

## CHAPTER-2

### Performing Masculinities in Everyday Life

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.  
-William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

#### 2.1 Introduction

What does it take to be a man? What are his essential qualities? How should he behave in public? How should he conduct himself in private? Although these are questions that clinical psychology and social anthropology sought to answer in the early part of research on men and masculinities, we now understand that answers to questions like these depend a lot on other socio-cultural factors. As Jaques philosophises on the public life of a man in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, we are reminded of the performative nature of human lives. It is this performance that forms the crux of this chapter. Here, social dynamics have a direct bearing on an individual's performance and the script of the performance should accordingly be read keeping in mind the subject's position vis-à-vis the surroundings. As "one man in his time plays many parts", this chapter will focus on the discursive performance of masculinities in the gendered space of society as reflected in a few selected texts. It will analyse works of fiction written by three representative contemporary writers of South Asian origin namely, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008-2015), which comprises *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) and Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan Trilogy* (2014-2018), which comprises of- *One Part Woman* (2014), *A Lonely Harvest* (2018) and *Trial by Silence* (2018).

This chapter will undertake a literary investigation of men and masculinities as represented in contemporary South Asian fiction written in and translated into English. It will explore individual characters enacting their gendered selves in everyday life. Such enactments will entail the characters' attempts to either resist or subvert hegemony amidst societal power dynamics. In its discussion on space, this chapter will show how the demarcation of spaces becomes suffocating for non-conformists and how they

navigate these to find subversive possibilities of sexual liberation and identity formation. In the process of navigation, they will often have to confront forces of racial history and politics. But there will be possibilities of liberation in the form of imagination, dreams, theatre performance and carnivalesque space. This chapter will also engage with the creative as well as subversive potential of language in the performance and projection of gender identities.

The theoretical understanding of this chapter has been informed by a reading of the concepts of Butler's gender performativity and Connell's hegemonic masculinity. A critical understanding of everyday life will also form the foundation of this chapter. If gender is understood as an improvised performance along the lines of Butler's thought, the performance of masculinity is a political act determining the status of an individual in society. Following Butler, Joseph Bristow writes in his preface to the book *Performing Masculinities* (2010) – "...masculinities are continuously making and unmaking themselves through performative acts – ones rooted in material practices and psychic formations..." (vii). He echoes Butler in the material aspect of production as well as the reception of masculinities and also highlights the fact that socio-cultural factors play a significant role in their continuous fashioning and re-fashioning. R. W. Connell developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity first in her book *Masculinities* (1995) and later reworked it with Messerschmidt in the essay "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" (2005). She explained it as a "pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue". It also "embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832).

Any critical inquiry of gender as a continuous, repetitive and improvised performance that is influenced by hegemonic forces requires an understanding of the dynamics of everyday life. The discourse of gender is framed through a series of everyday performances. Everyday life has been theorised from various standpoints over the years. Scholars like Erving Goffman, Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre and their successors have debated the philosophical, material, and psychological nature of everyday life. In his dramaturgical analysis of everyday life, Goffman highlights a plural self which is a collection of performances spatially arranged across the events of

everyday life. In his celebrated work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), he explains the performative nature of the self:

The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (173)

Goffman's view of the plural self which was enacted according to the changes in scenes and circumstances gave rise to subsequent theorisation by many scholars. In the introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) Michel de Certeau defines everyday practices as "ways of operating or doing things" (xi). Referring to Foucault's theorisation in *Discipline and Punish*, he writes-

These 'ways of operating' constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production. They pose questions at once analogous and contrary to those dealt with in Foucault's book: analogous, in that the goal is to perceive and analyse the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of 'tactics' articulated in the details of everyday life; contrary, in that the goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'. (xiv)

While Certeau popularised the Foucauldian approach of understanding everyday life, Henri Lefebvre deviated from it and sought to explain the philosophy of everyday life from a Marxist perspective. Employing a dialectical standpoint, Lefebvre in his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991) highlighted the interconnected nature of work and leisure in everyday parlance. According to him, "the discreteness of the elements of everyday (work- family and 'private' life- leisure activities) implies an alienation, and perhaps at the same time a differentiation- certain fruitful contradictions. In any event, like all ensembles (or totalities), it must be studied in terms of the interrelations of its elements" (Lefebvre 32). Thus, while Goffman highlighted the dramaturgical nature of everyday life achieved through the performance of a plural self, Certeau echoed Foucault when he philosophised on the ways in which everyday practices are "caught in the nets

of discipline”. Again, Lefebvre advanced the theorisation to provide a Marxist interpretation of everyday life. Considering the varied explanations put forward by the above theorists, we understand the multi-layered nature of everyday life and its related practices. Therefore, following the works of Ben Highmore, we can concur that everyday life is theory as well as practice, subject as well as object, nature as well as culture, private as well as public, singular as well as plural and dominance as well as resistance (Highmore 5). For this chapter, we will consider everyday life as a multi-layered performance that exposes the plurality of self, amidst hierarchical structures of discipline as well as surveillance.

Along with the concepts of gender performativity, hegemonic masculinity and everyday life, this chapter will also employ the notion of gendered space, the dynamics of which prove to be important markers to our understanding of the texts selected for this study. It is because, spaces exert tremendous influence on the lives of individuals and in the process of enacting their selves, individuals, in turn, negotiate with the power dynamics associated with particular places, thereby creating a space of their own. The ways and means they employ to achieve this require our critical attention. Moreover, an inquiry into the nature of the performative space will also be beneficial for this study.

Doreen Massey’s theorisation of space has linked the concept to factors like geographical place, time, social relations, institutionalised power dynamics, etc. In her words:

‘The spatial’ then, it is argued here, can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace. It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations, and it forces into view the real multiplicities of space-time. ...The spatial is both open to, and a necessary element in, politics in the broadest sense of the word. (4)

Massey’s words highlight the impossibility of understanding space in isolation from history and politics in their widest implications. She also discusses how the same place in different points of space-time becomes significantly different for individuals.

Following Butler, Massey and Bristow, we can argue that if the improvised performance is enacted in a gendered space, there will be times when individuals or groups will try to evade hegemony and create a different space for their own. This escape into the alternate space can, in diverse circumstances, forge the creation of fictional communities. With a change in the configuration of social relations, the same place, according to Doreen Massey, will challenge the currently dominant form of gender definitions and relations. This space can be an ideological “third space” in the lines of Homi Bhabha and Edward Soja or a physical “heterotopia” in the lines of Foucault. Spaces like these offer possibilities of transgression. In other words, they transform into avenues where other selves, realities and social orders or hierarchies can be lived and realised. Again, the relaxation of rules and norms in such spaces provides the scope for Bakhtinian carnival ambivalence where transgression, gender fluidity and alternative realities can be experienced.

Further, the use of language is a performance through which individuals assert their identities in gendered spaces. The establishment of identity invariably leads to differentiation from others. Language also provides an avenue whereby individuals can project their transgressive desires. In other words, language is a medium of identification as well as differentiation in society. But this process of identity formation is not free from the politics of societal hegemony as language often functions as a repressive mechanism for the non-conformists and deviants of society. Dale Spender, in her celebrated work *Man-Made Language* (1980), describes the paradoxical nature of the power of language:

Language helps form the limits of our reality. It is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world. It is through language that we become members of a human community, that the world becomes comprehensible and meaningful, that we bring into existence the world in which we live.

Yet it is ironic that this faculty which helps to create our world also has the capacity to restrict our world... Having learnt the language of a patriarchal society we have also learnt to classify and manage the world in accordance with patriarchal order and to preclude many possibilities for alternate ways of making sense of the world. (17)

Spender's words highlight the power of language to create, organise and restrict the world. It is essentially gendered and exercises hegemonic control over individuals as well as groups. As such, language becomes an important factor in the performance or expression of gender identities. Moreover, through its subversive potential, language may serve the purpose of a redemptive agency for the marginalised.

Thus, the above discussion highlights the interplay of the politics of language and space with the everyday performances of gender identities. By exploring the subtleties of everyday life when individual characters enact their gendered selves negotiating forms of oppression in private as well as public spaces, this chapter will pave the way for more critical discussions on the representation of masculinities from the perspectives of body and embodiment, intersectionality and nation-building in the subsequent chapters.

## **2.2 To Make a Man of Him**

Shyam Selvadurai's debut novel *Funny Boy* (1994) is a bildungsroman narrative that brings together Radha Aunty's transgressions of femininity with the protagonist Arjie's queer awakening amidst the violence of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Along with the main plot that revolves around the exploration of Arjie's sexual identity between the ages of seven and fourteen, the narratives of Amma's adulterous relationship with Daryl Uncle and Jegan's brief stint with the Chelvaratnam family run parallel.

The first chapter of the novel, titled "Pigs Can't Fly", which recounts the activities of the family on "spend-the-day" Sundays, depicts Arjie's initial entry into the queer world. During those Sundays, Arjie and his cousins along with their families would gather at their grandparents' house for spending the entire day. While the elders socialised among themselves, the children were left on their own to play in the open spaces of the large house. Arjie's boy cousins would play cricket in the front yard and his girl cousins would play games like "bride-bride", "cooking-cooking" or enacting fairy tales in the backyard (Selvadurai 4). He, being the narrator, confides to the readers that from a very young age, he feels the strongest attraction towards this territory of the girls. He says, "It was to this territory of 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." (Selvadurai 3)

The area where his boy cousins play Cricket is essentially a male territory, a prerogative of his boy cousins. As they restrict the entry of the girls into their territory, the girls are forced to play “girlie games” in the backyard. This segregation of places underlines the inherent segregation of “gendered spaces”, a term used by Daphne Spain in her book, *Gendered Spaces* (1992). In her words-

Spatial arrangements between the sexes are socially created, and when they provide access to valued knowledge for men, while reducing access to that knowledge for women, the organization of space may perpetuate status differences... To quote geographer Doreen Massey. ‘It is not that the spatial is socially constructed, the social is spatially constructed too’. (3-4)

Spain focuses on the perpetuation of status differences ensured through the organization and differentiation of space. In the novel, the demarcation of spaces is religiously followed by the kids and also unquestioningly permitted by all the elders of the extended family. It is taken for granted that a game of cricket is for boys and “bride-bride” or “cooking-cooking” is for girls. Accordingly, the territories are assigned—the front yard for the active, masculine boys and the backyard for the docile, homely girls. Consequently, Arjie is forced into the front yard.

The binary in the demarcation of space baffles the imagination of Arjie. Being unable to align himself with this arrangement, he realises himself to be a misfit in the cricket ground and instead ventures out to the territory of the girls. He confides, “For me, the primary attraction of the girls’ territory was the free play of fantasy. Because of the force of my imagination, I was selected as a leader” (Selvadurai 4). Led by Arjie, the girl cousins would conduct a raid on their grandparents’ dirty clothes basket. They would create costumes out of the odorous saris, blouses, sheets, curtains, etc. to enact exciting stories.

