
Arjie’s homosexuality destabilises the Sri Lankan patriarchal values whereby heterosexuality is considered vital. Sedgwick states, “[.] patriarchal structures suggest that ‘obligatory heterosexuality’ is built into male-dominated kinship systems [.]” (3). Arjie’s behaviour disrupts the patriarchal hierarchy because he does not behave according to his traditional gender role. Arjie’s behaviour threatens and disrupts the patriarchy. He is more attracted and fascinated by things that are only related to women. He has different values. He is effeminate and takes on a less aggressive role that deconstructs masculinity. R.A Isay in his discussion on gender behaviour in boyhood writes, “Boys who have artistic sensibilities and interests, who may not be competitive or aggressive, who are sensitive and solicitous of the needs of others, who like ‘pretty’ clothes and objects, are likely to be perceived as being more feminine than other boys” (as quoted by Demb 86). Arjie’s gestures, the ways he dresses up, behaves and interacts within the family play a fundamental role in the construction of his South-Asian identity and in his feeling a lack of belonging within the larger Sri Lankan society.

Although some people believe that homosexuals have more female tendencies, it is not always true. An individual can demonstrate male and female homosexuality by certain values, gestures and behaviours. Robert Linder describes homosexuality as an overt appearance and mannerisms:

the homosexual is conceived of as a person who looks and acts like a member of the opposite sex. Actually, this is an erroneous notion. Although some homosexuals do adopt some mannerisms typical of the opposite sex, there is no simple correlation between effeminacy and homosexuality or between masculinism and lesbianism. (Schur 69)
Arjie is aware that other boys such as his brother, Diggy, prefer to play with masculine toys rather than girlie games such as dolls, dress-up and so forth. The gay character Arjie still prefers playing “bride-bride” with the girls to cricket with the boys and feels more comfortable dressing-up as an Indian bride.

In *Funny Boy*, Arjie’s prohibition from the girls’ world and his forced entry into the world of the males is associated with territorial space. Both male and female characters are subjected to societal hierarchy that controls and assigns their respective territorial and cultural space. Societal hierarchy does not allow these male and female characters to construct their own identity independently. The narrator describes the segregated space of boys and girls and explains why he prefers the girls’ space. Arjie prefers the girls’ space because it gives freer play to his imagination:

Territorially, the area around my grandparents’ house was divided into two. The front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys, although included in their group was my female cousin Meena. In this territory, two factions struggled for power, one led by Meena, the other by my brother, Varuna [...]. The second territory was called “the girls,” included in which, however, was myself, a boy. It was to this territory of the “the girls,” confined to the back garden and the kitchen porch, that I seemed to have gravitated naturally, my earliest memories of those spend-the-days always belonging in the back garden of my grandparents’ home. The pleasure the boys had standing for hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun, watching the batsmen sun from crease to crease, was incomprehensible to me. For me, the
primary attraction of the girls’ territory was the potential for the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagination, I was selected as leader. (3)

In the Sri Lankan patriarchy, masculinity forms boys as leaders through sports and physical endurance. It maintains masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality as norms. Stephen Cox and Cynthia Gallois write, “[. . .] heterosexuals may use the characteristic of reproduction in their comparisons with homosexuals claiming that they (heterosexuals) are better than homosexuals because they are able to reproduce while homosexuals cannot” (13). Heterosexuals may consider themselves to be better than homosexuals. Homosexuality is marginalised under Sri-Lankan patriarchy because it threatens heterosexuality and the family which are bound to reproduce powerful men. Burke states, “Negative attitudes toward homosexuals have been widely documented and are believed to occur for number of reasons. Among these are a secret fear of being homosexual oneself, a need to prove one’s masculinity or femininity, and lack of tolerance for homosexuality. Each of these is believed to indicate some degree of feeling threatened by homosexuality [. . .]” (83). In Selvadurai’s portrayal of this male-dominated society, females are placed in the backyard whereas males are allowed to play in the front yard of the house. Females are forced to take on a secondary role, near the kitchen. They are not only placed near the kitchen, but also excluded from outdoor activities such as sports. Subordinate to the males and considered inferior and passive, the females are victimised in the sense that they are assigned the inferior backyard. They are not able to control their own space as the society overcomes this control.

In Arjie’s bride-bride world, female characters are the ones who take on the most important role whereas the groom is portrayed as being of less importance. Selvadurai notes, “In the hierarchy of bride-bride, the person with the least importance, less even than the priest and
the page boys, was the groom. It was a role we considered stiff and boring, that held no attraction for any of us" (6). Compared to the Sri Lankan South-Asian patriarchy, girls games disrupt the real patriarchal world, for the game is called bride-bride instead of bride-groom. In the bride-bride world, the gay character is the one who takes on the most important role. He is being a leader, but his male dominance is undercut by his desire to appear female. In this case Arjie is exercising male dominance by taking the lead. He is the one who is always role-playing the heroine. “The reward for my leadership was that I always got to play the main part in the fantasy. If it was cooking-cooking we were playing, I was the chef; if it was Cinderella or Thumbelina, I was the much-beleaguered heroine of these tales,” says Arjie (4). This passage mentions mainly girls’ games which shows the character Arjie’s feminine tendencies and his sense of belonging to feminine space. Although he feels that he belongs more to the back garden of the house than the front yard, the gay character still finds himself in-between the walls, a boy merely playing at being a girl – in a word cross-dressing – assigned to both genders simultaneously, which results in confusion in the construction of his identity. For example, “‘But he’s not even a girl,’ Her Fatness said [. . .] ‘A bride is a girl, not a boy.’ [. . .] ‘A boy cannot be the bride.’ [. . .] ‘A girl must be the bride.’ [. . .] ‘You’re a pansy,’ she said. Her lips curling in disgust. [. . .] ‘A faggot,’ [. . .] ‘A sissy!’ she shouted in desperation. It was clear by this time that these were insults” (11). Selvadurai uses the metaphors of the walls to show that homosexuality belongs neither to the family circle nor to South-Asian patriarchy. It exists on the margins of patriarchal society since everything that does not match the patriarchal norm is rejected. But, at the same time, the homosexual character also feels threatened and conditioned by societal, parental and traditional values. For example, Arjie enjoys going into his mother’s room to try on her sari and play with her jewellery, but he gets shut out of the female space when his family prohibits his behaviour as
a "funny" boy. After the incident at his grandparent's house, Arjie feels excluded within the walls. He thinks for a long time why he was accused of being "funny".

One day, about a week after the incident at my grandparents', I positioned myself outside my parents' bedroom door. When Anula arrived with the sari, Amma took it and quickly shut the door. [. . .] I knocked timidly on the door. She did not answer, but I could hear her moving around inside. I knocked a little louder and called out "Amma" through the keyhole. [. . .] she replied gruffly. "Go away. Can't you see I am busy?" [. . .]. 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 has 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. (16-17)

Amma's act of closing the door in Arjie's face constitutes rejection of his natural impulse and his desires. He is excluded both from his family and his community. The gay character is forbidden within the walls as his sexual orientation may have severe repercussions for the social order. He tries desperately to question and understand the meaning of the word 'funny' that he overheard. The sudden behaviour of his mother and the sense of disgust in his father's voice confuse him, make him feel even more guilty, and he also wonders whether he has done something wrong. He is not sure whether it had to do with his sexual orientation, his identity, or simply something else? The "unsayable" nature of the crime indicates the strength of the taboo. Arjie's confusion demonstrates that the walls between heterosexuality and homosexuality, "us" and "them," are
invisible but firm. Labels, segregated spaces, and behavioural norms are used to maintain the walls.

Arjie’s parents try desperately to force their son’s masculinity. They believe that their son has to follow the norms. For example, Amma orders,

"‘Okay, mister,’ she said to Diggy, ‘I am going to tell you something and this is an order.’ [. . .] ‘I want you to include your younger brother on your cricket team.’ [. . .] And I, too, cried out, ‘I don’t want to play with them. I hate cricket!’ [. . .] ‘Why do I have to play with the boys?’ ‘Why?’ Amma said. ‘Because the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly, that’s why.’ [. . .] ‘If the child turns out wrong, it’s the mother they always blame, never the father.’" (18-19)

Also, his mother says, "‘You’re a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys.’ [. . .] ‘I can’t play with you today. Amma says that I must play with the boys’” (23). Although, the gay character is conscious that bride-bride disrupts the family, he still has no interest in playing cricket. His mother orders him to drop out of the girls’ world and instead to play with the boys. He is condemned to bow down to his parents’ will, experience tremendous frustration and reevaluate his identity in order to maintain the norms. He feels that his Amma is hiding things from him, for she is not telling everything and is unable to give him a proper explanation of why he is not allowed to play with the girls and forced to play with the boys. Instead, her reply to Arjie is, “because the sky is so high and pigs can’t fly, that’s why” (18). In other words, the unspoken judgements of his parents leave the gay character Arjie with an unsatisfactory explanation. The behaviour of Amma and Appa does not facilitate the construction Arjie’s identity. The latter feels betrayed, disappointed, angry, and more confused as his persistent questions remain unanswered.
Also as the narrator comes of age and develops increasingly as a gay male, his sexual experience with Shehan makes him feel even more outside the walls. He does not feel any sense of belonging within his patriarchal family anymore. He says, “My eyes came to rest on my parents. As I gazed at Amma, I felt a sudden sadness. What had happened between Shehan and me over the few days had changed my relationship with her forever. I was no longer a part of the family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn’t understand and into which they couldn’t follow me” (285). Arjie’s sexual experience with Shehan affects the mother-and-son relationship. He notices that his mother does not talk to him as much as she used to. There is barely any communication between the two characters. He is trying to understand whether Amma is betraying him, ignoring him, or simply helping him in this growing up phase. The consequence of such rejection for the character Arjie results in self-blaming and inner emotional reactions. The reader asks who is to be blamed, the hostile society he is living in or the character Arjie for being gay?

