

Strategies of Subversion and Resistance in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

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In his book, *The Poetics of Protest: Literary Form and Political Implication in the Victim of Society Novel*, George Goodin defines 'the victim of society' novel thus:

It identifies a protagonist, a subject matter, and a basic action: victim, social injustice and suffering.... I shall take the term to refer to a group formed by the intersection of social protest novels and novels of victimage. Thus, in addition to excluding all novels which are neither, it excludes all social protest novels in which the protagonist is not a victim in any significant sense.¹

While these victims are 'subjected to injustice and suffer more than they deserve',² their suffering, according to Goodin, must necessarily be accompanied by the recognition that their lot can be changed for

Only if we see something which injustice has not created or some capacity to struggle against it are we likely to see a limit to its power and thus a reason to hope for effective action.³

Goodin's paradigm is useful in reading *Funny Boy*⁴ by Shyam Selvadurai, a Sri Lankan Tamil who emigrated to Canada after the 1983 riots. Even a cursory reading establishes that Selvadurai foregrounds the theme of victimization unlike many Sri Lankan novelists in English to whom this motif is merely a point of departure. It would not be too sweeping a generalization to state, in fact, that this theme entered the Sri Lankan novel only recently. Novels written before Independence were either satires which contrasted local values unfavourably with those of the West or romantic potboilers which focussed on the life of the sheltered middle class. The fiction that emerged after 1948 was similar in many ways, but some concessions were made to accommodate the social transition that began after Independence. Writers, like Punyakante Wijenei, showed how the positions of the propertied, 'aristocratic,' 'respectable' families were threatened by the more enterprising 'lower classes', and others depicted a neo-romantic scenario in which city dwellers, disillusioned by life in the metropolis, sought a haven in the village. Sarachchandra's *Curfew and the Full Moon*⁵ which focussed on the 1971 insurgency was perhaps the first novel to give prominence to the theme of victimization. But it is only in the recent past that writers have begun to consistently concentrate on this theme and to demonstrate the manner in which the oppressed challenge their antagonists. Shyamali, in Punyakante Wijenei's *Amulet*,⁶ for instance, is affected by 'madness' and 'hysteria' because of her husband's malevolence; nonetheless, she employs subtle strategies of resistance that eventually drive him to distraction so much so that he admits at the end that '[s]he has escaped my authority, into silence';⁷ in Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*,⁸ Jean and Barry Mundy are initially enervated by the racial prejudice that they encounter in their adopted

country, Australia. Jean, however, is unwilling to succumb to such pressures without resistance; as a consequence, she retaliates by exposing the formidable Ron Blackstone's racism in public. To some critics even Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree*,⁹ though set up as a novel 'in which women were expected to submit meekly to the dictates of a male-dominated society',¹⁰ ultimately demonstrates that, '[f]ar from playing a marginal role, the female protagonists emerge as vocal, assertive initiators of action'.¹¹

Despite some significant touches, however, none of these texts are victim of society novels *in toto*. Selvadurai's novel, on the other hand, privileges the theme of victimage more substantially and in a manner that lends itself to the kind of analysis suggested by Goodin. The Chelvaratnams, Selvadurai's major protagonists, are victimized because they are Tamils, and Arjie is, in addition, marginalized for his behaviour which is at variance with accepted social norms. Although most of the characters succumb to these oppressive forces, Arjie and a few others defy them with varying degrees of success. The object of this essay is to examine the dynamics between the antagonists and the victims and to assess the extent to which these strategies of resistance and subversion are successful.

Although Arjie is the main character, there are others who also play significant roles. To Radha who has just returned from overseas and is unused to Sri Lankan mores '[i]f two people loved each other, the rest is unimportant' (p.78). Consequently, she is ready to defy her mother's admonition that it is unwise to be seen 'galavanting around with an unknown Sinhala boy' (p.58) and Anil's father's warning that '[w]e Sinhalese are losing patience with you Tamils and your arrogance' (p.66) and marry Anil for love. In contemplating this move, Radha challenges both the racial enmity between Tamils and Sinhalese, and the institution of the family, as portrayed by Selvadurai, which valorizes arranged marriages. Her principles cannot withstand the racial polarization that increases after she is attacked and injured by a Sinhalese mob, however. Although her feelings for Anil are not totally destroyed, she dumbly allows her family to contract a marriage for her with the Nagendras. A lesser artist would have allowed this sequence to lapse into sentimentality, not so Shyam Selvadurai. The break up between Radha and Anil is suggested not dramatized. It is left for Arjie to observe 'a seriousness in her face that was new, a harshness that ... [he] had never seen before' (p.93) and to realize that, although the wedding he had fantasized about for so long would come to pass, 'there would be something important missing' (p.99).