Arjie’s sustained free play of fantasy and the force of his imagination secure him the roles of either the chef or Cinderella or Thumbelina among his group of girl cousins. This opens up for him a whole new world of fascination. He gives a vivid description of his favourite game of bride-bride:

For me the culmination of this game, and my ultimate moment of joy, was when I put on the clothes of the bride. In the late afternoon, usually after tea, I along with the older girl cousins, would enter Janaki’s room. From my sling-bag I would

bring out my most prized possession, an old white sari, slightly yellow with age, its border torn and missing most of its sequins. The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki's cracked full-length mirror-by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes-I was able to leave the constraints of 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 *pallu*, seemed to revolve. (Selvadurai 4-5)

This is a very crucial paragraph right at the beginning of the novel which shows Arjie's disavowal of conventional gender norms through identification with girl spaces and girlie-games. In his words, through the game of bride-ride in the secluded space of the backyard, he was "able to leave the constraints of (him) self and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self". Apart from being a geographical place, the territory of the girls is essentially an ideological heterotopia where layers of signification exist. Firstly, it is a space which bears marks of masculine dominance and subjection to authority. Secondly, it is a space where compliance to dominance is enacted through supposedly innocent play. Thirdly and more importantly, it is a liminal zone where Arjie can live his identity through the free play of his fantasy.

Arjie's predominance in the transgressive world is threatened for the first time when his cousin Tanuja (whom they mockingly call Her Fatness) asserts her right to be the bride and derides him for being one despite being a boy. Calling him a "pansy", "faggot" and "sissy", she exclaims: "But he's not even a girl... A bride is a girl, not a boy... A boy cannot be the bride. A girl must be the bride" (Selvadurai 11). This threat is further aggravated when Tanuja's mother, Kanthi Aunty exposes him in front of the whole family in the drawing room. Grabbing him by his elbow, she pulled him up the porch steps and entered the drawing room:

Kanthi Aunt cried out, her voice brimming over with laughter, 'See what I found!'

The other aunts and uncles looked up from their papers or bestirred themselves from their sleep. They gazed at me in amazement as if I had suddenly made myself visible, like a spirit. I glanced at them and then at Amma's face. Seeing



her expression, I felt my dread deepen. I lowered my eyes. The sari suddenly felt suffocating around my body, and the hairpins, which had held the veil in place, pricked at my scalp. (Selvadurai 13)

This act of Kanthi Aunty jolts Arjie out of his comfort zone and exposes his “difference” in front of all the members of the family. It exposed him to some subtle, yet powerful changes in his life. He is now made to believe that he is a misfit, rather a criminal, who needs to be chastised through public ridicule and strict disciplinary action. From then on, his father became more anxious to send him to an all-boys school where “a man could be made of him”. He was not allowed to play with the girls and was instead shoved to the front garden where his boy cousins played cricket. It was essentially a hyper-masculine activity where Arjie finds himself to be a fish out of water. Moreover, he came to be deprived of the pleasure of watching his mother put on her sari. He realised that something was permanently changed between him and his family, especially his mother. In her study of *Funny Boy*, Gayatri Gopinath writes that the pleasure Arjie takes in the activity of dressing in a sari with accessories “causes intense embarrassment and consternation on the part of adults, who decree that henceforth Arjie is to play with the boys” (467). She continues, “Arjie’s eventual traumatic banishment from the world of the girls and his forced entry into proper identification are figured in terms of geography and spacialization, of leaving one carefully inscribed space of gender play and entering one of gender conformity...” (467). Extending Gopinath’s argument, the following section will highlight spaces (both imaginative and physical) that allow Arjie to fully express himself without the fear of public ridicule.

There occurs a constant navigation of spaces both within and outside his home where Arjie tries to defy heteronormativity and live his identity. In the authoritative space of his parents’ bedroom Arjie could kindle an imaginative space which is congenial to his identity by watching his mother dress up. Such an imagination is intensified when he enters the permissive space of Radha Aunty’s room, especially the corner which had the dressing table:

I gaze at the various shades of lipstick and nail polish. A glass jar contained a selection of shiny stars and circles. I leaned over to examine them more closely. “They are *pottu*”, Radha Aunty said. She picked one up and stuck it in the middle of her forehead to demonstrate what it looked like. I gazed at her forehead, enchanted by the *pottu*, so different from the coloured pencils Amma used. I

turned and looked covetously at the jar. “You want to try it?” Radha Aunty asked, sounding both surprised and amused.

I nodded shyly.

She picked up a star, smeared a little Vaseline on it, and then stuck it on my forehead. I gazed at my reflection. Radha Aunty sat on the dressing-table stool and looked at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Then she picked up a tube of lipstick. “Open your mouth”, she said.

Through the corner of my eye, I watched Radha Aunty work. She painted my eyelids with blue shadow, put rouge on my cheeks, and even darkened a birthmark above my lip. When she was done, I grinned at my reflection in the mirror. (Selvadurai 49-50)

As evident in the above passage, Radha Aunty’s bedroom gives Arjie an opportunity to revel in the glory of a beautifully decorated self and creates an initial site of liberatory possibility for him. It is a safe space where Arjie can perform his preferred self, after his banishment from first, the territory of girls and then from his parents’ bedroom, following the incident when Kanthi Aunty exposed him. Thus, by allowing Arjie a space for free gender play, rather than forcing him into heteronormative conformity, the corner of Radha Aunty’s bedroom with the dressing table becomes an alternative space of possible resistance as well as subversion.

Outside the house, there are places which facilitate free gender play for Arjie. The rehearsals for the play *The King and I* were held on weekends at St. Theresa’s Girls’ Convent. This was the school to which Arjie’s sister Sonali went. Since this was an all-girls school, boys were not allowed to enter it when classes were on. Arjie’s entry to such a prohibited space symbolically marks his transgression. There is, however, a slight difference in this transgression and the transgression to girl spaces like the backyard and dressing room. The former transgression was sanctioned by parental authority, but the latter was not.

Again, Arjie was allotted the role of one of the children of the King of Siam. When the rehearsals were going on in full swing, Aunty Doris exclaimed that Arjie should have been a lovely girl with his beautiful pair of eyelashes. Aunty Doris’ remark struck a chord in Arjie’s mind. He realised that the dramatic space of the play was a

potential site that could provide him with the subversive possibility of being a girl. Just like the private space of Radha Aunty's dressing table, the dramatic space of the stage became a site of possible resistance as well as subversion for Arjie.

One day, after the rehearsal ended, Arjie saw a group of actors discussing a song in the play which said that a man was like a bee and a woman like a blossom. The discussion was started by a man named Anil Jayasinghe, who agreed with the sentiment of the song. When Radha Aunty joined the group, she became the leader of the girls' side and Anil became the leader of the boys. Arjie was intrigued by the nature of the discussion. The sexual innuendos used by the groups initiated Arjie into a different kind of knowledge:

They began to argue, each side yelling with joy when they scored a point. Radha Aunty was soon the leader of the girls and she and Anil exchanged comments back and forth until Radha Aunty said, "I would rather wither and drop off my stem than be pollinated by a bee like you."

At this retort even the boys cheered, and Anil bowed slightly to concede to her the victory.

As we walked towards the hall a little later, one of the girls gestured towards Anil and said to Radha Aunty, "I think that bee is dying to pollinate your blossom".

The other girls who heard this comment screamed with laughter. Radha Aunty was not amused. "You're mad", she said. "Utterly mad".

Although I didn't understand the joke, I knew that it was something bad, because Radha Aunty looked very annoyed (Selvadurai 55-56).

The exchange at the rehearsal kindled the imagination of Arjie and held up to him a forbidden world of sexual fantasy and license. In the liminal space of the theatre and the permissive nature of the conversation, Arjie is exposed to a very different kind of knowledge about sex and sexuality. To quote from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, "The play is the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (Act II, Scene II). Although spaces like the theatre allow for an artificial enactment of human emotions and subjectivity, in the case of Arjie and even Radha Aunty, these make way for the performance of their "real" gender identities. Here, they do not have to suppress their selves and instead enjoy the performance of their non-normative gender identities.

Arjie's new-found exposure at the performative space of the theatre emboldened him to steal spaces from distinctively strict and punitive places like the school building. Within the authoritative gaze of Queen Victoria Academy, Arjie located the liminal zone of the staircase where he expressed his love for his boyfriend Shehan for the first time. Later on, such zones materialised in places like the garage and also in his dreams. The space of the garage provided him with another haven where he could resist heteronormative hegemony. Inside the compound of his home, this space took on a character of its own, as if unaffected by the strict disciplining of compulsory heteronormativity. It once again enabled him to escape compulsory heterosexuality, in the same way as Radha Aunty's room and dressing table fulfilled his desire for transvestism.

Just like the performative space of the theatre and liminal spaces of the staircase and garage, the imaginative space of Arjie's dreams fulfilled his desires. The dream of the Otter's Club swimming pool, which is quoted below, is an instance where his sexual drives are gratified through a visual fantasy. Even if only in the realm of imagination, the dream space fulfils his sexual needs without the fear of societal censure:

That night I dreamed of Shehan. We were in the Otter's Club pool, swimming and joking around. He was in a very mischievous mood, and every time I spoke to him, he answered in Tamil, knowing that I didn't understand. He swam away from me and I chased after him until finally I caught him in the deep end. I wound my legs around his so that he couldn't escape. He splashed water in my face and tickled me, but I would not let him go. I was very aware of the feel of his legs against mine and of the occasional moments when, in trying to prevent him from getting away, my chest would rub against his.

The next morning, I noticed the familiar wetness on my sarong. (Selvadurai 242-43)

The dream space provided him with an avenue of sexual liberation through the fulfilment of his desires. Here, even in the public place of the swimming pool, Arjie could live his private life with Shehan. No parental authority or strict disciplining of the school could restrict him here and he could employ his imagination to successfully subvert the oppressive forces of reality. Thus, the visual fantasy provided a safe space for

Arjie where he could live his identity without the rigidity enforced by strict heteronormativity.

The discussion on Arjie's performance of his adolescent sexuality can be extended to two women of his family. They are- Radha Aunty and Amma. Never having seen her grown-up self, Arjie imagined Radha Aunty to resemble the Sinhala actress Malini Fonseka. With big rounded hips, the Radha Aunty of his imagination had a fair complexion and large kohl-rimmed eyes. Her hair was straight and made into an elaborate coiffure on top of her head, and she wore a Manipuri sari with a gold border. But on meeting her after her return from America, Arjie found in her a stark contrast with the woman of his imagination. She was "flat like a boy", "as dark as a labourer" and "her long hair was frizzy" (Selvadurai 46). "Instead of a sari, she wore a halter-top and strange trousers that were tight to the knee and then became wider. Further, the heels on her shoes were odd because they ran the length of each shoe" (Selvadurai 46).

The quoted passage registers Arjie's first encounter with his aunt's resistance to heteronormativity that corporeally manifests on her body through her dark skin, unkempt hair, flat chest, and American apparel. She fails at playing the piano well as is expected of women of marriageable age. Her transgression of conventional gender roles and clothing are two aspects of her character that endear her to Arjie and forge a close affiliation between the two. She understands and consequently, empathises with his struggle as a non-conformist. By facilitating Arjie's escape into the fantasy world of painted lips, shadowed eyelids and rouged cheeks, she became the bridge for his journey of self-realisation and fulfilment.

Like Arjie, Radha Aunty encounters violent spaces and suffers for her visible differences when her return train to Colombo is attacked by an angry Sinhalese mob at the Anuradhapura train station after a market in Jaffna is torched. Arjie narrates,

Mr Rasiah was in the middle of describing what had happened at the Anuradhapura station. I... stood listening to him tell how Radha Aunty had been assaulted by two men, one carrying a stick and the other a belt, and how he had managed to save her because he spoke good Sinhalese and the men had believed that he was Sinhalese.