As Arjie’s homosexuality is presented as natural in the novel, he is bound to suffer from other children’s cruelty at and mockery of his effeminate nature. The text represents the scenes of mockery as follows: “‘Why don’t you keep the girlie-boy?’ At the new nickname ‘girlie-boy,’ everyone roared with laughter, [. . .]. I should have felt humiliated and dejected that nobody wanted me on their team but instead I felt the joy of relief begin to dance inside of me. [. . .] I looked at my feet so that no one would see the hope in my eyes” (25). Although he does not understand the meaning of these words, deep inside he knows that they are insults which represent a form of harassment. Yet Arjie feels secretly relieved to be excluded from the boys’ space. His female tendencies, these insults, and the playing of bride-bride get him into trouble with his parents and account for the negative construction of his homosexuality by others. John
Kituse comments on identity and behaviour of how a homosexual perceives himself and how others see him: "The critical feature of the deviant – defining process is not the behaviour of individuals who are defined as deviant, but rather the interpretations others make of their behaviours, whatever those behaviours may be" (Schur 97). Arjie's behaviour and the different ways others perceive him cause a profound embarrassment and consternation on the part of his parents who try to force him into the world of the boys in order to maintain patriarchal norms. His father, Appa, also prohibits him from reading *Little Women* which he considers is for girls. Arjie's wanting to read girl's games shows that despite marginalisation, he prefers the in-between space of homosexuality.

Appa is concerned about his son turning gay. He fears that *Little Women* may influence his son's gender identity and may eventually cause his son to turn "funny." The narrator notes, "I loved *Little Women* and longed to read the sequels but couldn't find them anywhere. I wondered if I dared ask my father to bring them for me. He had found me reading *Little Women* and declared it to be a book for girls, a book that boys should not be reading, especially a boy of twelve. After some hesitation, I wrote down the three sequels to *Little Women* as the fifth item" (104). Arjie hesitates to make his true desires known because they are taboo. Although his father tries to police these desires, Appa is looking at only one side of the whole situation as he tends to forget that no matter how hard he tries, there will always be other things in everyday life that may affect his son's gender identity. By preventing his son from reading *Little Women*, he is simply trying to force his masculine identification. Appa is not only concerned about his son's reading *Little Women* and his female tendencies, but also afraid his son will be the "laughing-stock of Colombo" (14).
The Sri Lankan way of doing things forces the character Arjie to adapt himself to the masculine world and to go "underground" with his homosexual desire. As masculinity is conceived within this patriarchy, Appa is scared of societal reactions if ever his son turns out wrong. He is fully aware that the homosexuality of his son will never be accepted in the Sri Lankan family and Sri Lankan society unless Arjie lives in secrecy. Sedgwick writes, "From the vantage point of our own society, at any rate, it has apparently been impossible to imagine a form of patriarchy that was not homophobic. Our society is brutally homophobic; and the homophobia directed against both males and females is not arbitrary or gratuitous, but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations" (3). If Arjie stays in Sri Lanka, he will have no choice, but to act according to patriarchal societal values.

His father considers that it is important to follow the norms that support and promote heterosexuality. From his father’s perspective, homosexuality may have destructive effects on both societal and family values. Although homosexuals grow up in all types of homes and societies and have different ethnic, religious, cultural, and class backgrounds, Arjie’s father’s greatest fear of his son being “funny” is basically to feel humiliated, laughed at, and shamed as people in the Sri-Lankan society will not look down only upon Arjie, but upon his whole family. Appa is conscious that the resulting shame may affect his whole family in terms of class status because the Chelvaratnam family belongs to the upper class. Eventually, the whole family may be exposed to the social mechanism of exclusion. Neliya Aunty says, “Society is not as forgiving as a sister is,” (125). [. . .]“People will talk” (58). Societal pressure and the fear of being rejected by the community force them to live a repressed life. Appa even puts the blame on the mother for encouraging Arjie’s “nonsense” of watching her dress and playing with her jewellery.
Gayle Rubin believes that there is little difference between the marginalisation of women and homosexuals. She says, “The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is [...] a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women” (Rubin as quoted by Sedgwick 3). The characters Arjie and his mother are given similar treatment as they seem to take on a secondary place in society ruled by men. The influence of male patriarchy causes dislocation of both female and gay characters who represent minority groups within patriarchy. In the Sri Lankan patriarchy portrayed in *Funny Boy*, males have more power and status than women and homosexual characters. On one hand, female characters feel exiled and marginalised because they are considered as the weaker sex. On the other, the main protagonist Arjie feels marginalised and excluded because of his homosexuality outside the walls of South-Asian patriarchy.

Although Appa is aware that the homosexuality of his son will be problematic and shameful, the protagonist himself knows that he does not belong in this Sri Lankan society, but in an in-between space, out of view, exiled to secrecy. He concludes: “The future spend-the-days were no longer to be enjoyed, no longer to be looked forward to. And then there would be the loneliness. I would be caught between the boys’ and the girls’ worlds, not belonging or wanted in either” (39). Arjie is represented as caught in a serious dilemma as he discovers that his sexual orientation is different from the norm. He feels afraid when he realises that he cannot cross the gender boundary imposed by the South-Asian patriarchy. He is impelled to suffer from dislocation and forced into secrecy. Patriarchy colonises his personal space as he is caught in-between two different genders and is seeking a sense of belonging between two different worlds. The character understands that Sri Lanka is not where he belongs as it is a hostile society in which he senses loneliness and feels distant from the whole community. This particular
knowledge allows the gay character to step back and view his community with a different and critical eye. As he feels different, the feeling of exclusion and in-betweenness allows him to have a different vision of things and ponder about social values. He realises that people in his community live according to societal and traditional values, instead of living for themselves. He is also aware that his coming out will be very hard and will be badly looked upon by his own people and may eventually result in shame. Mark Chekola explains the problem of hiding one's sexual orientation:

"The closet" is an institution, a set of practices occurring within the context of a culturally or morally negative view about homosexuality, which has at least two functions. One is to provide a means of protection and survival; the other is to provide a means for hiding something about which one feels shame. First, it is a way of keeping secret information that, if known, might lead people to despise and perhaps do harm to someone. (70)

If Arjie decides to remain in the closet and hide his homosexuality, he is more likely to feel suppressed, more confused, and to suffer negative psychological effects. Whether or not Arjie feels exiled and marginalised by oppressive societal values, he is bound to accept them as identity interacts with the social structure. If he decides to "come out," he is aware that he may also be harassed both physically and verbally since patriarchal society in which he is living will not tolerate his gender difference. As a gay male he is likely to face rejection, insults and tremendous humiliation. He fears that he may be disowned and condemned by some members of his family, which may lead to isolation, depression and denial. Later on in his life, he may eventually have to face discrimination and unequal educational and professional opportunities because of his sexual orientation in a society which only supports heterosexuality. One expert on
homosexuality claims, “Sexual orientation goes to the very heart of social and personal identity. It must be evident to the confirmed homosexual not only that his sexual inclinations disgust the "normals" but also that he is unable – or, at least, unwilling – to meet socially prescribed masculine-role expectations” (West 98). But in the protagonist Arjie’s case, his sexual orientation is shaped naturally. It is presented more as an unconscious process than a matter of choice.

Selvadurai presents homosexuality as natural, pleasurable and innocent as well as a cause of extreme marginalisation. The author describes the gay character Arjie’s attraction to other male characters as part of his coming-of-age story. The text does not act as a forbidden site for homosexuals; instead it is a site for outing homosexual desire. Sedgwick uses “the word “desire” rather than “love” to mark the erotic and social emphasis because, in literary critical and related discourse, “love” is more easily used to name a particular emotion, and “desire” to name a structure” (2). Gradually, the gay character Arjie realises that he is more attracted to male subjects than females. For example, later in the novel, he finds out that he looks at the character Jegan differently and feels more physically attracted towards males. “What had struck me was the strength of his body. The muscles of his arms and neck, which would have been visible on a fairer person, were hidden by the darkness of his skin. It was only when I was close to him that I had noticed them. Now I admired how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers” (161). Also, the narrator proclaims, “All I could think of was the boys in shorts at St. Gabriel’s. I longed to be with them” (213). The gay character Arjie belongs to the margins of Sri-Lankan society, but he discovers gradually who he is by constructing his identity mediated by his sense of attraction for men. The protagonist Arjie is fascinated and attracted by the male body. He examines Jegan’s body carefully and admires the way he is built and carries his body.
The grace with which Jegan carries himself, the strength of his body, the darkness of his skin, his gestures and movements attract Arjie sexually and the text reports this desire. Even though Arjie still feels confused about his gender identity, all these factors allow him to become more and more aware of not belonging.