Arjie's mother had likewise split with Daryl (a Burgher) and married a Tamil when their friendship threatened the *status quo*. While her subsequent, extramarital affair with Daryl, which is conducted in the haven of the hill country, demonstrates that such relationships can prosper when not incommoded by the parochial demands of race, the sequence is more important for depicting Mrs Chelvaratnam's vain attempts to identify Daryl's killers and to bring them to justice.¹² Selvadurai's account of the woman's mission to discover the truth, despite a system that thwarts her every move, is rendered with chilling realism. Not only do the police torture 'Daryl's servant who was perhaps a witness to what had transpired and tap the Chelvaratnams' telephone, but the ASP even threatens Mrs Chelvaratnam with blackmail when he says with veiled malice that the 'servant boy was a real jobless character. He knew all the comings and

goings of your friend.... My regards to your husband ... I'm sure he will be fascinated by all that's happened in his absence' (p.134). Mrs Chelvaratnam perseveres in her quest because she is convinced that 'People can't get away with these things. This is a democracy, for God's sake'(p.137). She even ignores the warning of her family friend, Appadurai, a famous civil rights lawyer, who informs her that the quest for justice is futile and precarious in the volatile socio-political climate of the 1980s: 'These days one must be like the three wise monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.... Let it rest, child'(p.141). It is only when her attempt to trace Somaratne's whereabouts in his village results in abuse and stones being hurled at her and Arjie by the innocent victims of this tragic event that she decides to desist:

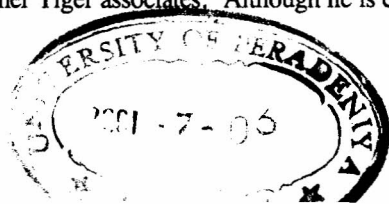
After a while she pulled the car up by the side of the road, then she got out and slammed the door. I watched her stand there, her back to me, and even though I was sorry to see her cry I was also glad of it. I hoped with all my heart it meant that she finally realized that things had gone too far. (p.149)

In a novel that is punctuated with tragedies, the calamity which strikes her is particularly poignant because her heroic efforts result in total defeat. She is so wounded and enervated by the entire episode that she suppresses the truth when one of Daryl's Australian colleagues arrives in Sri Lanka to undertake the kind of mission that she had just abandoned. What makes her plight even more harrowing is that she has no alternative but to return to her role as 'pattern wife' to an egotistical husband once more.

If the episode with Daryl is an indictment of a political regime which employed the police to get rid of 'dissidents', the sequences which involve Jegan, while reflecting the chauvinism that compelled several capable Tamils to leave the country during the 80s, also critique the open economy and the 'business' mentality it engenders. Chelvaratnam immediately takes to his late friend's son because of his striking resemblance to his sire and because he recognizes Jegan's talents as an accountant. Their rapport is threatened, however, by their different approaches to life. Although Jegan had joined the Tigers when a close friend who had worked with him in the Gandhian movement was tortured by the forces, the Tigers, too, become anathema to him, eventually. Consequently, he ponders on the limited options open to Tamils in Sri Lanka, thus:

If you become a Tiger you cannot question anything they do. Recently they killed a social worker who disagreed with their opinions.... On the other hand, what is the alternative? We cannot live like this under constant threat from the Sinhalese, always second-class citizens in our own country. As my father used to say, 'It's small choices of rotten apples.'(p.176)