...

The scene he had described, the bottles being flung, the beatings, seemed unreal. And yet they were real, as I could see before my very eyes. (Selvadurai 90-91)

This incident highlights the dynamics of space in relation to racial history and politics. The train station becomes a heterotopia of conflicting claims which bears different levels of signification for the opposing parties. Being a Tamil, Radha Aunty faces violence inflicted on her by the Sinhala men. She faces yet another form of violence because of her supposedly different gendered self. This exposes her to the risk of “double displacement” according to the theorisation of Gayatri C. Spivak (Spivak 1988). Although Spivak used this term to refer to the marginalised position of women in third-world countries, it can be applied to the status of Radha Aunty who is a foreign-educated “karapi” Tamil in a Sinhala-majority train station. As a result of this attack, Radha Aunty’s family imposes a harsh sentence. She is promptly engaged to an influential Tamil named Rajan Nagendra, as a means of deftly cutting off the clandestine love affair developing between her and Anil Jayasinghe, the Sinhalese admirer for whom Radha Aunty reciprocates romantic feelings.

The search for a space where Radha Aunty can escape Tamil orthodoxy leads her to St. Theresa’s Girls’ Convent where she regularly meets Anil Jayasinghe over theatre rehearsal. Here, they bond over permissive conversations and performative proximity without being concerned about the sharp, controlling gaze of their antagonistic families. Thus, the performative space of the theatre serves as a subversive possibility for both Radha Aunty and Arjie. Here, Arjie can be away from the rigid heteronormative space which his family imposes on him and Radha Aunty can carry on her clandestine affair with Anil, defying Tamil orthodoxy.

If Radha Aunty facilitated Arjie’s journey of performative fulfilment, Amma, in a very discreet way, fulfilled her sexual desire using Arjie’s convalescence as a pretext. Amma renews a love interest with Daryl Uncle, a Sri Lankan descendant of the burghers, when she spends days in a bungalow in the hill country with Arjie convalescing while her husband was away on a business tour to Europe. The bungalow becomes a liminal zone where she could have the autonomy to give free rein to her transgressive desires. It was on top of a hill with a back verandah and a terraced garden. Bordering on a tea estate, the garden had symmetric arrangements of different flowers. Apart from the cook

who left by early afternoon, the only person who was there with Arjie and Amma was Daryl Uncle. Arjie describes:

Daryl Uncle was with us all the time. At night, when I went to bed, I could hear the murmur of their voices on the front verandah. Yet when I woke up in the morning Daryl Uncle was never there. He would always come up to the house after breakfast. He made me laugh a lot and usually included me in his conversations with Amma. Also, Amma was happier than I ever remembered her being and this made her even more kind and loving towards me. (Selvadurai 117)

Although the story does not reveal much about the previous association of Amma with Daryl Uncle, it provides sufficient hints of their old, yet unfulfilled, love for each other. It is projected as forbidden, an event that can take place only in the distant and consequently unmonitored space of the bungalow. Moments after Daryl Uncle left for Jaffna, Arjie confides, “I understood what he was doing here and why Amma had taken me away to convalesce. I felt a cold chill of fear as I realized that I was an unwitting accomplice in this scheme for Daryl Uncle and her to spend time together, away from the family” (Selvadurai 118).

Therefore, the bungalow at the hill country proves to be a significant marker in our study of gendered performances with regard to the dynamics associated with spaces. Its location allows the inhabitants to remain outside the trappings of social norms and expectations. It reveals a completely different facet of Amma, hitherto unknown in the novel and establishes her as a non-conformist like Arjie and Radha Aunty. It awakened what lay latent in her for years amidst the authoritarian space of the family and the institution of marriage. In other words, she becomes a “funny girl” who is ready to flout all norms of normative family life. However, there is a difference in the non-conformism of the three characters. Arjie does not conform to the established norms of heteronormativity, while Radha Aunty disregards the feminine codes of conduct. For Amma, the non-conformism is far more subtle and inconspicuous. Although not free from the patriarchal control of the home and family, she rejects the sexual morality of monogamy and instead indulges in an adulterous relationship with Daryl Uncle in the outer space of the bungalow at the hill country.

In the preceding discussion, we understand how the three major characters- Arjie, Radha Aunty and Amma- enact their selves amidst societal power dynamics in an

attempt to either liberate themselves from oppressive structures of societal hegemony or fulfil hidden desires. In doing so, they often appear “deviant” to the normative structure of society. But, this so-called “deviance” proves liberating for the expression as well as development of the true nature of their gendered selves. The following section will highlight the role played by language in the enactment of gender identities and explore the avenues whereby it functions as an important tool of subversion for the central character. More specifically, it will analyse how Arjie uses the same language that is used to abuse him to avenge the wrongs done to him.

From early on in the story, Arjie is verbally abused by different members of his extended family. But, instead of deterring his transgressive desires, their comments make him increasingly aware of the true nature of his gendered self. When he is exposed by Kanthi Aunty, Cyril Uncle mocks him as:

‘Ey, Chelva’, Cyril Uncle cried out jovially to my father, ‘looks like you have a funny one here.’

My father pretended he had not heard and, with an inclination of his head, indicated Amma to get rid of me. (Selvadurai 14)

On their way back home from his grand-parents’ house on that fateful day, Arjie hears his father warning his mother: “If he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing stock of Colombo, it’ll be your fault...You always spoil him and encourage all his nonsense” (Selvadurai 14). Later, in the playground, Sanjay nicknames him as “girlie-boy” and exposes him to the ridicule of other boys like Diggy, Muruges, etc. Though Arjie could not recognise it immediately, the continual repetitions of nicknames like “funny boy” and “girlie-boy” produced an awareness in him. He now recognises his self, more than ever. It is further strengthened by Radha Aunty’s exclamation- “Gosh! You would have made a beautiful girl”- after having made up his face and Aunty Doris’ exclamation after observing his beautiful girl-like facial features as highlighted in the previous section.

A week after the incident at the Grandparents’ place, Arjie positioned himself outside the bedroom door to get a glimpse of his mother getting a sari from Anula and wearing it with utmost care and poise. Unlike other days, even after putting on her blouse and underskirt, Amma never opened the door for Arjie to enter. He knocked on the door



twice and called out to her. He was shocked to get the gruff reply from her- “Go away. Can’t you see I am busy?” (Selvadurai 16). This short reply was enough to stir Arjie out of his comfort zone and induce a sense of guilt in him:

I crept away quietly to my bedroom, sat down on the edge of my bed, and stared at my feet for a long time. It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn’t comprehend. I thought of what my father had said about turning out “funny”. The word “funny” as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, “that’s funny”. Neither of this had fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone. (Selvadurai 17)

Amma’s subsequent evasions of Arjie’s questions regarding forced gender performances and heteronormativity shook Arjie. He knew that something between him and his mother had changed terribly. There seemed very little hope of repairing that broken bond.

The repressive power that can be wielded by language is felt once again by Arjie when his father takes the sudden decision of transferring him from St. Gabriel School to Victoria Academy. When Arjie wanted to know the reason for his father’s decision, he responded evasively that Victoria Academy was “better” than St. Gabriel. His father “picked up his fork to indicate that the subject as closed. ‘The Academy will force you to become a man.’” (Selvadurai 209-210). The concluding line of this conversation is very significant from the perspective of adolescent sexuality and gender performance. In the mind of the father, Arjie is a deviant who needs to be disciplined for his perverted sexual orientation. He needs to be forced into “being a man” from the dangerous state of “being a funny boy”. The existing structures at school and home were not adequate. It could only be performed by the pervasive surveillance and strict discipline of Victoria Academy.

The choice of words used in the description of Victoria Academy is striking. In a very Foucauldian sense, the Academy aims at producing “docile” bodies “that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault 136). This is violently enforced through a panoptic gaze of constant surveillance and severe physical punishments that range from hard slaps to canings. Notably, a boy is marked “an ill and burdens student” when transgressions of masculinity appear in the form of long hair, winking, and licking the lips. When Arjie befriends Soyza (Shehan), who is himself considered one among the

“ills and burdens”, he invites the ire of the school authority. The harsh authoritative control at home is again echoed by Principal Abeysinghe (whom the boys nickname “Black Tie”) at school and can be read as a form of performative gender violence imposed on Arjie. This time, however, the violence is a terrible combination of corporeal punishment and verbal abuse.

As opposed to the violence inflicted on Arjie by the principal, the text depicts moments when he appropriates the power of language to subvert authority. For instance, in the chapter titled “The Best School of All”, Arjie is entrusted with the responsibility of reciting a poem titled “The Best School of All” by Sir Henry Newbolt. His teacher Mr Sunderalingam had already explained the importance this poem carried for Black Tie and his welcome speech prepared in honour of the ministers. It is here that Arjie takes revenge upon Black Tie by deliberately garbling the lines of this poem with another one titled “Vitae Lampada”. This act on the part of Arjie can be read as a subversive use of language through which he is able to avenge the wrongs done by Black Tie to his lover, Shehan. When Shehan asked him the reason behind his deliberate garbling, Arjie replied emphatically, “I did it for you... I couldn’t bear to see you suffer any more” (Selvadurai 283-284)

Although the mangling of lines invited public humiliation for him, Arjie could achieve what he initially desired. He wanted to avenge the wrongs done to him and Shehan and what better way than to expose the faults of the same institution of which he was entrusted the task of singing its glory. Black Tie made the following observation on stage:

Ladies and gentlemen, this young man who has just spoken to you was given the honour of reciting the words of a great poet. But he has taken it upon himself to defile a thing of beauty, wreak havoc on fine sentiments...He is a perfect example of what this school is producing...The kind of scoundrel who will bring nothing but shame to his family and be a burden to society. (Selvadurai 281)

Black Tie uses defamatory terms like “scoundrel”, “a shame to family” and “a burden to society” while referring to Arjie on stage. Aimed at humiliating Arjie, these words highlight the utter failure of social institutions like family and school in nurturing non-conformists like him. They also reveal the violence imposed upon non-conformists while subjecting them to repressive control, strict disciplining and moral censorship.

However, on a deeper level of thought, the whole act of deliberately garbling the lines of the poem during the grand event is a powerful statement in itself. Through this act, Arjie undercuts the overarching hegemony of the school in disciplining him. Although under the constant panoptic gaze of Black Tie, his revenge becomes yet more powerful because he was the chosen one to recite the poem in such an auspicious event. By enacting the revenge under the rapt attention and comprehensive gaze of the audience, he reverses the disciplinary (read punitive) gaze of Black Tie and exposes him, instead, to public ridicule. This ensures that, though not privy to Arjie's plan, the audience with their laughter become Arjie's allies in subverting the hegemony of social institutions like the school. Thus, through Arjie's example, the text highlights the subversive role that language plays in resisting societal control and hegemony, thereby providing avenues of liberation to affected individuals.