His brother, Diggy, wants Arjie to be aware that their father is very worried about his female tendencies. Diggy tells his younger brother: “Once you come to The Queen Victoria Academy you are a man. Either you take it like a man or the other boys will look down on you” (210-11). Patriarchal society uses schools as well as families to influence the construction of gender identity. Arjie cannot simply choose who he wants to be. The Queen Victoria Academy serves as a colonial site where South-Asian males are privileged and trained to copy powerful British models by wearing uniforms, playing cricket, reading English literature, and following boys’ school rules of conduct. Although the character Diggy is trying to prevent his brother from turning “funny,” he is unconsciously kicking his brother out of the masculine world when he threatens, “‘If you ever come near the field again, you’ll be sorry.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ I replied tartly, ‘I never will.’ And with that, I forever closed any possibility of entering the boys’ world again” (28). The narrator takes advantage of the threatening situation to exclude himself completely from the boys’ world in order not to play cricket, a boy’s game in which he has no interest. On one hand, the space of in-betweenness is converted into exclusion as his brother chases him away. On the other hand, his brother’s insults help him to escape from the boys’ world. Instead of feeling humiliated at being kicked out of the male world, he seems to feel good and relieved about it. It also signifies that by escaping from the male world, he is protecting his masculinity from being forged by the existing institutions. Also, his father told him that “the Academy will force you to become a man” (210). Instead of forcing him to become a real man, ironically, the
protagonist meets Shehan to whom he is physically attracted and with whom he eventually falls innocently in love. The existing love relationship and the time the two characters Arjie and Shehan spend together bring light to his gender identity confusion. Arjie's contact with Shehan has helped him understand his sexual difference. As Cox and Gallois state about homosexual community: "the person comes to prefer social interaction with other homosexuals, and the prevailing negative evaluation of the homosexual identity becomes more positive, to the point where the person moves from the position of 'probably a homosexual' to acceptance of being a homosexual" (4). The experience of spending time together and getting to know Shehan helps Arjie to a great extent to construct his gender identity. He realises that he has something in common with his lover Shehan that allows him to discover more about who he is. The narrator says:

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 [. . .]. I now knew that the kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along. (256)

Both characters share the same world. Arjie realises that he is completely different from the norms. In other words, he does not belong to the patriarchal Sri Lankan society. He also says,

Then I imagined him kissing me, not quickly but slowly lingeringly, so that I could feel the full impact of the kiss. I tried to remember the instant when his tongue touched mine. It had been rough and wet, but beyond that I hadn't had a chance to experience how it felt or tasted. As I lay there, looking up at the
mosquito net above me, I realised I had not only liked that kiss but I was also
eager to experience it again in all its detail and sensation. (251)

It is unfortunate that these two characters Arjie and Shehan cannot express tenderness and
affection for each other in public and construct their respective identities. They are condemned to
a hostile and homophobic society in which homosexuality exists outside both the patriarchal
family and society. They are not totally excluded; instead, ironically, they are obliged to hide and
occupy a space of in-betweenness in the masculine world in order to survive. Both characters
benefit from the restricted space, however, developing strategies of freedom within that space.
Thus the freedom acquired can interfere with Sri Lankan patriarchy, but at the same time remain
above and beyond patriarchal intervention. In *The Sunday Times*, Selvadurai dismisses the law
against homosexuality in Sri Lanka as “stupid and something which breeds crime. People think
of it as something like smoking, which you can get rid of. But that’s wrong. Whether it’s nature
or nurture, you can’t help it” (Selvadurai as quoted by Mendis 1). Discrimination and negative
attitudes still exist in Sri Lankan society. Selvadurai believes that the laws need to be changed so
that homosexuals can be treated with equality and justice. He says homosexuality has nothing to
do with other social vices such as smoking a cigarette because, according to him, whether
homosexuality is natural or adopted, it is hard to get rid of.

Apart from feeling exiled because of his gender identity and in-betweenness, the narrator
also experiences voluntary exile as a complete loss of place and the lifestyle he loved because at
the end of the novel Arjie’s family has to emigrate to Canada due to racial tension. Arjie’s father
declares, “‘It is very clear that we no longer belong in this country’ […] ‘When this is all over,
we’ll start to make plans for Canada.’ […] ‘I long to be out of this country. I don’t feel at home
in Sri Lanka any longer, will never feel safe again’” (304). Neither Arjie nor his father are
seeking a return home. Home is of second value in their lives as they feel very little sense of belonging within it. Home is a place where one needs to feel secure. What happens when one loses this sense of security? What happens when home is no longer the place to be? Suleiman says, in voluntary exile, one may tend to be happy, comfortable, satiric, even self-righteous about the society left behind (11). But in Arjie’s situation, it is not a matter of choice. His family feels obliged to emigrate to Canada. This is an involuntary exile. Sri Lanka represents an alien land due to the constant violence, social tensions and instability of ethnic war. It appears to be more of a war land than a homeland, which causes a sense of homelessness and insecurity. His father is fully aware of the social exclusion his whole family will have to bear if they decide to stay in Sri Lanka. For example, Appa is aware that if they stay, they are likely to suffer from loss of class privilege. As they belong to the upper class, they will have to face all types of injustices, marginalisation and discrimination from those who have power. In contrast, Arjie feels that he no longer shares many things with the other members of his family and community due to his gender in-betweeness. The narrator claims,

Those spend-the-days, the remembered innocence of childhood, are now coloured in the hues of the twilight sky. It is a picture made even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them. By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada. Yet those Sundays, when I was seven, marked the beginning of my exile from the world I loved. (5)

These spend-the-days of remembered innocence of childhood refer mainly to the days when Arjie was trying to understand his identity. The various experiences he underwent during these Sundays have marked the beginning of his exile as they have helped him discover who he is
during the time he was feeling confused about his sexual orientation. It is the period during his childhood in which Arjie did not feel the sense of belonging because of both his gender difference and the existing political and ethnic tensions in his country of origin.

In Arjie's case, exile takes another turn as he realises that exile can be double-edged. The narrator says: "We are allowed five hundred pounds each. The thought of being this poor scares me. Today I watched a beggar woman running from car to car at the traffic lights, her hand held out, and I wondered if this would be our plight in Canada" (309). While seeing this beggar woman on the street, the protagonist wonders whether his plight will be similar to the beggar woman in Canada as exile may not mean only the loss of home, but also serious hardship, insecurities, poverty and declassing. Although at the beginning exile appeared to be doubtful, scary and full of negativity, for Arjie, in Selvadurai's life it eventually turns out to be a positive experience. It allows him to live his homosexuality, discover, accept and experience new things that he would not have been able to if he had stayed in Sri Lanka. The author himself declares,

Being in Canada has been good, however, in that it has given me a creative perspective I might not have had otherwise. Like a lot of immigrant writers I find that a homeland pull inhabits my creative mind, that it is the capturing of the world I left behind that haunts my imagination. Yet, without the isolation from that world, without the act of migration, I wonder if FUNNY BOY would have been written. (Selvadurai, homepage)

Canada is represented as a site where the author feels free and less oppressed to explore his homosexuality more openly, even writing Funny Boy, a novel that "outs" homosexual desire. In Selvadurai's case, exile has a positive effect; it liberates him from the space of exclusion on the margins of Sri Lankan society.
CHAPTER THREE: Identity Construction of South-Asian Immigrant Experience in Vassanji’s No New Land.

Amongst South-Asian Canadian writers, Kenyan-born Moyez Vassanji is especially interesting because of his cross-cultural experiences. Of Indian descent, he was born in Nairobi, Kenya. After finishing his secondary education in Africa, he moved to the United States for further studies in physics. He started his career as a novelist when he moved to Toronto in 1989 at the age of thirty-nine. He has published five books so far: The Gunny Sack, No New Land, Uhuru Street, The Book of Secrets and, his latest, Amriika. The one that is the subject of this analysis, No New Land, like many South-Asian Canadian novels highlights marginalisation as an element of the dislocation produced in the Indian Diaspora. In this chapter, I investigate Vassanji’s representations of the identity of South-Asian immigrants to Canada. Vassanji’s novel explores language barriers, the Canadian work experience, the polemics of ethnicity, cultural othering, class-consciousness and the search for a sense of belonging. I will explore his representation of these forces in shaping South-Asian immigrant identity as both positive and negative experiences.

A few years ago, South-Asian diasporic academics had a hard time to find a publishing house. This is one of the marginalising factors that South-Asian academics had to face. This form of marginalisation accounts for the reason why, in 1981, Vassanji established the Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad in order to support and publish South-Asian and world writers. In other words, he helps minority writers from different corners of the world to voice their opinions. Some immigrants establish themselves successfully in Canadian society because of their previous work experience, abilities, and required skills. Vassanji is a striking example of
a successful South-Asian immigrant in Canada; this is reflected in the many interesting novels and articles he has published and for which he has received critical acclaim. For example, *No New Land* is a masterpiece in terms of simplicity, originality and mastery of the English language. Yet Bissoondath in “True Expatriate Love” criticises Vasanji’s *No New Land*. He says,

Fiction works best when it presents the viewpoint of the singular and not the plural, the I or (s)he, not the we or they. It is, in other words, through individual lives that we best approach alien outlook and experience. Yet a pressure faced by many writers, not least by those writing from an “ethnic” or “immigrant” perspective, is a need to present the whole, to be a kind of literary ringmaster for the community circus. (44)

Despite what Bissoondath says, which betrays his own individualist bias, I consider that as both an author and a South-Asian immigrant, Vasanji successfully uses language as a means to survive and to shape communal identity. He uses language to redefine the identity of this South-Asian community, focusing on the people, events, cultural heritage, values, and traditions that shape the community. Although Vasanji seems to perceive his exilic experience in Toronto as being positive, he tries to represent experiences of the group who feels discriminated against. Perhaps he thinks that the harsh unexpected realities of a group of South-Asian immigrants in his novel would better represent South-Asian immigrants’ collective experiences as well as similar difficult experiences of other groups of immigrants in Canada.