Despite these dilemmas, Jegan remains idealistic and is determined to succeed in the commercial world of the South. But he discovers that he can neither live down his past as a Tiger nor receive fair treatment from his bosses, colleagues, subordinates, or the general public. Jegan is interrogated after he is seen talking to two of his former Tiger associates. Although he is cleared



of any suspicion, this information is conveyed to a newspaper which promptly refers to him as a 'key Tiger suspect' living with 'a well-known Tamil hotelier' (p.183) in its columns. This report exposes Chelvaratnam to 'hate mail' and to abusive telephone calls which jeopardise his philosophy that

As a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game. Play it right and you can do very well for yourself. The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous. Go around quietly, make your money, and don't step on anybody's toes. (p.173)

While Jegan can ignore the jealousy of his colleagues and accept with less composure his boss' order that a Tamil cannot directly reprimand a subordinate, he refuses to adopt a posture that would deny him any self-respect or allow profit to affect his sense of values. On his first visit to the hotel, he reacts angrily to Chelvaratnam's callous observation that the prostitution of young village boys was both an inevitable and even necessary consequence of the tourist industry, 'if I tried to stop them, they'd simply go to another hotel on the front.... It's not just our luscious beaches that keep the tourist industry going, you know. We have other natural resources as well' (p.171). Given his subordinate position in the company, Jegan can do little more than wear a 'stern expression on his face' (p.171) at this comment. But he seems to be biding his time for a more positive response when subsequent events prevent him from taking any corrective measures. When Chelvaratnam had subtly suggested a holiday in Jaffna after the newspaper 'revelations' had embarrassed him, Jegan had refused the offer, yet he cannot maintain this posture when the 'Death to all Tamil pariahs' sign is drawn on the hotel wall. All the major players know that Jegan will have to be sacked because, as Sena says, '[t]hings can't continue this way. If they do the whole business will fall apart' (p.203). Spurning the alternative offer of a sinecure in the Middle East, Jegan leaves for Jaffna, presumably to rejoin the Tigers.

Selvadurai's social criticism in the Jegan episodes is two-fold. That Chelvaratnam, a responsible parent, and one who had shown such sensitivity in signing a pledge to look after Buddy and his family could nonchalantly refer to teenaged prostitutes as 'natural resources' is indicative of the cynicism that entered the country with the tourist boom and the open economy. Such policies also led to an overdeveloped sense of competition which capitalized on communal tensions, witness Banduratne Mudalali's method of eliminating powerful commercial rivals. In this environment, intelligent, industrious Tamils who refuse to indulge in the sycophancy associated with Chelvaratnam can do no more than return to a precarious existence in Jaffna.

Arjie's role in all these acts of resistance is crucial. He functions as Radha's chaperon during her dalliance with Anil, his mother's partner in trying to discover the truth of Daryl's death, and Jegan's confidante during his stay in the Chelvaratnam household. This exposure to events and actions which illustrate the iniquities, the parochialism, and the basic injustice prevailing in Sri Lanka reinforces Arjie's inborn desire to be different from and to challenge the 'normal' world. What his apprenticeship in these 'political' engagements has taught him, moreover, is the value of subtlety over direct confrontation when one is faced with a stronger opponent.

The first chapter perhaps too obviously introduces Arjie's 'exile from the world' (p.4). 'Exile', here, refers not merely to his eventual departure to Canada, but also to his subsequent discovery that he is a homosexual--a discovery that allows him to occupy a world that is stimulating, satisfying, but fraught with hazards. Arjie's childhood fantasies are given substance through games like 'bride bride' in which he plays the role of the bride. While his participation is welcomed by the girls whose games are enriched by his creative imagination, the boys, too, are glad of an arrangement which ensures that their macho sports are not encumbered by a 'weakling'. This happy state is halted, however, when Tanuja arrives from abroad and insists that Arjie is a 'faggot' (p.11) for playing female roles. When her efforts to take over Arjie's world are met with resistance, she marshals the support of the adults, an action which results in Arjie being forbidden to participate in these 'effeminate' pastimes. Although Arjie rebels against these constraints, he temporarily yields to the dictates of the adult world and lives 'between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either' (p.39). Selvadurai largely suppresses this implied homosexual theme in the next three chapters,¹³ but he presents it forcefully in the last two. Committed as they are to the values of a patriarchal world and given their latent homophobia, Chelvaratnam and his 'normal' son, Diggy, find Arjie's flirtations with crossdressing both embarrassing and threatening; consequently, they combine forces to prevent him from 'turning out funny or anything like that'(p.210). Chelvaratnam's solution is to send Arjie to a school that will 'force ... [him] to become a man' (p.210). To a person who had resisted conforming to 'male' ideals from his youngest days, joining an institution which purports to reinforce such ideals is wounding indeed, especially when these macho ideals are presented as the only reality.