Thus, Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* is a captivating document of adolescent Arjie's sexual awakening negotiating oppressive societal structures. We find him in constant search of physical spaces like the backyard and Radha Aunty's bedroom, performative space of the theatre, liminal spaces like the staircase and garage and imaginative space of dreams that are liberating for him and the expression of his sexuality. However, in doing so, Arjie confronts attempts of heteronormative disciplining by his family and school. This incites him to rebellious acts like that of his deliberate garbling of the poem chosen for recitation by Black Tie which, in turn, demonstrates the subversive power of language. Corresponding to Arjie's gender performance, the preceding discussion also sheds light on Radha Aunty and Amma who became "funny girls" in their search for companionship and fulfilment. While Radha Aunty explicitly disregards the feminine codes of conduct, Amma subtly and inconspicuously rejects the sexual morality of monogamy to find a purpose in life and love.

### **2.3 A Space of Their Own**

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* is a complex work of historical fiction. The first book of the *Ibis Trilogy*, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) interweaves the stories of several characters, who, in the latter half of the novel, find themselves taking a passage from Calcutta to Mauritius on a ship named *Ibis*. Their destinies are shaped and re-shaped in the other two books of the trilogy. *River of Smoke* (2011) charts the series of events revolving around the opium trade in China. *Flood of Fire* (2015) is the concluding

instalment of the trilogy. It winds up the loose threads of the two preceding books and concludes the trilogy at the same point where it began- Deeti's Memory Shrine. This section analyses a few major characters of the trilogy in an attempt to understand how they perform their gendered selves while navigating oppressive spaces and language.

An untouchable ox-man from Deeti's neighbouring village of Chamar-basti, Kalua is a striking character that we first meet in the *Sea of Poppies*. His physique is described in the book as:

Kalua was a man of unusual height and powerful build: in any fair, festival or mela, he could always be spotted towering above the crowd- even the jugglers on stilts were usually not so tall as he. But it was his colour rather than his size that had earned him the nickname Kalua- 'Blackie'- for his skin had the shining, polished tint of an oiled whetstone. It was said of Kalua that as a child he had shown an insatiable craving for meat, which his family had satisfied by feeding him carrion; being leather-makers, it was their trade to collect the remains of dead cows and oxen- it was on the meat of these salvaged carcasses that Kalua's gigantic frame was said to have been nourished. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 53-54)

However, the gigantic frame of Kalua's body was not an indicator of his mental prowess. Being duped of his parental property at their death, he was evicted from the family dwelling by his brothers and other relatives and was sent to fend for himself in a cattle pen. Finding an occupation as a wrestler for the land-owning Thakur-sahibs of Ghazipur, he managed to get an ox-cart from them. This came at the cost of his becoming an object on which the sahibs could gamble their money. But Kalua's fortune changed for the worse when he suffered his first defeat at the hands of the champion wrestler of the court of the Maharaja of Benaras. Stories began to circulate regarding the cause of Kalua's defeat. "It was said that on taking Kalua to Benaras, the three young landlords, being seized by the licentious atmosphere of the city, had decided that it would be excellent sport to couple Kalua with a woman" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 55). For that purpose, a well-known *baiji* named Hirabai was brought to the *kotha* where the landlords were staying and Kalua was introduced to her. Although nobody knew what Hirabai had expected, "but when she saw Kalua, she was rumoured to have screamed: This animal should be mated with a horse, not a woman" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 55)

Kalua being forced to have sexual intercourse with Hirabai in the presence of the landlords and their friends is an act which violates his privacy. Here, his bare body is made an object of display as well as ridicule. When Hirabai refused to have any sexual contact with him and instead suggested that he should be mated with a horse, she refused him his humanity and imagined a beast-like existence for him. The rumour went that this verbal humiliation by Hirabai cost Kalua the fight at Ramgarh Palace. On returning to Ghazipur, he was again violated by the three landlords when they actually acted upon Hirabai's words and forced him upon a horse. The violation of Kalua established an initial image of the hyper-masculine brute who was at the mercy of his providers. At this point in the trilogy, we get only a partial glimpse of Kalua's personality which is of the poor, oppressed Dalit and a victim of bodily violation.

But, it is only in the second book of the trilogy, *River of Smoke*, that Kalua is first projected in a larger-than-life figure by Ghosh. In Deeti's Memory Shrine in Mauritius, she takes pride in recounting the story of their great escape from *Ibis*, showing her children and grand-children the charcoal pictures on the wall of the cave:

It was that first, larger-than-life image that was always the starting point for viewings of the shrine: here, as in life, Kalua, was taller and larger than anyone else, as black as Krishna himself. Rendered in profile, he bestrode the wall like some all-conquering Pharaoh, with a langot knotted around his waist. Under his feet, engraved by some other hand, was the name 'Maddow Colver' - enclosed in an ornamental cartouche. (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 13)

Such a transformation in the description from an out-caste of Chamar Basti to the Pharaoh in Deeti's Memory Shrine marks a change in his identity. An anglicisation of his name gives him a heroic identity which is very different from his initial portrayal in *Sea of Poppies*. Along with a change in name, he seems to have got a swap of life in alien spaces. He is now no longer the brute of Nayanpur but a strong gun-lascar under Kesri Singh fighting for the British against the Chinese in the First Opium War in *Flood of Fire*. His physical prowess is repeatedly highlighted when he is shown carrying a pair of hundred-pound wheels on his shoulders as if they were toys. This makes him a very valuable member of Captain Mee's army.

Again, in various sections of the trilogy, Kalua is compared to the mythological Lord Krishna. The most apparent comparison is because of his dark complexion.

However, there is more to it than meets the eye. Kalua's enigmatic transformation first to Maddow Colver and then to the Pharaoh in the Fami Colvers through part ingenuity and part fortune, to become the most important deity of worship for the succeeding generations, renders a God-like, rather a Krishna-like, status to him.

A different side of Kalua's masculinity is portrayed when he becomes the shadow of Raju (Raj Rattan) after the death of Dicky. Dicky's death exposed him to the louts and bullies of the other fifiers. Right from carrying the extra loads given to Dicky, Kalua helps him in escaping with Serang Ali to find his father, the former Raja of the Zamindari of Raskhali, Raja Neel Rattan. *Flood of Fire* highlights such a soft and parental side of Kalua. He understands the plight of an apparently fatherless boy like Raju and therefore, in an act of sub-conscious compensation, tries to shower fatherly love on him, which he, himself has never received in his life in India.

The familial aspect of Kalua's masculinity is further developed when he nurses Kesri Singh, day and night, after he incurred serious injuries in the battle at Canton. For several days Kalua did everything from changing his clothes to cleaning his bedpan and giving him medicines. When, in a moment of consciousness, Kesri asked him the reason for his caregiving, Kalua replied that he did it for Deeti's sake. This exchange depicts him as an honourable family man who can go to any height for the honour and integrity of his family, even when it entailed the risks of catching any contagious disease or exposing his identity to Kesri Singh.

The above discussion projects two different representations of masculinity for Kalua. On the one hand, we meet the ox-man of Chamar-basti who epitomised brute strength and was a victim of socio-economic oppression. On the other, there is the fatherly figure for Raju and care-giver for Kesri Singh in Captain Mee's army. By juxtaposing the two facets of masculinity in the same character, Ghosh highlights the fluid nature of masculinities.

In depicting Kalua as the marginalised brute from Chamar-basti, Ghosh's trilogy might initially seem to reiterate the conventional imagination of Dalits in colonial discourse and upper-castes fictional as well as non-fictional narratives. Historian Charu Gupta critiques the representation of the Chamar male in *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (2016):

Since Dalit men did hard manual labour, justifying the harsh conditions forced upon them required objectifying their bodies as resilient and dim-witted, thus reinforcing their status within domestic subservience. The Chamar male, for example, was often seen as docile, both in colonial and upper caste literature, ready to do hard work. The Dalit male body was infantilized, tamed, and trained for practical use. Dalits were considered a form of agricultural machinery, valued primarily for their hard work, endurance, and productive capability. (Gupta 114)

Gupta's words highlight the ways and means exercised by the upper castes to maintain the legacy of authoritarian control over the bodies of the lower castes. However, the power-relation between the oppressor and the oppressed is not unidirectional. While the Dalit body is controlled by the upper caste, the upper caste body is also influenced by the Dalit body. Joshua Samuel writes in *Untouchable Bodies, Resistance, and Liberation: A Comparative Theology of Divine Possessions* (2020), "caste subjects and outcaste subjects create and sustain each other, all the while maintaining the hierarchy between them" (58). Samuel's idea of "creating" and "sustaining" the two positions of the oppressor and oppressed is echoed by Mahamadul Hassan Dhabak (2021) when he writes, "the untouchable bodies or 'the outcaste bodies' formulate and validate the upper caste bodies or the caste bodies which makes a body touchable" (116). Through the figures of Kalua and the zamindars, Ghosh's trilogy reveals such a complex and multidirectional relation between the oppressor and the oppressed. Following Charu Gupta, Samuel and Dhabak's analyses of Dalit representation, it may be argued that although the trilogy initially portrays Kalua as the "resilient", "tamed and trained" conventional Dalit within a rigid structure of "domestic subservience", later on, he is given an agency so that he is able to transcend the hierarchies of caste as well as class. While Kalua was forced to take part in wrestling competitions where the zamindars gambled their money, their caste as well as class pride was actually contingent upon his bodily performance. Whenever he won any wrestling competition, his masters exhibited his huge body as a trophy. That is, the strength of the carrion-fed "gigantic frame" of marginalised Kalua predicated the upper-caste, upper-class Zamindars' performance of masculinity. But, in the third book of the trilogy, Kalua achieves distinction by becoming Maddow Colver, the most valuable member of Captain Mee's army. As the trilogy concludes, he transforms into the prime deity in Deeti's Memory Shrine. In his transformation, Ghosh creates a well-rounded character which gains agency and finds a solid purpose in life towards the end of the story. Thus, in the

complex characterisation of Kalua, the narrative adopts a multidirectional stance in the representation of caste hierarchies and provides agency to the marginalised brute, not to be appropriated for someone else's display of power, but for his own sake.

Following the analysis of the layered representation of masculinity in Kalua's character, this section will engage with the celebration of gender fluidity through the character of the Vaishnavite priest Baboo Nob Kissin. Baboo works as a "gomusta" or overseer for Mr Burnham and his physical appearance is described in a gender-fluid manner with elements of transvestism:

...it was impossible to tell whether the visitor was male or female, man or woman, so strange was the appearance of the apparition: the body, imposing in its girth, was clothed from neck to toe in a voluminous saffron robe; this was topped by an enormous head, undergirded by heavy jowls and set off by a billowing halo of hair. Complementing this extraordinary ensemble of features were two huge eyes, now so filled with alarm that they appeared to be on the brink of shooting out of their sockets, like projectiles. (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* 508)

Baboo Nob Kissin is a devout worshipper of the godmother-figure, Taramony, who was actually his childless aunt. The profound devotion to Taramony led him to inculcate a sense of concern and parental love for Neel on his penal transportation to Mauritius. Moreover, harbouring a soft-corner for Zachary Reid, the gomusta began to imagine him to be an avatar of Lord Krishna, who will guide his gradual transformation from a man to a woman in the image of his revered Taramony.

