Cyber Criticism and the Representation of the LGBTQ+ Experience in South Asian Literature: A Comparative Analysis of "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal

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Abstract

This research paper aims to discover the depiction of the LGBTQ+ experience in South Asian literature through a comparative study of two novels: "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal. The study implements a cyber criticism approach to examine how the internet and digital spaces influence the portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities and narratives. The paper provides an overview of the cultural and social context of South Asia, emphasizing the taboos and stigmas surrounding non-heteronormative sexuality in the region. It evaluates how the characters in the novels, through virtual spaces such as social media platforms and online support groups, seek acceptance, build connections, and claim their identities beyond the limitations of their physical and cultural settings. Additionally, the paper investigates how the novels engage with issues of diaspora, intersectionality, and the role of tradition in perpetuating or challenging heteronormative norms. By examining the depiction of the LGBTQ+ experience in South Asian literature from a cyber criticism outlook, this study sheds light on how literature includes digital spaces to amplify marginalized voices, disrupt stereotypes, and challenge societal norms.

Keywords: Cyber Criticism, LGBTQ+ representation, South Asian literature, Digital Age, Online Spaces, Social Media, Technology, Identity, Relationships, Acceptance, South Asian Context, Societal Norms, Inclusivity, Self-expression.

South Asian LGBTQ+ literature has developed as an influential means of expressing the varied experiences and struggles of entities whose sexual orientation and gender identity challenge traditional cultural norms in South Asia. Against the framework of deep-rooted societal and religious liberalism, South Asian LGBTQ+ literature has boldly directed taboo subjects, providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and understood. The literary works of this genre critically examine the difficulties of gender and sexuality, giving insight into the experiences, challenges, and conquests of LGBTQ+ individuals. These narratives also serve as a compound for social change and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights in South Asia. Through storytelling, poetry, and other literary forms, LGBTQ+ literature continues to shape and redefine societal perceptions, understanding, and solidarity within and beyond the region.

Literature analysis within the context of digital and online technologies holds significant importance in modern literary analysis because the rise of digitalization has fundamentally transformed how literature is consumed, disseminated, and created. Cyber literature allows us to engage with how digital culture influences the production, distribution, and reception of literary texts and the impact of these changes on the reading experience. Digital technologies have reshaped the socio-political scene, disturbing issues such as access to literature, censorship, surveillance, and digital inequality. Cyber criticism examines how literature reflects, responds to, and critiques these dynamics in the digital age. The spread of online platforms, social media, and digital archives has profoundly impacted how readers engage with literature and writers produce their work.

The purpose of conducting a comparative analysis of "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal on Cyber Criticism and the Representation of the LGBTQ+ experience in South Asian literature is multifaceted; it aims to

examine how the two novels depict the LGBTQ+ experience within the context of South Asian culture. It explores the themes of identity, sexuality, and acceptance within a cultural framework that may have traditional views. The comparative analysis also explores the impact of digitalization on the reception and discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ literature in South Asia. It examines how social media and online communities have influenced the texts' discussion, reception, and interpretation. It investigates how the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the novels negotiates with, challenges, or reinforces cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality. This allows a deeper understanding of how different authors depict and engage with LGBTQ+ themes and how these depictions are received and interpreted within the digital sphere.

The emergence of LGBTQ+ literature has been a significant development within South Asian literary discourse. Authors like Shyam Selvadurai and Rakesh Satyal contributed to this growing literary scene through their novels "Funny Boy" and "No One Can Pronounce My Name," depicting the complexities of LGBTQ+. The progress of South Asian LGBTQ+ literature reflects a growing recognition of the need to address and validate LGBTQ+ individuals within South Asia's cultural and social contexts.

The connection between cyber criticism and LGBTQ+ representation offers a powerful platform for critically analyzing and discussing their narratives. Cyber criticism has provided a wide-ranging space to engage with and deconstruct the representation of LGBTQ+ experiences.

"Funny Boy" is a coming-of-age novel set in Sri Lanka, exploring themes of sexuality, ethnicity, and political chaos. Arjie, a young Tamil boy, comes to terms with his identity and sexuality against the backdrop of ever-increasing ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka. A critical comment by a reviewer in The New York Times praises the novel for its "vivid and heart-rending portrayal of a society torn apart by ethnicity and sexuality." They also laud Selvadurai's

ability to seamlessly weave together personal and political struggles, capturing the reader's emotional investment and empathy for the characters.

"No One Can Pronounce My Name" is a novel that explores the lives of Indian immigrants living in America, exploring themes of loneliness, friendship, and cultural identity. The book interweaves the stories of several characters, including a middle-aged Indian woman dealing with her marital struggles and a young man navigating his sense of otherness. In a review by The Washington Post, the novel is praised for its "sharp, often hilarious observations about identity and family" and its "complex and authentic depiction of the immigrant experience." Critics have also praised Satyal's ability to balance humor and depth, making the characters and their experiences relatable and distressing.