Vasanji’s *No New Land* depicts the harsh reality of immigration through realism. As mentioned earlier, Meenaksh Mukherjee believes that realism is a popular form of narration in India and the diaspora, that approximates reality to depict life and life desires. The emergence of
the novel made social realism the most popular genre of fiction in India according to Mukherjee (98). Vassanji is one of the authors that uses this mode of narration both to shape reality and construct the identity of his characters. In an interview Vassanji explains, “With No New Land, I had a dual readership in mind, mostly Canadians, but also immigrants” (32). Vassanji comments on various social and economic realities in Canada to describe how South-Asian immigrants live and the way native Canadians in the host society tend to behave towards immigrants. He relies on language and cultural memory to prevent the exilic and marginal experiences of the people of the Indian diaspora from being swept under the carpet. No New Land is set in the Canadian migrant mecca that is Toronto. Vassanji relates the experiences and challenges immigrants from East Africa face in a host society which is very different and sometimes hostile to them. On one level, the novel may simply project the individual life story of a South-Asian immigrant who is accused of rape. For others, it may also represent the interesting and striking past and present lives of South-Asians who live in the apartment buildings numbered “Sixty-five,” “Sixty-seven,” “Sixty-nine,” and “Seventy-one” of Rosecliffe Park in the suburb of Don Mills in Toronto. These South-Asian immigrant characters attempt to construct their identity by voicing their experiences (2). Identity is not simply a matter of choice. It includes, but supersedes, all previous identities. Identity is not shaped in one day. It is constantly modified (Josselson 12). This concept of identity as process applies to members of the diaspora and those who are in exile, as though one’s roots were portable, but adaptable, and sometimes fragile. Although the same rule seems to apply to both, in some ways the exiled person is able to construct a more complex identity than the individual who has not lived elsewhere than at home. Coming into contact with new cultures, the immigrant cannot simply choose who he or she wants to be, as it is a whole contiguous process.
Past and present memories help in shaping the immigrant’s identity in Vassanji’s *No New Land*. In his discussion on social memory, Paul Connerton says:

These memory claims figure significantly in our self-descriptions because our past history is an important source of our conception of ourselves; our self-knowledge, our conception of our own character and potentialities, is to a large extent determined by the way in which we view our own past actions. There is, then, an important connection between the concept of personal identity and various backward-looking mental states [...] Through memories of this kind, persons have a special access to facts about their own past histories and their own identities, a kind of access that in principle they cannot have to the histories and identities of other persons and things (22).

Connerton’s theory of social memory reminds us that identity is built upon memories. Certain remembered past events and personal experiences in the novel, such as that of the South-Asian immigrants going to mosque, emerge to recreate their lost African life in Toronto and to serve as a point of compassion with the new land:

Their Dar, however close they tried to make it to the original, was not quite the same. Rushing to mosque after work in your Chevy, through ice and slush, for a ceremony organized in a school gym, dumping your coats on a four-foot mound of coats and throwing your shoes and boots among the several hundred other pairs – and then afterwards scrambling to retrieve them – was not the same as strolling to your own domed, clock-towered mosque fresh after a bath.

(171)
The immigrant characters define and reinforce their identities as they bring back memories of their former lives while living in exile. They remember the traditions they have left behind; they are haunted by old values and memories, not to mention of a warm climate. Yet they still keep their traditions and old ways of doing things so far as possible in their new environment.

Robert Langbaum has commented on the importance of memory to the construction of identity. He argues that our memories are constituted of past and present experiences which help us gradually reshape our identities.

Identity is not the different perceptions themselves, uniting them, 'but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them.' The self is a retrospective construction of the imagination, and for this reason 'memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production.' Only through memory can we create the self by seeing continuity between past and present perceptions; only through memory can we conceive 'that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person.' (27)

Vassanji shows how immigrants recreate their identity through the past and the present. Much as memories help them to maintain and connect with their past life, they also contribute in reconstructing the self by blending with the present. In No New Land, the narrator claims, "We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off. An account of Nuradin Lalani's predigocation must therefore go back in time and begin at a different place" (9). This passage illustrates that the South-Asian immigrants cannot get rid of their past memories easily even though they migrate from one place to another. They are caught
in-between their land of birth and their new land. Vassanji tries to reclaim the past by giving voice to the communal experiences of migrancy and diaspora, through which he expresses his awareness of the complexity of both individual and collective identity.

In some cases, it can be hard for a person to surmount some memories in order to reconstruct identity. In a chapter of her book, called, “Becoming Herself: Identity, Individualisation, and Intimacy,” Josselson says:

Identity is also a way of preserving the continuity of the self, linking the past and the present. In states of identity diffusion, a person experiences a sense of not knowing who she or he is and feels at the mercy of parts of the self, impulses, memories, and traits that do not add up or feel coherently connected, to a core self. In its essence, identity becomes a means by which people organize and understand their experience and deeply share their meaning systems with others. What we choose to value and deprecate, our system of ethics - these form the core of our sense of identity. (10-11)

This definition of identity applies to Vassanji’s South-Asian immigrant characters who are grouped in Toronto in that they experience and share a state of identity confusion. Nurdin feels marginalised and discriminated against when he seeks work. He realises that his fellow South Asians and he share similar experiences and seem to understand each other. They feel the need to hang on to other things that help reshape their identities within the host society such as material belongings and the sense of loss in exile (44).

Both exile and marginalisation in the host country help shape the identity of people who are forced into exile from their countries for economic, religious, or political reasons including war. The identities of Vassanji’s characters depend on how secure these people feel in their new
surroundings and how much they feel they have lost through exile. In “Reflections on Exile,” although Said discusses both the advantages and disadvantages of exile, he defines exile as loss in this way: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. Its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (357). Exile can be experienced differently by each individual, but Said’s definition can be applied to the exilic experiences of South-Asian Canadians who are physically dislocated and part of the Indian diaspora. The novel represents this shared but individualised sense of loss in the following scene aboard ship:

They were in high spirits and chatty enough when they arrived, but the vastness of the ocean and the rhythm of the wind and the waves and the rustle of the leaves overhead soon drew them in separately, lulling them to stillness, until each man sat motionless, contemplating the expanse in front of them and what lay across it; the land of their birth which they had left a long time ago, to which even the longing to return had been muted, although memories still persisted. (10)

Although the hope of returning home to Africa is often muted, some immigrants tend to sway between the past and the present, attempting to establish a new hybrid cultural identity by adapting new ways of living, new habits, changes in their attitudes and values. This is when identity construction is called into play as it involves dimensions such as the place of origin and the host country. What Connerton says about us all, “[. . .] we may say that our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past” (3), applies especially to an exile’s identity because it is constructed by both images of the past and present and the interplay
between them. Vassanji has characters remember and compare many past and present experiences that connect them respectively to Africa and their new land. Nurdin says,

Notch by notch it seemed to Nurdin he had come down in self-esteem and expectation, grasping whatever odd job came his way, becoming a menial in the process. Back home even your glass of water was brought by a servant. A servant to fetch you from school, to hold your bag. Things had changed there, of course, but not that much. And now, here. In Canada. He had carried cases on his back the likes of which he would have thought he could not even move an inch; he had pressed trousers, cooked french fries, swept and mopped floors.

You could weep. (88-89)

In the case above the different places are important, but so are the different class identities in each place. This shows that immigration has been a declassing experience for Nurdin. His self-esteem has gradually eroded; he does not think any better of himself. He also thinks that the women at the Donut store see in him no more than a servant (86). Thus past and present experiences help Vassanji’s characters to construct their identity. The experiences that these South Asians go through in their new society seem to depend largely on the juxtaposition and interplay of knowledge and images of the present and the past.

No New Land is an effective voice to question the various experiences that immigrants go through to be able to identify themselves in a host milieu. Vassanji uses historical, marginal and exilic experiences to demonstrate how these immigrant characters survive their sense of displacement in a foreign land. The first epigraph in No New Land is by C.P Cavafy, translated by Lawrence Durrell in Justine, a novel which questions the sense of belonging.

You tell yourself I’ll be gone
To some other land, some other sea,

To a city lovelier far than this....

There's no new land, my friend, no

New sea; for the city will follow you,

In the same streets you'll wander endlessly.... (n. p.)

By citing this poem, upon which his title is based, Vassanji projects the image that "no new land" exists because some immigrants carry an image of their pasts within them as memories. Vassanji further explores the idea of looking for better opportunities in a new land: job opportunities, better education, and the discovery of new cultures and values. Most of the time it can be hard for someone to start a new life successfully because it usually takes a while to adapt to new things. In the article "There From Here," Rohinton Mistry also explores a similar attitude towards dislocation when he writes, "It's very naive to assume that you leave a place and you go to a new country and you start a new life and it's a new chapter - it's not" (65). First, one wonders what it will be like to experience a new land. It seems that an individual has lots of expectations, hopes and dreams. Second, one wonders whether or not there is "no new land." Does it mean that we are only displaced physically, but not psychologically? Does the title of the novel refer to the fact that one cannot escape from his or her past? The novel suggests that the new identities of immigrants are a complex mixture of past and present, with both positive and negative results.