It is striking to note that Baboo's devotion for Taramony originally sprang from an unfulfilled sexual desire for her. This is evident when he escorts the newly widowed Taramony with her small retinue of servants to an ashram in Brindavan. Though Taramony never permitted him "to touch her in an unchaste way- yet he would find himself trembling in her presence; at times his body would go into a seizure, leaving him drenched in shame" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 161). However, the Gomusta's love for Taramony has no hope of sexual fulfilment as he was "trained to turn his mind from sensual thoughts" (161) and retain his semen so that no image of a woman could succeed in "penetrating his mental defences" (161). Through a platonic display of love, he agrees to remain a celibate in order to be close to her. He confesses: "*You* will be my Krishna and I will be your Radha" (162). On Taramony's question regarding his duties to his



family and the temple, the Gomusta said, “I care nothing for such things... You will be my temple and I will be your priest, your worshipper, your devotee” (162). Thus, while relinquishing his duties towards his own family, the Gomusta concentrates solely on the duties towards Taramony. In the process, he performs a shift in gender identity and adopts the persona of Radha to remain as a forever consort of his Krishna- Taramony.

The Gomusta believes that there is a woman trapped inside his corporeal self who will eventually find her way out. She was “in another birth... a gopi, a girl who played with cows and made butter for the butter-thieving lord” (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 396). He often dresses in the attire of a woman just like the male devotees of Lord Krishna in Mathura and Vrindavan who dress like women to pose as his consort, Radha.

As he was closing the almirah, Baboo Nob Kissin’s eyes fell on a saffron-coloured alkhalla- one of the long, loose gowns that Taramony had liked to wear. On an impulse, he slipped it on, over his dhoti and kurta, and went over to a looking-glass. He was amazed by how well the robe fitted him. Reaching up to his head he undid the bindings of his tikki, shaking out his hair so that it fell to his shoulders. From now on, he decided, he would never again tie it or cut it; he would leave it open, to grow, so that it hung down to his waist, like Taramony’s long, black locks. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 167)

Like Arjie in *Funny Boy*, the Gomusta believes that he is elevated into a purer and more sacred self when he wears attires conventionally associated with women. This self is constructed in the image of Taramony, the woman for whom his desire transformed from initial sexual attraction to Platonic love and then, finally, to God-like devotion. However, the Gomusta’s transformation reveals a nuanced understanding of gender for us. The novel suggests that when he and Taramony were living in the heterosexual space of the nephew and the aunt, he could never attain her either physically or spiritually. It is only when he elevated her to the status of a goddess and adopted the persona of a woman in her image, he could be close to her at least spiritually. That means, the sacred space in the cult of Taramony allowed him the liberty to perform his transvestite self and attain his desire of staying in close proximity to her which was not possible in the confines of the aunt-nephew relationship. Thus, by making way for same- sex love/devotion through Gomusta’s new-found persona of a woman in the image of Taramony, Ghosh’s novel transcends established structures of heteronormativity.

In all his performances ranging from his devotion to Taramony to his curious attire to his parental concerns for Neel and Zachary in the beginning and Raj Rattan towards the end, we find Baboo Nob Kissin moving towards a gradual shift in his gender. He cannot be polarised into one gender-identity, rather it is in him that we find the best example of gender-fluidity in the *Ibis Trilogy*. However, there is a minor character named Mamdoo Tindal who, in water, playfully echoes Baboo's transformation on land. We meet him in the first book of the trilogy where in a joyous mood he brings out his alter-ego Ghaseeti Begum for an entertaining performance in front of the lascars of the Ibis.

Mamdoo Tindal was tall and lissom and when the mood was on him, he would doff his lungi and banyan and change into a sari, choli and dupatta; with kohl in his eyes and brass rings dangling from his ears, he would assume his other identity, which was that of a silver-heeled dancer who went by the name of Ghaseeti Begum. This character had a complicated life of her own, strewn with heart-breaking flirtations, sparkling exchanges of wit and many besetting sorrows- but it was for her dancing that Ghaseeti Begum was best known, and her performances in the fana were such that few among the crew ever felt the need to visit a shoreside nautchery: why pay on land for what was free on board? (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 189)

The name of Mamdoo Tindal's alter-ego, Ghaseeti Begum- rings a very important personage from Indian history. Ghaseeti Begum or Mehar un-Nisa Begum was the eldest daughter of Alivardi Khan, Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during 1740–1758. She conspired against Siraj ud Daulah with the help of Mir Jafar, but was later imprisoned by the latter after the fall of the former in the Battle of Plassey (Pranto). This similar naming is not a coincidence for Ghosh. It serves the purpose of a deliberate comparison between the scheming Mehar un-Nisa and the skillfull Mamdoo Tindal, both of whose lives were besotted with sorrows and heartbreaks. However, Ghosh does not further develop the character of Ghaseeti Begum (Mamdoo Tindal) in the trilogy. But with the least detail provided for him, we can place him alongside the character of Baboo Nob Kissin as both of them project a kind of sexual orientation much different from the celebrated hyper-masculinity encouraged by conventional patriarchal structures. The next part of the discussion would focus on another major character of the trilogy- Zachary. It would analyse the performance of his gender and sexuality through a

conscious process of self-fashioning with the aid of Serang Ali and Mrs. Burnham. His transformation from the intersectional perspective of race and class is studied in a subsequent chapter of this thesis.

An American sailor born to a quadroon mother and a white father, Zachary escapes racism by joining the *Ibis* on its first voyage from Baltimore to Calcutta. A series of misfortunes soon befall the ship, leading to the loss of more senior crew. With the support of the head of the lascars, Serang Ali, Zachary becomes the second in command of the ship. When the first mate also disappeared at the prospect of carrying a motley crew of lascars headed by the formidable-looking Serang Ali, Zachary was entrusted with the responsibility of standing in for the first mate. “Thus, it happened that in the course of a single voyage, by virtue of desertions and dead-tickets, he vaulted from the merest novice sailor to senior seaman, from carpenter to second-in-command, with a cabin of his own” (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 14)

Once under sail, it was Zachary’s turn to learn and adopt a new kind of white gentility hitherto inaccessible for him and his black roots. Apart from learning the new language of the ship, he had to learn the manners and etiquette of the white masters. He also had to change his attire from a loose-fitting coarse tunic paired with canvas trousers to a white captain’s dress. In every step, Serang Ali constantly aided and supervised his transformation:

In a couple of hours Zachary was looking at an almost unrecognizable image of himself in the mirror, clothed in a white linen shirt, riding breeches and a double-breasted summer aletot, with a white cravat knotted neatly around his neck. On his hair, trimmed, brushed and tied with a blue ribbon at the nape of his neck, sat a glossy black hat.

...

He stood in front of the mirror, watch in hand, hat on head, and burst into laughter. ‘Hey! They’ll make me Mayor, for sure’. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 19-20)

Echoing Kesi Augustine, we can say that Zachary’s education in white gentility is a precaution against the dangers of mis-articulation (Zachary must use the right vocabulary) and of mistranslation (Zachary must not be taken for “a clodpoll of a

griffin”). He realises the social impact of his physical transformation. He was to become what no other lascar could be—a “Free Mariner”, the kind of officer they would call a “malum” (Augustine 50). “For Serang Ali and his men Zachary was almost one of themselves, while yet being endowed with the power to undertake an impersonation that was unthinkable for any of them; it was as much for their own sakes as for his that they wanted to see him succeed” (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 50).

In Calcutta, Zachary is mistaken for a gentleman due to his colour and enjoys the privileges of a high-profile society. He becomes second mate for the *Ibis*'s next voyage, carrying indentured labour to the island of Mauritius. But throughout his stay in Calcutta and even afterwards, Zachary is constantly troubled with the camouflaging of his identity. Or else, he would not be able to enjoy the privileges of the powerful class embodied by people like Mr. Burnham. It is his colour that brings him the favour of esteemed citizens like Mr. Chillingworth, Mr. Doughty and Mr. Benjamin Burnham. Based on their verdicts, Justice Kendalbushe clears all the accusations against him regarding the escape of five people including two convicts from the *Ibis* and saves him from further penal procedure and public humiliation.

We witness a very different aspect of Zachary when he secures a job of a carpenter with Mr. Benjamin Burnham. Lodged in the budgerow which he is entrusted to repair, we now get to see a sexually hyper-active “mystery” who indulges in sexual adventures with Paulette in imagination and Mrs. Burnham in reality.

Afterwards he went up to the deck above and summoned Paulette to sit beside him, under the stars. Her presence was so palpable that it made him long for the pleasures of his bed; he went hurrying back to his stateroom and tore off his clothes. Wasting no time, he parted the mosquito net and slipped between the sheets, pausing only to snatch up one of the stained and crusted doo-rags that lay strewn around the bed. (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* 59)

The above instance is one among many which shows him masturbating. His hyperactive sexuality is however (and humorously enough) a cause of concern for Mrs Burnham. She takes it upon herself to cure him of his “disease” and save the world of dirt and filth, “darkness and degradation”:

If you think your affliction is a secret you are mistaken, Mr Reid. The world has been alerted to this scourge by a few brave doctors, and you should know that one of them is here right now in Calcutta, attempting to combat the disease.

...

And it really will not do, Mr Reid, to conceal from yourself the true causes of your unfortunate condition. It is but a *disease* and the first step towards a cure is to accept that you are a sufferer and a victim. (Ghosh, *Flood of Fire* 90-91)

Zachary's hyper-masculine behaviour is projected many times in *Flood of Fire* when he has his sexual escapades with Mrs. Burnham. While his intimate episodes with Mrs Burnham and Paulette are an assertion of his masculinity, they are symptoms of a "disease" for Mrs Burnham. Ironically enough, she wants to "cure" him of his "unfortunate condition" of which she is an integral part. But, in an attempt to cure Zachary of his "disease of sexuality" and "save the world of dirt and filth, darkness and degradation", Mrs Burnham falls for him and ends up committing adultery. The implications of Zachary's relationship with Mrs Burnham is further explored in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

The preceding discussion analysed how major characters like Kalua, Gomusta and Zachary and minor characters like Mamdoo Tindal performed their masculinities by navigating oppressive personal and social circumstances. The next part of this section explores the performance of masculinities in the confined space of the ship and critique the notion of a utopian existence in the liminal space of the ship on the waters of the Indian Ocean.

In the dominant narrative of the trilogy, the formation of the ship-community of "jahaz-bhais" and "jahaz-bahens" by forging the bond of "jahazi-nata" has been romanticised as a utopia which is free from the artificial barriers and divisions of the land. To quote Paulette:

On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same. It's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we shall all be ship-siblings: *jahaz bhais* and *jahaz bahens*. There'll be no difference between us. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 356)

The established readings and criticisms of this trilogy forwarded by critics like Rudrani Gangopadhyay, Maroua Touil, Devyani Agrawal, etc., agree to Paulette's view and consider the ship community as an ideological utopia and an immaculate paradise. According to Maroua Touil, the displacement that the characters undergo helps them to form a diaspora which is marked by transgressions of artificial barriers of class, caste, gender, race, etc (Touil 2015). Rudrani Gangopadhyay stressed on the re-fashioning of their identity on board the *Ibis* (Gangopadhyay 2017). On similar lines, Devyani Agrawal discusses the psychological remaking of self, getting rid of the baggage of caste, class and racial identities (Agrawal 2016). All the three critics subscribe to the romanticised tradition of understanding the in-between space of the ship on waters as a utopia which is free from the hierarchies, barriers and exploitation of land. However, such readings deny any possibility of domination and marginalisation in the constricted space of the ship. Our analysis will complicate their romanticised interpretation and explore oppressive structures present in that utopia. It will examine the demarcation of physical spaces, division of work and gendered performances on board the *Ibis*. Through the perspective of a minor character named Jodu, the following section will establish the confined space of the ship as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a "counter-site" which reproduces the hierarchically repressive structures of land.