"Funny Boy" and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" received critical acclaim for exploring complex themes and skillful character development. The novels effectively capture the experiences of marginalized individuals, drawing readers into their emotional journeys and shedding light on diminished perspectives.

Cyber Criticism is a theoretical framework that explores the intersection of literature and digital culture. It delves into how technological advancements, including social media platforms, online communities, and digital storytelling, influence the production and reception of literary works. In the context of LGBTQ+ literature in South Asia, cyber criticism can be applied to examine how authors may use digital spaces to engage with and represent LGBTQ+ experiences and how these representations shape readers' understanding of identity, sexuality, and community.

In "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai, the protagonist, Arjie, uses a digital diary to explore and express his sexuality in a society that is not accepting individuals like him. The

digital arrangement allows him to explore and document his experiences in a private, potentially public, space.

"No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal presents the challenges and achievements of LGBTQ+ individuals within South Asian communities in the United States. The novel delves into the lives of such characters, navigating complex family dynamics, cultural expectations, and personal aspirations.

Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations as race, class, gender, and sexuality to an individual or group. In LGBTQ+ representation, intersectionality is crucial for understanding such individuals' layered identities and experiences within the broader context of South Asian culture and society.

"Funny Boy" and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" explore the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ identities, addressing the complexities of identity formation, familial expectations, and the challenges of belonging to multiple marginalized communities. Both novels incorporate technology and cyberculture to reflect the intersection of modernity and tradition. Characters in the stories navigate their identities and relationships through online platforms, highlighting the impact of technology. "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai is set in Sri Lanka during the 1970s and 1980s, which were marked by political turmoil and ethnic tensions. The novel portrays the complexities of family, tradition, and societal expectations amidst social and political upheaval. The protagonist, Arjie, grapples with his sexual orientation and explores his identity in the context of societal norms and technological advancements, depicting the evolution of the LGBTQ+ representation of cyberculture. In "No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal, the story unfolds in present-day America, exploring the experiences of Indian immigrants and their struggles to reconcile their cultural heritage with their LGBTQ+ identities. Both novels

address the societal stigmas and cultural taboos surrounding LGBTQ+ identities within their community, shedding light on the challenges faced by individuals in navigating their sexual orientations and gender identities.

"Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai is set in Sri Lanka during a turbulent political and social unrest. The story follows the life of Arjie, a young Tamil boy discovering his identity and sexuality amid a conservative society. The narrative is divided into six interconnected stories depicting Arjie's experiences at different stages of his life, each providing a nuanced portrayal of his family, cultural dynamics, and personal growth. Arjie is a complex and multifaceted character who navigates the societal expectations of masculinity and heteronormativity while also exploring his understanding of gender and sexual orientation.

Amma held up her hand to silence us. 'That's an order,' she said.

'Why?' I asked, ignoring her gesture. '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.' (Selvadurai, Citation1995, pp.18–19)

His relationships with family members, particularly his traditional grandmother, Amma, and his spirited and rebellious cousin, Shehan, deeply influence his coming-of-age journey. "Funny Boy" presents a poignant portrayal of LGBTQ+ representation and the challenges of embracing one's identity in a repressive environment. Arjie's exploration of his sexual orientation and his burgeoning attraction to other boys is sensitively depicted, showcasing the internal conflicts and external pressures he faces as a queer individual in a conservative society. The novel offers a rare insight into the Tamil community's attitudes towards non-normative sexual orientation and gender identity, shedding light on the complexities and tensions inherent in navigating these aspects of identity within traditional cultural contexts.

Though "Funny Boy" is set in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the novel finely explores the impact of emerging cyberculture on its characters. One prominent example is Arjie's use of technology, such as the radio and television, as a source of escapism and connection to a broader world beyond the confines of his immediate surroundings. The novel suggests that technology serves as a means of transcending societal limitations and providing a platform for individuals to explore alternative identities and perspectives.

Additionally, the interconnectedness facilitated by cyberculture, mainly through the dissemination of global media and information exchange, influences Arjie's understanding of his own queer identity and the broader social and political dynamics at play in Sri Lanka. This interplay between traditional societal structures and the burgeoning influence of modern communication technologies enriches the novel's exploration of identity and personal agency within a rapidly evolving world.

Whereas "No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal delves into the lives of Indian immigrants living in the United States. The plot revolves around the intersecting lives of Harit and Ranjana, two Indian Americans navigating their cultural identities and personal struggles. Harit is a middle-aged man who struggles with loneliness and the recent loss of his mother, while Ranjana is a housewife who yearns to break free from the societal expectations imposed on her. The novel explores LGBTQ+ themes and representation through the character of Ranjana's son, Prashant. Prashant is a gay man who deals with his sexual identity and the expectations placed upon him by his family and cultural community. Satyal sensitively delves into Prashant's internal struggles, expressing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals within conservative and traditional familial settings. The novel explores self-acceptance and the complexities of reconciling personal identity with family and cultural expectations.