Barbara Harlow enunciates, in *Resistance Literature*, that

The connection between knowledge and power, the awareness of the exploitation of knowledge by the interests of power to create a distorted historical record, is central to historical narratives.¹⁴

Although *Funny Boy* deals with recent Sri Lankan history, it is not a historical narrative *per se*; still, Black Tie's clash with Lokubandara, which is really a conflict between neocolonialism and rabid nationalism, demonstrates why institutions of knowledge are so important to 'the interests of power'. Lokubandara's position is not rendered in depth, but Black Tie's politics are plain. He tries to maintain control by perpetuating decadent, Public School values and by resisting the indigenization of the Victoria Academy. Arjie's response is emphatically subversive and postcolonial. By embarking on a clandestine homosexual relationship with Shehan, he strikes a subtle blow against the macho order represented by his father, his brother, and Black Tie. Their 'intercommunal' friendship, furthermore, undermines the racist positions held by Lokubandara and Salgado, and endorses Howard McNaughton's point that '*Réalisation* through role-breaking asserts the power of the oppressed ...'¹⁵ The 'role-breaking' that is begun with Arjie's clandestine relationship with a Sinhalese is taken a step further when he deliberately misreads Henry Newbolt's 'The Best School of All' on Prize Day before the politician whose support the principal needs so badly. In doing so, Arjie takes a positive step towards having this anachronistic, colonial college dismantled.

I agree with Raj Rao that in *Funny Boy* some institutions are 'extension[s] of repressive centralised structures, like the State.... Hence there is a need to subvert them'.¹⁶ What I would add is that Selvadurai's subversions are convincing because he maintains a sense of balance. He is neither triumphalistic in his sexual assertion nor insistent on placing homosexual love and heterosexual love in binary opposition; there is, after all, sufficient evidence to suggest that some heterosexual relationships would have succeeded had 'family and social values [not] take[n] precedence over love between two people'.¹⁷ From Shehan's first kiss which leaves Arjie wanting to 'experience it again in all its detail' (p.251) through their first sexual encounter in the garage to their last engagement which is 'almost passionless, uncoordinated and tentative, lacking synchronization' (p. 310), their relationship is drawn with a poise, sensitivity, and honesty that eschews any sensationalism. The text does not articulate the Arnoldian concept that a 'true' relationship can succeed amidst turbulence from without; on the contrary, Arjie and Shehan 'withdraw' from each other knowing that their friendship has been shattered by the riots. Their relationship is valuable, however, for its subversive potential and for implying, albeit diffidently, that, racial harmony can be achieved among the marginalized; this suggests, furthermore, that comparable bonds could be established in the world 'out there'.

Although Selvadurai's courage in writing a gay novel situated in Sri Lanka is a *doneé*, his undermining the inherited form of neocolonial education is an even greater achievement. To the editors of *The Writer as Historical Witness* 'postcolonials ... identify, recognise, interrogate, challenge and subdue the distorting dominant history that had subverted and marginalised them'¹⁸ Arjie undertakes such a project in 'The Best School of All.' While schools founded by imperialists benefitted the colonies in some ways, they did much to legitimize the colonial enterprise. The 'values' they imparted, though not too problematic when taken in isolation, become pernicious when coupled with the notion of loyalty to queen/king and country. By forcing schoolboys to commit Newbolt's verses to memory, Black Tie perpetuates colonial values even after Independence. These verses, after all, insist on total obedience to 'the rule we knew' and foreground the 'ethics' of a chauvinistic private school. That Arjie abhors these values is seen in his conversation with Shehan at the British Council during which they mockingly speculate on the poet's spectacular school career, and 'hold up for ridicule all that was considered sacred by the Queen Victoria Academy' (p.240). What Arjie finds ironic is that these 'values' are never actually practised:

It said that through playing cricket one learned to be honest and brave and patriotic. This was not true at the Victoria Academy. Cricket, here, consisted of trying to make it on the first-eleven team by any means, often by cheating or by fawning over the cricket master. (p. 233)

Selvadurai's portrayal of Black Tie sometimes borders on caricature, but it is convincing on the whole. This man who dons 'a sola topee, that white domed hat I had only seen in photographs from the time the British ruled Sri Lanka' (p. 214) shares the brutal, sadistic tendencies of his antecedents in British public schools. As Diggy informs Argie,

Once, he slapped a boy and broke some of his teeth. Another boy got caned so

severely his trousers tore. Then he made the boy kneel in the sun until he fainted. (p. 211).

That Diggy was not exaggerating Black Tie's severity is confirmed when both Arjie and Shehan are subjected to his cruel punishments for flimsy reasons. In such a world, Arjie realizes, "[r]ight and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were" (p.273). He enunciates:

How was it that some people got to decide what was correct or not, just or unjust? It has to do with who was in charge; everything had to do with who held power and who didn't. If you were powerful like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. If you were like Shehan or me you had no choice but to follow what they said. But did we always have to obey? Was it not possible for people like Shehan and me to be powerful too? I thought about this, but no answer presented itself to me. (p.274)

Such private criticism achieves little, however. To be truly revisionist Arjie must discover a way of subverting the system. In Nigel Thomas' *Spirits in the Dark*,¹⁹ a cane-cutter father ensures that his daughter is never birched again by giving the teacher, Miss Anderson, a lacerating verbal lashing which he ends thus: 'You don' ever put yo' fucking hands on she again. If yo' do, so help me God, I will knock every teeth outta yo head!'²⁰ Arjie cannot expect similar protection from his father to whom, no doubt, beatings were part of the 'learning' process; consequently, he has to devise his own kind of resistance. Unlike his mother, who had confronted the system directly and failed, and Jerome in Thomas' novel who 'succeeds after realising that conformity and acquiescence (rather than non-conformity and challenge) is the rewarded strategy,'²¹ Arjie pretends to join the system and then subverts it from within. Although he balks at the idea of reciting Newbolt's offensive verses on Prize Day, he later realizes that he could use the language of the oppressor to defeat the oppressor:

The plan was simple. Instead of trying to get out of writing the poems, I would do them. But I would do them wrong. Confuse them, jumble lines, take entire stanzas and place them in the other until the poems were rendered senseless. Black Tie who Sunderalingam said would write a speech based on these poems, would be forced to make a speech that made no sense. His attempt to win the cabinet minister to his side would fail, he would lose the battle to Lokubandara, be forced to resign ... (p.277)

Arjie's strategy works, as Black Tie leaves the hall "tired and defeated" (p.283) and in public disgrace.

Funny Boy then is a novel in which some victims resist their lot and occasionally succeed; consequently, Rajiva Wijesinha is correct in saying that the novel enunciates 'the importance of asserting individual feelings and relationships in defiance of the dictates of authority'.²² But these acts of defiance and assertions should be placed in their proper perspective. While Arjie's 'triumph' over Black Tie is a given, his relationship with Shehan constitutes just a modest blow against patriarchy and chauvinism. To say that Arjie 'come[s] out'²³ audaciously against

orthodoxy, therefore, is inaccurate and misleading. Since his homosexuality is never made public, his oppositional stance, like the gestures of resistance made by women against a world dominated by patriarchal values in Punyakante Wijenaike's and Muller's recent novels, only succeeds at a *personal* level. The overly positive readings rendered by some critics succeed only because they gloss over the last pages in which Tamils are killed, their houses burnt, and the survivors practically forced into exile. Still, to regard *Funny Boy* as a novel of defeat would be equally incorrect because Selvadurai manages to resuscitate the novel even when Arjie's fortunes are at their nadir. Consider Arjie's reaction on seeing his gutted home:

I felt hot, angry tears begin to well up in me as I saw this final violation. Then, for the first time, I began to cry for our house ... for the loss of my home, for the loss of everything I held to be precious. I tried to muffle the sound of my weeping, but my voice cried out loudly as if it were the only weapon I had against those who had destroyed my life. (p.311)

It is worthwhile fusing the careers of the writer and his protagonist here despite the hazards involved in undertaking an autobiographical approach.²⁴ If the power of the word had enabled Arjie to successfully speak back to his tormentor on prize day, Selvadurai writes back equally effectively to those who had destroyed the psyche of thousands of peace loving Tamils and banished them overseas. Selvadurai does not possess the tremendous optimism of a Hubert E. Weerasooriya who writing before the riots of 1983 could regard the communal tensions as a passing phase which would eventually be dispelled by love.²⁵ He has seen and experienced too much to indulge in such fantasies. Though he writes with anger, however, Selvadurai, unlike the Tigers, is not advocating violence in retaliation for the 'violation'. Instead, he uses the pen as a 'weapon' to write an engaging novel that sensitively portrays the victimization of a people, while demanding some form of justice and reparation.

Notes

1. George Goodin, *The Poetics of Protest: Literary Form and Political Implication in the Victim of Society Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) p 4
2. *Ibid* p 13.
3. *Ibid.* p 14.
4. Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy: A Novel in Six Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1994). All references to this novel are given in the body of the text.
5. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, *Curfew and the Full Moon* (New Delhi: Heinemann, 1983).
6. Punyakante Wijenaike, *Amulet* (Colombo: n.p., 1994).
7. *Ibid* p 167.
8. Yasmine Gooneratne, *A Change of Skies* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989).
9. Carl Muller, *The Jam Fruit Tree* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993).
10. Ruvani Ranasinha, '[sic] Jam Fruit Tree and Carl Muller's Constructions of Women: Subversion or Reinforcement?', *Nivedini* 2, 1, (1994), p 18.
11. *Ibid* p 20.
12. Daryl's career, and Mrs Chelvaratnam's efforts to discover the truth behind his death, seem to be modelled on the life and mysterious death of Richard de Zoysa and on his mother's campaign for justice.
13. Selvadurai maintains some interest in the theme, however, by showing how Arjie finds men attractive--vide p 116 and pp 160-61.
14. Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987) p 116.
15. Howard McNaughton, 'The Speaking Subject: The Impossible, Possible World of Realized Empire' *De-Scribing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*. Ed. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson. (London: Routledge, 1994) p 228.

16. Rao made this point in for 'Because Most People Marry Their Own Kind: A Reading of Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*', a paper read at the tenth ACLALS Triennial Conference held in Sri Lanka. The quotation is taken from the Abstract.
17. Kirthie Abeyesekera, 'First Ondaatje, Now it's Shyam' *The Sunday Times* (16 October 1994), p 20.
18. Edwin Thumboo and Thiru Kandiah, Introduction. '"Commonwealth Literature": Resisting Dichotomization' *The Writer As Historical Witness: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. Ed. Edwin Thumboo and Thiru Kandiah. (Singapore: UniPress, 1995), p xviii.
19. H. Nigel Thomas, *Spirits in the Dark* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994). This novel has some points of convergence with *Funny Boy*. Thomas is an expatriate living in Canada, like Selvadurai, and Jerome experiences homosexual desires, *a la* Arjie.
20. *Ibid* p 9.
21. A.L. Macleod, 'The Search for Personal Identity in Nigel Thomas' *Spirits in the Dark*', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 18,1 (1995), p 17.
22. Rajiva Wijesinha 'Aberrations and Excess: Sri Lanka Substantiated by the *Funny Boy*' *The Sunday Observer* March 1996 p11.
23. Stephen Gray, 'Coming Out into Chaos', *Mail & Guardian Review of Books*, November/December (1995), p3.
24. See Selvadurai's interview with Afdhel Aziz, 'Growing Up Gay in Sri Lanka', *The Sunday Times* 29 January 1995 p17 for comments on the novel's autobiographical concerns.
25. Hubert E. Weerasooriya, *The Tamil Lady and the Sinhala Lawyer* (Colombo: Ruhunu Books, 1982).