First, let us examine the demarcation of physical space on board the *Ibis*. There was a stark difference in the spaces allotted to the cabin and crew members of the *Ibis*. Jodu described the "peechil-kamra" or officers' section when he saw that the schooner was being prepared for the next expedition. The peechil-kamra lay directly beneath the quarter-deck. To get to it, they had to go through one of the two companionways that were tucked under the overhang of the quarter deck. The entrance on the dawa side led to the officers' cabin and the other to the adjoining compartment, which was known as the "beeche-kamra" or midships-cabin. The dawa companionway opened into the cuddy, which was where the officers ate their meals.

Looking around it, Jodu was astonished by how carefully everything was made, how every eventuality had been thought of and provided for: the table at the centre even had rims around its sides, with little fenced enclosures in the middle, so that nothing could slip or slide when the schooner was rolling. The mates' cabins were on either side of the cuddy, and they were, in comparison, somewhat plain, just about large enough to turn around in, with bunks that were not quite

long enough for a man to stretch out his legs in comfort (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 318)

Jodu's astonishment was further intensified when he reached the captain's room:

The Kaptan's stateroom was further aft, and there was nothing about this kamra that was in the least bit disappointing: it extended along the width of the stern and its wood and brass shone brightly with polish; it seemed grand enough to belong in a Raja's palace. At one end of it there was a small beautifully carved desk, with tiny shelves and an inkwell that was built into the wood; at the other end was a spacious bunk with a polished candle-holder affixed to one side. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 318-319)

The officers' section or captain's stateroom were places which Jodu could have for himself only in his dreams. He himself observed that he would never again set foot there, except as topas or mess-boy. His state of being a lascar could never bring him the comforts of luxurious spaces like that of the pechil-kamra or the Captain's Stateroom.

Jodu's navigation to the midships-cabin or beech-kamra reveals to us a space which was occupied by the overseers and guards of the schooner. This part was also relatively comfortable. It was equipped with bunks rather than hammocks, and was fairly well lit, with portholes to let in the daylight and several lamps hanging from the ceiling.

But in terms of the cabin and crew members of the ship, the most uncomfortable and cramped up space was that which was reserved for lascars like Jodu himself. This was called the "fana". His description of the fana is interesting for readers as it reveals the dynamics of performance in such cramped-up spaces.

The fana was airless, hot and dark, with no source of lighting except a single oil-lamp hanging on a hook; in the glow of the sputtering flame, it seemed to Jodu that he had tumbled into some musty cave that was densely festooned with cobwebs- for everywhere he looked there was a webbing of hammocks, hanging in double rows, suspended by wooden beams...In height, it was not quite as tall as a full-grown man, yet the hammocks were hung one above another, no more than sixteen regulation inches apart, so that every man's nose was inches away from a solid barrier: either the ceiling or an arse.

Strange to think that these hanging beds were called ‘jhulis’, as if they were swings, like those given to brides or infants; to hear the word said was to imagine yourself being rocked gently to sleep by a ship’s motion- but to see them strung up in front of you, like nets in a pond, was to know that your dreaming hours would be spent squirming like a trapped fish, fighting for space to breathe. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 186)

It is striking to note that such scarcity of space amidst a webbing of hammocks is alleviated through the use of the word “jhuli”. This word, which can be roughly translated into swing, cradle or hammock, can be read as a ship-lingo which seeks to soften or give comfort (at least, superficially) to the otherwise harsh existence on board the ship. Again, if we examine the passage cited above, we find that in the masculine struggle for space, there is an attempt at equating the feminine with the infantile when the narrative describes the webbing of hammocks or jhulis. If not in reality, then in dream, a sea-toughened lascar could dream of apparently “delicate things” like a newly-wed bride swinging in all her glory or an infant gradually falling asleep in a rocking cradle.

There were two separate segments earmarked for the migrants and convicts respectively. Although much constricted in comparison to the previously discussed spaces, the migrants’ quarter was slightly better than the convicts’ snake-pit.

Next to the beech-kamra lay the migrants’ part of the ship: the ‘tween-deck, known to the lascars as the ‘box’, or dabusa. It was little changed since the day Jodu first stepped into it: it was still as grim, dark and foul-smelling as he remembered- merely an enclosed floor, and arched beams along the sides- but its chains and ring-bolts were gone and a couple of heads and piss-dales had been added. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 319)

The “grim, dark and foul-smelling” dabusa stood as testimony to the multitude of migrants that were transported to and from the perilous waters of the Indian Ocean. Every inch of that confined space reminded one of the vagaries of such journeys, irrespective of whether they were forced or deliberate depending on the individual circumstances. A solely romanticised reading of “a truly liberating journey” would, therefore, erase the complexities of Ghosh’s trilogy.



The rear part of the dabusa was boxed off to make a cell, with a stout door. This was the convicts' quarter and life here was, at the worst possible. "The cell was as cramped as a chicken coop and as airless as a snake-pit: apart from a lidded porthole in its door, it had only one other opening, which was a tiny air duct in the bulwark that separated it from the coolies' dabusa" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 320).

As the living conditions deteriorates with a descend in the hierarchy of crew members, migrants and convicts, the question of having access to food, material resources and the division of work comes up. When Steward Pinto and his mess-boys were serving roast lamb, mint sauce and boiled potatoes in the officers' cuddy, the migrants were only given rice, dal and lime pickle. Again, when the captain had all luxuries of life, the migrants were denied even the basic needs of candles and lamps to dispel the darkness of night. Although the overseers reasoned that to keep those burning would only increase the risk of fire, everyone understood that the ulterior motive was to cut down extra expenses on oil and candles.

With no flame lit and the hatch secured, such light as there was came from cracks in the timber and the openings of the piss-dales. The leaden gloom, combined with the mid-day heat and the fetid stench of hundreds of enclosed bodies, gave the unstirred air a weight like that of sewage: it took an effort even to draw breath. (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 370)

In such a fetid enclosure, it became a luxury to get a breath of fresh air on the deck or a few mugs of water to bath. About once each day, the convicts would be released from their cell and given time to empty their shared toilet bucket and to wash their bodies. Then, they would be taken above and given a few minutes' exercise, consisting, usually, of a turn or two around the main deck. But this last part of the convicts' routine was the most humiliating for them as Subedar Bhyro Singh took pleasure in inflicting pain on them and display his authority among the lesser mortals. Pretending that they were a pair of plough-oxen and he a farmer tilling a field, the subedar would loop their chains around their necks in such a way that they were forced to stoop as they walked. Then shaking their fetters like reins, he would make a clicking, tongue-rolling noise as he drove them along, occasionally slicing at their legs with his *lathi*. While driving them around the deck, he would shout expletives for the amusement of the silahdars and maistries or would rap them on the genitals and laugh- "Aho, keep

going... don't weep for your balls now... tears won't bring them back... What's the matter? Aren't you hijras, you two? There's no pleasure or pain between your legs" (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 384). It is as if his masculinity is soothed by denying them the signifier of their male anatomy. That is, Subedar Bhyro Singh's masculine arrogance is heightened by the imagined castration of the two convicts. Again, by treating the convicts as animals, he re-enacts the master-slave relationship of land on board the ship. This reproduces the structural hierarchies of land on the supposedly "utopian" space of the ship.

In terms of division of work, while the convicts were engaged in picking and rolling oakum, the womenfolk was engaged in works like sewing, washing clothes and tending to the livestock of the ship's provisions, to be later on consumed by the officers, guards and overseers. It is ironic to note that the officers lived on the sweat and blood of the migrants as well as the convicts and yet denied them the basic amenities of life. This can be read as a replication of the exploitative structures of land on the space of the ship.

From the above discussion, we can conclude that there is a stark demarcation of space on board the *Ibis*. This demarcation is marked by a prominent division of class privileges, division of labour, living conditions and access to material resources. The exploitation of the workers, migrants and convicts on the constricted space of the ship echoes the hierarchies and exploitative structures of land. The inhuman treatment meted out to the two convicts by the arrogant Subedar annihilates the imagination of the space on board the *Ibis* as an immaculate paradise and instead posits it as a living hell. Moreover, the attempt on the part of the narrator to ease the scarcity of space by terming the webbing of hammocks in the scant space of the deck as "jhulis" disturbs our understanding on the lines of Paulette's imagined pilgrimage and the critics' romanticisation. The journey of crossing the Indian Ocean, on board the *Ibis*, therefore becomes a testimony not of the barrier-less refashioning of the migrants' identity, but a re-enactment of the exploitative politics of land.

Thus, the above discussion analysed how selected characters performed their gender while negotiating the politics of space in Ghosh's celebrated trilogy. It revealed how, through the complex story of Kalua's transformation and his eventual gain of agency, Ghosh's narrative highlighted the multifaceted nature of gender performance in the context of caste politics. The analysis also showed how the fluid nature of

masculinities was celebrated when Gomusta re-fashioned himself in the image of Taramony. Similarly, Zachary, managed to climb the ladder of social hierarchy by acquiring a new knowledge of white gentility and aspirational masculinity. In addition to the stories of individual transformation, the section also engaged with the idea of confined space on the schooner. By highlighting the demarcation of spaces and the prevalent hegemony on the basis of class and gender privileges, the above discussion subverted the notion of a utopian existence in the liminal space of the ship on the waters of the Indian Ocean.

## **2.4 Child of God**

If *Funny Boy* (1994) and the *Ibis Trilogy* (2008-2015) are narratives of individual growth and transformation, the next trilogy for our study, Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan Trilogy* (2014-2018) comprising of the books- *One Part Woman* (2014), *A Lonely Harvest* (2018) and *Trial by Silence* (2018) depicts the worship of an androgynous form of deity. The story revolves around the repercussions of a particular custom followed during the chariot festival where the aforementioned deity is worshipped. The custom in question is the one which allows childless women to freely mingle with strangers on a particular night of the year so that they can conceive and successfully continue the progeny. The child born of such a union would be considered a "child of god". This section will analyse the form of the deity as described in the trilogy and the particular custom followed during the worship of the same. It will critically engage with Ponna's participation in the chariot festival and its consequence on her married life with Kali. Critiquing the apparently liberal nature of the chariot festival, the following discussion will reveal a crisis of masculinity faced by Kali. Finally, this section will investigate the narrative position with regard to the chariot festival considering the massive controversy faced by Perumal Murugan in 2014 following the translation of the first book of the *Madhorubagan Trilogy*.