Satyal incorporates cyberculture as a significant element in the novel, reflecting the characters' efforts to connect and find community in a digital age. The characters use online platforms, social media, and chat rooms to seek solace, friendship, and cultural connection, reflecting how technology has altered the immigrant experience. Where physical space fails to provide a sense of belonging, the digital realm becomes a space for fake connections, exchanging stories, and sharing experiences. Critics have noted that Satyal's portrayal of cyberculture in the novel highlights the evolving dynamics of community and identity formation in contemporary society, showing how individuals utilize digital platforms to create networks and find solidarity.

"Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal feature LGBTQ+ representation as a central theme. In both novels, the authors sensitively explore the challenges and complexities faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in their respective cultural contexts. Both books reveal the struggles of characters in the face of societal norms and expectations, as well as the conflicts that arise within their families and communities due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In "Funny Boy," the protagonist, Arjie, faces his identity and sexuality against political unrest in Sri Lanka. Selvadurai skilfully depicts Arjie's coming of age and his acknowledgment of his homosexuality, offering a profound exploration of the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ identity and ethnic conflict.

Similarly, "No One Can Pronounce My Name" delves into the lives of LGBTQ+ characters in a diasporic Indian community in the United States. Rakesh Satyal portrays the

experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations, shedding light on their challenges and cultural clashes as they navigate their identities.

While both novels feature LGBTQ+ representation, they differ significantly in their cultural and historical contexts. "Funny Boy" is set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, offering a unique perspective on LGBTQ+ experiences within a politically turbulent environment. The novel navigates the complexities of ethnic and religious tensions, adding cultural and historical depth to the LGBTQ+ representation. On the other hand, "No One Can Pronounce My Name" is set within the Indian-American community, exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within the context of diaspora and cultural assimilation into a Western society. The novel encapsulates the challenges of integration, family dynamics, and cultural identity, providing a distinct lens through which to view LGBTQ+ representation.

In "Funny Boy," Arjie's exploration of his sexuality and desire for self-expression is hindered by societal expectations and cultural norms that disapprove of homosexuality. Throughout the novel, Arjie faces criticism and bullying when his private moments are exposed, significantly impacting his sense of self and identity. This cyber criticism highlights the detrimental impact of external judgment and social ostracization on LGBTQ+ individuals, echoing real-life experiences of online harassment and its effects on mental health and self-esteem. In "No One Can Pronounce My Name," the character Harit experiences the impact of cyber criticism and judgment on his identity as a gay man. Satyal portrays individuals' challenges in navigating social media and cyberspaces to falsify connections and acceptance. Through Harit's character, the novel underscores the impact of cyber criticism on individual identity and the struggle to find acceptance within online and offline communities.

Renowned literary critic Maureen Corrigan praised "Funny Boy," stating that Selvadurai "creates an affectionate, tough-minded and tragic portrait of the struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in a politically charged environment." Similarly, "No One Can Pronounce My Name" has been praised for its authentic and empathetic portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters navigating the complexities of cultural and digital spaces.

Cyber criticism has played an influential role in shaping the identities of LGBTQ+ individuals by providing a platform for diverse voices to engage in discussions about gender and sexuality. Individuals can share their experiences, connect with community resources, and find support networks through social media, online forums, and digital platforms. This cyberspace has also raised critical conversations about LGBTQ+ representation in literature.

Through a comparative analysis of "Funny Boy" by Shyam Selvadurai and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" by Rakesh Satyal, this paper has identified that Both novels provide complex representations of the LGBTQ+ experience in the context of South Asian literature. The authors complicatedly weave together themes of identity, family, tradition, and societal expectations while addressing the challenges and triumphs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Additionally, cyber criticism has been shown to play a crucial role in shaping the reception and interpretation of these literary works, as online platforms provide spaces for marginalized voices to engage with and critique literature.

The findings of this study have significant implications for literature and cyber criticism, underscoring the importance of diverse and inclusive representation in literature. These novels offer powerful narratives that challenge stereotypes and provide LGBTQ+ individuals with a platform for visibility and validation. Furthermore, the intersection of cyber criticism and literature highlights the potential for online discourse to shape the reading and reception of

literature, especially for marginalized communities. This suggests a need for continued analysis of the impact of digital platforms on literary interpretation and engagement.

Building on this analysis, future research should explore the evolving landscape of LGBTQ+ representation in South Asian literature and its interaction with cyber criticism. Investigating how authors and readers navigate online spaces to discuss and promote inclusive narratives can provide valuable insights into the intersection of literature and digital culture. Additionally, further studies could delve into how online discussions influence literary trends and the reception of LGBTQ+ literary works. This would contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cyber criticism, representation, and the LGBTQ+ experience in literature.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of "Funny Boy" and "No One Can Pronounce My Name" has underscored the significance of diverse and inclusive representation in South Asian literature while highlighting the influential role of cyber criticism in shaping literary reception. This study opens the door for future research that explores the dynamic interplay between online discourse, literature, and the LGBTQ+ experience in the South Asian context.

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