In an interview with Smaro Kamboureli, Vassanji is quoted as declaring that exile is an exciting experience and gives positive feedback about his own life experiences. He even declares: "If I felt completely oppressed, then I wouldn't live here. And "here", Toronto, is where I feel (s) most at home" (Kamboureli 355). Exile allows him to go through different
phases in life. He feels mothered by Toronto. In other words, Toronto represents his homeland, where he feels less oppressed, more secure and free to assert his rights. Vassanji seems to be somewhat aware of the fact that members of the dominant culture have to face some of the same challenges as the immigrants. For example, similar to Vassanji, some South-Asian immigrant characters feel secure on the materialistic level in Canada, something they would not have been able to acquire in Dar (59). As an exile, he represents those who successfully construct their identities through different positive forms of exilic experiences. He seems not to have had a lot of difficulties to accept his host society, or for the society to accept him as an immigrant. In "Reflections on Exile" Said says, "Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal" (366). Similarly, Vassanji, himself as a diasporic and migrant writer, represents the individuals who have a positive vision of things and positive life experiences. Georgi Adamovich's poem, for example, considers the condition of émigré life as positive to the point of romanticising exile: “there is no pain sweeter than to lose everything./ No fate more joyful than to become a wanderer” (as quoted by Whitlark 46). Exile as a fruitful experience may help an individual to discover hidden things about himself or herself as in Vassanji's case. In other words, exile can be full of pleasures; it is about discovering new cultures, new architectures, new ways of living and learning about new histories and new settings. Exile may give immigrants, as well as travellers, the opportunity to experience new things and to broaden their vision of themselves as individuals. Then, why did he choose No New Land as the title? Perhaps, the novel represents what he has learned from his own exilic experiences. The negative aspect of the title may be
trying to represent the immigrant experiences of those who have had hard times adapting and accepting unexpected things in Canada as a host society. The title may also suggest that one can be at home anywhere in the world because, as Said’s notion of seeing “the entire world as foreign land” suggests, when all lands are new, none are newer than others. But Vassanji may also be pointing to the ability of the diaspora to recreate home wherever they go. As a collective, they are able to create a new sense of belonging based on shared memories and cultural practices.

Vassanji makes an attempt to show us the past communal life of a particular group of South-Asians from East Africa who left their country of origin for Canada due to unstable political circumstances, such as political corruption and civil upheaval:

These buildings lined Dar’s main streets, each a monument to a family’s enterprise, proudly bearing the family name or else that of a favourite child. When they were taken, that was the final straw. Cynicism replaced faith, corruption became a means. The “Uganda exodus” showed a way out for Dar’s Asians. Canada was open and, for the rich, America too. Thus began a run on Canada. (25)

Compared to the individualistic ways of living in highrises in Canada which Mistry portrays in “Swimming Lessons”, these buildings in Dar which Vassanji portrays in No New Land, represent communal life experiences where families of South-Asian origins lived together and had closely-shared collective values. These values are also reflected in the Indian scenes from Mistry’s Tales from Firozsha Baag, which describe the daily lives of the Parsi residents of an apartment block in a Bombay apartment complex. They tend to live in tightly-knit communities in these apartments called baags in contrast with Canadian highrises. For many immigrants, the past will
include a different perhaps warmer experience of collective living because Canada, although a
wealthy destination, emphasises individualisation and modern living. Vassanji portrays the
Toronto suburb of Don Mills as a grey landscape which stands in stark contrast to the rest of the
picturesque scenery that surrounds it (2). Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park sounds like a romantic,
exotic, storybook or film address, but as soon as the South-Asian immigrants from Dar step out
into their corridors the sights, sounds and smells remind them of their country of origin. “But
then you step out in the common corridors with its all too real down-to-earth sights, sounds, and
smells, and you wonder: This, Sixty-nine Rosecliffe? And you realize that you’ve not yet left Dar
far behind” (60). The sights, sounds and smells still remind the South-Asian immigrants of Dar.
This is both a disappointment and a comfort, because it gives them a sense of home in the new
land.

The eruption of racial tension between native Africans and those of South-Asian origins
made it necessary for many people to leave Africa to go to the Americas in search of better
opportunities. They had no choice but to leave their country of origin where they were
undergoing a lot of hardship. In Dar, the characters were “kicked out” by the blacks because of
the racial conflict that exists between South Asians and native Africans. Insecure, they were
under constant pressure and feared that eventually they would witness their shops being looted
by native Africans, only to stand by impotently (23). Now in their host country, they feel that the
whites are doing the same to them. (103). Whether in their homeland or not, they feel
discriminated against. They emigrated to Canada due to ethnic tension and political instability in
their country of origin. In cases like this, exile may take on a more dramatic aspect. The result
may be negative as those who are forced into exile from their country of origin may not be able
to return to their respective homelands even to visit. The fact that they had to leave their
countries of origin while under political tension, caused them to lose both their personal belongings and their identity. They are aware that they have to start from scratch in the host society. They tend to ask themselves where they belong and they feel very insecure as they have no sense of determining the outcome of their exile. The loss of the sense of belonging through forced exile brings a form of disruption in their identities. They move from the margins of one society to the margins of another. In these cases, being orientals, they may feel themselves to be inferiorised, objectified, and othered through Western eyes.

Edward Said's critique of Orientalism seems to play out in the representation of identity in *No New Land*. Linked to postcolonialism, Said's arguments show the objectification of the "Other" across cultures and clarifies the portrayal of the Other's identity:

> Le concept est la première arme dans la soumission d'autrui—car il le transforme en objet (alors que le sujet ne se réduit pas au concept); délimiter un objet comme « L'Orient » ou « L'Arabe » est déjà un acte de violence. Ce geste est si lourd de signification qu'il neutralise en fait la valeur du prédicat qu'on ajoutera : « L'Arabe est paresseux » est un énoncé raciste, mais « L'Arabe est travailleur » l'est presque tout autant; l'essentiel est de pouvoir ainsi parler de « L'Arabe » (9).

Orientalism is the othering of people from the East. Orientalism marginalises the Other by providing an image and identity that is inferior, exotic, and essentialised. Although Said's theory is based on the depictions of Arabs, the concept can apply to the portrayal of all people from the East, including South-Asian immigrants in Canada. For example, in *No New Land*, Nurdin Lalani encountered a lot of difficulties in finding a job when he first came to Canada. His work experience is dismissed as foreign. He says: "Just give me a chance. Why don't they understand
we can do the job. ‘Canadian Experience’ is the trump they always call, against which you have no answer. Or rather you have answers, dozens, but whom to tell except fellow immigrants at Sixty-nine” (44). The negative experience of racial discrimination is highlighted in scenes where South-Asian Canadians seek work in the novel.

When Nurdin had filled in the form he asked Mr. Rogers if he would get the job. ‘There are many other applicants, you know. But we’ll call you. Keep your fingers crossed!’ ‘Fingers crossed, eh.’ [ . . . ] ‘I’m afraid, Nurdin,’ Mr. Rogers said, ‘we gave the job to someone else.’ Nurdin exploded. ‘But my experience! I know shoes, I can give references – ’ [ . . . ] ‘I know I don’t have Canadian experience,’ he breathed hotly and with emotion on the phone, ‘but how can I get Canadian experience if you don’t give me a chance? I’ve sold shoes for eight years! Eight years – ’ ‘Perhaps you were overqualified, sir.’ That was a new one. Overqualified. Good for laughs, and it got many. (48)

These statements illustrate Nurdin Lalani’s disappointment and bitterness. According to his belief, he should be eligible to work as he automatically brings his acquired work experience from his country of origin. Yet his status as a newly-landed immigrant often makes him ineligible in the job market in his host country. Does it matter whether Lalani’s work experience is foreign or Canadian? Vassanji’s character believes that the demand for Canadian experience is not fair. In Lalani’s case, his identity is affected as he feels “othered” in his host society and doubly exiled. So, how do these employers want Lalani, as an immigrant, to acquire the necessary skills and gain Canadian experience, if he is not given the chance to work whilst he is new in this country? How will he show what he is capable of doing? Nurdin Lalani not only had to go through a lot of hardship and humiliation in order to find his first job in the Canadian
milieu. He has also been accused of sexually harassing a Portuguese-Canadian girl at the Ontario Addiction Centre in downtown Toronto after looking for a job. Although he was found not guilty at the end of the novel, he was perceived as the South-Asian Other, the overly sexualised Other, throughout the ordeal. But Vasanji shows that Lalani does objectify and eroticise women. He has strong, self-righteous beliefs about different aspects of Canadian life, for example eating pork and drinking beer amongst other things. But the narrator tells us his problem is lust. Nurdin’s lusty eye had not only discovered the ample but forbidden body of his wife, but that of all women. He portrays women as the sexual Other. Usually after fantasizing about women, he is overcome by bouts of guilt and remorse. He seems to regret his innocent youth and tends to compare himself to Jamal who has done everything in his youth (141-43).