Let us first consider the description of the deity in the temple of *Madhorubagan*. The word *Madhorubagan* is the Tamil equivalent of *Ardhanareeswara* which stands for the half-male, half-female avatar of Lord Shiva. There is, in fact, a temple in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu which is dedicated to this rare form of Lord Shiva. The novel depicts the deity for the first time when Kali and Muthu reach the temple on the top of the hill after walking the arduous stretch of road:

It was an earthen goddess. Vermillion had been scattered all over her body; and her face was aglow with wrath. But there was a faint smile at the corners of her lips. He felt the smile revealed a defiance that said, ‘What can you do to me?’ When he stood at her feet, she appeared to be lying there with the full confidence that the entire land was hers. Her arms and legs were as big as the trunks of trees. She had a round face, and her wide-open eyes met him in an unwavering stare. Even when Kali averted his gaze, he could still feel her eyes boring deep into him. (Murugan, *One Part Women* 31-32)

The description of the form of the deity combines the characteristics of both male and female physique. Although she had a faint smile, her wide-open eyes and face glowing with wrath lent her a fearsomeness that could terrify any mortal being. Her trunk-like arms and legs gave her an unnatural robustness. Moreover, the wide-open eyes were a marked difference from the description of conventional female deities with lowered eyes.

The presence of male as well as female parts in the same deity suggests androgyny. The concept of an androgynous mind was elucidated in the theorisation of early thinkers like Coleridge and Virginia Woolf. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines androgyny as- “the quality or state of being neither specifically feminine nor masculine” and “the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics” (“Androgyny”). The description of the deity which combines both masculine as well as feminine features renders it an androgynous nature.

In *One Part Woman* (2014), a priest of the hill shrine at Karattur explains to Kali the principle of androgyny in the context of the deity, *Devatha*:

Devatha is no one but Madhorubagan himself... For hundreds of years, our family has been conducting rituals for the half-female god. Many saints have sung his praise, calling him ‘Mother God’, ‘One Part Woman’ and so on. The male and female together make the world. To show that to us, the Lord stands here combined with the Goddess. In other temples, you would see separate shrines for Eeswaran and Ambal. But here they stand together as one. He has given her the left half of his body... Even though we are born male, we also have feminine qualities within us. Considering all this, elders have called him One Part Woman. (Murugan 30)

The description of the deity given by the priest harks back to the universal motif of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* or *Yin* and *Yang*. The different names- “Madhorubagan”, “Mother God”, “One Part Woman”- make this principle very apparent in a commoner’s imagination of her. It reinforces the essential unity and mutual interdependence of the two sexes for the propagation of the principle of life force.

The rituals observed to appease an androgynous goddess like Madhorubagan also carries with them elements of androgyny. In addition to the Pongal rice and rooster that needs to be sacrificed to satisfy Madhorubagan, Kali has to buy two separate sets of clothes for man and woman and offer them to the deity.

At the end of the conversation, Kali gave the priest the fifty rupees he had asked for. Buying new clothes for the deity was a separate responsibility. Madhorubagan is male and female fused into one. What great pleasure it is to stay as one, body to body, forever! Only God gets to enjoy such great pleasure. Kali had to buy two kinds of clothes. (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 30)

This theme of unification of the two basic principles of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* gives the trilogy its distinct character. Here, we find that the deity is addressed not with a single pronoun. Rather, the two pronouns “he” and “she” are interchangeably used in addressing her. For example, when addressed as “Devatha” in page 30, the deity is addressed as “he”. On the other hand, when addressed as “Madhorubagan” in pages 31 and 32, the deity is addressed as “she”. Such a shift in the use of pronouns in the novel gives a fluid nature to the gender of the deity.

The following lines of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* best explain such a fluid identity:

If gender is the cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders...The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorised as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify

a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (9)

The description of such a fluid identity of the deity, in the critical understanding of Butler, sets the tone of the novel. It is not a matter of mimetic relation of gender to sex, but a matter of co-existence so much so that often a blurring occurs and a person cannot distinguish one from the other. Thus, “Ardhanareeswar” (who is himself composed of “Eeswaran” and “Ambal”) shifts between the identities of “Devatha” and “Madhorubagan” in the story.

*One Part Woman*, therefore, reveals a very unique understanding of gender performance. It portrays the worship of an androgynous form of deity, rather than placing emphasis on the individual growth and transformation stories of particular characters. The description of the form, the performance of worship and pronouns used to address the deity add to our understanding of androgyny and gender fluidity. The worship of the androgynous deity also provides a carnivalesque space, the events of which have enduring influence on the lives of the major characters Kali and Ponna. The next part of this analysis engages with the nature of the carnivalesque space where Kali and Ponna perform their gendered selves and impact each other’s lives as a consequence of their actions.

Bakhtin’s book, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963) highlights four important characteristics of the term “carnivalesque”. They are- familiar and free interaction between people, eccentric behaviour, carnivalistic mesalliances and profanation. Carnivals bring the unlikeliest of people together and encourage the interaction and free expression of themselves in unity. It encourages unacceptable or eccentric behaviour without stressing on consequences. Moreover, the familiar and free format of carnival allows everything that are separate in normal circumstances, to reunite — Heaven and Hell, the young and the old, etc. Lastly, in carnival, the strict rules of piety and respect for official notions of the “sacred” are stripped and condemned and instead, blasphemy, obscenity, debasings, “bringings down to earth” are celebrated. Keeping in mind these four characteristics, we see a common thread that connects them. This is the phenomenon of subversion. The space of the carnival is essentially, a space of subversion where all established rules and norms are broken to allow a free play of will.

It knows no boundaries, accepts no limitations and hence, becomes a place of possibilities and liberation.

The most obvious and apparently innocent understanding of the festival is a carnival in Bakhtin's terms. The feast of the half-female god, Madhorubagan has almost all of the four characteristics of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The first most important characteristic of familiar and free interaction between people, irrespective of caste and class division is seen in many instances of the novel. For example, Ponna's father agrees to take Maran and his family in his cart when they request him for the same (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 154). Maran works as a farm-hand in Periyasami's farm in Veliyur and in normal circumstances, a high caste man would not allow a low caste man to travel in the same cart (155). It is only in the feast of Madhorubagan that such a thing can happen.

Once they are at the festival site, Ponna is startled by the behaviour of the people around her. Away from her mother and clad in a beautiful dress, she gets lost in an ocean of strangers.

She looked around for anyone she knew from the village. No one. Any relatives? Anyone she had worked with in the fields? From within her mind, she brought out several faces that she had known since childhood and checked to see if any of the faces in the crowd now matched any of those from her mind's inventory. None. Even if any face matched, it might not mean anything. Once people entered such a large crowd, everyone becomes a new, unknown face. (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 202)

In such a large crowd, eccentric behaviour almost became the norm. Bare-bodied dances of men with clashing sticks inspired a sense of awe as well as fear. The vigour of the glistening bodies was juxtaposed with the sweat from the interlocked bodies. Ponna felt a few suggestive caresses on her body. "While she was thinking about this, she felt a touch on her right arm. She was not able to turn immediately. She felt a lack of desire in that touch.... It was merely the body working" (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 205). She had to dodge a number of eccentricities until she found her god.

The free format of the carnival allowed conventionally unacceptable alliances. Bakhtin calls them carnivalistic mesalliances. The narrator states in a tone of carnivalistic mesalliance, "At the peak of the celebration, all rules were relaxed. The night bore witness to that. Any consenting man and woman could have sex. Bodies

would lie casually intertwined. Darkness cast a mask on every face. It is in such revelry that the primal being in man surfaces". (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 98)

In an apparently rigid caste-based society, the chariot festival at the temple of Madhorubagan allowed for the free interaction among people of all the castes. Kali remembered himself visiting the festival with Muthu before his marriage and losing his virginity after having intercourse with a girl from a lower caste. Moreover, in normal circumstances, Ponna could not even imagine watching a theatrical performance that was pregnant with puns and double meanings with a group of strangers. But in the festival, she is shown sitting in close proximity with a group of strangers, young and old alike and watching the theatrical performance.

According to Bakhtin, carnivals blur the very thin line between the sacred and the profane and celebrate blasphemy, obscenity, etc. In the novel, the utterance of profanation by the clown in the theatrical performance is representative of the carnival spirit. When the announcer of the play starts explaining the concept as well as the context, his words are constantly interrupted by a clown who, instead, finds fissure in every sentence to play puns and crack jokes. His puns stand on the border-line between sanctity and blasphemy as they debase gods to the level of human beings and raise human beings to the level of gods:

The clown had to rupture all this bombast! He said, 'This man says the gods and goddess roamed around the villages. But are they jobless like you? Wherever they roam about, they have to come back home eventually. That's why we have this eighteenth day of the festival. All right, what was it you said about Ammaithazhumbu, the chickenpox scar?

The announcer was ready to handle this pun on words. 'Not Ammaithazhumbu, pa. I said Ammaiyappan, the mother-father form'

The clown who was on a roll by now, replied, 'Oh, you mean your mother and your father? Okay. Didn't you say something else? Something about Madhiyaanasoru, the afternoon meal? You were mentioning that you and I didn't eat lunch, weren't you?'

(Murugan, *One Part Woman* 213-214)



Creating confusion out of the words signifying the mother-father form and the chicken-pox scar, the clown staged a repartee referring to the word of address (the more respectful “pa” and the less respectful “da”) used by the announcer. Then he gave a long description of his wealth and persisted in asking about the lunch. Irritated beyond limits, the announcer kept on clarifying his stand that he talked not about the lunch, Madhiyaanasoru, but about the deity Madhorubagan.

The long conversation between the clown and the announcer is significant in many ways. First, the clown’s words bring down the announcer’s lofty ideals to the level of basic earthly existence. For example, when the announcer refers to the worship of the half-female god, Madhorubagan, the clown refers to Ammaithazhumbu or Chickenpox scar. Similarly, when the discussion is about the worship of Ammaiappan or the mother-father form, the clown interrupts to ask about Madhiyaanasoru, the afternoon meal. Again, the clown debunks the notion of human deeds leading to either heaven or hell and instead imagines them on the basis of sole monetary affluence. Lastly, by repeatedly insisting on the essential unity of the two sexes for the purpose of procreation, the clown celebrates the true spirit of the deity and derides the veil of propriety that people put on the earthly enjoyment of basic bodily instincts. “Back to addressing the announcer, the clown said, ‘What uncouth thing did I say? I said that male and female sides touch each other despite being so close. What’s wrong with that? You and I came about because they touched, isn’t it? You call this dirty?’” (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 215)

The preceding discussion situates the festival of Madhorubagan in the context of Bakhtin’s theorisation of the carnivalesque. But, certain questions remain as to the nature and repercussions of the carnival. What is the function of the carnival in the lives of Kali and Ponna? If carnivals ought to liberate individuals irrespective of their social affiliations, does the chariot festival truly liberate anyone in Murugan’s trilogy? If we take the perspective of Kali as the narrative perspective of the text, what happens to the space of the carnival? The following discussion will seek to address these questions.

From the beginning of the text, Kali’s sense of his masculinity is defined by Ponna’s allegiance to him. He takes pride in her devotion to him. Although he empathises with her and consoles her when she menstruates every month, the fact that she menstruates regularly is a matter of reassurance to him. It made Kali happy on the

inside whenever Ponna got her periods on time and came crying to him. He believed that she was trustworthy as long as she was menstruating regularly.