Orientalism constitutes mainly the construction of images by the West to portray the East as the Other. Said explains in L’Orientalisme: «On peint le portrait de l’autre en projetant sur lui nos propres faiblesses; il nous est à la fois semblable et inférieur. Ce qu’on lui a refusé avant tout, c’est d’être différent : ni inférieur ni (même) supérieur, mais l’autre, justement» (8). This excerpt explains the concept of Otherness when East meets West. Lalani is both a false projection of the oversexualised South-Asian male and a South-Asian male with a lustful eye. But it is also important to point out that the East also constructs the identity of the West as Otherness. For example, Vasanji’s characters construct hostile and negative representations of Canadians, “The pig, they said, was the most beastly of beasts. It ate garbage and faeces, even its babies, it copulated freely, and was incestuous. Wallowed in muck. Eat pig and become a beast. Slowly the bestial traits—cruelty and promiscuity, in one word, godlessness—overcame you. And you became, morally, like them. The Canadians” (127). Vasanji dissociates himself from the South-Asian characters who perceive Canadians as hostile. The author reflects on the negativity
of these characters, for example, Nurdin who is mistreated in Canadian society and learns through his harsh unexpected experiences. Nurdin believes that someone who eats pork does not regain what he has lost (129). “Eat pig and become a pig,” says Zera (128). On the one hand, perhaps the author uses negative representations of this Western society to project a certain form of frustration, discrimination and marginalisation felt by South-Asian immigrant characters in *No New Land*. On the other hand, the above passage also shows that instead of making an effort to adapt, accept and construct social relations within the new society, some immigrants tend to criticize and label people of the host society which, after all, is trying to shelter them. They do not seem to understand that the Canadians are not trying to force their societal, cultural values and their ways of doing things on anyone. How do these South-Asian immigrants intend to integrate into the new land if they do not adapt to new ways of behaving? Vassanji represents the different ways of living in order to show the thinking of South-Asian immigrants who are caught in-between two cultures. They hesitate to integrate into Canadian society. Nanji says:

> Well, they didn’t give out degrees for nothing. You’ve got to have something up here. You are already changed when you think about pork. Think about that. There must be something in the Canadian air that changes us, as the old people say. The old people who are shunted between sons and daughters and old peoples’ homes --who could have thought that possible only a few years ago. It’s all in the air: the divorces, crimes you could never have imagined before, children despising their parents. An image of his own arrogant Fatima came to his mind and he pushed it back. (136-37)

These are the realities facing the South-Asian immigrants in Vassanji’s novel. In his writing, he depicts the resistance of immigrants to the new society’s ways of living and of doing things.
In *The Geography of Voice: Canadian Literature of the South Asian Diaspora*, Diane McGifford argues: “South Asians in Canada usually find that the cold, forbidding Canadian climate is outmatched by the icy, hostile social environment where they feel themselves doubly marginalised: first because they are immigrants and second because they belong to racial, often linguistic, and usually religious minorities” (viii). Lalani feels marginalised not only on the job market, but he perceives the land to be a naturally hostile environment. He feels dislocated not only by cultural exclusion, but also by the climate. “You check the mail hopelessly, before taking your bus to meet the jobs head-on. These are the first days and you hate yourself for arriving in winter. Braving the punishing cold, you beat the footpaths, searching for vacancies. You do Yonge Street, then Bloor, Dundas, and Queen, the East End, then the West. (44) Language is shown to play an important role in this shaping of identity. It is also important to note that a shift in language and place can lead to a sense of loss of remembered identity. Linguistic skills seem to be a fundamental advantage if an immigrant wants to integrate and recreate an identity positively in a host society. Perhaps the Canadians do not see their society and the climate of their country as hostile until immigrants, amongst others, articulate it.

Vassanji is one of the South-Asian diasporic writers who try to recreate the identity of this particular community through collective memory by commenting on the importance of language in the creation of identity. In *No New Land*, the narrator compares Africa and Canada based on how well one learned English in each country and on the resulting access to jobs.

On one hand to see your children using hoes and spades and brooms during schooltime and not learning English when English was one constant you could not deviate from: English education, the one pillar of success, [...] becoming more and more inaccessible in the country. On the other hand lay the wealth,
the stability of Canada and the Western world. [ . . . ] they saw their friends
return as wealthy tourists waving their dollars and speaking snappy English?

The way you spoke English determined who you were. (26)

Language is a key component of identity. It is one of the factors that act as a determinant to
describe who you are. In the excerpt above, English is a coloniser’s language but it is also the
key to mobility in a new land.

In Vassanji’s text, Zera is one of the female characters who encounter language
problems. In Africa, Zera teaches religion in a school; but after she gets married to Nurdin, she
decides to help her mother-in-law to run the shop that they own. In Canada, she has to change
from one job to another. First, she works as a receptionist. She was able to teach Gujarati
language part-time at the Heritage Languages Program in Canada with teaching skills she has
refined in Africa. She also works as a quality control factory worker packing and folding
sweaters. She has to quit because the dust in the factory is detrimental to her health. As a
receptionist employed by a Chinese doctor she is dismissed: “But then, after a few months, she
had been dismissed. ‘Your English,’ the doctor had said vaguely. A ‘Canadian’ was duly
installed. ‘I brought so many patients,’ she said” (66). She does not have a good knowledge of
English and her employer reproaches her for having language difficulties. Is it because she is a
foreigner that they have difficulty accepting her? Or is it the fact that she is not a native speaker?

Both these reasons can explain this rejection. It is important to note that besides these bitter
experiences, there are positive aspects to her situation. Although she lacks marketable skills as a
doubly marginalised Third World figure with a South-Asian background, Zera is allowed to live
more freely than in Africa and to break free from a dominant patriarchal society and all its
restrictions. She is able to discover her own self. She becomes more aware of what she is capable
of doing and finally forges her own identity. Joan Anderson writes of immigrant women's difficulties: "Lack of language skills also works against the development of a broad network of supports. Consequently, women remain confined within the narrow social milieu of menial jobs and family obligations" (419). Zera can manage in everyday life with her basic knowledge of English, but if she acquires the necessary language skills, more doors will open up for her. Another advocate of immigrant women claims that they are obliged to leave a lot of things connected to their pasts behind in order to gradually accept new values in a new society and to face new problems. In an interview at the Immigrant Women's Job Placement Centre in Ontario, Vijay Agnew talks to a South-Asian woman who explains:

"'Immigrant women choose to come to Canada and when they come here they have a dream. They know they have a bright future.' But they have left 'their country, their relatives, and their roots' and 'they must start a new life all by themselves.' They are 'faced with a new language, new society, new culture, and they are faced with family problems, financial problems, and language problems.' Usually people want to come into an existing network, 'either a community network, or a support group.'" (66)

Some South-Asian women have to overcome many difficulties and constraints after having left their roots, their culture, their country of origin and most importantly their family. They are aware that they need to start "from scratch" in order to fit into the new society. For example, Roshan, Zera's sister, continued to be battered at home. Already in the last few months twice she had come with puffed-up face to spend the night. Nurdin was all for calling the police: "Let them lock up the pig" (yes, pig, he had said). But the women said no hush-hush, don't wash your dirty linen in public. Well,
hadn't they heard, that is precisely what you do, there are laundromats here.

This is Canada, he told Roshan, giving back her own. (137)

Nuradin uses humour and irony to ask his sister-in-law to protest. But Roshan takes the subordinate role. She finds it difficult to go through family pressure, injustice and violence in a foreign country where she has to face a new culture, new ways of being and doing. Being a South-Asian women from a Third World country, she prefers to keep this situation private and within the family, ensuring it does not become a public issue. To some extent, she shares this shame with battered women everywhere.

In *Digging Up the Mountains*, Bissoondath comments ironically on new problems in the new land. He juxtaposes employment problems with language problems to show how immigrants are often blamed for the discrimination against them. “There is much disemployment in Spain now. Unemployment. Unemployment, pardon me. My English is not perfect. I could not stay in London as long as I had wished. Money was the problem. As always [. . .]” (153). Similarly, in *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*, Bissoondath writes, “He turned to the newspapers, discovering there, for the first time in his life, his lack of qualifications and the limitations of a high school education that had ended almost half of a century before. The employment requirements, long lines of incomprehensible terms linked by strings of undefined letters, bewildered him” (92). These excerpts are representative of language barriers and insufficient qualifications that South-Asian immigrants have to face. Lack of education can be a handicap, even though some immigrants are allowed in the host country on the grounds of their occupations or skills. Language is considered to be one the major elements that may facilitate the opening of doors onto the job market. In certain cases, lack of language skills may lead to tremendous feelings of frustration and isolation. Joan Anderson also discusses this issue of
language: “[...] people from the poorer non-white countries of the world are looked down on—they are stereotyped as incompetent” (432). Lack of language skills may prevent uneducated immigrants from accessing certain advantages and opportunities that the host society offers. But it is also vital to underline that some of these immigrants are subjected to violent discrimination whether or not they lack the language as well as the marketable skills. On one hand, “South Asians also face ethnic and racial discrimination in employment, which is a cause for great community concern,” says the authors of *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*. (Buchignani et al. 151). On the other, Buchignani, Indra and Srivastiva say, “They face the demand for ‘Canadian experience,’ and it is not always easy to convert their occupational records, skills, and education into Canadian experience” (151). *No New Land* protests that South-Asian immigrants should be given opportunities in order to share their knowledge and contribute to the host society. With better communicative skills, they could interact more easily; these skills would allow them to build relationships amongst locals of the host country. Jamal and Nanji are examples of successful immigrants in Canada. Jamal graduated with a degree in law in Dar. He is seen as a respectable and rich lawyer in Toronto (141). Nanji was born in Mombasa, Kenya. He did not get to know his parents as they died in an accident. Nanji goes on to study in California and later become an assistant professor at University of Toronto (99). Nanji and Jamal have established themselves successfully in the Canadian society as better qualified immigrants compared to the Lalani family who feel marginalised as they are less qualified.