Subsequently, he reasoned: ‘Poor thing. How can I be so suspicious because of just one thing she said? She only said it in the urge to do something to have a child of her own. Does that mean I can conclude she would go with any man? Didn’t she come to me complaining about Karuppannan’s advances? She said what she said because of me- she said it for me. She said, “I will go if you ask me to”. And I didn’t ask her to. Then why would she go?’ This made him treat her with affection, and it looked as though the Kali she knew was back. (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 119)

Kali’s ego is soothed only by Ponna’s obedience and fidelity although he knows very well that his infertility is the cause of their childlessness. He does not agree when his mother and in-laws propose to send Ponna to the chariot festival celebrated in honour of Madhorubagan in the hill shrine of Karattur. He feels that her going to the festival will be a severe insult to his masculinity. If she becomes pregnant with a child born out of that night’s union with a “god”, he will have to bear an inward, biting and lifelong brunt of his infertility. In a conversation with Muthu, he expresses his reservation towards sending Ponna to the chariot festival where she would get the opportunity to sexually engage with a stranger “god”. Muthu reasons that a child born from any stranger god would be a blessing to the family. In a tone of sarcastic dismissal, Kali dismisses his claim recollecting the fact that when they were younger, they would go to the festival with the sole motive of finding “some decent-looking women to fuck” and that there was no divine motive in the act. Expressing his caste pride, Kali continues:

‘More than half the young men roaming about town are from the untouchable castes. If any one of them gets to be with Ponna, I simply cannot touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold the child. Why do I need all that? I am happy lying around here. I don’t want a child so desperately. Moreover, all of you will call me impotent and laugh at me. So, let it go.’ (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 139-140)

This conversation reveals a striking aspect of Kali’s character. His arrogance regarding his masculinity comes in the way of our understanding of the liberal nature of the chariot festival. Going back to the questions posed earlier, if the custom of childless women participating in the festival with the hope of getting pregnant by stranger “gods”

was socially sanctioned and practised for many years, the stance taken by Kali in this regard is against the temporary relaxation sanctioned by the society. He objects to her having sexual intercourse with an “untouchable” God as, according to him, such an act would pollute him and his entire family. A child born out of such a union would, therefore, be not only unacceptable, but an object of disgust for him. This highlights the dynamics of caste when we consider Kali’s masculinity. He is not ready to disregard the caste hierarchy even when it is socially sanctioned (at least on the one day of the chariot festival) and would help him to beget a child that he could call his own. Thus, like the zamindars who relied upon the masculine prowess of Kalua to showcase their caste pride in Ghosh’s trilogy, Kali’s rejection of Ponna taking part in the chariot festival reflects his masculine arrogance which is supplemented by his caste pride.

When Kali comes to know of Ponna’s actions, he calls her a “whore” in the third book of the trilogy (where he survives his attempted suicide) titled *Trial by Silence* (2018). He is unable to forgive her and considers her action as an unhealable wound to his marriage and life. As a result, their marital life is caught in a limbo of lovelessness and silence, the burden of which is shouldered by the two strong women –Ponna and Seerayi (Kali’s mother). If we look at the second book, *A Lonely Harvest* (2018) we do not find his presence altogether as he has already succumbed to his attempt at suicide. Devastated by his cruel punishment, yet constantly haunted by memories of the happiness she once shared with him, Ponna faces the world alone. Irrespective of his survival, what we can surmise is that his hyper-masculine arrogance crushes both himself and his near ones. In such a context, the apparently liberal space of the carnival becomes suffocating both for Kali as well as Ponna. Unlike the old Vellapillai woman in their village who gave birth to two children through the customary union with gods, the chariot festival of Madhorubagan does not prove advantageous for Ponna.

Again, if Kali’s perspective is read as the narrative perspective, the carnivalesque space of the festival cannot be read as an immaculate paradise. Although this third space overthrows the socially established hierarchies and encourages mesalliances, it proves detrimental to Ponna. It is because, even in such a liberal space, Ponna is not able to overthrow the influence of Kali from her mind. During her search for the god, every gesture and movement of the men that she came into contact with reminded her of Kali. That means, even in the liberal space favouring carnivalesque mesalliances, Ponna was not free from the dominance exerted by Kali. Therefore, we may argue that the narrative

subverts the apparently innocent understanding of the carnival as a liberal third space and instead posits the same as one upholding the ideological hegemony of Kali over Ponna.

Murugan's trilogy is also an engaging read on "failed" masculinity. It highlights the crisis of masculinity faced by Kali through the portrayal of his anxiety in sending Ponna to the chariot festival. Ponna's regular menstruation every month reminds him of his infertility which in turn may be read as his lack of virility. In general, patriarchy assigns superior status to a man who can extend the lineage. Kali probably realises that if Ponna succeeds in begetting a child through the sanctioned custom of the chariot festival, his failure of paternity would be established. As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, he handles his "failure" in two alternate ways in the two sequels to *One Part Woman*. In the book where he commits suicide, Kali is unable to resolve the crisis altogether and embraces death. As suicide is considered a "cowardly" act, Kali's death by suicide reinforces his internalisation of the hegemonic ideal of masculinity and his inability to grapple with the crisis. In the book where he retires to a life of silence, the crisis of masculinity is manifested through Kali's "absent presence" where he is physically alive but is unable to perform the duty of a father. He alienates himself from the "child of god" as he continues to uphold the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Thus, in both circumstances, Kali becomes an epitome of "failure" following his life-long crisis of masculinity.

Finally, the narrative position with regard to the chariot festival needs critical attention here as the author faced a massive controversy in 2014 following the translation of the first book of the Madhorubagan trilogy. The text was under attack by Hindu religious and caste groups who objected to the depiction of the aforementioned esoteric custom of the chariot festival, emphasising that it denigrated the position of women of that region (western Tamil Nadu) and the close-knit caste-based society. Moreover, the use of the photo of the Ardhanareeswar deity on the cover page of the initial Tamil copies of the novel was another source of resentment among the religious groups. This act, according to them, denigrated the Hindu God Ardhanareeswar (the half-male, half-female form of lord Shiva) and spread misleading information regarding the worship of the eponymous deity. The protests against Perumal Murugan were so intense that a one-day bandh in his native district of Namakkal was observed following which he was forced to file an unconditional apology with the district administration, assuring of his withdrawal of all the copies of his novel from circulation. Consequently, he had to ask

his publisher, Kannan Sundaram from Kalachuvadu Publications, to withdraw all copies from circulation and fled Namakkal to settle in Chennai (Ali). If we minutely investigate the stance of the narrative regarding the controversial custom, we will find that the text is far from adopting a radical position in portraying the chariot festival. Although, on the surface, we find that the chariot festival is depicted as an avenue which sanctions a temporary relaxation to conventional social and sexual norms, Kali's reaction to Ponna's act in both the sequels dismisses a liberal reading of the carnival. In *A Lonely Harvest*, Kali commits suicide after being unable to bear the thought of Ponna's action even if only for the sake of a child. On the other hand, in *Trial by Silence*, Kali survives his suicide attempt, but is unable to forgive Ponna or any of the others he held responsible for her act. Consequently, he retires to a life of solitude and Ponna has to bear "his judgement, rejection and eloquent silence" (Murugan, *A Lonely Harvest* xi). That is, in both the sequels, we find Kali rejecting the carnivalesque nature of the chariot festival and rigidly holding on to his masculine arrogance and caste pride. As a result, Ponna has to bear a life-long brunt of his disgust and anger. Therefore, contrary to the allegations levelled against the author and his work, the narrative in *One Part Woman* does not adopt a radical stance in depicting the chariot festival. Instead, it reinforces certain conventional notions of caste pride and masculine arrogance which are characteristic features of a close-knit, caste-based and heteronormative society. In other words, we can safely conclude that the text adopts an ambivalent position in its representation of the festival of Madhorubagan.

Thus, Murugan's trilogy is an engaging read of gender fluidity and masculinity. The form of the Ardhanareeswar deity and its worship highlights the androgynous form, thereby emphasising gender as "a free-floating artifice" in the lines of Butler. However, the celebration of the chariot festival in honour of the deity has a far-reaching impact on the course of events in the trilogy. The apparently liberal, carnivalesque space of the festival becomes suffocating, even violent for Ponna when after the night of relaxation, she has to bear the brunt of Kali's masculine arrogance. Irrespective of his survival, Kali's hyper-masculine arrogance crushes him and Ponna. Murugan's trilogy also highlights the crisis of masculinity faced by Kali when Ponna participates in the chariot festival. The sequels with alternative endings establish him as a "failure" who either retires to a life of silence or takes the extreme step of committing suicide. Finally, in

light of the 2014 controversy, it can be asserted that the text adopts not a radical, but an ambivalent position in its representation of the festival of Madhorubagan.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Thus, this chapter focused on the representation of masculinities in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008-2015) and Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan Trilogy* (2014-2018). It conducted a discursive-performative study of selected characters enacting as well as re-fashioning their identities while navigating repressive structures and hegemonic forces. Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* portrayed adolescent Arjie's sexual awakening by negotiating heteronormative institutions and social structures. In an attempt to confront heteronormative disciplining by his family and school, Arjie found physical spaces like the family's backyard and Radha Aunty's dressing corner, performative space of the theatre, liminal spaces like the staircase and garage and imaginative space of dreams that allowed free expression of his sexuality. He also utilised the subversive power of language to avenge the wrongs done to his lover by deliberately garbling the poem chosen for recitation in honour of the school. Parallel to Arjie's performance of his gender and sexuality, the chapter also shed light on Radha Aunty and Amma who became "funny girls" by defying societal norms in search of companionship and fulfilment. While Radha Aunty explicitly disregarded the feminine codes of conduct, Amma subtly and inconspicuously rejected the sexual morality of monogamy to find a purpose in life and love.

Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* traced the transformation of Kalua from the marginalised ox-man of Chamar Basti to Maddow Colver of Captain Mee's army to the prime deity in Deeti's Memory Shrine. Through the layered characterisation of Kalua and his eventual gain of agency, the narrative displayed the complex nature of gender performances in the context of caste hierarchies and politics. While Gomusta's re-fashioning of himself in the image of Taramony demonstrated the fluid nature of masculinities, Zachary's climb on the ladder of social hierarchy through the newly acquired knowledge of white gentility reflected his aspirational masculinity. In addition to the studies of individual transformation, this chapter also engaged with the idea of space on the schooner. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, the analysis subverted the notion of a utopian existence in the liminal space of the ship. It argued that the hegemonic demarcation of spaces based on class and gender reproduced the hierarchically repressive structures of land.

Our understanding of gender performances was further enhanced by the critical examination of Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubagan Trilogy*. The trilogy highlighted the androgynous nature of the Ardhanareeswar deity and thereby emphasised gender as "a free-floating artifice" in the lines of Butler. However, the apparently liberal, carnivalesque space of the chariot festival celebrated in honour of the deity turned suffocating for Ponna when after the night of sanctioned temporary relaxation, she had to bear the brunt of Kali's hyper-masculine arrogance and caste pride. Irrespective of his survival in the second and third books of the trilogy, Kali's performance of his masculinity destroyed the lives of two women- Ponna and his mother Seerayi. Murugan's trilogy also highlighted the crisis of masculinity faced by Kali when Ponna participated in the chariot festival. The sequels with alternative endings established him as a "failure" who either retired to a life of silence or took the extreme step of committing suicide. Finally, following a critical investigation of the 2014 Madhorubagan controversy, the chapter asserted that the text adopted not a radical, but an ambivalent stance in its representation of the festival of Madhorubagan. Thus, the three contemporary writers were successful in weaving palimpsests of fiction, the narratives of which engage in never-ending deliberations of gender performances defining and redefining identities amidst the structural inequities of everyday life.