Canadian Immigration policy plays a crucial role in the integration and adaptation of immigrants. According to Abu-Laban, the 1966 White Paper recognises that better skilled and more qualified immigrants have better chances to live a better life:
[... ] the White Paper called for immigrants who are skilled because if large numbers of unskilled immigrants come to Canada when the economy is particularly buoyant, the problems of poverty exposed by any economic readjustment will be more severe, (12).

Abu-Laban claims that "the White Paper stressed that increasingly we will have to explore new sources of well-qualified immigrants" (Abu-Laban 74). In *No New Land*, material belongings are highly symbolic and representative of class-consciousness amongst South-Asian immigrants. Class-consciousness contributes to the construction of identity because it includes various practices and other styles of living in a new society that entail issues of status and power. The South-Asians in *No New Land* are constantly threatened by societal pressure to conform to the system and be upwardly mobile. He writes, "During the last year, whenever any well-wisher asked her what she wanted to 'become,' she had given one unequivocal reply: 'Become rich.' To many of the girls and boys of Sixty-nine and Sixty-seven and the other high-rise apartment buildings in this part of Don Mills, this is what growing up meant -- making it" (4-5). This passage illustrates how material belongings within certain cultures have significant implications for identity construction. The South Asians in *No New Land* have come to Canada in search of better opportunities in "the new land" as it represents the Canadian Dream of "making it."

While identity is a combination of both someone's past and present, it also depends on a sense of belonging to a community in the new land in order to construct a new sense of identity. In the article "True Expatriate Love", Bissoondath quotes what Bharati Mukherjee says in *Darkness*: "In my fiction, and in my Canadian experience, 'immigrants' were lost souls, put
upon and pathetic.... If you have to wonder [whether you will ever belong], if you keep looking for signs, if you wait--surrendering little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-retreating past -- you'll never belong anywhere” (44). It implies that the South-Asian immigrants in No New Land should not ask many questions of themselves, as the strange feeling of isolation and loneliness may invade them. Bissoondath suggests the immigrant should at least try to integrate himself gradually in the new place and in the new culture. According to Frank Birbalsingh: “Resistance comes from those who believe that integration into Canadian culture entails the necessary loss of their own inherited cultural identity” (105). Birbalsingh suggests that it is only by feeling a certain sense of belonging that immigrants are compelled to let go of past identities and feel a sense of discovery.

Although South Asians bring along their old practices such as language, memories, family and cultural values, the new realities help them to create a new identity. Their identities tend to shift as these immigrants move from one society to another. Individual success depends on how secure the individual feels in his new surroundings. The identity of an individual may also lie in the degree of acceptance and tolerance of the host society. Josselson argues: “Identity is always bound to one’s sense of connection to others. From its earliest roots, identity emerges from what is separated out from others but continues to exist in connection with them. Identity fuses into a creative, emergent whole the sense of who one was (with them) and the sense of who one will be (with whom)” (21).

Although elements such as place, sense of belonging, employment, culture and language are important to the well-being of an exiled person, race also plays upon this sense of well-being. In an interview, Vassanji declares: “I tried to be honest about racism, which was the most brutal in the seventies and early eighties, and the humour and foibles of immigrant life” (Vassanji as
quoted by Kanaganayakam 132 "Broadening the Substrata"). Vassanji makes an attempt to show racism through the physical traits of the characters in his novel and their reception in the host country. Nanji believes that he is a victim of racism: "He got in and remained seated alone all the way, even when most of the seats were taken and some passengers stood. This happened often to him. Racism, the word kept intruding into his mind and kept pushing it back. On what basis racism? It could be my face, dark, brooding, scowling, cratered. Perhaps I look like a bum" (93). This passage denotes that race can be a strong aspect of identity construction. Nanji feels uncomfortable and inferior about his physical being. He has self-doubts about his image. He thinks that perhaps he looks like "a bum" as no passengers in the bus would sit beside him. By using words such as "dark, brooding, scowling, cratered", the novelist attempts to reflect racist perceptions of Others in his text. In No New Land, Vassanji has his character protest:

   Why doesn't someone tell the Canadians we are no Pakis. I have never been to Pakistan, have you ever been to Pakistan? Tell them we are East Africans!"
   "You tell them." "Are," Jamal's voice came in derision, "it is because of milksops like you that we have to suffer such ignominy. Your time has come and gone. The blacks fingered your asses and you let them. We will fight back." (103-104)

Vassanji's characters have clearly suffered from various forms of prejudices in the old and new land because of their skin colour. They are tremendously frustrated. They have no choice but to suffer from misidentification in a misinformed society. This is representative of the negative aspect of moving to a new land as some may have to face all types of discrimination as well as racial oppression. The novel shows that even the racial slurs are misdirected based on lack of knowledge about the South Asians as cultural Others. Vassanji writes: "The three louts had come
up behind Esmail and began their abuse. "Paki!" one of them shouted joyfully. Esmail turned towards them, looked frightened. "What do you have there, Paki? Hey, hey? Paki-paki-paki...."

(95). In this social realist text, the author uses this discourse to represent the daily realities that certain immigrants of different origins have to go through when they are exiled. Also Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons" exemplifies a similar situation based on racism. He writes: "As I enter the showers three young boys, probably from a previous class, emerge. One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum, under his breath: Paki Paki, smell like curry (238). South-Asian identity is constructed by white Canadians on the basis of assumptions about skin color and facial features.

These prejudices are reflected in Himani Bannerji's poem, "Paki Go Home," which tells the story of a female subject who is ill-treated in Canada. The poem represents racism:

And a grenade explodes
in the sunless afternoon
and words run down
like frothy white spit
down her bent head
down the serene parting of her dark hair
as she stands too visible
from home to bus stop to home
raucous, hyena laughter,

'Paki, Go home!'" (184)
She is not only an immigrant, but she is very visible. She is racially and physically different and is also of a different colour. The image of her dark hair represents ethnicity. The racial slur is accompanied by an assault, and one that shows contempt.

Some believe that an individual can construct his or her identity in a host society when he or she feels the sense of belonging. Marlene Nourbese Philip says: “In the absence of a sense of belonging, there is only being ‘othered’. Philip’s challenge to the country is to transform this othering into m/othering. Canada needs to m/other us” (as quoted by Verduyn 105). South-Asian immigrants need to feel a certain sense of belonging and security in Canada, otherwise it will be hard for them to feel mothered and identify themselves with the host society. If they feel othered all the time, they will never belong. No New Land offers a representation of a realistic view of the fate of some South-Asian immigrants in Canada. It provides us with a good sense of mothering and othering of these South-Asian immigrant characters throughout the novel. Some of the characters feel that they are being othered because of their foreign educational qualifications, foreign language skills, Third World origins, skin colour, and foreign work experience. No New Land represents fragments of reality in the text which make readers more aware of the relationship that exists between individuals, groups and the host society in which they are living. Vassanji portrays the various forms of discrimination, frustration, and protests that South-Asian immigrants go through in an alien society to reshape their identity.
CONCLUSION

"[...] whether you are marginalised as [...], a gay person, a woman or a person of lower caste, you all suffer the same way" (Selvadurai as quoted by Aziz).

Mistry, Selvadurai and Vassanji try to recreate the identities of various marginalised characters through their fictional texts. In their three novels, it matters less whether a person is a gay character, a female subject, an untouchable character, a resident of India, or a member of the diaspora; what is more important is that they are marginalised as "them" vs "us". They all go through different forms of discrimination and injustice either because of being born female or untouchable in Mistry's story, as homosexual in Funny Boy, or as South-Asian immigrants in the Canadian host society. These marginalised characters feel out of place whether they are inside or outside the Indian subcontinent. They are not perceived as equal members in India, Sri-Lanka, or Canada. Instead, they are perceived as being different from the norms and tend to question their sense of belonging, value, and most importantly their place in the South-Asian community itself. They share similar feelings of isolation and insecurity, for marginalisation and the feeling of not belonging is not usually a matter of choice.

A Fine Balance, Funny Boy and No New Land share important similarities. As diasporic writers, Mistry, Selvadurai and Vassanji construct South-Asian identity and share their memories, joy and despair, pain and nostalgia in relation to Indian ancestry. Accordingly, their writing recreates the world they have left behind or the new world they encounter. We have seen that in these novels by diasporic writers, identity is mediated by caste and class, gender, sexual orientation, race, language and exile. These forces help reshape diasporic South-Asian identity. For example, in his fictional representation of the postcolonial history of India in the 70's, Mistry
represents the struggles of large groups of South Asians in the Indian subcontinent through epic realism. Mistry reconstructs historical events by realistically portraying a group of untouchables who experience violence and atrocious injustices during the Emergency Period. The author also shows conflicts between Dina and her brother Nusswan as well as those between upper and the lower caste to illustrate that gender is marginalising within castes. Female untouchable characters are traumatised for they are abused sexually, objectified. Some are asked openly to get rid of their newborn girls. Male untouchable characters undergo trauma as they are forced to be sterilised. They feel marginalised by their own people and traditional social values and practices of caste.

Selvadurai writes about one individual mostly. He puts emphasis on the gay protagonist Arjie who is caught in-between two traditional gender identities. Selvadurai uses psychological realism to portray how the character Arjie discovers his homosexuality that exists outside the patriarchal norms. The author represents homosexuality as a certain form of displacement which excludes the main protagonist from mainstream Sri Lankan society. The author exposes the different attitudes against homosexuality in Arjie’s immediate surroundings. The ethnic conflict between the Tamil and the Sinhalese forms the frame for the individual’s story and in the end of the novel the family must leave their country of origin for Canada.

Vassanji writes about a small circle of South-Asian immigrants from East Africa who migrate to Toronto because of racial tension between Africans and South-Asians in Kenya. They are caught in between two worlds and face unexpected harsh realities in the Canadian host society. He represents Canada as a hostile land. Vassanji uses social realism to recreate immigrant experience and also to protest against racism that some newly arrived immigrants are
bound to face in *No New Land*. For example, he writes about Professor Nanji who thinks that he looks like a bum as none of the passengers come to sit beside him in the bus.

Representations of gender help to show the ways women are treated in the Indian Diaspora. In all three novels, female characters take on subordinate roles. They are portrayed as secondary subjects who construct their South-Asian identities through marginal and exilic experiences within and outside the Indian subcontinent. In Mistry’s story, male characters show little respect towards women characters who are at the mercy of unfair gender practises. For example, the birth of females are not well-received. The female characters are portrayed as largely passive and powerless subjugated objects. Considered as the inferior sex, they succumb to harsh living conditions. Some female characters is abused and eroticized as the sexual Other, others are verbally and physically harassed. Mistry does not only show women as victims, however; for example, the female character Dina Dalal who is a member of the Parsi community is marginalised by gender. She is the only one in the story who talks back against marginalisation. She is able to voice her opinion which nevertheless remains unheard. Other female characters such as the ayah, the character Roopa, the Bhil woman are neither able to voice their opinion nor make decisions. They are amongst those who feel exiled and are marginalised by both gender and caste.

In *Funny Boy*, female characters in the Sri Lankan patriarchal society are allocated to the backyard and the kitchen compared to the male characters who are placed in front of the house. The female characters seem to have less control over their space and are forced to take on a submissive role. For example, the character Appa blames Amma for spoiling their son, Arjie. Instead, in the gay protagonist’s bride-bride world, female characters do not occupy the subordinate role, except in respect to Arjie’s dominance in taking over the main female roles.
The text gives positive value to women characters by giving them the subject position, a position that they are not given in the patriarchal world. In other words, the patriarchal hierarchy imposed by the Sri Lankan society is shown to be disrupted by the alternate gender roles that are in between. In Vassanji’s novel, the Portuguese female character is able to discredit the male South-Asian in the host Canadian society. She accuses Nurdin of sexual harassment when he is innocent. As a female character she has more agency than the South-Asian male character.

Caste and class-consciousness are common elements in these three novels. In Mistry’s *Fine Balance*, for instance, male untouchable and female characters are marginalised due to their caste and class positions since only the upper caste people are privileged economically. The male untouchable characters are “Othered” as they are born within the lowest caste of Indian society. Both male untouchables and female characters are reduced to animal status. They are called names and are treated as animals. The novel dramatises how these severely marginalised characters suffer from low self-esteem, frustration and various injustices that constitute a violation of human decency. They are also forbidden to have access to certain things and spaces in South-Asian society. As they have little agency, they are not able to voice their opinion.

In *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai uses realism to discuss the bourgeois status of the Chelvaratnam family, wealthy enough to have Sunday family get-togethers, private school life, the inner garden, amongst other spaces that they can access. As Sri Lanka is falling into a nightmare of ethnic warfare between Tamil and Sinhalese, Arjie’s father becomes more and more class-conscious. The ethnic tension in Sri Lankan society destabilises and affects the identity of Arjie’s whole family in terms of class status. The gay protagonist Arjie is class-conscious and wonders whether his plight in emigrating to Canada may result in the same fate as
the beggar woman. Arjie’s father decides to emigrate to Canada because he is afraid to suffer from loss of class status because of ethnic tension if they stay in Sri Lanka.

In *No New Land*, the South-Asian immigrant characters are marginalised in both East African and Canadian societies. They are “kicked out” from East Africa in search of better opportunities, but also feel declassed within their host society. Thus the South-Asian immigrant characters in Vassanji’s *No New Land* are class-conscious and the text recounts their thoughts about class in order to demonstrate this. As literature of exile or immigrant literature, the novel also uses social realism to show that the host society puts up class barriers to keep the newly arrived immigrants in their place. For example, in Vassanji’s novel, Zera has to deal with a new society, a new culture and a new language which affects her class-status. She is not satisfied with her social status in Canada and feels marginalised as a person of South-Asian origin. Although she can manage in everyday life with her basic English, her lack of language skills keeps her from discovering and benefiting from the different advantages the host society provides. Her lack of education and insufficient qualifications limit the reshaping of her identity as a South-Asian female immigrant in Canadian society. Although the character Zera encounters language problems as a doubly marginalised Third-World figure with a South-Asian background and a South-Asian accent, nevertheless she is allowed to live more freely by breaking loose from the dominant South-Asian patriarchy compared to the female characters in *A Fine Balance*.

Although Said talks about exile being an unhealable rift, in these three novels, different forms of exile are lived differently by each and every character. They experience voluntary and involuntary exile, exile as loss, new identities emerging within exile, internal exile, exile within a diasporic community—all in both positive and negative ways. In Mistry’s novel, both male untouchable and female characters feel oppressed within their own society. In this case, internal
exile describes the experience of those who are forced to relocate or go to work camps. Ishvar, Om and Maneck are the three characters who experience involuntary exile from their villages and relocation in the big city of Bombay. The character Maneck’s parents choose to send their son to study in Bombay for a better education. The two male untouchable characters Ishvar and Om are forced to become tailors. As they feel internally exiled, they choose to leave their small village to go to Bombay in the hope that the big city will bring changes to their lives by providing more freedom, less injustices and more job opportunities. Exile to Bombay will unfortunately not free them from violence and marginalisation, but they end up being swallowed by the big city.

In *Funny Boy* external exile takes place at the end of the novel because of political and ethnic tension in Sri Lanka. The male protagonist Arjie and his family are forced to go through involuntary exile to Canada as they feel threatened by civil war. They no longer feel the sense of belonging and security within the country of origin. The gay character Arjie, however, has never felt he belonged. He feels internally colonised within the Sri Lankan society as he cannot live his homosexuality freely. He feels exiled because he is caught in-between two gender identities. He is forced to put up with his parents who have tried to force traditional masculinity upon him as well as the mockery of his cousins which causes him to feel exiled from family and community.

In *No New Land*, exile takes a new turn as the promised land will not eliminate marginalisation, but it will bring new forms of it to diasporic South-Asians. The disruption caused by racial tension, political and economic instability between native Africans and those of South-Asian origins causes South-Asian characters in the novel to migrate from East Africa to Canada. In the Canadian host society, these South-Asian immigrants suffer from misidentification as they are perceived as Pakistanis instead of East Africans. They are portrayed
as the inferior Other on the grounds of their cultural otherness, skin colour, language barriers and lack of Canadian work experience. The South-Asian immigrants feel exiled and inferiorised because they are perceived as Other. The novel shows them trying to get accustomed to the Canadian ways of living, different social practices and the Canadian winter which altogether appear hostile to them. They go through various forms of injustice in their host society due to their foreign identities. The novel protests that the Canadian host society allows them to immigrate, but inferiorises them afterwards. Vassanji’s title may describe the fact that there is no new land as immigrants or exiles have a tendency to carry and recreate memories and lived experiences in the host society, but also because they cannot easily find a sense of belonging in a society that marginalises them.

*A Fine Balance, Funny Boy* and *No New Land* define various marginal groups in the Indian diaspora. Mistry, Selvadurai and Vassanji give voice to characters that have suffered from humiliation, violence and injustices because they are marginalised to a different degree and with different criteria. To some readers, these stories may appear shocking as they depict the harsh realities of South Asians who are marginalised due to caste, gender, sexual orientation, race, language and exile. To other readers, these three novels expose the experiences of marginalisation of South-Asians in the Indian diaspora. This does not mean that all South-Asians are always destined to marginality. The three South-Asian Canadian authors are good examples of successful South-Asians who find a home in a new land. They have all exiled to Toronto where they have written many novels in order to share the essence of their own diasporic experiences and that of their people. Being outside their countries of origin, they have a double vision of things. Their exilic experiences allow them to not only view the society they have left behind with a different eye, but also bring into view the different minority groups within their
own ethnic group: such as women, untouchables, homosexuals and South-Asian immigrants.

Perhaps, if they had stayed in their countries of origin, *A Fine Balance, Funny Boy* and *No New Land* would not have been written.
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